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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 10 June 2026

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

Committee Conveners

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Today's business begins with the results of the elections for committee conveners. I will announce the results for each committee in turn.

Stuart McMillan has been elected as convener of the Climate Action Committee. The total number of ballots was 121 and the results were as follows: For 106, Against 12, Abstentions 3.

Alyn Smith has been elected as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 107, Against 10, Abstentions 5.

Calum Kerr has been elected as convener of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 118, Against 1, Abstentions 2. There was one spoiled paper.

Duncan Massey has been elected as convener of the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 66, Against 21, Abstentions 29. There were six spoiled papers.

Karen Adam has been elected as convener of the Education and Gaelic Committee. The total number of ballots was 121 and the results were as follows: For 105, Against 11, Abstentions 5.

Patrick Harvie has been elected as convener of the Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 97, Against 15, Abstentions 8. There were two spoiled papers.

Katie Hagmann has been elected as convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 112, Against 6, Abstentions 4.

Clare Haughey has been elected as convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The total number of ballots was 123 and the results were as follows: For 95, Against 23, Abstentions 4. There was one spoiled paper.

Helen McDade has been elected as convener of the Health, Care and Sport Committee. The total number of ballots was 121 and the results were as follows: For 65, Against 21, Abstentions 29. There were six spoiled papers.

Neil Bibby has been elected as convener of the Public Audit Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 105, Against 3, Abstentions 11. There were three spoiled papers.

Paul Sweeney has been elected as convener of the Public Petitions Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 106, Against 4, Abstentions 8. There were four spoiled papers.

Bob Doris has been elected as convener of the Public Service Reform Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 110, Against 10, Abstentions 1. There was one spoiled paper.

Mark Ruskell has been elected as convener of the Rural Affairs Committee. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: For 100, Against 14, Abstentions 6. There were two spoiled papers.

Craig Hoy has been elected as convener of the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee. The total number of ballots was 123 and the results were as follows: For 67, Against 34, Abstentions 18. There were four spoiled papers.

Willie Rennie has been elected as convener of the Transport Committee. The total number of ballots was 120 and the results were as follows: For 110, Against 1, Abstentions 5. There were four spoiled papers.

There were two candidates for convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee: Emma Roddick and Jenni Minto. The total number of ballots was 122 and the results were as follows: Jenni Minto 90, Emma Roddick 28, Abstentions 4. Jenni Minto has been elected as convener.

That concludes the elections of conveners.

Urgent Question

14:04

Racist Demonstrations (Glasgow)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what urgent action it will take in response to the reported violent racist demonstrations that took place last night in Glasgow.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The actions of a very small number of individuals in parts of Scotland last night, which included the assaulting of police officers and members of minority ethnic communities, are shocking and unacceptable. Violence and racism have no place on our streets, and I utterly condemn the actions of the mindless few who were involved in the disorder and assaults that took place in Glasgow. What happened in Belfast is utterly horrific and unspeakable, and it will already have caused great concern, but the events that followed also caused distress and fear for all, and particularly for some communities.

I think that I speak for the whole Parliament when I express my gratitude to Police Scotland for its response last night. Police Scotland has since established a community reassurance cell, and officers are engaging with communities and stakeholders to understand and respond to their concerns. Police Scotland has also put in place appropriate plans to manage potential further protest activity, including the deployment of specialist public order officers, as required.

Let me be crystal clear: there is no place for racism, hatred and intimidation in our society, nor for the actions of those who seek to stoke those sentiments and division. Those beliefs and actions are not those of the vast majority of people who live in Scotland, who have values of being a welcoming and warm nation.

Paul Sweeney: Last night, racist thugs stormed through the centre of Glasgow under the white nationalist slogan “White lives matter”. Members of the public were attacked indiscriminately because of the colour of their skin, and two police officers were injured. My prayers are with those who were attacked by the savage mob and with the victim of the vicious and barbaric assault last night in Belfast. All those who have been affected across the United Kingdom are in my thoughts today. However, let me be clear that this shocking display of hate is the antithesis of the compassionate character and welcoming spirit of Glasgow and Glaswegians.

Last night’s event was not a random outburst of bigotry and violence. It marks a further escalation in the organised far-right riots that are becoming all too common in Scotland. From Perth to Peterhead and from Falkirk to Ayr, we are seeing the forces of hate emboldened and out on our streets, intimidating and harassing law-abiding citizens who have come to our country to build a better life. No one in Scotland should live in fear due to the colour of their skin or their religious belief. That bigotry must not be tolerated any longer.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the issue cuts to the core of what it means to live in our country and society, that there is no place for that type of thuggery in Scotland and that we must be thoughtful and compassionate and not give in to the impulses of hatred and bitterness, regardless of colour or creed?

Neil Gray: I completely agree with everything that Paul Sweeney has put on the record in his supplementary question. The Scottish Government’s approach is grounded in tackling hate consistently and proportionately across all communities, which is underpinned by a zero-tolerance stance on racism and hate crime. Our work is underpinned by community cohesion and by promoting mutual respect, understanding and positive relationships across communities.

What happened last night was designed to intimidate, to cause alarm and to divide, but we will not allow those who seek to intimidate us or to divide us to do so. The values of the people of Scotland must prevail, and we must show leadership across the chamber to ensure that that is the case.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Before Paul Sweeney comes back in, I say to him that I am looking for questions rather than speeches. Other members are keen to come in, so it is important that we keep questions as brief as possible.

Paul Sweeney: Some members of the Parliament have sought to fan the flames of division with continual talk of “strangers” and calls for further protests tonight. Does the cabinet secretary agree that every one of us in the Parliament has a duty to calm tensions in this country and not to inflame them, and that we should be reminded that our first duty is to our constituents and the people of Scotland, not to American neo-Nazis on social media?

Neil Gray: I fundamentally and completely agree with what Paul Sweeney has said—I believe that to my core. We are a welcoming nation. We have benefited from migration to this country and we continue to benefit from it. I say that particularly given the offices that I have held in health and the public services that I have represented in the Government. This country’s police service, fire

service and health and social care systems would not be able to do what they do without people coming from other countries to serve the people of Scotland.

My first office in this Government was in culture, and the culture and fabric of our society would also not be the same were it not for migration into this country. We should celebrate it, protect it and cherish it, and we should always stand up to those, including in this Parliament, who seek to divide, intimidate and cause fear and alarm.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): The scenes in Glasgow city centre and in other parts of Scotland—and, indeed, in Belfast—were truly shocking. Those scenes and all racism must be condemned by all parties in the chamber. Shame on those who choose not to do so.

How will the Scottish Government reach out to and work with minority communities to reassure them that all measures will be taken to prevent such disgusting, racist behaviour from recurring and that Scotland is a welcoming place for all those who choose to live here?

Neil Gray: In the first instance, those efforts are being led by Police Scotland in the work that it is doing to reassure communities across Scotland. Work is ongoing in Government to ensure that we are able to protect and enhance communities, including minority ethnic groups and religious communities, across Scotland. That work will continue and intensify, and we will do it in the full knowledge that any further such incidents off the back of last night's incidents will cause significant concern to communities across Scotland. We—not only this Government, but, I hope, this Parliament—will not tolerate fear and alarm being caused and want to support people to live well in this country.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Looking at the footage of last night's events, we see that it was not protest but criminal disorder. Families should be able to go about their daily lives in Scotland without fear of violence, intimidation or public disorder from a gang of balaclava-clad hooligans.

Will the cabinet secretary ask Police Scotland to give a full report on the incidents in Glasgow, including the number of officers who were injured, the arrests that were made and the extent of any damage that was caused? Will he confirm whether the force has the public order resources and operational capacity that are needed should further incidents occur?

Neil Gray: I agree with Mr Kerr's points. Of course, there is a right to protest and to organise peacefully, but that is not what we saw last night. We saw thuggery and intimidatory tactics seeking to divide communities. They will not succeed in Scotland.

Last night, I was in live dialogue with Police Scotland through my officials. To answer the final question, we saw a very clear response from Police Scotland, which stood up in very short order and showed that it does have the resources at its disposal to deal with such incidents. To answer Mr Kerr's middle question, I am in constant dialogue with Police Scotland and expect further information from it on the outturn of the event. I seek continued reassurance that it is prepared for any further such disorder.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I commend Paul Sweeney for his contributions in the chamber. There is a lot of unanimity across the Parliament, and we should all be careful with our words in general when discussing such matters.

These are aggravated offences. I commend the cabinet secretary for his response, but does he agree that the nature of the offences is so significant that we need to make example of a zero-tolerance approach to such crime and that, when we get to it, the sentencing should reflect that?

Neil Gray: I understand the motivation behind Mr Smith's questions. He will understand that Police Scotland, the Courts and Tribunals Service and the Crown are rightly independent of Government. However, what we are able to see from the footage that Mr Kerr and Mr Smith have alluded to speaks to the motivation behind last night's organised thuggery.

I want to ensure that we continue to take a zero-tolerance approach to racism, hatred and division. Over many years, we have taken steps in Scotland to legislate to ensure that we have the fullest protections possible in place for people who choose to live here. I expect the full weight of the law to be applied to anyone who is prosecuted or convicted for any of last night's incidents.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the urgent question. We will have a one-minute break to switch over, after which we will resume with portfolio questions.

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Finance and Local Government, Parliamentary Business and Veterans

14:15

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, finance and local government, parliamentary business and veterans. I remind members that questions 1 and 3 have been grouped together and that I will take any supplementaries to those after both questions have been answered. If a member wishes to request to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Non-domestic Rates System

1. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will bring forward proposals to reform the non-domestic rates system. (S7O-00029)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The issue is on my immediate agenda. The Scottish Government is constantly evolving and reforming the non-domestic rates system, given the ever-changing circumstances that businesses find themselves facing. We specifically consider retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

Very soon—before the summer—we will meet business leaders from across the sectors to start the process of a comprehensive review of non-domestic rates, which will build on our commitment to examine the impact and configuration of all our reliefs in advance of the next revaluation, on 1 April 2029.

Tim Eagle: I am not alone in calling for reform of non-domestic rates. New Scottish National Party MSP Jack Middleton has said that there are "flaws in the system" and that the issue is a "top priority". Even the SNP manifesto promised to rebalance the system.

I have spoken with people from businesses in Moray, including funeral parlours and clothes shops, who have described real pain and uncertainty about their future. We need a clear timeline for change. I do not expect a full timeline right now, but will we get a ministerial statement that draws out what the minister has said, so that we and all businesses in Scotland can be absolutely clear on the timeline for change?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Next week, there will be a statement to provide a medium-term update on the budget. As I said, a meeting before the summer with business leaders from the six priority business areas is on my agenda, and the issue will be a priority as we go into the summer recess.

Non-domestic Rates System

3. **Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is taking forward plans to rebalance the non-domestic rates system. (S7O-00031)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): As I said, we want the non-domestic rates system to offer the best environment for businesses in relation to business growth, investment and competitiveness, to ensure that businesses have predictability, stability and a line of sight as to what is coming down the track. I also acknowledge the important role that non-domestic rates play in providing just over £3 billion in funding for our public services.

A comprehensive review of non-domestic rates will be starting, and we will engage with businesses so that they can shape how the system will operate in a fair, transparent and accountable way in the future.

Claire Baker: The minister will be aware that there is a big issue with empty properties and that local businesses regularly raise concerns about the costs of and barriers to taking on such premises. The United Kingdom Government will be investing £20 million in Kirkcaldy town centre. Does the minister accept that we need a business rates system that actively supports new businesses to occupy vacant units and enhance our high streets? When can we expect progress on potentially widening the scope of the fresh start relief, as was agreed by the Parliament last week?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: As the member knows, we have agreed to the fresh start campaign that we discussed last week—the amendment on that came from the Labour benches. We are looking at that as the only relief of its type that we have in Great Britain. We are very mindful of the tax avoidance risk associated with the relief, so, when we are considering the review in the round and moving forward with the reform of business rates, the fresh start relief and occupying empty properties will be part of that.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The question that Claire Baker just asked is very important. When I asked the First Minister what his support for DC Thomson's fresh start campaign was worth in terms of action, his answer was very vague and non-committal. I am afraid that the minister's answer there was pretty much the same.

I ask this directly: does the minister support the fresh start campaign? If so, what concrete action will she take to implement it?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: The member will be aware that we had the debate on the matter only last week. We are committed to exploring and working on it. We are working with officials, and I will be happy to write to the member as we firm up our timeframe, as I will meet the business leaders before the summer. The campaign is hot off the press; it is something that we are working on. I will be happy to write to the member when we have a timeframe in mind.

Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP): I point members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a sitting councillor in Falkirk.

Tax increment financing has been incredibly successful in Falkirk in unlocking the economic potential of the area, delivering 2,000 jobs and £36 million of infrastructure in the first half of a 25-year project. What assurances can the minister give that any changes to non-domestic rates will support and enhance TIF schemes, such as the successful example in Falkirk district, so as not to put such vital economic growth at risk?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Six TIF projects were set up as part of a pilot scheme. The impact on place and on the local economy will be assessed as the investments near completion, allowing ministers to come to a view on further use of the funding tool.

The review of non-domestic rates will be comprehensive and will include consideration of how the NDR system can best support and encourage growth and investment.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The recent removal of listed buildings relief for rates has caused a number of unintended consequences that have been very damaging. The cost of servicing the rates for empty listed buildings and of raising the capital to renovate them has proven prohibitive for many projects. Will the minister undertake to review that, together with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and to introduce an appeals process, where that makes sense, to allow for reliefs to enable renovation?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: That is something that I am happy to take away and have a look at, as I take the discussion forward before the summer. I would be quite happy to engage with Mr Sweeney on that before the summer recess.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): It is welcome that the minister has given a clear commitment to consider carefully what improvements the Government could make as quickly as possible to ensure that all businesses can continue to invest, rather than have issues arising with business rates impeding their success. Will the minister expand on the steps that the Scottish Government will be taking, as part of the process, to engage with business stakeholders more widely, outwith hospitality, to ensure that their voices, too, inform any decisions made?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: As I have said a couple of times, the first step will involve a comprehensive meeting with business leaders from across the portfolio on six priority areas—leisure, hospitality, tourism et cetera—to ensure that we gather views, that I listen and that we understand the asks and the offer; to ensure that Scotland is a place where business is welcomed; and to give predictability, stability and, ultimately, the ability to grow the economy.

That meeting will be happening just before the summer as we take forward the review, through the recess into August and beyond.

Local Authority Pay Negotiations

2. **Mark Griffin (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities regarding the pay negotiations for 2026-27. (S7O-00030)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): I had an introductory meeting with COSLA on 28 May and I will meet it again, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform, next Thursday.

Although the Scottish Government has no formal role in local government pay negotiations, we worked closely with COSLA to confirm funding flexibilities and additional funding. That allowed COSLA to provide a fair and affordable two-year pay deal, which was worth 7.64 per cent across 2025-26 and 2026-27.

Mark Griffin: After years of cuts, councils are struggling to put an offer on the table that meets the cost of living pressures for their staff. Year after year, we have disputes and disruptions—there has been rubbish piling up on Edinburgh streets during the festival and school and nursery closures—and, annually, there is intervention from the Government to resolve them. What more constructive, regular discussions can happen between national and local Government to break the cycle of disputes and late interventions to solve them after the public has already faced disruption? How does the Government plan to formalise those discussions?

Jenny Gilruth: Mark Griffin will know that, in my former role, I spent a good amount of time with our teaching trade unions and local government, trying to negotiate an agreement in relation to reducing teachers' class contact. Through joint negotiation, we were able to do that, but it took time. Unnecessary stress was caused for parents and carers because we thought that we might be in

receipt of some industrial action—so we had to work at pace to get to that point.

As the Deputy First Minister, I do not want to get to that stage. I want us to have a much more strategic approach to negotiating in relation to pay. Work on that was led across the Government by my predecessor and I want to continue it. I had a helpful discussion with Roz Foyer, who joined the event about public service reform that the cabinet secretary and I attended on Monday; we talked more about how we can have that strategic overview. I would be more than happy to hear any suggestions that Mr Griffin has on that.

We must work in close partnership with local government and our trade unions. The member's point in relation to the disruption of services is well made. I will take forward the suggestions that he has made to that end in our engagement with COSLA next Thursday.

Earnings Growth

4. **Jenny Young (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to warnings issued by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on 27 May 2026 that, if earnings in Scotland grow in line with the rest of the United Kingdom, Scotland could face a deficit of over £6 billion by 2030. (S7O-00032)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Governments across these islands face significant pressures on public finances. Those challenges have intensified in recent months due to global instability.

Last summer, we published the medium-term financial strategy, which sets out the scale of the challenge and the action that is required. That was reinforced through the spending review and portfolio efficiency and reform plans, which were agreed in January, led by cabinet secretaries across the Scottish Government.

In addition, last week, I met the IFS to discuss its report and findings in more detail, including the learnings for the Scottish Government, to inform our next steps.

Jenny Young: The interventions that the Deputy First Minister references were made when we thought that the budget deficit would be £5 billion. If the projections for earnings growth turn out to have been more optimistic than what actually transpires, it is likely that that deficit will increase by a further £1 billion. The Scottish Government has a budget of around £60 billion, and that would be a deficit of £6 billion—around 10 per cent of the entire Scottish budget.

The IFS has said that Scotland

"faces a fiscal reckoning—with spending cuts or tax rises on the way".

Which one of those will it be?

Jenny Gilruth: I hope that Ms Young knows that I am taking a keen interest in those matters, given my responsibilities as Deputy First Minister. However, I have to work in partnership with the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform. That is exactly why the event that we held on Monday was so important to that end. The Government has to work to meet and balance our budget every year—Ms Young will well understand that we do not have borrowing powers that exist in other parts of the United Kingdom. The discussion that I had with the IFS was important, as was the engagement that we have already had with the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

It goes back to the work that Ivan McKee is leading in relation to public service reform. I want to engage cross party on that, which is why I have been in contact with all parties to set up initial meetings in that space. I know that Michael Marra is keen to engage on those steps, and I would be more than happy to engage with Ms Young, too. We must work collaboratively to respond to the situation. That is the most appropriate and responsible action that a Government can take.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Last week, when I asked in the chamber how the black hole would be filled, the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform replied that it would be public service reform that would fill the gap. At the same time, he said that public service reform was not about reducing the overall spend on public services. Those two statements cannot be true at the same time. Which is it? [*Interruption*.]

Jenny Gilruth: I can hear Mr McKee disagreeing with Murdo Fraser's description of his contribution last week.

As I said to the member previously, we need to work on the issue on a cross-party basis. I am more than happy to hear any suggestions that Murdo Fraser might have. Of course, the budget-setting process in Scotland would be a lot better had we not had Liz Truss's mini-budget, which made things far more challenging. Had we adhered to some of the tax cuts that Ms Truss was advocating for some time ago, we would have been poorer to the tune of £1.8 billion.

However, I repeat that I am more than happy to take any further learning that Mr Fraser can offer the Scottish Government on these matters.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister said that she met the Institute for Fiscal Studies last week to understand what learnings the Government might take. Will she tell us what those learnings are?

Jenny Gilruth: We will have a follow-up meeting on that over the summer recess. There are a number of learnings in relation to health and social care, the use of technology and our use of capital across Government. We had an introductory meeting of around 30 minutes. I would be more than happy to come back to the member with further detail in that regard, because I want to continue that dialogue with the IFS. It is hugely important that we listen to it and that we act accordingly, given the extent of the challenge that members across the chamber recognise exists in relation to our budget.

Pension Fund Assets (Affordable Housing Delivery)

5. **Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the members' register of interests: I am an elected member on West Lothian Council. To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work with West Lothian Council and other local authorities, on plans to unlock pension fund assets, including in local authority pension schemes to deliver more affordable housing. (S7O-00033)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): That is a really interesting question. There are 11 local government pension schemes across Scotland, which are worth about £75 billion. For the past decade, they have consistently outperformed their United Kingdom peers. We should be doing more to explore how we can invest on a Scotland-to-Scotland basis and recycle that capital.

We will continue to work with West Lothian Council in pursuit of our manifesto commitment to deliver and progress funding models that safeguard the fiduciary duties and long-term investments of pension schemes and accelerate the delivery of social and affordable homes across Scotland. That will require an unprecedented level of commitment and investment. That work will not be done in isolation; it will involve the private and public sectors, and the Government and pension funds, working together. Collaboration is the name of the game. We need to think more creatively about how we can access pools of capital to build at scale the affordable housing that we need.

Pauline Stafford: Given the acute demand for affordable housing in West Lothian, in particular, when can local authorities expect to see tangible developments resulting from that work?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: As we set out in our manifesto for this parliamentary session, we will work in partnership and collaboration with others to progress funding models that safeguard pension schemes' duties and provide secure, inflation-linked returns that accelerate the development of housing.

At the moment, it is challenging to provide a timeframe, but, through the affordable housing supply programme, we will invest up to £4.9 billion in affordable housing over the next four years, £4.1 billion of which will be public investment, including £75 million of investment in West Lothian.

Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform): In the interests of transparency, I declare that I am a member of Aberdeen City Council's pensions committee.

When it comes to pension funds investing in local housing, how do we see the investment returns on such investments? How do those pension funds deal with their fiduciary duties and ensure that, first and foremost, they meet the needs of the pension holders?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: As I mentioned, there needs to be a mix of private and public investment, with the Government and pension funds working together. Last night, I was at a dinner at which members of the Scottish National Investment Bank mentioned that the investment in six affordable houses in the Shetland Islands, which is my constituency, had provided the most stable return that the bank has in its portfolio.

It is a matter of ensuring that we bring the private and public sectors together and that we ensure stability of return for pension funds that are seeking such stability over multiple years at an interest rate that is good for their portfolio.

Hyperscale AI Data Centres (Planning Authority Guidance)

6. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether planning authorities have adequate guidance on how to assess proposed hyperscale artificial intelligence data centres. (S7O-00034)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Planning authorities have qualified planning officers who apply their professional analysis and judgment to inform decisions. I recognise the speed of the development of hyperscale AI data centres and their scale in a very new and evolving part of our society. They present risks, upsides and downsides that need to be considered.

The national planning hub has been working with planning authorities, infrastructure providers and industry stakeholders to share an understanding of those benefits and impacts. We will continue that work with diligence and thought over time. We will consider whether there is more formal guidance that would be beneficial to a planning authority locally. We will need to ensure that local authorities are appropriately supported in the assessment of the coming data centres.

Mark Ruskell: This is a new and rapidly evolving situation. I hope that the minister recognises that, because there have been huge concerns raised about the proposed data centre at Auchtertool in Fife in relation to its size, its proximity to the village, the energy and water demand and the fact that Fife Council has not requested that an environmental impact assessment be conducted.

I hear what the minister says about time, but, given the lack of specific guidance and the inconsistencies that we are seeing across local planning authorities in Scotland, will she commit to urgently reviewing and updating planning guidance to ensure that the full impact of the AI data centres is considered? We are talking about a problem that exists now, not in the future. Planning authorities need to make proper decisions now.

Hannah Mary Goodlad: AI data centres are a rapidly evolving sector. It would not be appropriate for the Scottish Government to comment on individual development proposals, because we want to ensure that we avoid any suggestion of favouritism.

The Scottish Government is clear that the voices of communities that are affected by such developments must be central in any considerations, and that planning authorities have a responsibility to consider the environmental impacts of all developments that require planning permission. We are also clear that any new AI infrastructure development should minimise reliance on fossil fuel solutions. Our AI strategy for Scotland is clear that data centre development should include steps to assess and mitigate potential risks presented by infrastructure, including in relation to environmental sustainability.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The Scottish Government's AI strategy has a clear aim of promoting Scotland as a centre for green data centres, but it is less clear on what the terms mean in practice. It says that

"guidance on what factors are prevalent in a 'green' data centre"

is expected to be published in 2027. Would that include the necessity to have an environmental impact assessment? At the moment, my understanding is that there would be no such necessity.

Does the minister think that the timescale that we are working towards is still appropriate, given the number of projects that are already seeking planning permission in principle?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Claire Baker will appreciate that there are local planning decisions that I cannot comment on from a Government perspective. To be honest, the issue that she raises is a planning matter that is devolved to Fife Council, so I would put to her that it must be Fife Council that considers it.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I firmly believe that Scotland cannot be left behind in the new digital age. However, that should not come at a direct cost to the environment or local communities without those communities seeing substantial benefits.

Many parts of Fife have been hit badly by deindustrialisation, with generations of people struggling with unemployment and underemployment. Does the Scottish Government agree that, if those data centres go ahead, the sufficient creation of permanent full-time jobs, with upskilling opportunities for local workers, should form part of the conditions for granting planning permission for them?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Economic growth, job creation and benefit within communities that host infrastructure projects such as data centres have to be at the front and centre of the issue. In my portfolio, I am starting to explore the use of planning as a tool. I had a meeting with planning officials yesterday. I am still to get my head around exactly what can be done, but I am sympathetic to using planning as more of a tool to stimulate the kind of growth and benefits that Julie MacDougall has talked about. Given our devolved powers, planning is a tool that we could use to our advantage. I will take that on board as I continue my thoughts and questions. I do not yet have an answer, but the issue is on my agenda and in my mind.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Similarly to Mark Ruskell's data centre in Fife, a 150-hectare data centre that would cover an area larger than 200 football pitches is proposed for the wilderness of the Lammermuir Hills, in the Borders. In the absence of a Scottish Government strategy for locating energy-intensive industries, communities are being left to fight ad-hoc developments that might have potentially irreversible environmental impacts. Does the minister agree that such industrial projects belong in industrial areas and not our pristine wilderness? *[Duncan Dunlop has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Again, I will not comment on specific planning applications that are going through councils. However, there is a difference between industrialisation and industry. Especially in areas of the Highlands and Islands, it is clear that industry can co-exist alongside communities, nature and built heritage. It is about making sure that we equip local authorities with

resources and appropriate funding from our side to be able to handle that.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment on individual cases, but I am sympathetic to Duncan Dunlop's point about the difference between industrialisation and industry, because a balance needs to be struck, especially in rural and island communities.

Better Surfaces Fund

7. **Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD):** I direct members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a Highland councillor. To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities regarding how its proposed better surfaces fund will be allocated. (S7O-00035)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government will work in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to design a fund that provides flexibility and empowers individual local authorities to improve their road conditions and connectivity, based on their local needs and priorities. I undertook an introductory meeting with COSLA on 28 May, and I will meet the organisation again, as previously intimated, on Thursday 18 June, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform.

Andrew Baxter: The Highland Council's identified roads repair backlog is £233 million, yet only £22.5 million is being allocated to capital road improvements this year. Across Skye, Lochaber and the wider Highlands, residents and businesses are experiencing road deterioration at an alarming rate. Before the Deputy First Minister heads off on her summer holiday, will she join me on a road trip to Skye to see the reality for herself and explain why the better surfaces fund will be anything more than a drop of tar in an ever-growing pothole?

Jenny Gilruth: I have been to Skye many times and am more than happy to come again and visit Andrew Baxter's roads. However, I put on record that the local road network is the responsibility of the Highland Council, which has had an uplift in funding from the Scottish Government. In 2026-27, it will receive £665.1 million to fund local services, which equates to an extra £32.3 million—5.1 per cent—compared with the previous financial year.

It is important to put on the record that the allocation of capital is a matter for the authority. However, the Government's budget of last year delivers in full a number of asks from island authorities, including the one in the member's constituency, to provide extra capital funding and resource for interisland connectivity, in recognition of the importance of rural roads in particular.

Dumbarton Health Centre (Funding)

8. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the 2026 Scottish National Party manifesto commitment of £10 billion in capital spending on health, including community health and care hubs, when it will allocate funding to build a new Dumbarton health centre. (S7O-00036)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Ten billion pounds-worth of capital investment in health infrastructure is planned for the coming decade. Work is already underway to develop a standardised approach to the planning, design and delivery of projects that were announced as part of the infrastructure delivery pipeline in January 2026. The first tranche of projects is currently being progressed.

Dumbarton health centre is recognised as a priority in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's primary care estate. Decisions on the allocation and timing of funding for subsequent projects, including Dumbarton, will be taken as part of future phases of the infrastructure and investment programme.

I do, however, expect to receive further advice on the next stages from my officials during the coming weeks, and I will be happy to provide Jackie Baillie with further updates when they are available.

Jackie Baillie: The former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care visited Dumbarton health centre with me earlier this year and agreed that the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board would consider it as an equal priority to a health centre in Port Glasgow.

Can the cabinet secretary tell me when there will actually be shovels in the ground, because a response to an earlier question suggested that it could be as late as five years from now?

Jenny Gilruth: I cannot give Ms Baillie a specific date at the current time, as I am awaiting advice on that from my officials, but I am more than happy to correspond with her on the challenge that she has put to me today.

However, I hope that she recognises that significant investment is being put in place to support projects such as the one that she has outlined. I am more than happy to write to her with further detail when I receive it.

High Streets (Businesses)

9. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish

Government how it is supporting businesses on Scotland's high streets. (S7O-00037)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): High streets are vital to our economy and town centres, especially in rural and island contexts. The Scottish budget reduces all three property rates and offers a package of reliefs that are forecast to save ratepayers more than £870 million in the 2026-27 budget.

The small business bonus scheme remains the most generous scheme of its kind in the United Kingdom, and we estimate that 96 per cent of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses could benefit from some form of relief in 2026-27.

As I said, the engagement that I will have with business communities before summer is high on my agenda and I look forward to kicking it off. That engagement includes a high street focus.

Clare Haughey: My constituency is home to many small and medium-sized businesses that make a significant contribution to the local economy and provide a wide variety of specialist services and goods. However, local high streets such as ours have been blighted by the presence of vacant shops in recent years. How is the Scottish Government working with local authorities and other partners to support bringing vacant premises back into use and encouraging more footfall in our town centres?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Our package of non-domestic rates relief includes the small business bonus scheme, which remains the most generous of its kind in the UK. As was said earlier, fresh start is a relief to incentivise the reoccupation of non-domestic properties that have been empty long-term, including on many high streets across Scotland. The business growth accelerator relief offers relief on new builds and property improvements. Local authorities also have wide-ranging powers to create local rates relief schemes to reflect local needs. As elected members, we should encourage our local authorities to make full use of that.

I remind everyone that next week is the annual Scotland loves local week, so I urge everyone to get out to their local high street. Members should go out and meet and interact with shop owners and give some prominence, social media content and visibility to the many dedicated shops that we have on our high streets across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Public Service Reform, Europe, External Affairs and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next portfolio is public service reform, Europe, external affairs and energy. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. During the previous portfolio, I noticed that a number of members did not keep their request-to-speak button pressed down all the time during the question, and it was not clear whether they wanted to be chosen. If you want to speak, please make sure that you keep your request-to-speak button pressed down.

Low-carbon Heat Recovery Technologies (Rivers, Estuaries and Coastal Waters)

1. **David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a councillor in Fife. To ask the Scottish Government what work is being done to ensure that regulatory and consenting frameworks support the deployment of low-carbon heat recovery technologies from rivers, estuaries and coastal waters. (S7O-00039)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I thank Mr Barratt for his question and acknowledge the expertise that he brings to the chamber on the issue, which will enrich our discussions and debates. The Scottish Government aims to capitalise on the thermal energy that is found in a range of sources, so that it can be distributed to homes and businesses through heat networks at an affordable cost. We have developed detailed guidance with the United Kingdom Government to support all parties with that, and it will be published shortly.

David Barratt: Research suggests that there is a near limitless supply of heat available from our coastal waters. That is being explored by the FORTH20 sustainable heat project, which is a partnership between SeaWarm, the University of Edinburgh, the City of Edinburgh Council, East Lothian Council and Fife Council. It has been identified that the cost and complexities of consenting are adding almost a year to the project delivery timescales and up to 20 per cent to the cost of the innovative technology. Will the Scottish Government commit to reviewing the current fragmented consenting process for small-scale water source heat projects, where a single installation may require permissions from multiple authorities, despite supporting Scotland's net zero and affordable heat objectives? Will the minister meet partners of the FORTH2O sustainable heat project to discuss the matter further?

Stephen Gethins: I thank Mr Barratt for his question and for his engagement on the matter. The project is important as we transition to a net zero economy. It will become increasingly important that we use resources efficiently. That includes maximising the recovery of heat from various sources that currently goes unused.

If the member writes to me with the people he would like me to meet, I would be delighted to meet them, after which the Scottish Government can consider their findings.

Prison Estate (Staffing Pressures)

2. **Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address staffing pressures across the prison estate through its programme of public sector reform. (S7O-00040)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): The prison estate is currently facing unprecedented pressures due to the record-high prison population, and our prison staff are working with dedication and resilience in challenging circumstances. The 2026-27 budget provides a £20.8 million resource funding uplift for the Scottish Prison Service, and the pay deal delivers an 8 per cent increase over two years. Recruitment is continuing at pace to deliver up to 500 new prison officers this year.

The public service reform strategy sets out a clear direction for modernising the workforce, with transformation at its core. It supports a shift in operating models, with a focus on efficiency, collaboration and protecting front-line workers, including in our prisons.

Mark Simpson: Given that staffing shortages can lead to reduced access to education, rehabilitation programmes and purposeful activity for those in custody, has the cabinet secretary considered the long-term effects of the issue, and will he outline what plans are in place to address those issues in the Prison Service and across the wider public sector?

Ivan McKee: I recognise that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Justice is working on those steps, but, as I have indicated, the Prison Service is significantly increasing staffing, with up to 500 new officers having joined this year and more than 800 new officers over the past two years, and that recruitment continues. We recognise the pressures from our record high prison population. That is why we are working with the Prison Service to take forward a number of actions in response to the issue, including expanding capacity, investing in community justice and reducing demand through alternatives to custody.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for the detail that he has already given, but could he also outline what more can be done to use the public service reform agenda to encourage staff to move outside the central belt and into other regions and areas where they are needed, such as to the new HMP Inverness, which will require an increase in staff?

Ivan McKee: Public service reform gives us the tools to better match staff to where they are most needed, and the strategy includes commitments on strengthening leadership and on workforce reform to ensure that we have the right number of people in the right roles with the right incentives and empowerment to deliver change.

The forthcoming workforce management governance framework will include good-practice guidance on recruitment and redeployment. That means supporting staff to move into priority roles, including in areas such as the Highlands, where HMP Highland will replace HMP Inverness. That includes targeted local recruitment, outreach with partners and encouraging experienced staff to transfer, thereby ensuring both community benefit and a safe, resilient service.

Farmers and Producers (UK and EU Markets)

3. **Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of whether farmers and producers in Scotland are better served and protected within the single market of the United Kingdom rather than when operating in the European Union market. (S7O-00041)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): Previously, of course, it was not an either/or. When we were in the European Union, our farmers were able to benefit from free access to an EU market of 450 million consumers, with funding stability provided by the common agricultural policy and much more.

Brexit, which the member's party campaigned for and wanted, was a costly mistake, and our agri-food industry has suffered as a result. The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, far from helping to ensure a functioning domestic market, is a recipe for confusion and uncertainty. We strongly support a closer relationship with the EU, including on agri-food, to help businesses to access the EU market in order to expand consumer choice and sustain Scotland's agri-food sector. The best way to do that is, of course, with independence.

Jamie Langan: Does the minister recognise the serious challenges that the Scottish pig farming industry is currently facing as a result of the glut of Spanish pork imports depressing prices? Can he confirm what work the Scottish Government has undertaken with the UK Government to address those challenges?

Stephen Gethins: I will write to the member more broadly on the specific issues, but I would set out the hit that consumers and businesses, including in agriculture, have taken from leaving the EU. That includes a Treasury hit of £90 billion less in tax revenues—that is £250 million being

wasted every single day—and UK food exports to the EU at well below pre-Brexit levels. Brexit has been a disaster. It is the 10th anniversary of the referendum in a couple of weeks' time, and I hope that the member's party will reflect on that.

Energy Security

4. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of Scotland's energy security, including any consequent action it plans to take in the light of heightened global tensions, particularly in the middle east and Ukraine. (S7O-00042)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): The ongoing conflict in the middle east and Russia's war in Ukraine have brought Scotland's energy security into sharp focus. Our assessment remains that, on the information that is currently available to us, Scotland's position in relation to energy security remains robust. However, despite that, as a responsible Government, we continue to monitor the current situation and prepare for any disruption. We are also continuing to pursue engagement with the United Kingdom Government to assess risks and share intelligence, to ensure that Scotland's energy security remains resilient and to inform our planning.

Liam Kerr: I would like to help the minister in that regard. It is reported today that, if the largest undeveloped oil and gas field in the UK, Rosebank, is given the go-ahead, it will generate £8.5 billion-worth of direct investment, £6.6 billion of which will be spent on UK businesses; it will support 2,000 jobs during its development alone; and it will help our energy security. The Scottish National Party has maintained a presumption against new oil and gas for years, and it was confirmed again by the Scottish Government on Politico this week. However, for the sake of energy security, for thousands of Scottish jobs, for the environment and for the economy, will the minister join me in demanding that Ed Miliband give Rosebank the green light?

Stephen Gethins: The issue is, as the member knows, reserved to the Westminster Parliament. However, I am glad that we are able to discuss reserved issues in this place as well.

The question of energy security is one of the tests that we apply, as well as the climate, when considering the options. However, I have to say that it takes something of a brass neck for the Conservatives to come to the chamber and lecture anybody about the oil and gas industry, given the thousands of jobs that were lost on their watch.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): The minister will, no doubt, agree that our energy security must be considered alongside our climate obligations. That is why I urge the Scottish Government to recognise the advice of the Climate Change Committee, which says that nuclear is essential to the UK's decarbonised electricity mix. I also urge the minister to recognise that decommissioning in Scotland, including at Dounreay, in my constituency, depends on retaining those skills in the long term. Will he therefore agree to visit Dounreay, meet our nuclear workforce and address the concern that his Government's opposition to new nuclear sends them a message that their future lies elsewhere?

Stephen Gethins: First, I would be delighted to visit the member in his constituency, for which he is obviously a champion.

Scotland is an energy exporter with excellence in renewables and other industries. Nuclear has been proven to be a very expensive technology. That being said, I will commit, as I said at the start, to engaging with members and will speak to them, as we can always learn something from one another.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Grangemouth provided aviation fuel and could have been used to develop sustainable aviation fuel for the future. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that, by letting it close and now pandering to Putin by allowing the importation of aviation fuel, the UK Labour Government has actively chosen to weaken energy security in the UK and has lost opportunities to strengthen our domestic capabilities for the future?

Stephen Gethins: Alan Brown is absolutely right to raise this issue. Labour committed itself, during the 2024 election campaign, to saving the Grangemouth refinery. Alan Brown and I agree that Scotland has a huge role to play in not only Scotland's energy security but pan-European energy security, which Labour, along with its colleagues in Reform, has been turning its back on. Eighteen months ago, the UK Government committed to providing £200 million-worth of targeted support to Grangemouth, which has not been forthcoming. We will continue to pursue that.

On the question of sanctions, Alan Brown is absolutely right that we should have the maximum sanctions on Russia. I was deeply concerned by the UK Government's recent action in that regard.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Is it not absolutely extraordinary that some people respond to a fossil fuel crisis that is sending prices spiralling through the roof by demanding that we double down and make ourselves even more dependent on fossil fuels and even more exposed to the next energy crisis that fossil fuels cause?

Stephen Gethins: I am a great believer in the energy mix. As we make a just transition and invest in it, that will involve a huge range of skills. However, we are, as Mr Harvie knows, a massive exporter of renewables, and we can also be a massive exporter of renewables to the whole of Europe. Scotland has an awful lot to offer when it comes not just to our own energy security but to that of our whole continent.

Electrical Infrastructure (Orkney)

5. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the installation of electrical infrastructure in Orkney. (S7O-00043)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): Since my appointment as minister, I have undertaken introductory meetings across the energy sector. I am clear that the energy transition represents one of our greatest economic opportunities, and I know that the member champions it as well. I will continue to hold those meetings over the coming weeks and over the summer.

The Scottish Government has supported Orkney's ambitions for decarbonisation and electrification, including by providing £5 million to support the development of a harbour facility for the assembly of offshore wind turbines at Scapa Flow.

Liam McArthur: I welcome the advances that the minister has made in his early days in the role. Earlier this year, the electricity cable serving North Ronaldsay, in Orkney, developed a fault that cannot be fixed. Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks has confirmed that a new cable will be needed. Given the impact on my constituents, I hope that the minister will agree that the new cable should be consented as quickly as possible. Will he also agree to ensuring that the fibre within the cable is now used to provide long-overdue digital connectivity and resilience to the residents of North Ronaldsay?

Stephen Gethins: I thank the member for the genuine work that he has done on this matter for years on behalf of his constituents. He will not expect me to comment on consents, nor would Mr McKee, who is sitting next to me. Given Orkney's vast potential—and the potential across the northern isles, as my colleague from Shetland, Hannah Mary Goodlad, will say—I would be very willing to engage with the member to ensure that Orkney, like elsewhere, is fulfilling its clear potential in renewables.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): Orkney and other communities across the Highlands and Islands will play a key role in Scotland's renewable energy future. However, new projects in the region are being unfairly disadvantaged by Westminster's transmission charging regime, which is costing Scottish renewable projects £1 billion. Does the minister agree that, if Labour ministers are serious about growing renewable energy in Scotland, they must scrap those unfair transmission charges immediately or get out of the way and give Scotland the power to control our own energy?

Stephen Gethins: I absolutely agree with Laura Mitchell, who has already been a strong advocate in this Parliament for jobs and investment in her constituency. We have seen unfair penalisation through the current transmission network use of system—TNUOS—charges. According to the figures that we saw at the weekend, transmission charges could cost Scottish projects almost £1 billion up to 2030-31, whereas projects in England and Wales will be paid £435 million to connect. That policy, which Labour must review, is holding back our sector, and Laura Mitchell is quite right to be a champion for her communities on that.

Aviation Fuel Supply

6. **Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of recent reports of aviation fuel supply issues at Edinburgh and Glasgow airports, what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding future fuel security and the fuel supply chain. (S7O-00044)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): The recent fuel supply issue that Glasgow and Edinburgh airports experienced was caused by a logistical issue. Although that has been swiftly rectified, I recognise the inconvenience that the disruption caused to passengers. We continually seek to engage with the UK Government regarding fuel security, as well as remaining in contact with key industry stakeholders. However, to be blunt, we need the UK Government to recognise Scotland's potential and, sometimes, to be a bit more forthcoming on information sharing.

Martyn Day: This issue underlines how precarious Scotland's position on jet fuel supplies has become. Before its closure, Grangemouth refined jet fuel for the whole of Scotland, which gave us a measure of energy security. The betrayal of the workforce at Grangemouth and the false promises that were once made to them by Anas Sarwar have helped to put paid to that. Does the minister agree with Unite the Union, which has accused the UK Labour Government of "industrial vandalism" in allowing the Grangemouth refinery to close, when Scotland could have been producing its own green aviation fuel?

Stephen Gethins: Martyn Day has for many years been a strong advocate for the people and industries in Grangemouth. Grangemouth is a

prime location, and it has a highly skilled workforce for the development and production of sustainable aviation fuels. Scotland is part of the solution when it comes to our energy security.

I said that the UK Government had been less than forthcoming. For example, the First Minister had to write to the Prime Minister to ask for more detail and greater security co-operation in the areas in which we still, I am afraid, have to rely on the UK Government. This democratically elected Parliament has voted for those powers to be devolved, which I hope can provide part of the solution.

Grant Schemes

7. **Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to adopt a tell-us-once approach to grant schemes, such as fair work first, across its departments to reduce the burden on individuals, organisations and businesses, as part of its planned public sector reform. (S7O-00045)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Our public service reform strategy commits us to reviewing and simplifying reporting requirements for grant recipients. That will include understanding how a tell-us-once approach to grants could be implemented. Work is also under way to simplify the grant landscape across Government and agencies in order to increase clarity and impact and to reduce administration costs for Government and, indeed, grant recipients.

On the fair work first scheme, the Scottish Government has commissioned an independent evaluation, which will include compliance and operational processes and is due to report this summer. We will consider the recommendations, including any further improvements that could be made to administrative processes.

Jenni Minto: I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to fair work and fully support its underlying principles. However, smaller organisations, third sector bodies and social enterprises do not have the dedicated compliance or bid-writing teams to cover the administrative burden of different funding streams. Will the cabinet secretary therefore meet me and the Mull and Iona Community Trust to discuss what immediate, low-cost improvements could be made to the process, in line with the Scottish Government's stated aims of efficiency, fairness and accessibility of grant funding?

Ivan McKee: I thank the member for the invitation. I am happy to meet her and representatives of the trust. It will be helpful to hear about their direct experiences to inform our improvements, which I am sure will very much chime with what I hear from community organisations in my constituency.

The Government recognises the importance of community organisations. Franky, we have a duty to make the administration processes for those organisations as straightforward as possible, subject to appropriate safeguards. That is a central part of the work in the PSR strategy.

On fair work first, I understand that my colleague Tom Arthur is responding to the member's request to meet his officials to discuss the issue, and that meeting is being arranged.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Question 8 was not lodged.

Prestwick Airport (US Military Use)

9. **Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on banning the use of Prestwick airport by the US military. (S7O-00047)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I am aware that Gillian Mackay has raised the issue previously. She will understand that the Scottish Government must comply with the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, which reserves national security, aviation and air transport, defence and foreign affairs to the United Kingdom Government.

The Scottish Government has no power to ban flights from Scottish airspace or airports. Non-UK military flights using UK airspace need permission from the Ministry of Defence.

Unfortunately, the Scottish Government is not provided with information on the purpose of military flights using Scottish airports, which is frustrating.

Gillian Mackay: The US Government's partner in this aggression is, of course, the Israeli Government, which has already been banned from using publicly owned Scottish infrastructure, including Prestwick airport. During the previous parliamentary session, the Parliament passed a motion calling for boycott, divestment and sanctions in relation to Israel. We later found out that the Government has not even started work on that proposal. When might we see that package of measures coming forward?

Stephen Gethins: I thank the member for raising the issue, including with the First Minister, and for the attention that she has given it. I am a great believer in the international rules-based system, which is under threat and is being undermined. Although we do not have the full range of powers that we would like—that is frustrating—we must adhere to that.

I am perfectly willing to look at the matter in good faith, and I can write to the member. I wish that we had the full range of powers that we just do not have. That is a source of frustration to me as much as it will be a source of frustration to Gillian Mackay.

Public Procurement (Small Businesses, Social Enterprises and Local Supply Chains)

10. **Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its vision for public procurement, particularly in relation to supporting small businesses, social enterprises and local supply chains. (S7O-00048)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Sustainability is central to public procurement, which is driving jobs and growth and generating £14.7 billion in economic activity, of which £7.6 billion goes to small and medium-sized enterprises. Communities are benefiting: 78 per cent of suppliers winning public contracts were SMEs, of which 61 per cent were Scottish SMEs. The third sector is engaged and has secured £1.2 billion of spend. Local impact is being delivered, with £3.6 billion retained locally.

Scotland leads the way in that regard, because 47 per cent of procurement spend in Scotland goes to SMEs, which compares favourably with the position in the UK, where 20 per cent of spend goes to SMEs, according to a British Chambers of Commerce report. Reducing barriers remains a priority for the Government through the supplier development programme, with 25,000 contracts awarded to registered suppliers.

Collette Stevenson: As the cabinet secretary highlighted, procurement offers great opportunities for small businesses and social enterprises, which, in turn, can boost local economies and wellbeing. South Lanarkshire Council, which is the host authority of the supplier development programme in my patch, works very hard to support that.

There is also a lot of potential to improve things, including in local supply-chain development. One example of that is the use of locally sourced venison, which is a healthy, low-carbon food source that could be better used in hospitals, schools and other public sector organisations. Will the cabinet secretary outline how subcontractors will be further encouraged to get involved in large public sector contracts, as well as in work to boost local supply chains, including those for food provision?

Ivan McKee: Absolutely. I am happy to confirm that legislation is in place that requires public bodies to consider opportunities to involve small and medium-sized enterprises, third sector organisations and supported businesses. For higher-value contracts, that includes splitting contracts into smaller opportunities to make them more accessible for smaller businesses. Public Contracts Scotland alerts suppliers to relevant contracts and allows main contractors to advertise subcontracting opportunities down through the supply chains. The flexibility that public bodies have to promote local sustainable produce is underpinned in the national good food nation plan.

Ms Stevenson gave the example of venison, and I am happy to confirm that we have provided funding to build capability in the venison sector to improve and establish new supply chains.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): There is broad consensus in the chamber about the need to develop Scotland's supply chains and to use public procurement to do so. However, especially in the Labour Party, we have felt that, in practice, there has been an overly cautious view, particularly in interpreting the Subsidy Control Act 2022. Will the cabinet secretary, in his new role, re-examine the Scottish Government's interpretation of that? Will he look at how procurement processes and grant schemes can be redevised so that they do not fall foul of the 2022 act?

Ivan McKee: First, I point the member to the numbers that I have gone through. It is hugely important to recognise that Scotland is absolutely leading the way, with more than 47 per cent of our public sector procurement going to SMEs, compared with only 20 per cent across the rest of the United Kingdom. It is hugely important to recognise the progress that we have made. As I said, we are always keen to make more progress and to look for opportunities to further expand the amount of procurement opportunities for SMEs, third sector organisations, supported businesses and others in our communities.

We always need to look closely at subsidy control when we are taking decisions. This morning, I met procurement officials and talked about the work that they are undertaking with others across Government to understand where the restrictions apply and where we can take steps that do not fall foul of the regulations. We will continue to push the envelope as much as we can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): That concludes portfolio question time.

Public Trust in Scottish Politics

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Before we begin the next item of business, I would like to say that the proceedings against Peter Murrell remain active until he has been sentenced. The sub judice rule is engaged, but the Presiding Officer has exercised his

discretion to allow the motion and the related amendments to be debated. In their contributions, members should specifically avoid commenting on the matter of sentencing. The sub judice rules will also apply to other cases, and members should be mindful of them.

The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar, on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now.

15:18

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): The choice before us in this debate is simple. Do we believe in honesty, openness, transparency and the rule of law? Is this a Parliament that believes that its job is to hold the Government and—no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient it is—the institutions in this country to account? Alternatively, do members believe that their job is simply to use this Parliament to protect the very culture that enabled Peter Murrell to commit his crimes?

The answer to this monumental scandal is not to continue the culture of secrecy and cover-up but to confront it. The answer is to shed light, ask questions and to meaningfully learn lessons. I say to the Scottish National Party that, if it has nothing to hide, it has nothing to fear.

Let me say clearly from the outset that the responsibility for Peter Murrell's crimes lies with Peter Murrell, but the issues that are raised by his crimes go beyond Peter Murrell himself. Operation branchform goes to the heart of the culture of the political establishment in Scotland. These are serious issues that require a serious response, which is why it is beyond doubt that there must be a parliamentary inquiry.

There has been some deliberate misinformation from the Scottish National Party, all in the hope that it can blag its way through this and that the story will move on—it will not. The inquiry is not intended to repeat operation branchform, and its role would not be to establish criminality, which is rightly the police's job. However, there are other issues, processes, judgments, implications and lessons that are not a matter for the police but the job of this Parliament.

To respond directly to the SNP amendment, I say that it is simply an attempt to muddy the waters. The inquiry is not about "rival political parties" inquiring into another party's internal workings. The SNP can own the shame of the embezzlement of £400,000 of its own hard-working supporters' money, but there are legitimate questions to be asked about a culture that goes beyond how a party internally operates and that affects how our Government and country are run.

Let me quote the former SNP MP, Joanna Cherry. [*Interruption*.] Some SNP members are laughing at one of their former colleagues, who was bullied and intimidated out of her job. Joanna Cherry wrote:

> "Peter Murrell was not a criminal mastermind he just took advantage of a system devoid of adequate checks & balances and a culture where scrutiny and questioning were demonised. That culture has infected the Scottish government, our Parliament & our civic life. It needs to change."

Members might disagree with the latter point, but the issues merit investigation and answers.

This is the greatest political scandal since devolution. It was a police investigation involving Scotland's governing party, so the public understandably have questions and there must be answers. Given such high levels of disaffection with politics, this inquiry is about restoring trust in our institutions and in our politics.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I ask this quite sincerely: does Mr Sarwar genuinely believe what he just said—that this is the greatest political scandal in the history of devolution—when one of his formerly close colleagues, Colin Smyth, is yet to be prosecuted for what he allegedly did in this place? Does he genuinely believe that this is a greater scandal than that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that criminal cases remain active and that the sub judice rule is engaged.

Anas Sarwar: I say gently to Mr Greer that that is a shocking case that relates to individual behaviour, but today we are talking about a systematic culture of cover-up and secrecy, and the embezzlement of £400,000 of the SNP's own supporters' money. Mr Greer wants to act as a human shield for John Swinney and the SNP—it is for him to answer those questions—but this scandal has implications and lessons for the Scottish Government, for ministers, for Police Scotland, for the Lord Advocate, for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, for the Electoral Commission, for the Scottish Legal Aid Board, for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and for those who administer Short money on behalf of taxpayers.

There are questions for the Lord Advocate—yes, she might have recused herself, but the controversy that was caused by her sharing information with the SNP leadership about charges against Murrell nearly a year before they were made public deserves answers. There are already questions about the Lord Advocate's dual role.

There are questions for the Crown Office. Why did it take so long to bring charges against Murrell? After years of investigation, why was the case conveniently not disposed of until merely weeks after the Scottish election? What were the terms and details of any plea deal and why?

There are questions for the chief constable on how operation branchform was conducted—the staffing, the cost, the length, the timescale and the force's dealings with the Crown. As we have seen from repeated leaks and briefings to the media, issues and disputes arose between the force and the Crown Office. What were those issues and why?

There are questions for the Electoral Commission about its powers, roles, responsibilities and sanctioning powers.

There are questions for the Scottish Legal Aid Board. Why was a man who earned a very large salary, owned his own home, owned property in Portugal, clearly has personal resources and now claims that he can immediately pay back the full amount that he embezzled, able to receive legal aid paid for by taxpayers when so many others in this country are denied it?

Those are questions about a culture of secrecy and cover-up that too often spills over into how senior people in Government—and the Government itself—operate. We all know what happened: there was bullying and intimidation; a treasurer was forced to resign for trying to do the right thing; and three members of the SNP's finance and audit committee quit due to obstruction. Those are all valid questions that must be answered.

There are also questions for those who administer public money: HMRC and those who are responsible for Short money. Last week, John Swinney confirmed to the Parliament that VAT was illegally reclaimed from HMRC using the false receipts. What was the extent of the VAT fraud? How was that money used? Was illegal money spent on election campaigns? Was Short money claimed and used in an illegal way?

What about the ring-fenced £600,000 of donations from SNP members for the supposed purpose of a referendum campaign? We now know that that money was spent by the SNP on other things. Why have there been lies and misinformation? What are the implications and the lessons?

There are undoubtedly questions for Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney, but there are also questions for those who held other positions of responsibility and have been rewarded for their loyalty with ministerial office. Let me give just two examples. Kirsten Oswald, who has been accused of blocking scrutiny of SNP finances and clamping down on whistleblowers, is now a minister; and Shirley-Anne Somerville, a former deputy chief executive to Peter Murrell, is now a cabinet secretary. Why are they being shielded from scrutiny? Again, I say that, if there is nothing to hide, there is nothing to fear, so the SNP should back an inquiry.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Anas Sarwar: If I get the time back, I will happily take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You can, Mr Sarwar.

Patrick Harvie: I wonder whether Anas Sarwar applies the same principle—if people have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear—to our argument that, if there is to be an independent process, it needs to apply to all political parties, so that it can look into, for example, his old friend Peter Mandelson's murky financial ties to the super-rich and criminals around the world and the way in which many United Kingdom Labour ministers expressed their thanks to him for his help in their ascension to ministerial office.

Anas Sarwar: I have sympathy for the argument that Patrick Harvie has made, and I have sympathy with the Green amendment. There should be greater transparency on party financing and donations, including on the £5 million gift that was given to Nigel Farage. However, the problem with the Green amendment is that it makes two very deliberate mistakes. First, it acts as cover for an SNP in trouble—the Greens believe that they are there to protect the SNP. Secondly, it raises a constitutional issue, because it talks about moving powers from Parliament to Parliament. However, I think that there are legitimate issues that Ross Greer and Patrick Harvie would want to investigate.

The measure of a functioning democracy is that even the governing party can be held to account. That is what is at the heart of this matter. The inquiry would be about strengthening our democracy, restoring public trust in our politics, holding those in power and our institutions to account and learning lessons.

I call on all those who care about standards in public life, who care about learning lessons from the biggest scandal in Scottish politics and who care about repairing the trust that is being so terribly damaged by this whole affair to back the motion. How SNP members vote on the motion will show whether the culture that enabled Peter Murrell to commit his crimes has changed or whether it persists to this day. If SNP members

have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear, so they should back the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to conduct an inquiry into the implications and lessons to be learned following the conclusion of Operation Branchform and the embezzlement conviction of Peter Murrell.

15:28

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): In the interests of transparency, I place on the record that my wife is presently employed by the Scottish National Party and has been since April 2023.

I begin by stating emphatically and clearly that what Peter Murrell did represents a serious breach of trust. His guilty plea makes that beyond dispute. Over more than a decade, he used his position of privilege to embezzle more than £400,000 from the Scottish National Party—my party—and from the many dedicated members and activists who placed their faith in him: people whom I and other SNP politicians know and have campaigned alongside for many years. That is a matter of settled record that has, quite understandably, shone a spotlight on the relationship between the public and elected representatives. We all recognise that it has led to some people calling into question a sense of trust in our political system.

For that very reason, it is my belief that the Parliament must be disciplined in its response—a response that must not be about protecting any single party and must not be about promoting any other; rather, it must be about protecting the integrity of the Parliament itself.

Let us be very clear about what is actually being proposed. We are being asked to agree to conduct an inquiry, presumably through the convening of a parliamentary committee comprised of elected representatives of competing political parties, to scrutinise the internal financial operations of one of those competing parties. Every single member who would sit on such a committee has a direct material interest in the outcome of its findings. Their parties contest the same seats. They seek support from the same electorate. They fight the same elections. Therefore, it is surely reasonable to question whether any inquiry and any committee constituted under those conditions could be independent or, at the very least, could be held to be independent.

I believe that there is an obvious conflict of interest in parties investigating each other in this way. When conflict of interest is baked into the very structure of a proposed parliamentary inquiry, no amount of procedural formality can remove that partiality or, at the very least, the perception that such an inquiry would fail to meet the test of impartiality.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I assert that what the minister has said is outrageous. He has called into question the very idea of why we have parliamentary committees and parliamentary inquiries. If the SNP is the victim in all of this, which the First Minister and others have claimed, why on earth would a minister for parliamentary business not entrust the Parliament with the vital work of learning the lessons from what has happened?

Jamie Hepburn: I am not convinced that that intervention was particularly worth hearing. We presumably all accept the objective fact that the issue in question is the former chief executive of the Scottish National Party embezzling money from the Scottish National Party.

Stephen Kerr: You should be in favour of an inquiry.

Jamie Hepburn: If the member is suggesting that it is not the Scottish National Party that is the victim in this case, I do not know who he thinks the victim is.

This picks up on a point that has just been made.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Will he give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Not at the moment.

I believe that the Parliament has a proud and good record of constructive committee work. It is not always easy or straightforward. It is well known that I was back on the back benches for a short while during the previous session, and I was on a parliamentary committee. I found it rewarding, collaborative and collegiate work. Parliament is capable of doing that. The question is whether, on this particular subject, it would be perceived to be possible, and I do not think that a perception of an impartial process could be achieved. I do not think that any of us would wish the record of the Parliament to be tarnished by inviting members to blur the lines when they have a stake in the verdict.

Michael Marra: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Can I check, Presiding Officer: if I give way, will I get the time back?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Yes. The Presiding Officer has agreed that that should be the case for all debates if you take an intervention.

Michael Marra: I appreciate the minister giving way. Would he not recognise that there is a question of public money paid in Short money to

the SNP? There are questions of public policy that must be addressed, where it is not just the SNP that is the victim, as the minister asserts.

Jamie Hepburn: Any of those questions will be dealt with by the Electoral Commission. That issue has already been raised in Parliament. The question was asked of the First Minister, and he responded clearly. This is a party political matter.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): It was about HMRC.

Jamie Hepburn: I think that the question was about Short money, Ms Baillie, and it would be a matter for the Electoral Commission.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way one more time, to Mr Cole-Hamilton.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The minister suggests that it would be inappropriate for a committee of inquiry to investigate the issue, but we have the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, which regularly investigates matters and is entrusted to do so in an impartial way. I do not see any disparity with that.

Does the minister recognise that there are still questions for Government ministers to answer? At the time when it was seized, the camper van was explained away by a senior SNP source as a legitimate campaign room. We still do not know who told them to say that, or why.

Jamie Hepburn: Government ministers are, quite correctly, accountable for their Government ministerial responsibilities, and they will be held to account by the Parliament. That speaks to the very point that I am striving to make.

In relation to the point about the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, it is the role of that committee to ensure that we adhere to the standards that are expected of us as members of the Scottish Parliament. Today, this Parliament is trying to veer into the territory of the internal governance of an individual political party. That would be a bad precedent to set.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way one more time, to Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: Does Jamie Hepburn not recognise that that is a fundamental misinterpretation of the Nolan principles? Openness and transparency relate to all aspects of the life of an individual in public office, not just the narrow aspects that relate to their ministerial responsibilities. His interpretation is a misinterpretation, is it not?

Jamie Hepburn: Of course I recognise that those principles stretch across all areas of public life. I question the appropriateness of a parliamentary committee inquiring into the activities and internal affairs of a political party. [*Interruption*.]

I can hear—and I have heard several times—members saying, "That's not what we are seeking to do." That is precisely what they are seeking to achieve through this debate and through the motion. Let us not pretend otherwise. We are not daft—we know that that is what they are trying to do.

We should be seeking to have a strong Parliament that uses its powers to hold the Scottish Government to account in relation to its governing activities. That is what serves the people of Scotland well. The suggested inquiry would divert and waste those powers on the internal governance of rival parties.

Last week, the Parliament agreed a committee structure that will be at the heart of legislative scrutiny and of holding the Government to account. Yesterday, we collectively determined who will convene those committees for this parliamentary session. The results of those elections were announced earlier today; I congratulate those, across all parties, who were elected to hold those offices. As parliamentarians, whether we are in government or otherwise, we should all desire strong and fair processes that enable those of us who are privileged to be elected to this place to contribute to effective governance.

In Scotland, we are lucky to have independent institutions whose explicit purpose is to investigate criminal conduct, gather evidence, assess that evidence against the standard of law and bring prosecutions when the public interest demands it; Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service exist for precisely those purposes. We have institutions that sit independently of political interference and direction, to deliberate and determine the outcome of such matters; the courts serve that role. None of those institutions are beholden to any Government, party or political agenda. That independence is not a bureaucratic nicety—it is the cornerstone of the rule of law. Their independence is as sure a defining characteristic of being part of a free, pluralistic democracy as this freely elected Parliament is.

Anas Sarwar: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way one more time.

Anas Sarwar: I thank the minister for giving way. He has been generous with interventions.

I get that the minister will not want questions to be asked about the internal workings of the SNP. However, does he accept that it is the legitimate role of this Parliament to ask questions on the internal workings of the police service, the Lord Advocate, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Legal Aid Board, HMRC and those who administer Short money and public money? Does he accept that those are legitimate areas for this Parliament to question?

Jamie Hepburn: There is a range of means by which any parliamentarian can do that.

Anas Sarwar: He is blocking the means.

Jamie Hepburn: It is inescapable that the type of inquiry that Mr Sarwar seeks to establish would go into the internal workings of an individual political party. That would not be a good precedent to set.

Any reasonable assessment would conclude that operation Branchform has been extensive, thorough and conducted by what the chief constable herself described as a team of "very skilled" individuals. It resulted in a charge, a prosecution and a verdict in court. The criminal justice process has done what it was designed to do.

If there are further investigative threads still to be pulled, it follows that those threads should be pursued by the bodies with the powers, expertise and, crucially, independence to pursue them properly. This Parliament cannot—and no committee of elected politicians can—replicate those powers or that independence. We could not compel disclosure under the same legal frameworks or assess evidence with the same impartiality. Crucially—and it is important that we remind ourselves of the fact in the context of what may be said as part of today's debate—we cannot act without the risk of contaminating, complicating or prejudicing the very proceedings that either the independent authorities are concluding or that they may yet have cause to pursue.

The people of Scotland who elected us to this Parliament did not send us here to spend our parliamentary time conducting political post-mortems on the internal governance of rival parties. They sent us here to govern and to address—with urgency, competence and purpose—the pressures that are bearing down on their daily lives.

Across Scotland today, families are making impossible choices at the supermarket checkout and the kitchen table. Energy bills, food prices and housing costs are not abstractions. They are the lived reality of hundreds of thousands of our constituents, and they demand our sustained attention.

On 7 May, the people of Scotland elected a Parliament in the expectation that those would be the types of issues that we would focus on. On 7 May, they chose a Scottish Government that intends to do that and to work for them—a Government that, day in, day out, is always on Scotland's side.

That brings me on to the part of my amendment that focuses on the need for us, collectively, to use our time to address matters that will improve the lives of the people of Scotland, by tackling the cost of living challenges that they face, improving the public services that they use and taking action to save the climate that we all rely on.

This Government is firmly focused on what matters most to the people of Scotland. Just yesterday, we brought forward a debate on the need to grow our economy as part of the process of creating a more resilient, more prosperous and fairer Scotland for all. As the First Minister has set out, as part of the process of bringing about a fairer Scotland, it will be the defining mission of this Government to support families with the cost of living and to eradicate child poverty. Our policies are already helping to keep an estimated 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year, but we are determined to do more and to deliver truly ambitious change to reduce the cost of living. That includes expanding all-year-round childcare to all children from nine months of age to the end of primary school—[*Interruption*.]

I hear Stephen Kerr saying from the sidelines, as he always does, "Stick to the motion." I am speaking to my amendment. Let me remind Mr Kerr of what my amendment says. It

> "urges elected representatives to use their parliamentary time to address matters that will improve the lives of the people of Scotland, including tackling the cost of living crisis, improving public services such as this NHS and taking climate action."

That is what I am speaking to right now.

I remind Mr Kerr and other members of our ambition to expand all-year-round childcare to all children from nine months to the end of primary school—the Government brought that issue to the chamber for debate on 27 May.

We have other plans to reduce the cost of living. We intend to introduce a £2 nationwide cap on bus fares and to increase the Scottish child payment to £40. We will be happy to bring those matters back to the chamber to be subject to scrutiny, just as we brought the issue of the first homes fund to the chamber. The statement on that fund, which was delivered on 27 May, set out that it will open by the end of June and will provide first-time buyers with a £10,000 contribution towards a deposit on their

first home. In its first phase, the fund is expected to support 2,000 households in the first 100 days of this Government and 50,000 over the course of this session of Parliament.

Just last week, the Scottish Government brought a debate to the chamber to set out the progress that we have made in improving our national health service and to deliberate on how we can collectively respond to the challenges that remain. Waiting lists in Scotland continue to fall. New out-patient waits of more than a year have decreased for 11 consecutive months, and in-patient and day-case waits have reduced for 15 months in a row. Our plan is delivering for the people of Scotland.

Let those be the types of issues that we bring to the chamber to discuss, to question and to debate. This Government is delivering what we promised and what we meant when we said in the election that we would continue to deliver for the people of Scotland.

There is much more to be done, and the Parliament has a role in doing that work. Every hour of committee time, every hour of research resource and every hour of attention that is diverted into a parliamentary process that is structurally conflicted is an hour not spent on that work.

However, the subject of accountability for serious financial wrongdoing is not one that I wish to shy away from. Accountability, transparency and trust in public and political life matter—

Jackie Baillie: Not to you.

Jamie Hepburn: It is precisely because those things matter—they matter very much to me, Ms Baillie—that it matters that accountability has a proper home.

In this instance, transparency has been best served by independent authorities that have the legal compulsion powers to extract it. The trust of the Scottish public, which every member presumably wishes to restore, will not be rebuilt by politicians using the machinery of Parliament to fight battles that belong in court or looking at matters of internal party governance.

I will close by speaking directly to the values that underlie this debate. No one in this chamber should be in any doubt that Scotland is not alone in experiencing falling levels of trust. Around the world, trust in Governments, institutions and, indeed, democracy itself is in retreat. However, trust in Government, in elected officials and in the democratic institution that we all stood for a little over a month ago is important.

When our institutions behave with integrity, when the police investigate without fear or favour, when the Crown Office acts on evidence, when the courts consider matters free from external influence and when this Parliament focuses its energy on the people's priorities, that is when trust is earned.

I do not pretend that trust has not been damaged in recent weeks, months and years, but let none of us pretend—this speaks to the points that were made by Mr Harvie and Mr Greer—that the blame for that can be laid at any single door. Also, let none of us pretend that the damage is not real and that it does not deserve a real response. However, the real response is not to conduct an exercise in what, in my view, would inevitably become—whatever its formal terms of reference—a partisan political exercise; it is to ensure that our independent institutions are properly respected, properly insulated from political pressure and properly trusted to complete their work.

Let the law do its work, let this Parliament do ours and let us ensure that this Parliament returns to doing what it does best: legislating, scrutinising Government and making the case for a Scotland that works better for the people who live here. I urge Parliament to support the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S7M-00294.1, to leave out from "agrees" to end and insert:

"considers the notion of representatives of political parties using a parliamentary committee to inquire into the internal operations of rival political parties to constitute a conflict of interest; believes that it is vital that independent authorities, including Police Scotland and the Crown Office, are free from political interference to fully and properly investigate and prosecute any and all criminal conduct, and urges elected representatives to use their parliamentary time to address matters that will improve the lives of the people of Scotland including tackling the cost of living crisis, improving public services such as the NHS and taking climate action."

15:46

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am glad that the Labour Party has secured a debate on restoring public trust in Scottish politics, because, quite clearly, the public have very little trust in our political institutions. However, that did not begin and does not end with Peter Murrell's crimes against the SNP. We have already talked this afternoon about the case of Peter Mandelson and the allegations against Colin Smyth. Anas Sarwar has already talked about the arc of history of this Parliament, and we could go back further and talk about Mike Watson, a member of this Parliament who was convicted of criminal offences. We could also talk about the mysterious disappearance of Foysol Choudhury—the purging of Foysol Choudhury, as some members have suggested.

If we want to talk about the damage that has been done to our politics in a UK context, we could mention Labour Together, an institution with strong links to the Prime Minister that was caught spying on journalists and did not declare substantial amounts of money that it had received in donations. We could also look to the Conservative Party, which for at least a decade was awash with Russian money that linked right back to Vladimir Putin's inner circle, or we could talk about Nigel Farage and his £5 million donation from a cryptocurrency billionaire. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Members, let us hear the speech.

Ross Greer: Of course, the current Prime Minister was almost immediately mired in scandal because of the clothes and gifts that he received from Lord Alli.

Two things can be true here. The SNP was the victim of a crime, but its internal governance processes and culture also failed. The crime was a matter for the police and the prosecution service, which have done their job; the SNP's internal governance arrangements are for it. If I was a member of the SNP, I would demand a root-and-branch review.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Ross Greer: Not quite yet, Mr Johnson.

However, I am not a member of the SNP, and it is no more my job to tell the SNP how to run that party than it would be for any member in this place to tell me how to run the Scottish Green Party.

We could have spent this afternoon talking about many different issues. The Labour Party's proposal is the result of one thing: it is the response of sore losers who cannot deal with the fact that, for 20 years, they have failed to put a positive vision about this country to the people and have got the response that they deserved over and over again.

We could have spent this afternoon talking about the NHS, an issue that I know is close to the heart of Anas Sarwar. We could have spent it talking about the problems in our social care system or—bearing in mind the greenhouse gas emissions statement yesterday—about the Government's failure to get a grip on the climate emergency, but we are not doing any of that.

We can reflect on the few weeks that we have been in this place since the election. I am not one who is going to spend the next five years giving the Reform Party any credit whatsoever, but it is notable that the two parties that have used First Minister's question time to ask about and challenge the Government on matters of public policy are the Greens and Reform—the two parties that gained seats at the election. As for the parties that have played silly games at First Minister's question time for the past few weeks—Labour and the Conservatives—well, we all know what result the public gave them last month.

Anas Sarwar and, indeed, a further number of our unionist colleagues like to regularly challenge the Scottish Government and all of us who believe in the cause of independence to focus on the day job and get on with that. Do they really think that the public believe that this topic is the day job of this Parliament? Of course they do not. On Mr Sarwar's specific criticism that an element of the Green amendment plays constitutional politics, I believe that the regulation of political parties and the laws that govern them should be the day job of this Parliament. Political parties have to register separately to run in Scotland. It is only logical that this Parliament, which has responsibility for elections and the franchise, should also have responsibility for that area of electoral law.

However, there is an obvious conflict of interest in having an inquiry along the lines of what the Labour Party has put forward, and I suggest that it is very much a case of throwing stones from inside glass houses. I was asked about that in the media this morning, and I used examples from other areas of public life. If one old firm team was accused of wrongdoing, we would not appoint the other one—or any club in Scotland—to an inquiry into that. We would appoint the governing institutions. In the case of political parties, the governing institutions include the Electoral Commission. There are serious questions about whether the Electoral Commission has the powers that it needs in order to act. There are also serious questions about whether it has the culture that it needs to oversee political parties in this place.

The Green proposal focuses on restoring public trust in this institution. Most importantly, the Greens have proposed an independent review, along the lines of that proposed in recent weeks by Professor James Mitchell, Transparency International and others. The review that we have proposed would apply to all political parties, not just one, to remove the element of conflict of interest.

Mr Sarwar, rightly, puts the challenge to the SNP, but I put it to him and to all parties in this place that if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. The Greens have nothing to hide or fear about an independent review of political party financial arrangements; neither has the Labour Party, I hope. We believe that an independent review that looks at all political parties and the governing arrangements, rules and regulations that apply to all of us is the appropriate way forward. We would like such a review to look into issues such as the influence that is wielded by

wealthy donors and dark-money organisations—those who do not declare their own funding before giving to political parties and working with them. According to a poll that was published, I believe, only this morning or yesterday, 83 per cent of the public across the UK believe that wealthy individuals wield influence over political parties through the money that they direct towards them. We will restore trust in politics by addressing such issues, which the public believes are seriously undermining our democracy.

There are serious risks to our democracy, whether in Scotland or UK wide. Foreign interference is a serious risk, and donations to political parties are one way in which foreign interference has wormed its way into our system. The Rycroft review made that clear. The previous UK Conservative Government would not act on it—because, I suggest, of the Russian money that I referenced. To its credit, the current UK Labour Government is entertaining proposals to deal with the issue. [*Interruption*.] Mr Sarwar is missing the limited praise that I am giving the UK Government, because of his conversation with other members. The UK Labour Government seems to be willing to get a grip on some of the issues, and I give it credit for that.

Transparency in our politics is important. I have mentioned the role of the Electoral Commission. Members across the Parliament will appreciate why the Greens in particular are frustrated with the Electoral Commission over its failure to act on issues that are undermining the legitimacy of our politics.

In closing, I go back to what James Mitchell proposed. I am not claiming that he endorses the Green proposals but, clearly, what we have proposed is closer to his calls than anything else that has been offered today. He said:

> "we need to make sure that what is done results in improved outcomes, enhances transparency and improves internal party governance … not an opportunity for grandstanding, obfuscation and hyper-partisanship."

The Greens do not want a review for its own sake. The 2025 social attitudes survey showed that less than half the Scottish public trust the Scottish Government, and that far fewer trust the UK Government. That lack of trust is easy to exploit. We see that in the other major story in Scotland this week. That is more relevant to us all than the situation inside the SNP.

The Greens do not want to waste public money on a hyperpartisan parliamentary inquiry with no clear objective other than bashing the Scottish Government. I urge members to support instead the Green proposal. We can produce something positive from the mess. In and of itself, the proposal will not restore trust in politics, but it takes an important step towards doing so. This afternoon, we can do something for the public, not just advance our party interests. I urge members to support the Green proposal.

I move amendment S7M-00294.2, to leave out from "agrees" to end and insert:

> "believes there is a need to restore public trust in politics following multiple recent financial scandals, including those uncovered by Operation Branchform; further believes that an independent review into party political finances would go some way towards restoring this trust; believes that, to avoid this becoming a nakedly partisan process, it should be independently led rather than conducted by parliamentary committee, and that its remit must apply to the funding of all political parties; recognises wider concerns about the role of money in politics, including the scale of donations by extremely wealthy individuals, and the influence of organisations that refuse to disclose their funding sources, and calls for the devolution of power over the regulation of political parties and their funding to allow for the implementation of any recommendations of the independent review that would require legislative change."

15:54

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I begin by praising Police Scotland and the National Crime Agency, which delivered justice in the face of inappropriate political meddling.

I remember when the Scottish National Party chief executive attacked Police Scotland. Peter Murrell's successor described its inquiry as a "wild goose chase" and a "grotesque circus", even offering a £5 bet that no charges would be brought. Well, charges were brought and Peter Murrell admitted his guilt and is behind bars, awaiting sentencing. However, this debate is not about one high-profile criminal; it is about public trust in Scottish politics, which has been dominated by one party for decades.

As a journalist, I investigated organised crime—organisations that are ruthless towards their rivals and even more ruthless with their own people when they step out of line. There is secrecy, dishonesty, intimidation, intolerance and power in the hands of one small group—toe the line or else. There are clear parallels with the culture of the SNP.

Jamie Hepburn: The member bemoans the fact that the SNP has dominated political life for the past 20 years. Will he reflect on the fact that that is because we have won five Scottish Parliament elections in a row? His party has lost every single Scottish Parliament election that has ever been contested.

Russell Findlay: Arrogance, too—unbelievable.

SNP members might not like that characterisation and the comparison with organised crime, but they should listen to senior

people on their own side who dared to ask questions, such as the former MP Joanna Cherry or former treasurer Douglas Chapman.

"Nothing to see here," they were warned by Nicola Sturgeon, and "Everything is fine," they were assured by John Swinney, but everything was not fine—far from it. For at least 12 years, Peter Murrell was stealing from under their noses; more than 1,000 items were bought with stolen money: jewellery, watches, homeware, toiletries, electronics and Montblanc pens that cost hundreds of pounds, just like the pens that Nicola Sturgeon flaunted right here when she was First Minister. Who on earth spends three grand on a salt and pepper set made out of crystal?

Then of course there is the 125-grand camper van that Nicola Sturgeon says she did not see. It is 24 feet long, 10 feet high and weighs 3.5 tonnes, but Nicola Sturgeon did not see it, just as she and John Swinney did not see anything remotely suspicious year after year after year.

Peter Murrell stole at least £400,000 to bankroll his and his wife's luxury lifestyle. In a plea deal, £60,000-worth of goods were wiped from Murrell's charge sheet—a plea deal crucially timed for just after the Scottish election. Did Peter Murrell discuss that with Nicola Sturgeon when they met at Easter time? Did the police agree with the Crown Office to prosecute just one person? Those are some of the many questions for an inquiry. Here is another: did Peter Murrell steal taxpayers' money? We still do not know the answer to that.

During this extraordinary SNP scandal, journalists also suffered bully-boy tactics. Hannah Rodger, John Ferguson, Georgia Edkins and others were lied to and smeared. They were told that they were wrong when they were right. Their professional reputations were maliciously denigrated.

We saw the same tactics during the Alex Salmond scandal. The SNP used every dirty trick to destroy the man who delivered it an independence referendum. It continues to attack him as he lies in his grave.

What of the young victims whose party protected the predatory sex offender Jordan Linden?

This week, allegations have resurfaced about a businessman handing Peter Murrell £50,000 to secure a safe Westminster seat for a relative. Now the SNP has been found guilty of contempt of court relating to the Alex Salmond case.

The sleaze keeps rising, and the stench gets worse, yet John Swinney sticks his head in the sand. His response to all this, as we heard from Jamie Hepburn there, is to hide behind the election result. He reckons that that gives him a free pass: telling the truth does not matter, attacking the police and journalists does not matter and silencing whistleblowers and crime victims does not matter. He preaches transparency, candour and respect, yet he practises secrecy, dishonesty and disrespect. He pontificates about misinformation while his party runs a breathtaking campaign of misinformation about renewable energy. They reckon they will get away with it, because they always do.

The Green amendment seeks to help the SNP by muddying the waters and diverting attention. Ross Greer is running to the rescue of John Swinney, who he calls his work dad—the same Mr Greer who thanked Peter Murrell for giving him a hefty pay rise, then deleted the tweet.

The SNP's rank of taxpayer-funded advisers will tell it to brazen it out, but public trust in Scottish politics is in freefall. Just weeks ago, one in two Scots did not exercise their right to vote. Today, we have a collective duty to do the right thing and back a proper inquiry, because if MSPs refuse to do so, Scotland's MPs surely must.

I move amendment S7M-00294.3, to insert at end:

"; believes that public trust is undermined when legitimate questions go unanswered; notes the conviction of Peter Murrell following Operation Branchform; believes that scrutiny is essential to democratic accountability, and calls for any independent inquiry to establish what lessons must be learned from this scandal and what reforms are required to restore public confidence in Scottish politics."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Amanda Bland, who is making their first contribution.

16:01

Amanda Bland (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I very much look forward to working with you and all my colleagues in the Parliament; I wish you all the best of health. May we all serve Scotland with integrity, compassion, justice and wisdom. To the constituents whom I represent in Central Scotland and Lothians West—I will serve you well.

I deliver my first speech with a sense of irony, because, as I arrive in the Parliament and am given my portfolio as justice spokesperson for Reform UK Scotland, the biggest political scandal in Scottish history unravels and the former chief executive of the SNP, Peter Murrell, pleads guilty to embezzling £400,000 from SNP funds. You could not make it up.

I take my duties as a regional MSP and justice spokesperson seriously. Many people know me as a primary teacher, but, before teaching, I was a police officer. I specialised in child protection and worked on incredibly complex, disturbing and

serious cases in which children were abused and neglected, and, sadly, some died at the hands of their abusers. I have a deep respect for the public sector workers who serve us with grace and dignity and who sacrifice themselves and their families to serve their communities. I thank them for their service.

However, we must acknowledge that the very services that are designed to protect the most vulnerable sometimes fail to do so. The recent publication of the learning review into the family C case outlines a deeply disturbing case of systematic child abuse in a family unit that took place in Glasgow. The experiences described in the report reflect the very worst outcome when systems that are designed to protect the most vulnerable fail to function as they should. Key strategies for improvement for the Scottish Government to consider have been highlighted in the report, and I look forward to working with the Government on delivering those improvements.

I reflect on the tragic deaths of the children Victoria Climbié, who died on 25 February 2000, and Peter Connelly, known as baby P, who succumbed to his injuries on 3 August 2007. Those young, innocent lives were lost to abuse, which led to serious case reviews in England and lessons to be learned. After the death of baby Peter, I, along with other multi-agency professionals, delivered high-level training, based on the recommendations in the Lord Laming report, to front-line professionals, in order to prevent anything like those cases from ever happening again. Yet, child abuse continues and organisations that are designed to protect do not deliver, and here we are again.

In Scotland, we have key pieces of legislation, guidance and frameworks for protecting our children: the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007, the "National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021" and the getting it right for every child—GIRFEC—guidance, to name but a few. My point, as justice spokesperson for Reform UK Scotland, is that we have the legislation, guidelines and frameworks in place to protect our children; however, the systematic abuse of children and young people continues in our communities. We must do better.

Domestic abuse and child abuse are often intrinsically linked. As an MSP, I have visited amazing domestic abuse charities. Many charities provide services to victims of crime, which are a lifeline for them. Statutory agencies depend on those charities as part of the wider referral systems to keep victims safe, and individuals rely on the ability to self-refer to try to protect themselves. However, those charities, despite having huge waiting lists, are left to seek funding each year through a variety of means, not knowing from one year to the next whether they can keep their doors open. One manager said to me:

> "On Christmas eve, we didn't know if we would have to shut our doors for good. Our funding streams are unpredictable and fragile."

We need to do better.

Criminals do not work in isolation; they are in our communities, workplaces and homes—they are among us. Criminals rely on individuals failing to act; on failing systems and smokescreens; on whistleblowers being silenced; and on coercion and control of others.

As a police officer, my job was to shine a torch in some very dark corners. My job was to hear hard-to-hear information and not to turn away but, rather, to act, investigate, arrest, interview and charge, and to work towards a successful conviction.

As a teacher, my job was to educate and nurture young minds, to care for and be part of a wider community and to raise children in a safe, happy and secure environment. All those skills I bring to the table. As an MSP, I will be shining a torch in dark corners. I will not turn away when the darkness disturbs me. I will not be deterred. I will not be silenced. I will work with others who work with me. I will challenge and question the Government. I will remain resilient, because people rely on those who are in positions of authority to do better. We must, we can and we will do better.

16:08

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I pay tribute to Amanda Bland for her first contribution in the chamber—I will listen closely to her future contributions as we progress through this session of Parliament.

I am a bleeding-heart liberal. I believe that the matter that we are debating today is a personal tragedy, and I understand the pain that many people feel. I understand that Nicola Sturgeon is hurting deeply with the breakdown of her marriage. I understand that it is a personal tragedy for party members in the SNP who worked really hard to raise a lot of money for a cause that they deeply believe in. I understand all of that. In fact, it is a personal tragedy for Peter Murrell, as well—he is in prison now; we do not know what is going to happen next. It is a personal tragedy for all those people and, in the circumstances, we need to think of those personal tragedies.

However, that is not what today's debate is about. It is about professional failure—it is professional failure, over a large number of

years—and the professional failure of Nicola Sturgeon, as leader of the SNP and the First Minister of the country. As SNP leader, she had fiduciary duties—I know, because I was leader of my party for 10 years and I took those duties incredibly seriously. Irrespective of the personal tragedy, therefore, this is first and foremost a professional issue.

Following all this, we cannot allow the matter to be swept under the carpet. What we are seeing from the SNP is an attempt to dampen it down, make it go away, ignore it and move on. In my advice surgeries over the weekend, this was the first and only thing that people wanted to talk about. This has cut through. People understand that the matter is serious, and they understand that it is incredibly impactful on Scottish politics.

The SNP should take this seriously, because, as well as affecting the body politic, first and foremost, it is affecting the SNP. There have been a number of failings, including the lack of curiosity that we have heard about repeatedly, as well as—this is more central to the operation of Government—the inability to listen. The inability to listen transfers across into how this country is governed. There was an inability to listen to people who protested, who raised the alarm and who raised concerns. We see that concerns were raised well before any police inquiry and that they were raised by people who were senior and respected members of the SNP. However, those people were dismissed and ignored. Frank Ross, who is the former provost of Edinburgh, Allison Graham, Cynthia Guthrie and a former competitor of mine, Douglas Chapman, who was the member of Parliament for Dunfermline and West Fife and who was the party treasurer—all of them resigned. All of them raised the alarm.

We understand that the issue at the beginning was about whether the £600,000 was spent on independence or elsewhere, but all those people at the centre of it wanted to see the books. They were denied the opportunity to do their duties and to carry out their functions. If that is how they were treated by the First Minister of the country, that is surely a matter for the Parliament to inquire about. That is surely our responsibility, because it has massive ramifications.

In recent days, Douglas Chapman has not said—

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Yes, I will take an intervention.

Alan Brown: I thank the member for giving way. In 2005, the Lib Dems accepted £2.4 million from Michael Brown. That money turned out to be stolen money that he had obtained through fraud. The Lib Dems refused to repay that money, because they said that they accepted it in good faith. Why does the member stand here and demand an inquiry, given that the SNP was a victim of fraud, while the Lib Dems were beneficiaries of fraud and refused to help the victims?

Willie Rennie: This is why the SNP is in more serious trouble than we thought. Its first reaction to any criticism of its internal affairs is to throw the muck around and blame everybody else. [*Interruption*.] We addressed that issue at the time. I am getting irritated now, because the SNP needs to understand that this is about the integrity of politics in Scotland as a whole—right here, right now. This is what people in Scotland are talking about, and the SNP is deaf to that.

If the SNP will not listen to me, it should listen to Douglas Chapman, because he is a strong supporter of independence. I do not know whether he continues to be a member of the SNP—I would not blame him if he was not. He said recently that

"senior people in the SNP failed to support the wishes of the SNP membership",

and he pointed directly to John Swinney. He looked back over all that time and recognised that the leaders of his party, who are the leaders of this country, failed in their responsibilities.

For all those reasons, we should have an inquiry. Actually, I think that an inquiry is in the SNP's interests, because it needs to cleanse before it can progress. We all know that; we have all made mistakes as political parties, but we can progress only if we acknowledge, clean up, inquire and have the sunlight running right into our party. That is the only way to move forward.

It is in the SNP's own interest to have an inquiry. I know that the SNP does not like that, because it believes that we will stitch it up. I understand that. However, the SNP is not even attempting to do anything else. It just wants to shut this down, but it cannot afford to shut it down.

I deeply regret that Ross Greer's approach to this is the same as Alan Brown's approach—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Rennie, you need to conclude.

Willie Rennie: I am going to conclude. The approach is to spread the blame around. Let us just reflect for a moment. This is what the public expect—if they believe that the Parliament will sweep the matter under the carpet, their faith in Scottish politics will diminish further. For goodness' sake, let us listen to what people are saying.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to the open debate.

16:15

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): A month ago, the people of Aberdeen Central put their trust in me to deliver for them. Labour told Aberdonians that the election was a two-horse race. While I talked about policies designed to improve folk's lives, the Labour candidate spent the campaign talking about the SNP and talking our city down. In the end, I won that election by 7,000 votes. Shortly after that result was announced, Anas Sarwar, who was humiliated, was forced to concede the election. His leadership led Labour to its worst-ever Holyrood result while the SNP won by a landslide.

The old Confucian maxim teaches us that there are 1,000 lessons to learn in defeat, but I regret to inform the chamber that private schoolboy Anas Sarwar has failed to learn just one. Because here we are again, with Labour choosing to ignore the priorities of the people and to play petty party politics—and, this time, it wants to do so at huge expense to the taxpayer. It is a strategy that is fundamentally built on snobbish arrogance. It failed miserably during the election campaign, and it will fail miserably again today.

Let us remind ourselves of the facts. Police detectives who have decades of experience—the cream of the crop—forensically investigated the issue for more than three and a half years. Their thorough and extensive investigation cost the taxpayer more than £2 million, but now Anas and co want to run it all back, cosplay as Columbo and charge taxpayers millions for the luxury.

I knew that Anas Sarwar thought highly of himself, but even I am shocked that, after such a heavy defeat, his ego seems to be inflating faster than a hot-air balloon. MSPs are not above the law, nor are we police detectives. Our function is to improve the lives of Scots, and Parliament's function is to hold the Government to account. That is the job that I want to get on with, and we should let the police get on with their job and let the Scottish court system get on with its job, too.

Frankly, this smug stunt from the election losers—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Jack Middleton: It is very cute that Stephen Kerr is jumping to the rescue of his better together colleagues. However, I want to make progress with my speech, thank you very much.

This stunt gives me the opportunity to explore a catalogue of scandals from within the Labour Party that have rocked public confidence, and to outline how I believe that Labour may seek to restore the trust that it has lost. They say that you can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep. Peter Mandelson was known as the "Prince of Darkness" to most, but to Anas Sarwar he was known affectionately as an "old friend". The biggest global political scandal of recent memory has led to Anas's chum continuing to be under police investigation for misconduct in public office. We know that Mandelson failed vetting but was pushed through anyway.

Shockingly, though, Labour's disdain for proper process is not unique to that incident. Matthew Doyle was a widely known friend of Sean Morton, a convicted paedophile, yet Doyle's appointment to the Lords and into a plum job for life was pushed through anyway—anything goes, it seems, for Keir Starmer's former head of press. We know, too, that links to Morton extended their tentacles into this very chamber and resulted in another huge scandal for those on the benches to my right. Those events eroded trust in politics, yet Labour still will not come clean about the facts.

Members may be wondering who on earth in their right mind would donate to a Labour Party that is up to its neck in such sickening scandal. Well, I am nothing if not prepared: more than £100,000 in donations has flowed into the accounts of Scottish Labour politicians from a shadowy think tank that was found guilty of 20 breaches of electoral law. Worse still, it spent tens of thousands of pounds hunting down and spying on journalists. I will happily give way to any Labour member right now who can tell the chamber that not a single penny of that tainted Labour Together cash was used during their election campaign. The silence is deafening.

Russell Findlay: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Jack Middleton: I thank Russell Findlay for jumping up—I am sure that Anas Sarwar will buy him a pint later for trying to come to the aid of his better together chum.

I will make progress with my speech. What is in it for the donors? In the case of a convicted sex offender who donated thousands of pounds to Anas Sarwar's leadership campaign, it was access to party events. In the case of Lord Alli, who donated more than half a million quid for designer gear, VIP tickets for new Labour Swifties and swanky penthouse flats, it was an access-all-areas pass to the protected corridors of 10 Downing Street.

For the Sarwar family, who funded the Scottish Labour Party to the tune of almost £300,000, its reward has been watching their son—the humble multimillionaire dentist—win a single constituency election in 2010. Of course, he lost three other elections in quick succession—in 2015, in 2021, and in 2026, to our very own Zen Ghani.

I appreciate that I am new to the chamber, but I cannot recall any Labour member calling for an inquiry into any of those revelations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the member wind up, please?

Jack Middleton: In closing, Presiding Officer, I say that whoever steps up as Labour's next leader when Anas Sarwar inevitably steps down and shoots off to the House of Lords would be wise to follow my lead and that of every SNP back bencher who is rolling up their sleeves, standing up for their constituents' priorities and holding the Scottish Government to account. That is our duty as MSPs and, importantly, it is the function of this Parliament. Multimillion-pound show trials certainly are not.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Members must keep to the time that they have been allowed, particularly if they have not taken interventions. [*Interruption*.] Could the members on the Conservative benches please allow the Presiding Officer to be heard? I call Daniel Johnson.

16:22

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): These are serious matters and there are serious questions. Willie Rennie was absolutely right. I offer this advice to the previous speaker: ad hominem attacks and whataboutery expose the weakness of the SNP's arguments, if that is all that they can speak to.

We have to ask ourselves two simple questions. Do we know all the facts with regard to these events, and is there public interest in having those facts? We do not have all the facts. What is more, there is a clear public interest because, despite Jamie Hepburn's attempts to suggest otherwise, the conduct of political parties—especially the party of government—has a direct bearing on how public power is exercised in this country. That is why it is important.

This would be of public interest regardless of what organisation it was about. If there was embezzlement of any size or scale in any organisation, questions would be asked in Parliament.

We have a separation of duties through legal entities, because that is a suitable thing to do so that we can organise ourselves. As a consequence of that, we have requirements to disclose and provide information, whether we are running a company, a charity or, indeed, an arm's-length body. There has been a clear failure of oversight in that regard. In addition, there are questions of conflicts of interest, because—let us be clear—the chief executive and the party leader were married.

Political parties are not just private entities or associations; they have wider public duties and roles. We are all here because we were selected by political parties. Political parties fundraise, develop policies and co-ordinate political activity, and therefore their conduct has a bearing on the public more widely. Clearly, there has been a breakdown in this particular party in this circumstance, which is why the resignations occurred of individuals who, until that point, had been elected representatives and loyal members of their party.

I turn to some of the specific points that have been made. On the points about the prior investigations, let us be clear that, yes, the police did sterling work—they are dedicated and professional—but they are investigating to a different threshold and scope from that of the wider public interest. The criminal threshold is much higher than the broader threshold that we need to look at, and the scope of the criminal law is very different from that of the wider public interest.

Let us also be clear that the issue is about the actions of people holding public office, and some of the most powerful offices in the land. Actions and conduct that occur in one space are not discrete from those in another. It is not good enough to say that it was with regard to people's party responsibilities that information was withheld, statements were misrepresented or the truth was not forthcoming. We expect people who hold public office to act with integrity and transparency in all their affairs. The reality is that there are serious questions about whether things were misstated and misrepresented while people were in public office. Events occurred, but there were denials that there was anything to see just a matter of weeks before police investigations were launched.

Members do not have to take my word for it. Roger Mullin, one of the key people concerned, who subsequently resigned, said that Nicola Sturgeon's statement to the SNP national executive committee was "ridiculous". He went on:

> "she was the accountable officer and ultimately responsible. But she turned her face against allowing any proper scrutiny. The way in which she behaved throughout the period was entirely inappropriate from a governance point of view."

That was Roger Mullin, a former MP and member of the SNP NEC, making very serious allegations, which I think raise wider questions.

Ultimately, we have wider questions about the separation of power and the exercise of power. The timeline with regard to the court proceedings and the information provided by the Lord Advocate

to the Government are serious issues that cannot be investigated or properly examined, in the way that we need to in order to satisfy ourselves and the public, through criminal investigations or investigations by the Electoral Commission or any of the other bodies that have been wheeled out.

Above all else, we need to consider the Nolan principles, which I invoked earlier, of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Are we all confident that, in the events that occurred, those principles were upheld by people who held Government office? If not, we need an inquiry.

16:27

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): The irony—the absolute irony—of Labour lodging this motion on public trust. Two years ago, people in Scotland voted Labour. They voted for the promise of change, and what did they get? More of the same—only worse, actually. That is what erodes public trust. Promising to protect the vulnerable but then cutting winter fuel allowance and disability payments—that is what erodes public trust. Promising to end sleaze and then taking freebies, clothes, tickets and travel, left, right and centre—

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Kate Campbell: I am delighted to take an intervention.

Jackie Baillie: Does the member not consider that stealing at least £400,000 of money donated by her party's members and by others for an independence referendum is a gross breach of public trust?

Kate Campbell: The member tries to distract from the fact that her Government immediately took clothes, travel and tickets, left, right and centre. Labour promised to make society fairer, but then it failed to tax billionaires and instead created a tax on jobs.

Michael Marra: That is not true.

Kate Campbell: It is true.

That is what erodes trust. Telling people that you are going to create growth and prosperity but having no plan to do it and failing to use any of the—

Stephen Kerr: That sounds like the SNP.

Kate Campbell: Sorry—I thought that the member was making an intervention, but it is just heckling. I will make a note of that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): If members wish to make interventions, they know how to do so. Mr Kerr, could you press your button when you want to make an intervention? It helps with broadcasting.

I call Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Is Kate Campbell giving way?

Kate Campbell: I was not sure whether the member was just heckling or seeking to make an intervention. He never showed up on the screen, so I assumed that it was not an intervention. I will continue if that is the case.

Stephen Kerr: No, that is not how it works. Will Kate Campbell give way?

Kate Campbell: I will give way.

Stephen Kerr: You do not have to press a button and appear on the screen.

Members: Yes, you do.

Stephen Kerr: You do not have to press a button, for goodness' sake—you just intervene. [*Interruption*.] My intervention on Kate Campbell is simply this: is she claiming that the Labour Party has a monopoly on broken election promises? Has she examined the SNP's record in relation to election promises? Has she considered that broken trust might have a lot to do with the fact that the party that Kate Campbell represents has governed in Scotland for the past 19 years?

Kate Campbell: The SNP's record has been very clearly demonstrated by the fact that we won 58 seats in the recent election. The nearest party—[*Interruption*.]

Deputy Presiding Officer, they do not stop talking.

Stephen Kerr: This is a Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): There should be no interruptions while the member has the floor.

Kate Campbell: I can honestly say that the behaviour in this chamber is astonishing. I came from a council, and I thought that it was rowdy in council chambers. In this chamber, we are making decisions about people's lives and I find this behaviour embarrassing.

Stephen Kerr: It is called debating!

Kate Campbell: It is not debating. Debating means allowing people to speak. I will make progress.

Telling people that you will create growth and prosperity but having no plan to do so, and failing to use any of the levers at your disposal to improve our economy or reduce the cost of living and refusing to devolve those powers to a Scottish Government that stands ready and willing to use them—that is what erodes public trust. Most of us

have spent the past year or so speaking to voters, and what have they told us? They are worried about the cost of living crisis and about the impact of global events on their lives. They absolutely hate to see politicians who seem more interested in slinging mud than making the lives of ordinary people better, and they want politicians who take those concerns seriously.

The SNP won the election, which we had no business winning after 19 years in government, and we won it by a landslide because we presented plans to make people's lives better. We showed people that we care about the same things as they do. What happened to Labour and the Tories in that election? They were absolutely decimated.

Jenny Young (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Kate Campbell: No, I will make progress.

Those parties did not listen or come up with plans to make lives better. They thought that they could just bandy around words like "secretive" and "dishonesty" and that that would somehow damage the SNP. We can see how that went for them.

Jenny Young: Will the member take an intervention?

Kate Campbell: No, I will make progress.

Just to ensure that everyone knows how catastrophically it has failed to learn the lessons of that defeat, Labour has, for its very first debate—its first opportunity to bring something to this chamber and to set out its priorities—lodged this motion. There is nothing in it about the party's vision for a better Scotland or how to improve the lives of the people it represents; it is just an opportunity to throw rocks at the SNP because we won the election and Labour lost it. It is so utterly depressing. Labour might think that it is clever to drag out lengthy debates on Peter Murrell, because it thinks that it will somehow harm the SNP, but it has failed to understand that it does not diminish the SNP. Our members and supporters understand that the SNP was the victim of this crime. This debate diminishes Labour. Sadly, as a consequence of the personal attacks, the grasping at straws and insinuation, it also diminishes our politics. It is off-putting to ordinary people and makes politicians seem out of touch.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member is winding up.

Kate Campbell: That is the main cause of the loss of trust in politics, which we should all care about, because a loss of trust causes a loss of participation, and, if the people do not participate, democracy will fail. There might be those—particularly on the populist right—who want that outcome. However, I cannot believe that there are not decent members on the Labour benches who are not cringing inside at Anas Sarwar's and Jackie Baillie's approach. It is unfathomable that, to date, there has been no leadership challenge in their party, because this is so embarrassing for Labour. It lost the election badly because, in place of having policies, Labour just has a visceral hatred of the SNP. That approach was roundly rejected at the ballot box.

We should be focusing on how we make Scotland work for everyone. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the member be heard, please? There must be no interruptions.

Kate Campbell: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

We should be focusing on how we make Scotland work for everyone. Opposition MSPs and SNP back benchers actually have the same job. We all need to roll up our sleeves, get stuck in and work across parties. Yes, we should all challenge the Scottish Government, but we should do so robustly and constructively to improve legislation, to ensure that ministers have considered the impact of their plans and to flag any outcomes that we might be worried about by making representations on behalf of the communities that we represent. Government ministers must listen to our concerns, reflect on them and take them in good faith. When we disagree with one another, we should challenge one another, but we should do so on the substance of a debate, on a point of principle or on a policy that we think the other person is getting wrong. This use of negative language and vague terms to insinuate some sort of blame or wrongdoing is, frankly, just grim, and it is not restoring anything.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Can the member wind up, please?

Kate Campbell: I will do.

In its briefing, openDemocracy sets out some helpful steps that we can take to restore trust. It asks us to include honesty, explain the reasons behind decisions, be respectful and put the public interest first. Democracy matters. Trust matters. I hope that we can spend the next five years restoring that trust by getting policies right. However, sadly, I do not think that this debate will contribute to that.

16:36

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Well, what an extraordinary contribution that was. Kate Campbell got one thing right—only one—when she said that the SNP had no right to win after 19 years in government. She got that right.

I did not think that I would be thanking Anas Sarwar any time soon, but I thank him for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is absolutely right that we should be discussing this, but all that we have heard from SNP members so far is deflection and lashing out. They have not addressed the problem.

The details and the scale of the Murrell embezzlement are shocking. This whole affair is a scandal, and it cuts right to the heart of public trust in politics. People have a right to think that they can trust politicians and political parties. When SNP supporters donated money in good faith, they should have expected that it would be handled properly, but it was not.

We know what Peter Murrell has been convicted of, but the question before this Parliament is not about the criminal case. The real question is, how on earth was this allowed to happen? How could someone so central to the running of the governing party abuse that position over such a long period? Where were the checks? Where was the scrutiny? Where was the accountability?

Let us be frank: this affair did not emerge from nowhere. For years, there were concerns about transparency and about finances. There were concerns about money that had been raised for one purpose being used for another, and there were questions about how that money was being handled.

Instead of openness, we have had defensiveness. Instead of answers, there was evasion. Instead of proper accountability, there was the instinct—which we always see from the SNP—to circle the wagons and hope that the questions would go away. However, the questions have not gone away; they have only grown louder. Who knew what and when? Why were warning signs not acted on sooner? Why were legitimate concerns brushed aside? What does it say about the culture at the top of the SNP that such a serious breach of trust could occur under the noses of its leaders for so long?

When the party of government is engulfed in a scandal of this scale, it drags down confidence in politics as a whole. It tells the public that those who demand trust from others are not always willing to submit themselves to the same standard. That is corrosive to democracy itself.

No, this cannot be brushed aside with the claim that the courts have done their job, so everyone else should just move on. Criminal liability is one thing; political accountability is another. This Parliament has a duty to ask the questions that the public are asking. How did this happen? What failures made it possible? What reforms are now needed to ensure that it can never happen again?

There are questions for the Electoral Commission, the Crown Office, the police and the Lord Advocate. If the SNP has nothing to hide, it should welcome that scrutiny. If the party is serious about restoring trust, it should stop blocking, it should stop deflecting and it should start answering. The Murrell affair is not just about one man's criminal conduct; it is about a system that failed, a culture that closed ranks and a public who deserve far better from those who seek to govern.

Nicola Sturgeon has not been charged with anything in relation to the scandal, but we have to ask—and this could be a question for an inquiry—what she actually meant when she told members of her party's NEC that they should "be very careful" when questioning the finances and that there was nothing to see, although there was?

In the previous session, I introduced a bill that would have given us a system of recall. It fell because the SNP voted against it. Giving voters the ability to remove errant MSPs would have gone some way towards restoring trust in politics. The First Minister has made some encouraging noises about recall in the past couple of weeks when I have asked him about it, as did Alex Cole-Hamilton. We need the Government to get behind that, because we cannot do it without the Government and we need to get recall on to the statute book. At the end of the day, we must do something to restore trust in politics. The Government needs to have a rethink and should back the motion.

16:41

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): This is my first speech since I was re-elected by my constituents in Clydebank, Milngavie and Bearsden north. I am extremely humbled to have again received the trust of the electorate. It is a trust placed in me that I have never taken for granted and never will, and I thank them for sending me back to our national Parliament to represent them. I work hard in recognition of that trust, motivated especially by the fact that I represent the constituency where I was born and raised and still live.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election to the role, and I wish you well in it.

Turning now to the debate, I will say something that I do not think I have ever said before—I think that the Labour Party is correct. Yes, we should debate public trust in Scottish politics and in politics in general. We need to, because we are kidding ourselves if we do not accept that trust in politicians is at a very low level. It is absolutely correct that we address that in debate and in our actions as politicians.

To do that justice, we need the widest possible discussion, not one framed in the narrow partisan terms that are being presented to us today by the Labour Party. As someone recently said,

"This is above party politics—it's a matter of trust and integrity in public life."

Unfortunately, that was Mr Sarwar. I can only say that that was just a soundbite, which did not really mean much. Instead of the approach that is needed to achieve any meaningful discourse, we have a motion that is steeped in political opportunism and dripping with hypocrisy.

Anas Sarwar: I actually agree with the substance of what the member is saying in relation to rebuilding trust. I think, however, that she misheard the opening speech and misreads the motion. The questions that need to be asked and answered are not on the SNP's internal governance, which of course is a matter for the SNP. Surely, however, the member accepts that there are legitimate questions to be asked of the Lord Advocate, Police Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Legal Aid Board, HMRC and those who administer public funds. Surely she can accept that they are legitimate questions and that it is the Parliament's job to ask them.

Marie McNair: When the member gets his own party scrutiny in order, I will probably take him seriously but, at the moment, I do not. It is the same tired attacks and opportunism that resulted in Labour's disastrous election result. The commentator Gerry Hassan has said that Labour's vote share is

"the lowest in the party's history".

Even Paul Hutcheon has said that Labour is "fighting for survival". It is absolutely desperate. Labour's result gives us a clue as to who is contributing most to the factors that have led to the diminution in trust from the electorate. Trust has been on the wane under Labour for some time.

Jenny Young: Will the member take an intervention?

Marie McNair: No—I will make some progress.

The loss of trust goes all the way back to the mishandling of the financial crash, when the payment of bankers' bonuses was more important than the ability of many to pay their household bills. It was exacerbated further by the Westminster expenses scandal, when some of Labour's own went to prison and others were allowed to pay back what they had wrongly claimed—including thousands of pounds that were paid back by the current Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, Douglas Alexander.

Since he arrived on the scene, the only thing that Mr Sarwar has excelled at is the erosion of trust from the electorate. Just a few days ago, Ipsos polling revealed that trust in Mr Sarwar has plummeted, with only the Tory and Reform leaders at even lower levels of favourability. John Swinney was the only leader with a positive rating.

Nothing in the debate—

Jenny Young: Will the member give way?

Marie McNair: I am going to make progress. I will not take an intervention—I have already taken one and I am mindful that I have a lot to say.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member making the speech must be given the floor.

Marie McNair: Nothing in the debate today acknowledges or explains why there is a lack of trust in the integrity of Mr Sarwar and the Labour Party. As has already been said, is he one of the least trusted leaders in Scotland because of cosying up to Peter Mandelson—who was the best friend of Jeffrey Epstein, the convicted paedophile—at a time when everyone knew that Peter Mandelson had maintained contact with Epstein? We will not forget the big smiles in the picture of Sarwar and Mandelson and the quotation that

"It was great to catch up with my old friend".

Scottish Labour appeared to maintain its murky relationship with Mandelson more widely than that—Douglas Alexander apparently credited him for getting Douglas Alexander back into Parliament and then had undeclared meetings at his behest. There are suggestions that Mandelson was allowed to hand pick Scottish Labour Westminster election candidates.

Or is the lack of trust due to the shady influence of Labour Together on the Scottish Labour Party, with Scottish candidates taking thousands of pounds in cash from it? Only one Scottish Labour MP signed the early day motion that called for an independent inquiry into Labour Together and, as far as I am aware, not one Labour MP has handed any money back. As the party's Scottish leader, will Mr Sarwar instruct his MPs to hand the money back, and will he back the calls for an independent investigation? Will he open the books to reveal how much cash Scottish Labour took from Labour

Together? On that point, I am sympathetic to the Greens' amendment.

As one of my constituents said,

"I don't trust a single word Sarwar and the Labour Party say."

It will be no surprise when I reveal that my constituent is one of the women against state pension inequality—the WASPI women—who were promised compensation, then betrayed. We do not forget, either, that Labour campaign leaflet with the fabricated quotation that Mr Sarwar could not explain and which he had to apologise for.

All those things are likely to have caused the lack of trust that the electorate showed in Labour. In particular, they show the spectacular lack of awareness—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must be heard. There must not be interruptions.

Marie McNair: —and the arrogant denial in the motion. [*Interruption*.] I am sorry—I am being heckled by Mr Sarwar.

I condemn Peter Murrell for what he did. It is right that he is in prison. The police investigation did its job and a criminal has been convicted. More generally, I am up for meaningful consideration of how we try to resolve and restore trust in politics. However, anyone who is being honest knows that that is not what the Labour motion is about.

16:48

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Robin McAlpine, the well-known Scottish writer, campaigner and supporter of independence, said, when addressing the SNP response to the Murrell criminal case, that

"The biggest mistake you are making is misunderstanding the nature of this scandal for the public."

I believe that he is right. He said:

"They are sick of powerful people abusing their power. They are in a cost of living crisis and the list of luxury purchases"

that Peter Murrell stole

"is nauseating. They think you're all at it (unfairly) and that you all have each other's backs so justice is never done".

The SNP does not see what is going on. That is the point that McAlpine was making. Willie Rennie made that point, too: that SNP members do not see that this is not only hurting Scottish politics but hurting their party. I have just heard that, apparently, what has happened does not diminish the SNP—I will come to that.

Let us talk of victims. There has not been much mention of the ordinary people who believe in the cause of independence and gave their own hard-earned cash—they have an interest, too.

The SNP has been in power for 20 years—that is a success—and it is going to have been in power for 25 years, which has never happened, but surely that means that there is a much greater responsibility on it to lead the way in tackling the cynicism against all of us from an electorate where almost half did not vote in the recent election. There is public distrust of all politicians. The Government has a big responsibility in that regard, which it does not seem to be waking up to.

There has not been a bigger scandal in Scottish politics in recent times. As Anas Sarwar said, people still have questions about how it was ever allowed to happen. We have seen no evidence that lessons have been learned. The SNP position has remained the same throughout: "This is our business. Keep out." Coincidentally, that is exactly what those who questioned the accounts were told.

The SNP is opposed to a parliamentary inquiry. I have listened to some of the points that have been made about the reasons for that, but my problem is that SNP members have not made any serious suggestions about how a wider look could be taken at the questions that need to be asked.

Patrick Harvie: I am genuinely trying to treat the issue with the seriousness that it deserves. We have proposed a way forward that would be independent. My question to those who are still seeking a parliamentary process is how on earth, realistically, they would expect that to avoid the naked partisanship that we saw during the inquiry into the Alex Salmond allegations in session 5, in which evidence that was given by witnesses off the record, to protect their privacy, was leaked by members of the Parliament.

Pauline McNeill: I think that there are members of all parties who would take an honourable position on such a committee, but that is just my personal view.

I turn to the matter of why there are wider questions to be asked. Every newspaper, broadcaster and social media outlet is talking about the issue. It will not go away, and the fact that it will not go away is being further fuelled by the Government's refusal to consider any scrutiny of how the situation was allowed to arise in the first place.

There can be no denying the public interest in the course of events that was reported in 2021, which involved the governing party. Therefore, it is in the public interest, and the SNP's interests, to do more to show that those questions can be answered.

Although it is the case that an individual has now been convicted of a serious criminal offence and found responsible for the crime, the issue goes beyond that. That is where the Green amendment misses the point. I do not understand why the SNP's appeal for donations for an independence referendum was not included in the COPFS investigation. Furthermore, it does not sit comfortably with me that it has been announced in the press today that Murrell said that he was interested in talking about a plea of guilty in March. I know the court system quite well, and I am not comfortable with the fact that it took until the second or third week in May for that plea to be discussed and negotiated and for an outcome to be reached. I have questions about that.

Jamie Hepburn is right to say that we need to be careful about questioning the independence of the Crown and the police. I totally accept that point. However, it should not be the case that we, as politicians, are never prepared to challenge when we do not feel comfortable about things that we see.

I ask members to forget that it is me or the Labour Party telling them this. I am telling them that people on the streets of Scotland and—behind closed doors—police officers are asking the same questions. It may be the case that nothing corrupt or wrong went on, but until there is an inquiry that allows such wider questions to be asked, I am afraid that, for the SNP, the issue will simply not go away. So, if you will not support our motion on the setting up of a parliamentary inquiry, give something to the general public—never mind the Labour Party—so that they can be satisfied that the questions to which I have referred can be legitimately asked.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I remind all members that they must speak through the chair.

16:54

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): We know that the public has always had a healthy mistrust of politicians and we know that trust is hard to gain and, once lost, is even harder to win back. We have gained that knowledge through our experience of the Westminster expenses scandal, of UK state cover-ups such as the Hillsborough disaster and the Post Office Horizon scandal, and of the failure of both Labour and Tories to abide by the ombudsman's recommendation of compensation for the WASPI women. Those are fundamental miscarriages of justice that completely undermined public confidence in and perception of institutions, and such things become a plague on all our houses.

That said, it is obvious to me that the aim of today's debate is not about restoring trust in Scottish politics. The concept of political parties holding an inquiry into only the SNP is clearly partisan. At least the amendment from the Greens calls for an inquiry to be independent and to cover the finances of all parties. That would involve looking at the funding of Labour Together, which *Democracy for Sale* found had received £730,000 in undeclared donations. Its funding was not transparent. It was an organisation that paid private investigators to dig dirt on reporters who highlighted the flow of money to Starmer's Labour Party.

Russell Findlay: Will the member give way?

Alan Brown: We also need to consider the outrageous donations to Reform UK from the crypto billionaires and Farage's undeclared £5 million gift from Christopher Harborne. What was Farage's response when asked about his non-declaration? He claimed that his phone was hacked by Russia—there was no contrition, just an attempt to muddy the water with a spurious hacking claim that experts would have cast doubt on. Harborne has donated £15 million to Reform while living abroad. So far this year, Reform has gained £9 million from those billionaires, and it tries to tell us that it is the party to protect the working classes. These are the same type of people who funded the Brexit campaign's lies and Cambridge Analytica with dark money. If anything ever undermined public trust, it was the Brexit promises of £350 million a week for the NHS.

Of course, the Tories were funded by Russian oligarchs. If Russell Findlay wants to come in now, I will take his intervention.

Russell Findlay: I was going to ask whether the member had anything to say about the journalists in Scotland who were denigrated, attacked and told they were lying by members of his party when they were doing their hard and tenacious work to get the truth about the Nicola Sturgeon and Peter Murrell scandal.

Alan Brown: I genuinely do not know what the guy is talking about—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Brown—

Alan Brown: —but, obviously, people should not be denigrated. I agree that there should be no smearing à la what I was talking about in relation to Labour Together and the fact that it attempted to shut down journalists by paying private investigators. I agree with that premise.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Brown, please sit down for a moment.

This issue has arisen with a number of members. I ask every member to refer to other members by their full name, please.

Alan Brown: The reality is that there has been a police investigation into the embezzlement of funds from the SNP. A parliamentary inquiry is not going to add any more to that and would be a waste of money. It would not even satisfy the Opposition. At the moment, we have an ongoing independent public inquiry into issues around hospitals, but, instead of letting that take its course and hopefully get proper answers for the grieving families, Anas Sarwar continues to demand answers in the chamber instead of waiting for the conclusion of that public inquiry. It is always the politics first.

Jenny Young: So that we are clear, is the member saying that Anas Sarwar has been wrong to come to this chamber and represent families whose children died in a hospital that, it is pretty well accepted, was opened before it was safe? Is he wrong to do that on behalf of his constituents in Glasgow?

Alan Brown: The member did not listen to a word that I said. I said that, hopefully, a public inquiry will get proper answers for the grieving families. That is what I want to happen. What I am saying is that there is no point in demanding answers in the chamber before the public inquiry is concluded. The public inquiry is there to get the answers.

Again, that shows the hypocrisy in this place around the embezzlement case, which is really frustrating. It is the SNP members who are the victims of the actions of a man who abused the trust that was put in him. Admittedly, that situation demonstrated the pitfalls of allowing too much power to be given and faith to be put in one individual. However, clearly, that situation has been discovered, and there are now procedures in place for greater control of SNP finances.

The fact that auditors signed off the accounts illustrates the scale of deceit. However, this was an individual within the SNP, not an elected official accountable to the public.

The notion that plea and sentencing taking place after the election somehow altered the outcome of that election is truly pathetic. It is head-in-the-sand stuff about how bad the election was for Labour and the Tories. From chapping the doors, I can assure them that enough people knew all about camper vans, so the idea that the election was influenced to our benefit is beyond parody. Labour, whose vote share and number of seats has decreased in every election since 1999, cannot even look inwards to see its own failings. The fact is that, at Westminster, it promised change but delivered more austerity. The fact is that, on day 1, Lord Ali had bought access to number 10. Labour members ignore the fact that the party's anti-corruption minister had to resign due to allegations of corruption.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member is winding up.

Alan Brown: I have taken a couple of interventions, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Exactly. You have time in hand. I was saying to the member that you do not have time to take interventions, but you have time to wind up because you have additional time.

Alan Brown: Labour's homelessness minister had to resign for trying to falsely evict tenants. Its housing minister and Deputy Prime Minister resigned for not paying the full amount of a property tax. A Cabinet Office minister resigned because of Labour Together. Starmer has appointed 122 life peers in just two years, which is the same as the number appointed by May and Johnson combined. It is as though cash for honours had never gone away.

That is the party that thought that Mandelson was suitable to be UK ambassador to the US, despite his dodgy history and links to Epstein. Labour tried to block a parliamentary inquiry into that public appointment—a public appointment that, clearly, railroaded vetting and security procedures.

I have had one email on the suggested inquiry. Overnight, I have had 150 emails about the mandate of the independence parties. Maybe the Opposition should realise that the constitutional question is a matter of trust for voters and cannot be continually ignored by Westminster.

As per my opening remarks, trust is hard won. We can regain it only by being successful and showing leadership in public office. After 19 years, the SNP has again been given the trust of the people to form the Government. That is a reflection of past achievements. We need to go forwards and deliver on our promises. The opening weeks of the session show to me the desire for us to get on with the day job of growing the economy, continuing to bring down NHS waiting lists, delivering on infrastructure projects and always putting first the people and interests of Scotland.

17:02

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Just over a month ago, the SNP won the election—who would have thought it?—and we walked alongside other parties into this chamber, fresh

and ready to go. We had all spent months knocking on doors and listening to the trials, tribulations, dreams and hopes of voters. I was hopeful. I thought that there was a great opportunity. When I listened to the first speeches and early contributions to debate of many members, across the parties, I was really encouraged. We had an opportunity to work together and co-operate on things that would make a real difference to our constituents. I am still ready to do that.

Even Anas Sarwar, Labour's current leader, spoke about focusing on what really mattered: the NHS, schools, childcare and tackling the cost of living crisis, to name a few. He seemed passionate about what people actually care about and the need to show them that the Parliament is capable of rising above party politics to deal with real issues—which I and the Scottish Government are happy to work together to tackle.

However, as they say, a week in politics is a long time, and it has taken only a couple of weeks for many members to show their true colours. Here we are today, not debating how we can work together to help people but instead creating the same old division, sowing doubt and scoring political points rather than scoring for Scotland. The people of Scotland elected us not to spend our time engaging in petty party politics but to represent them, listen to them and improve their lives. Sadly, some members seem incapable of resisting the temptation to debase the Parliament in pursuit of a political headline. They should hang their heads.

Let us be clear about the facts. Operation Branchform has already taken place. Police Scotland spent more than five years and more than £2 million of public money investigating these matters. It was not a superficial investigation.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Colm Merrick: No.

It was a thorough, detailed, independent criminal investigation that ran its course, secured a conviction and ensured that justice was served. To imply now that there has somehow not been a proper investigation is disgraceful. That message is coming across. It is a slight on those who carried out that investigation and on the institutions that have already done their job.

We should be concerned about the repercussions of these solely politically driven actions and worry about the effect that the approach has on devolution. We should be worried about the willingness of many members to undermine devolution and the powers of the Parliament. An increasing number of calls for Westminster committees to interfere directly on matters that are fundamentally Scottish should concern every member of the Parliament, regardless of their party affiliation. It certainly concerns the residents that I represent.

The Scottish Affairs Committee has carried out a number of principled and worthwhile inquiries dealing with Scotland's renewable energy sector, economic development and welfare issues. Those were serious inquiries into matters of public policy, and they are what parliamentary committees should be doing. However, the proposal that we are debating is something entirely different. This is not a serious attempt to improve governance—it is a farce.

I am genuinely concerned that some members seem perfectly willing to take a wrecking ball to the principles of devolution if they think that it might provide a short-term political advantage. That is wrong, and it is wrong regardless of which party is being targeted. All of us who care about the Parliament should resist it with all our strength, because once we establish the principle that parliamentary committees can be used to pursue political opponents, that principle will not simply disappear when it becomes inconvenient—it will be used again and again.

If members are genuinely interested in restoring trust in politics, by all means let us have a conversation about that. Let us talk about transparency, accountability and standards, but let us do it honestly and fairly, without exception or selective outrage. However, that is not what the motion is about. it is not about restoring trust or improving politics, helping a single family struggling with the cost of living, reducing a single waiting list, building a single home or creating a single job. The motion is about politics—pure and simple.

The good folk of Scotland can see that. They sent us here to help improve their lives, not indulge our grievances. For those reasons, I urge members from across the chamber to reject this nakedly shameless and shameful slop.

17:08

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Like Willie Rennie, I recognise the brutality in all this and the pain that is so evident for those on the SNP benches. Relationships have been severed and careers lie in tatters.

Let me offer a word about our motivation. We are as far as it is possible to be from a Scottish Parliament election. There is no political capital to be gained, but we are a representative democracy, and this issue is everywhere. Questions about it are everywhere—in supermarkets, taxis and bus queues. I cannot believe that SNP back benchers,

when they go back to their constituencies, are not receiving those questions, at volume.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Will Alex Cole-Hamilton take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am afraid that I do not have time. I might take one later, but I need to make progress.

We should welcome an inquiry, because it will have lessons for us all. This matter is not going away. The response of the SNP, which we have heard much of today, is only making matters worse. It is fuelling further legitimate questions that the court proceedings can no longer answer. The multimillion-pound police investigation—which Jack Middleton reminded us of, in a speech that, frankly, was beneath him—was unable to answer such questions. It is fuelling questions such as why, in the week when it was seized, the camper van was explained away by a senior SNP source as a legitimate campaign room for a Covid election. Why did another SNP spokesperson explain away the loan of £107,000 that Peter Murrell gave to the SNP in June 2021 as a personal contribution to help with cash flow just months after his partner at the time—his wife—Nicola Sturgeon, was captured on camera saying that the SNP's finances had never been in better shape? Nobody has ever answered those questions. Who told them to say those things? For me, those statements represent the trigger point in relation to why a parliamentary inquiry is necessary. Those senior SNP sources could well be Government special advisers on the public payroll, and, if they were told to say those things, who told them and why, and what other Government resources were used in a cover-up?

The central point of the SNP amendment is that no committee of this Parliament should conduct or investigate the internal workings of another political party, because that would represent a clear conflict of interests. However, the SNP was not encumbered by concerns about that conflict of interests in 2008, when the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, chaired by Keith Brown, an SNP member, investigated the internal finances of the Labour Party as they pertained to Wendy Alexander's leadership election, which caused her resignation. She accepted the verdict and outcome of that inquiry and resigned accordingly.

While we are on the subject of amendments, I say to the Greens that, in the past hour—

Jamie Hepburn: On that point, does Alex Cole-Hamilton accept that the matters that the standards committee looked into at that time pertained to what we are required to register as elected members of the Scottish Parliament? That is the difference.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The fundamental substance of that inquiry went into the internal workings and finances of the Labour Party, so there is nothing different about the two propositions.

On the subject of amendments, I say to members that, in the past hour, Professor James Mitchell has taken to social media to say that he does not agree with the Green Party amendment and regards it as a serious attempt to evade the considerable questions that the SNP still has to answer.

Willie Rennie is right: sunlight is always the best disinfectant, and there will be lessons for us all in such an inquiry about the role and training of the people who deliver the governance of our political parties. Most of those people are volunteers and do that work in good faith but do not necessarily understand the ledger book from back to front or how political parties' funding is collected, how it is corralled, how it is spent and how it is accounted for.

Trust in politics is at an all-time low—of that there is no doubt—and I am not sure that the tone of this afternoon's debate has helped that reality in any way whatsoever, but it needed to happen. We needed to expose the genuine questions that are still extant in the public domain and in the body politic, because there is no criminal trial and there is no further recourse for answers outside a parliamentary inquiry. We needed it to happen, because, when questions go unanswered, we risk losing the dressing room of public opinion. Our constituents, the people who send us to this place, are beginning to turn away, and that is why the Liberal Democrats will support the Labour motion at decision time.

17:13

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): SNP members all got the memo, or perhaps they received their speeches by email—I do not know—but there was a remarkable similarity in the tone and content of their speeches, with Jack Middleton setting a low. It was generous of Alex Cole-Hamilton to suggest that Jack Middleton's speech might be beneath him, because we do not yet know what level Jack Middleton operates at. However, he will discover that, although robust debate on substance, policy and issues is absolutely warranted in a Parliament, personal abuse and insults directed at individual members—[*Interruption*.]

George Adam can laugh all that he likes, but the problem with SNP members is that, whenever anyone challenges them on anything, they

consider it a personal affront and attack. They are so thin-skinned, but what Jack Middleton—[*Interruption*.]

George, the one thing that you cannot accuse me of is being thin-skinned.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Again, I am going to—

Stephen Kerr: But—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Kerr—Mr Kerr!

I remind Mr Kerr, who is an experienced parliamentarian, that he must speak through the chair. I also remind all members that they must use the full names of other members. The same thing has happened a number of times today, and I repeat that the full names of other members must be used.

Stephen Kerr: I say to George Adam that he, of all people, should know that, of all the things that he might accuse me as being, I am not thin-skinned, but what we heard from Jack Middleton and others was an orchestrated, spad-organised attack on the character of a particular member of the Parliament.

It is not about riding to the rescue of anybody. I do not think that I need to rescue the individual concerned—I am sure that he is more than capable of looking after himself—but I do ride to the rescue of the reputation of the Parliament, the nature of the debates that we have in this place and the standards to which we should subscribe.

To be frank, beyond the issue of the memo, or shared speech, that was put among the SNP MSPs for this afternoon's debate, I would say that they would rate nil points—nil points!—on self-awareness. On self-awareness, ladies and gentlemen—nil points. They talk about other parties. Where have they been living for the past 20 years?

Kate Campbell: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am happy to give way to Kate Campbell, who quite rightly pointed out what a disgrace it is that they are sitting where they sit. Carry on.

Kate Campbell: I thank the member for taking an intervention. He mentions self-awareness. In many of the conversations that we have had on doorsteps, people have said that their concerns about politicians are that they are very un-self-aware; that they come to the chamber and just shout at other people; and that they do not seem to be concerned about their constituents' worries—rather, they are just concerned about heckling other members. Would he recognise any of that behaviour in himself?

Stephen Kerr: I was not elected to serve in the reading room of a library. We were elected to a Parliament that should have robust debate. The member needs to realise that that is what Parliament is all about.

I say again to SNP members that, on self-awareness, they rate nil points. Pauline McNeill was right: we have heard time and again from the SNP today, "We can do what we like because we've won elections and we are the masters."

Well, that is a poor tone, because with the privilege of service in the Parliament, and the greater privilege of serving as Scotland's Government, there are obligations. There are honourable obligations, because "honourable" is a word. I know that we ruled out the word "honourable" earlier—I think it was Stephen Gethins who used that word, and he was corrected by the Presiding Officer. However, I say to the Minister for Parliamentary Business that to ascribe to any of us less-than-honourable motives as we conduct parliamentary business or sit on committees is beneath the ministerial office that he holds.

The SNP needs to know that the public are not fools. That is the first thing that we should recognise in this debate. The public can handle bad news. They can handle disappointment and difficult choices. What they cannot tolerate indefinitely is a suspicion that they are not being told the whole truth. That, in my view, is why trust in Scottish politics has fallen so far.

Alex Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am tempted to take an intervention from my fellow clansman—[*Laughter*.] Carry on.

Alex Kerr: I thank Stephen Kerr. It is just to agree that the public are not fools, which is why they elected the SNP back to the Parliament as the Government to focus on the cost of living, on tackling the issues in the NHS and on performing for the people in driving up economic growth.

Stephen Kerr: The member has just made my point for me. I have just finished highlighting the very fact that, while members can stand up and say, "Well, we won the election; we can do what we like—and, by the way, we know all about what the priorities of the people of Scotland are", there are 129 MSPs in the Parliament, and we represent all strands of view and opinion. Members on the SNP side of the chamber may have the privilege of forming the Government. Our job as members of this Parliament, regardless of party, is to hold the governing party, and ministers, to account.

The problem in Scottish politics is not that the people of Scotland have suddenly become cynical about politics but that too many people have concluded that politics in Scotland has become less transparent, less accountable, less willing to answer legitimate questions and more secretive. That is why there needs to be an inquiry on the issue. That is why Professor James Mitchell is correct. This is a serious political scandal—perhaps the biggest of the devolution era—which is undermining the confidence of the people of Scotland in politics. When they are not treating us all with disdain, they are laughing about the state of our politics, as exemplified by the conduct of the SNP in Government and how the SNP has governed its own party affairs. The people ask themselves how they can trust a party with more than £60 billion of public expenditure when it cannot account for £600,000 of its own members' money and when it has just had someone convicted of serious fraud of £400,000.

I need to conclude, so let me simply say this: imagine a Government in which ministers were recently found in contempt of court because of their secrecy. Imagine if that was a Labour Government or a Conservative Government. No, this is an SNP Government. Action was brought to the Court of Session, no less, by the Scottish Information Commissioner. Just think about that. The Government that was responsible for freedom of information legislation was found guilty by Scotland's highest court because it failed in its obligations under that legislation. That goes directly to the issue of trust.

The people join the dots—the scandal of what is happening in our maternity services, as highlighted on the front page of *The Herald*; the scandals at Historic Environment Scotland; and the scandal of how whistleblowers are treated in Scotland's public services—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must wind up.

Stephen Kerr: All those issues are connected—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must bring his remarks to a close.

Stephen Kerr: —and they are connected with a lack of fundamental honesty in our politics, as exemplified—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I will have to cut the microphone if the member does not conclude.

Stephen Kerr: —by the conduct of these ministers.

17:22

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I beg your pardon, Presiding Officer. I was just discovering how much some speeches improve when I remove my hearing aids.

Sadly, today, we have very much seen the debate that I expected. There has been some opportunistic partisanship dressed up as principled concern, and there has been a touch too much defensiveness on the other side, too. We should all recognise Peter Murrell's crimes as his crimes, committed against the SNP, which has been betrayed both professionally and personally in a deplorable way. The party will feel pain about that, and it has a right to feel angry about it. That is very different from the view of Anas Sarwar, who stated in his opening speech that the SNP should own the shame of those crimes. I wonder whether he thinks that the victim owns the shame of any other type of crime. I thought that we all condemned that attitude.

SNP members have a right to feel anger, not shame, at the crimes committed against them, and they have a right to know that their party has put its finances and its governance on a sound footing; however, that is ultimately a matter for them. Throughout the reporting and debating of the scandal, there have been regular insinuations that the Scottish Government is implicated or that Peter Murrell embezzled money from the Government. If anyone has evidence of that, they should present it. If not, the innuendo is beneath contempt. Although Labour presents the debate as being about restoring public trust in politics, to encourage or even hint at such misleading insinuations can only further undermine trust.

Peter Murrell's crimes have been investigated thoroughly. That investigation examined others in the SNP and the party itself, and the result was the establishment of his guilt, and no basis was found to bring charges against others. However, some of the response today amounts to a demand for an investigation into the victim of a crime. Is there more that should be looked at? Were there further crimes that have not yet been prosecuted? That is for the police, the prosecutors and the courts to consider, if there is evidence. Has there been a breach of party political rules and regulations? That is for the Electoral Commission to investigate—again, if there is evidence.

What is the case for a parliamentary inquiry? Mr Sarwar answers that it is the criminal justice process itself that should be investigated. If the justice committee of this Parliament wants to do that, it does not need the permission of the Parliament to do so, but it would need a clear basis for doing so. It does not hold parliamentary inquiries into every criminal prosecution, or even into every very high-profile criminal prosecution. It

is hard to avoid the conclusion that Mr Sarwar wants this one to be subject to a parliamentary inquiry explicitly because a rival political party is involved.

Anas Sarwar: Mr Harvie says that committees in this Parliament could investigate certain prosecutions. To clarify, if a motion came to the justice committee, would his party support such an investigation by the justice committee?

Patrick Harvie: I think that Anas Sarwar would be horrified if a former or a current leader of a political party told its members how they should vote on a committee decision. [*Interruption*.] That is for committees to decide, and I am not going to instruct any—[*Interruption*.] Look at him laughing. Look at Mr Sarwar laughing at that suggestion that we should respect the independence of our committees. If Mr Sarwar will stop heckling, I will continue.

The Greens agree that the wider question of trust is legitimate. Indeed, it is more than legitimate; it is urgent, and it requires a political response. The Greens say that, beyond the criminal justice response to Murrell's crimes, which is the job of the courts, a further response is needed. However, that response must avoid the naked partisanship that has characterised too much of this debate.

If we are serious about it, a pantomime performance is not what is needed. If we want to restore trust across our political spectrum, we all need to face scrutiny and not only demand it from others. My party is willing to face it and others should, too.

The damage to public trust relates to the crimes exposed by operation Branchform, but it relates not only to those crimes. There is also the decades-long influence of Peter Mandelson despite his murky ties to the super-rich such as Epstein; the influence of Russian oligarchs and kleptocrats and the flow of their money into UK politics; the series of huge bungs from the crypto spivs towards Nigel Farage and the rest of the far right; the political influence of the dark money junk tanks peddling propaganda for fossil fuel corporations and other big business; and the routine acceptance of high-priced gifts by serving ministers, from clothes to gig tickets. Those are the kind of freebies that most hard-working people never see, and they are funded not as a perk of the job but by companies and vested interests that all want something in exchange.

The list of issues that have undermined trust in politics is a long one, and for anyone to pretend that only one political party is at fault would be deeply dishonest. It is also not only a domestic problem. This week, we have witnessed the chilling result of the abuse of power by a super-rich owner of social media, Elon Musk, who uses that power to foment racism and violence on our streets. His actions represent a wrecking ball through public trust, yet we allow him to carry on doing business, pumping toxic propaganda into our society and telling people that they cannot trust Government or political parties or even their own neighbours. The overwhelming majority of the public believe that money buys influence in politics; what is worse is that they are clearly right.

The response should begin with a review, but it must be independently led and it must look at these issues across all parties and organisations seeking to buy political influence. That review must also lead to action—the kind of action that UK authorities have, so far, chosen not to take. If this Parliament is sincere in wanting to do what it takes to restore public trust, we need the power to do it as well. The Green amendment is the only option in front of us today that confirms the need for action but ensures that it will be independent instead of partisan. More to the point, it is the only option that says that we need the power to act on the conclusions afterwards. The option in Mr Hepburn's amendment, of taking no action, should be rejected, but so should the option of holding an inquiry without having the power to do anything about it. That is why I urge the chamber to vote for the Green amendment when we vote today.

17:29

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): I support this debate and back calls for a full parliamentary inquiry into the shocking embezzlement of party funds by Peter Murrell.

The Scottish people deserve the truth. For years, the SNP has presented itself as a slick, professional political machine. In reality, it has operated more like a closed, unaccountable political syndicate where members' money disappeared, senior figures allegedly broke the law and the party put its own survival above basic democratic standards.

The SNP has exerted more energy in protecting its reputation than in helping the public to understand what happened to the hundreds of thousands of pounds that vanished from its coffers.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Amanda Lindsay: Forgive me, but I wish to make progress.

Jamie Hepburn: Ah, come on!

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): No, no, minister. The member does not have to take interventions.

Amanda Lindsay: Instead of full transparency, we have had silence, deflection and obstruction. The First Minister likes to lecture others about integrity, yet he still refuses to put country before party. If he truly believes in restoring public trust, he must stop hiding behind lawyers and finally come clean.

This Government has spent years and millions of pounds of taxpayers' money fighting women in the courts to defend the discredited ideology that men can be women. It has dragged For Women Scotland through the legal system, appealed rulings and wasted public resources, throwing women's rights under the camper van, defending the indefensible. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must be heard.

Amanda Lindsay: Yet, when it comes to holding one of its own to account for embezzling party funds, the urgency mysteriously disappears.

Meanwhile, Scottish Labour, which called this debate, might want to reflect on its party's sleazy history. After all, its hero, Lord Mandelson, was twice forced to resign from Tony Blair's Cabinet—first over an undeclared loan from a colleague and again over allegations of interfering in a passport application for wealthy donors. Just last year, Mandelson was sacked as His Majesty's ambassador to the US. He later resigned from the Labour Party and the House of Lords amid fresh revelations about his close and continuing ties to the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, including allegations of passing sensitive Government information and receiving substantial payments.

Sleaze is not unique to one side of the chamber, but only one party is pretending that it does not exist. The public are sick of it—sick of the cronyism, sick of the cover-ups and sick of politicians who treat public office as a protection racket for their own interests. That is why this Parliament must launch a full, independent parliamentary inquiry with the power to call witnesses and examine all relevant documents. No more self-serving internal reviews and no more hiding—the First Minister must choose: Scotland or the SNP; country or party. The time for secrecy is over. Let the inquiry begin.

17:33

Jamie Hepburn: I say to Amanda Lindsay that I might take more seriously the notion that my party operated like a syndicate if her party was not one that had been formed as a private limited company that is owned by one individual. Let us just remember where we are all starting from. [*Interruption*.] I am happy to give way if the member really wants me to.

Amanda Lindsay: The only thing that I would say in response to that is that the SNP lecturing Reform on sleaze is like Lord Mandelson selling ethics lessons. No one is buying it.

Jamie Hepburn: That was a wonderful pre-prepared line delivered tremendously well, Ms Lindsay. We look forward to much more of that.

The past few weeks have been uncomfortable, difficult and very distressing for many of us—I will not pretend otherwise. No one would believe me if I did. However, I do not think that any of us should pretend that this debate has been anything other than a particularly unedifying spectacle.

The notion of an inquiry that is authorised by Parliament into one party's finances has now been debated, and it is now for Parliament to decide on that. I hope that Stephen Kerr is not too disappointed, but I will revert back to all the reasons that I laid out in my opening remarks. For the various reasons that I laid out, I urge Parliament to reject the proposition of a parliamentary inquiry, as set out in Mr Sarwar's motion. I know that Mr Kerr—there are a lot of Kerrs here, so I should refer to them by their first names. Mr Stephen Kerr suggested that it was beneath me to question the motivation for lodging the motion that we are debating today. I merely say that I feel obliged to point out that my cynicism is born out of bitter experience.

I do not think that any of us should pretend that people out there are stupid. People out there will understand perfectly well why the Labour Party lodged the motion, and they will understand perfectly well why Reform UK, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats support it. Those parties want to make political capital. Let us not pretend that it is about anything other than that.

I genuinely believe that it would set a very bad precedent if Parliament established a parliamentary inquiry into the internal workings and finances of an individual political party. That would be a poor decision, and I think that, collectively, we would come to regret it. Colm Merrick was right to set out that, inevitably, we would all seek to return to that process whenever an individual party faced some form of difficulty.

However, today's debate has demonstrated something important. It has demonstrated that, across the chamber, there is agreement that a serious breach of trust took place. That was a breach by one individual—the former chief executive of my party—of the trust of the members who placed faith in him. However, agreement on the seriousness of that and those events does not justify what is proposed in the motion. We should not establish that a parliamentary committee that is comprised of elected representatives of competing political parties is the right mechanism

by which to scrutinise the internal financial operations of one of the parties.

Daniel Johnson: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way one more time.

Daniel Johnson: The minister does not want to accept questions coming from other parts of the chamber. Does he accept that questions are also coming from people who served his party, both in the NEC and in Parliaments? Those people are saying that blocks and obstructions were put in the way of them asking relevant questions, and that that goes to the heart of governance. There are questions about the statements made by people holding public office in this Parliament relating to those things. Does he accept that those questions are important and need to be examined and answered?

Jamie Hepburn: That brings me to a point that I was going to make later, because it picks up on a point that Willie Rennie made—I see that Mr Rennie is now paying attention to me. He made the point that my party does not want to do anything in response to some of the issues that have arisen out of this situation. I see that Mr Rennie is nodding away, but I am afraid that that is fundamentally not the case.

I will not go into the full detail, because that would take us into the territory of internal processes, but this gets to the heart of the issue. Where such issues happen, it is of course incumbent on the organisation that has been impacted to learn lessons, which is precisely what we have done. There has been a governance review in the Scottish National Party, and processes have been improved. That has been communicated by our national treasurer directly to every constituency and branch treasurer, and by our party leader to every member of the Scottish National Party.

Willie Rennie: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I do not think that Mr Rennie is one of those SNP members, but maybe he wants to apply to join—we might let him come on board.

I will give way one more time, to Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: That is a very generous offer, but I will have to decline.

The minister is talking about the SNP investigating itself. How does that improve the confidence of the public in the Government party in this country?

Jamie Hepburn: There are two things there. First, the public can be confident that the crime that has been perpetrated has been fully investigated and prosecuted and there is now a plea. I do not think that any of us is suggesting that there is a lack of confidence in that process—I certainly hope not, as that would take us into a bad place.

The other point, which is fundamental, is that the issue comes down to internal matters. If there were challenges in the Scottish Liberal Democrats, and doubtless, there have been such challenges—I see Mr Rennie nodding, so we will discuss those later, perhaps—I would not expect Parliament to be breenging into that territory. I would recognise that that would be a matter for the Scottish Liberal Democrats to determine.

That is what the SNP has done with its processes. SNP members, who above all should be concerned about the issue, can be assured that improvements have been made.

I turn to the notion of transparency, which I consider to be important. It is vital, but only if it is paired with impartiality. As I and others have stated, the obvious conflict of interest of parties investigating each other cannot be mitigated with any degree of procedural formality. That goes back to the point that I made at the outset. Even if we exercised our very best efforts to achieve impartiality, I do not think that it would be perceived as such, and it would not be possible to get away from the unavoidable structural reality of party politics.

To return to my amendment, I made the point in my opening remarks that the people of Scotland collectively elected this Parliament to govern in their interests. As part of that, they chose a Scottish Government that seeks to work for them. Scotland has not chosen a Government that spends its time second-guessing the assessments that are made on matters by independent authorities. This debate seems to have been a bit of a return to some of the mud slinging that we saw from the Labour Party and the Conservatives during the previous parliamentary session, which carried on into the election. There is certainly no sense of arrogance to this point, but I gently remind folk that we went through that election after all those years of mud slinging, and the SNP is back on the Government benches, while Labour and the Conservatives are here in much reduced numbers. Mr Findlay made the point that it was arrogant for me to point that out, but it is a matter of fact. He bemoaned the fact that the SNP has dominated Scottish politics for 20 years.

All I was pointing out—

Anas Sarwar: That is your mindset.

Jamie Hepburn: It is not a mindset but a matter of fact—

Anas Sarwar: It was the mindset that Murrell had.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Please speak through the chair.

Jamie Hepburn: —that the SNP has won five elections in a row. It has earned the trust of the people for five elections in a row. It is just a matter of fact—there is no arrogance about it; it is just a reality.

I think that it is important that we—

Russell Findlay: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way to Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: I remember how sleazy, arrogant and entitled Labour became when it dominated Scottish politics. Does the minister see that at all in his party?

Jamie Hepburn: No, I do not, so let us move on.

The point that I was going to make was one that I made earlier: it is important that, as an institution, we focus on matters that are of primary interest and of paramount importance to the people of Scotland. Instead of raising issues like this, we brought a debate on childcare and delivered a statement on our first homes fund on 27 May. Last week, we brought a debate on the future of the national health service, and yesterday, we had a debate on the Scottish economy. It is why we have a business motion before us that says that—if members agree—next Tuesday we will have a statement on urban regeneration and a debate on supporting the third sector and, on Wednesday, a debate on affordable bus fares and three statements, including one on the provisional outturn and one on child poverty. Those are the things that the people of Scotland expect us to focus on.

I urge Parliament to support the amendment in my name.

17:43

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The key and absolute qualification for any First Minister of Scotland is that

"that individual must be able to command the trust of the Parliament and the public."—[*Official Report,* 28 November 2001; c 4118.]

Those are not my words but those of John Swinney and, on that point, we are in complete agreement.

However, we have just come out of an election in which only half of Scots voted. I say this to SNP members who say that this debate is simply a distraction and that we should get on with delivery: we need trust and transparency as foundations in this Parliament in order to do exactly that.

Trust in politics feels like it is at an all-time low, but the revelations over the past few weeks mean that that trust has been further undermined. The story of Peter Murrell embezzling more than £400,000 from the SNP is, frankly, one of the biggest scandals of the devolution era. SNP speakers' repeated attempts at deflection today have been embarrassing, because winning an election is not justification for covering up stealing £400,000.

This story is fundamentally about power and trust, and it has implications for all of us in this Parliament. Willie Rennie is right: there might well be personal tragedies in all of this, but this is about professional failure. People believe that this is corruption at the highest level. If this was just a crime conducted by the most senior officer of the SNP—the governing party in Scotland—that would be bad enough, but, at the time, this was the husband of the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and the childhood friend of the current First Minister, John Swinney, who appointed him to his role. In that context, it is simply not credible for John Swinney to say, "There is nothing to see here. Trust me."

The First Minister says that, because there has been a police investigation, there is no need for a parliamentary inquiry. Let me reassure John Swinney that I have nothing but admiration for the police and have no intention of marking their homework, but the police themselves are not happy. Wider questions arise from this, and I will set them out shortly. Contrary to what John Swinney seems to think, I am clear that it is not for me or this Parliament to consider the internal financial operation of the SNP. It is a matter for the SNP itself.

I gently suggest to the First Minister that there is much merit in Alex Neil's suggestion of asking an independent KC to examine the governance arrangements, both then and now, so that he can satisfy himself that robust arrangements are in place. The First Minister's so-called governance review was pretty thin.

Interestingly, Robin McAlpine noted yesterday that the problem in the SNP was not about rules and procedures but about democracy and culture.

Jamie Hepburn: I find it interesting that, although Ms Baillie said that it is not for others to take an interest in the SNP's internal affairs, she is now talking extensively about the appointment of a KC and the thin nature of our internal governance review. It seems that she is taking an interest. Does that not speak to the very point that that is exactly what an inquiry would do, which is why we should not agree to one?

Jackie Baillie: The minister misunderstands and is clearly not listening. The people of Scotland

are interested in those wider questions, but that is not what I am suggesting the inquiry should do. I have been very clear on that point.

Let me go back to what Robin McAlpine had to say about democracy and culture. There was a culture that bullied and intimidated those who raised legitimate questions, a culture of denial and deflection, and a culture of secrecy and cover-up. The shame, the dishonesty and the cover-up speak for themselves. Although I do not believe that the Scottish Greens support such a culture, in coming to the SNP's aid they are giving it cover. The claim that this is about internal politics is fundamentally wrong. This is about honesty, trust and integrity. This is about ministers knowingly making public statements that are wrong or, at the very least, incompetent.

Many questions—from members of the public, SNP members, police officers and those in the legal profession who have contacted me— remain unanswered. Why did it take more than four years, at a cost of £2.7 million, for the police to investigate? Why did it take so long for the Crown Office to decide to prosecute? Pauline McNeill is right: if Murrell indicated that he would plead guilty on 3 March, why was the case postponed until after the election? Why was Murrell granted legal aid when he part owned a villa in Portugal—an asset that was not frozen and that he sold after his application was granted? Why is legal aid not recoverable in Scotland?

Did the SNP unwittingly make fraudulent VAT claims on Murrell's purchases? How much was claimed? The Electoral Commission gave the SNP a policy development grant worth, on average, £175,000 a year—more than £2.4 million over the period of Murrell's crimes. The House of Commons gave the SNP more than £8 million in Short money over the same period. In 2020, in response to concerns from SNP members that donations for a referendum campaign had been spent on other matters, the SNP treasurer, Colin Beattie, said that

> "donations are woven through the overall income figures each year."

If donations were not ring fenced, what reassurance can the SNP give that public money was not also woven through the accounts and consequently spent by Murrell? There is, apparently, just one bank account.

I also have questions for the Electoral Commission. Its role is to oversee and monitor the operation of political parties. Does it have enough powers? What enforcement action can it take? Were complaints made to the Electoral Commission about the SNP's finances at the time, and how were they taken forward?

The Greens' amendment is arguably not needed if the Electoral Commission has responsibility for overseeing all political parties. I gently point out to them—as Alex Cole-Hamilton did earlier—that Professor James Mitchell has indicated:

> "I do NOT support the Green amendment. It is an attempt to evade the very serious issues that require focus on SNP financial mismanagement."

That is a direct quote.

As Joanna Cherry, the former SNP MP and KC, said:

> "The fact that public money may have been stolen makes the requirement for a parliamentary or other independent inquiry all the more necessary."

None of those questions is about the internal workings of the SNP.

I know that colleagues in the Scottish Affairs Committee are considering whether to launch their own inquiry. My preference is that the inquiry is done by this Parliament. However, if that is voted down today, then a joint inquiry or a Westminster-led inquiry is an option that is likely to be taken forward by others.

By rejecting scrutiny, the SNP is putting party before country. We have seen this before. Last week, the Court of Session found ministers to be in contempt of court for their refusal to respond to a freedom of information request regarding the Salmond files. Stephen Kerr referenced that in his speech.

In the past decade we have seen the appalling way in which relatives who lost loved ones at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital have been treated and in which the staff who whistleblew have been bullied and silenced. It is this culture of secrecy and cover-up that has infected the Government and some of our public institutions.

Restoring trust starts with transparency and accountability. It starts with a parliamentary inquiry—and it is not an inquiry about the internal machinations of the SNP. We have better things to do.

I say to SNP members that sunlight is the best disinfectant. If the First Minister and other senior SNP politicians claim that they have nothing to hide, what is there to fear? Let the sunlight in and vote for a parliamentary inquiry.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics.

Business Motion

17:52

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-00301, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 16 June 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by General Questions

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government Investment in 'Our Union Street' and the People's Palace

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Strengthening Scotland's Partnership with the Third Sector

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 17 June 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Justice; Health and Care

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Affordable Bus Fares

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 18 June 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm General Questions

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

followed by Ministerial Statement: 10th Anniversary of the UK Referendum on EU Membership

followed by Ministerial Statement: Provisional Outturn 2025-26

followed by Ministerial Statement: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan - Annual Progress Report 2025-26

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

4.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 23 June 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by General Questions

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 24 June 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Rural Affairs; Education, Culture and Gaelic

followed by Reform UK Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 25 June 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm General Questions

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 15 June 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:53

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jamie Hepburn is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Ross Greer will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S7M-00294.1, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar, on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:53

Meeting suspended.

17:55

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S7M-00294.1, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00294.1, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, is: For 55, Against 68, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00294.2, in the name of Ross Greer, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar, on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)

Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00294.2, in the name of Ross Greer, is: For 70, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00294.3, in the name of Russell Findlay, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar, on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00294.3, in the name of Russell Findlay, is: For 53, Against 70, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar, on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to vote. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)

Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-00294, in the name of Anas Sarwar, on an inquiry to restore public trust in Scottish politics, as amended, is: For 71, Against 50, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes there is a need to restore public trust in politics following multiple recent financial scandals, including those uncovered by Operation Branchform; further believes that an independent review into party political finances would go some way towards restoring this trust; believes that, to avoid this becoming a nakedly partisan process, it should be independently led rather than conducted by parliamentary committee, and that its remit must apply to the funding of all political parties; recognises wider concerns about the role of money in politics, including the scale of donations by extremely wealthy individuals, and the influence of organisations that refuse to disclose their funding sources, and calls for the devolution of power over the regulation of political parties and their funding to allow for the implementation of any recommendations of the independent review that would require legislative change.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Screen Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00188, in the name of Alyn Smith, on growing Scotland's screen sector. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I call Alyn Smith to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the work undertaken by Creative Scotland and Screen Scotland to support the film and screen industry and create opportunities for Scotland's cultural and arts sector; recognises what it sees as the potential economic and cultural opportunities that a new studio facility and dedicated screen skills academy could bring to Scotland, including Stirling; notes that Scotland's screen sector reportedly contributed £718 million to the Scottish economy in 2023 and supported 12,260 full-time equivalent jobs; welcomes the fact that the sector is on course to contribute £1 billion annually to the Scottish economy by the end of 2030-31, and commends Screen Scotland, local authority screen offices and all others who have contributed to the continued successful growth of the sector in Scotland.

18:03

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I am delighted to lead my first members' business debate in the chamber on a subject of great importance not just to Stirling, but to Scotland and, indeed, to all of our constituencies and constituents. It is a success story, and something for us to celebrate, because we are all winners in this.

The film industry—the screen sector—is a success for Scotland. I modestly suggest that Stirling is at the heart of it—as, indeed, I suggest Stirling is at the heart of everything else—but we will all have constituents who work in the sector, and many of our constituencies might well have been used as film locations. Therefore, I will be happy to take interventions from members across the chamber, and I am very grateful to colleagues for supporting the motion.

I am also grateful for the interest that the motion has spurred from the sector itself. I have had a lot of interest, and great support, from Screen Scotland, Stirling's own Broadcasting Scotland, Forth Valley College, the University of Stirling, the University of the West of Scotland, the BBC and Channel 4. There are a lot of players in this market, and the scale of the industry is significant. In fact, it is much more significant than people may realise—it is not just one company or one set of individuals; these are very mobile, global people who move around a lot. In 2023, the sector brought £718 million to the Scottish economy and 12,680 full-time equivalent jobs.

Many of those jobs are temporary, and many are mobile, which is why the industry often does not get the attention that I think that it needs, because the sector is growing apace. Scotland has a natural advantage in the sector. We are English speaking; we are globally centrally located; and we have tech and a talent pool of artists that most countries would give their eye teeth for. We have any location that people want—anyone who has watched "Outlander" will know that we can even do time travel. We have a spectacular advantage in the sector.

We are also investing in the future, and I think that, as a chamber, we need to focus on that. We have students across Scotland in 35 television and film-relevant courses at 12 colleges; 1,112 college students training for a future in the industry; and 915 students at five universities who are gaining the skills to take the industry into the future for Scotland. That is exciting.

Stirling really does have an advantage in the sector. We have all the talent that we could ask for and we are building for the future. At Stirling university, we have Dario Sinforiani and a fantastic communications, media and culture division that is turning out stellar talent such as Eilidh Barbour, Mark Cousins, journalist Shelley Jofre and Mark Daly. We have talent in spades, and there is much more to come. For four years in a row, Stirling students have won Royal Television Society programme awards. There is a very successful collaboration between Stirling university and BBC Scotland, which gives students experience in the real world to prepare them for real, and very lucrative, jobs.

Broadcasting Scotland, which is based at Stirling university campus and is no stranger to MSPs in particular, is doing fantastic broadcasting work and giving students experience. Of course, jobs in the screen sector are not only behind or in front of the camera. There are the painters, joiners, designers, sparkies, people moving things around, scouts, transport and catering. The screen sector supply chain is significant for all of our constituencies and all our industries.

Forth Valley College has a fantastic track record in all those skills. There is already talk in Stirling about greater tie-ups between Stirling schools and the college and the screen sector in general. There is exciting potential there; we have a significant pool of talent in the Forth valley.

The screen sector is a global industry. There is some criticism, particularly of BBC Scotland and Channel 4, about where things are made, but I am more relaxed about that. This is a globally mobile industry, and we need to make ourselves as naturally attractive as we possibly can be. I am less concerned about the brass plaque on a

production company's headquarters, and more concerned about where control is exercised from and how much money is spent. I want to see the maximum control, and the maximum money spent, in Scotland. The BBC and Channel 4 are already significant players in Scottish screen production, and I welcome that. I think that both could be doing more, but they are both doing significant good work and, bearing in mind that public money is involved, scrutiny of that will continue.

However, I want this debate to be about the wider picture. There are big players in Scotland and in the United Kingdom, but this is a global industry, and much of it is funded by private capital. We therefore need to make ourselves as attractive as we can by investing in the talent pool; supporting, fiscally and politically, the screen sector; and ensuring that we have an environment that welcomes that investment, however temporary or long term. That is a fantastic opportunity, and we will all benefit from having world-class facilities that naturally draw production to Scotland. The spin-offs from production in Scotland are massive. Stirling has a huge amount to contribute to, and gain from, those efforts, and I am really excited for the industry's future in Stirling and in Scotland.

18:08

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank Alyn Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber; it is very welcome. As he outlined, the screen sector is very important for the whole of Scotland, and he rightly highlighted his own constituency's particular assets in that respect.

The sector makes a significant contribution to the Scottish economy—it is a modern industry in a content-hungry global economy. There is huge scope for growth globally in many other sectors, but it is right to highlight some of the key assets that we have in this country, whether that be our natural physical environment or being an English-speaking nation, which allows us to export our talent around the world through digital streaming. The impact of those digital streaming platforms is significant and profound; it is driving diversity in content and disrupting the business models that were previously used by the industry.

As a result of that, there are threats as well as opportunities. Quite often, in debates in the Parliament and in other places, people talk about some of the disruptive elements of online digital streaming and social media content creation and the threats that they can bring.

However, at the same time, we have to be at the forefront of taking advantage of some of the opportunities. In doing so, it is vital that we consider the end-to-end process of creation, production and enjoyment. That all loops back into the same process, because production requires prior consumption and inspiration among young people and older people, so that they can see themselves as having a place in that industry. They have to see it to be it.

As Alyn Smith highlighted, the skills are significant, whether they are delivered through further or higher education. We should probably consider the evidence that was taken at committee in the previous session of Parliament about some of the school-level skills that might be an option for Scotland. In Northern Ireland, that is certainly the case. Production skills in Scotland are more often delivered in a partnership model between further education—our colleges—and our schools, but we know that many of those partnership arrangements with colleges are under threat or have been retracted because of the funding model. We might want to consider whether Qualifications Scotland can deliver some of those skills more directly through our schools.

In particular, I want to highlight the consumption end. I pay tribute to the Belmont cinema in Aberdeen and the campaign to restore it after its closure in late 2022. There has been a significant community campaign for that key project, which has raised £2.815 million to date. I know that members will appreciate the efforts that the volunteers have put into pulling together that money, but they still have a distance to travel to ensure that that key facility in the centre of Aberdeen is brought back to life—not just for the enjoyment of citizens and their consumption of culture, but as a key contributor to driving the tourist economy and the night-time economy. It is absolutely critical: it has been the city's only independent cinema and it is a key cultural draw.

I would like to hear from the minister, when she is summing up, what more we can do to support not just Belmont but similar cinemas across the country.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Mr Marra and I represent the north-east of Scotland, so we also represent the Chalmers cinema in Arbroath. Does he agree that it is incumbent on all of us who want Scotland's screen sector to progress to support independent cinemas by watching films there as often as possible?

Michael Marra: I absolutely agree with Mr Melville, and he is right to highlight the cinema in Arbroath. I also point to the independent cinema in Montrose, which is supported by the local port authority on a sponsorship model; it helps to provide the facilities through the funding that it gives to the cinema. It is a critical hub for the community and for enjoyment.

I note that Dundee Contemporary Arts—DCA—has ambitious plans for redevelopment, to build sustainability into its model as part of a longer-term redevelopment plan. Its outstanding building opened as far back as 1999, but it requires further investment to make it a more sustainable business model. I hope that we can hear a little bit from the minister about what we can do to support that consumption end of the pipeline in a very important sector for Scotland.

18:13

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Alyn Smith for securing this debate. The motion recognises something that is truly worth celebrating—Scotland's screen sector is growing and it is doing so in places that we might not expect, such as Kirkcaldy and across Fife, where creative ambition, technical skill and local pride have been turned into real films, real jobs and real opportunities.

Let us take Hex Studios as an example. Hex Media was formed in 2013 and officially established a dedicated studio division in late 2017. It is a dedicated horror studio based in a church, with green-screen facilities, sound recording space, and special effects and workshop capacity. It has a clear purpose to develop and produce horror and fantasy content, nurture emerging voices and provide a home for original storytelling. Its founding team includes Lawrie Brewster and Sarah Daly, and the project was described at the time as not just a production space but a grass-roots movement with real creative intent.

Hex's story is a reminder that success in film, as in so many other areas of life, often begins with courage. Its break-out feature, "Lord of Tears", premiered at the Bram Stoker international film festival in 2013 and won the audience award, establishing Lawrie Brewster and Hex as a distinctive Scottish voice in modern indie horror.

The film and the studio that followed helped to put Fife on the map in that genre of filmmaking, with the work continuing to attract attention from the wider horror community. In 2025 and 2026, the studio's work was recognised by Rondo Hatton classic horror awards, which included special recognition for its contribution to independent horror.

The Hex story is about as local as it gets. Lawrie Brewster has written about being brought up in Kirkcaldy and the influence of the town and the surrounding Fife communities on his imagination, and about how a working-class background did not prevent him from building a creative career. That is key, because the screen sector should never feel like it belongs only to the biggest cities or the biggest budgets. Fife has shown that imagination can come from anywhere and that local stories can travel to far-flung audiences.

Then there is the British Horror Studio, which is an umbrella project that began with Hex Studios and Amicus Productions. With the B-team, a community-facing initiative around independent horror and direct-to-audience filmmaking, a production house, a training ground and a community built around classic cinema venues, Hex Studios has gained recognition for reviving Amicus Productions.

Scotland's screen economy is about not only income and production but home-grown companies and ambitions, and about creating a place where ideas can be developed. Skilled people can stay here and the value can be retained here. That is exactly why investment in studio capacity and screen skills is so important. We should never concentrate on attracting the next big production from elsewhere; we must focus on ensuring that Scotland—including places such as Kirkcaldy—is the place where the next generation of screen businesses can grow.

That brings me to Square Go Films, which is another brilliant example that comes from Fife. Square Go Films is a Kirkcaldy-based production company whose team has built a reputation through independent feature making, podcasting and a lively, community-driven presence in Scottish film culture. It is probably best known for "Dick Dynamite: 1944". The team is well known in the Scottish indie scene.

Would you believe it, Square Go took Fife to Cannes in 2025. It attended the Cannes festival, meeting sales distribution companies and promoting the company's work. Last month, the team was back again, wearing kilts and turning heads on the red carpet. They met distributors and held talks with US-based Epic Pictures Group about the next instalment of the "Dick Dynamite" film series. I am sure that great things lie ahead for Square Go.

The motion recognises that Scotland's screen sector is a living network of people and places, from national institutions such as Creative Scotland and Screen Scotland, to local offices and studios in Fife and individual makers with a vision and the determination to pursue it.

Let us recognise and celebrate the film-makers and all those working behind the scenes who are helping to put Scotland firmly on the map. From the writers and directors to the crews, technicians, designers and the countless others whose work often goes unseen, it is their talent and determination that bring the stories of life and help to showcase Scotland to the world.

18:17

Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I thank Alyn Smith for securing this debate. I shall begin with a wee bit of a disclosure. I have been informed of a television show called "Dept Q", which was filmed in and is set in Edinburgh, but it has nothing to do with my office. I was not consulted or invited to audition. I can only describe this as a shocking act of impersonation, and I fully intend to raise it with the appropriate authorities.

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Ben Macpherson): Considering the points that Q Manivannan has made, will they also share my praise for the programme and celebrate the fact that a second series of "Dept Q" is being filmed on the north-eastern side of Edinburgh, which is creating opportunities and showcasing more of Scotland to the world?

Q Manivannan: I should say that that filming is happening during recess, so I will let the programme makers know that I am available if they need me. My office will be in touch. I have also been informed that I have a passing resemblance, when the right lighting hits me, to Ben Whishaw and the main character, but I will leave that with members.

"Dept Q" features the Scottish actor Sanjeev Kohli, who played Navid in "Still Game". Navid came from India, arrived in Craiglang and, speaking little English, learned Scots from his neighbours until he became the beating heart of his community. I watched that show right before I came to Scotland, and I think that I understood something about what this country is and what it was capable of being.

The screen, in some ways, taught me, before anything else did, that someone like me could belong here and be celebrated as almost an essential part of Scottish culture. I think, in some ways, that that is also what we are debating today. The screen sector is on track to reach £1 billion by 2030, but it is a sector that generates not just economic value but narratives. It decides whose lives are visible, whose voices carry, and whose experiences are treated as central and whose are, at times, treated as optional. I do not think that that is a soft concern alongside the economic argument—it is the economic argument. A screen sector that draws on the full range of Scottish life will make better work. That is not woke ideology; it is a question of craft.

Recently, I lodged a motion following restructuring at BBC Radio Scotland in which, reportedly, the majority of those who were stood down were women. Despite BBC successes, a pattern nonetheless emerges about who speaks with authority in our cultural institutions and who is treated at times as replaceable. I think that that question travels through broadcasting, through screen and through culture.

I am grateful for the inclusivity that BBC Scotland has shown in its programming and I acknowledge its importance in our culture. We need a strong, stable, well-funded BBC. One funded by advertising will have extremely negative consequences for commercial public sector broadcasting—that is an issue that has been raised with us.

Screen Scotland has also increasingly emphasised creative origination, which involves more than just production taking place here in Scotland and means that stories are developed, owned and led here. That distinction matters enormously because we can grow output without growing control, and growth without authorship is, at the end of the day, dependency. Research that was commissioned by Screen Scotland found that, of the top 15 producers of programmes that were counted as Scottish by volume, only five were headquartered in Scotland, with the remaining 10 based in London. I was happy to see Channel 4's creative hub open in Glasgow in 2019 and I note that it now has 26 full-time members of staff. We need to progress with creative origination or else any production will not be Scottish or represent growth; it will just be a statistic wearing a kilt.

The workforce data tells a similar story. Around 87 per cent of screen workers have experienced a mental health problem. Factors including long hours, freelance insecurity and short-term contracts select for people with financial cushions and existing cover for their caring responsibilities, and they select against everyone else. According to recent reports, it will take until 2085 for gender equity to be achieved in the UK's film industry, and the Equal Media & Culture Centre has reported high rates of sexual harassment and bullying in the industry.

Growth in the screen sector cannot just be measured in terms of investment and output; it has to include who gets to show up. When Screen Scotland invested in writers such as Alia Ghafar and Dawn Sievewright through its first draft programme, it was not just backing good scripts, it was backing the next generation of people who get to decide what Scotland looks like on the screen. That is important because, for many young people, including me, screen culture is often the first place where we get to see Scotland reflected back to us, and it shapes what we believe is possible and what we believe is not.

The test for this Parliament is not whether Scotland's screen sector can grow—it will. Rather, it is whether we build a sector that redistributes

cultural power, or one that quietly concentrates it in the hands of those who are not here. Therefore, we must ring fence resources for training and mentoring opportunities for women; provide resources for peer support networks; formalise rates of pay, policies on flexible work and inclusive workplace practices; and ensure that public funding bodies apply conditions to their funding and procurement practices to ensure that fair work for women and efforts to close the gender pay gap remain central focuses for our creative industries, including Scotland's screen sector.

I hope that we reach a point where the sector contributes £1 billion to the economy, but, more than that, I hope that our future generations see Scotland build a screen sector that is capable of seeing more of Scotland and the world.

18:22

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Alyn Smith on securing the debate. I am pleased to speak in support of the motion and to recognise the work of Screen Scotland and the wider screen sector, particularly in creating opportunities for new talent. The fact that, 31 years ago, its closest predecessor, Scottish Screen, rejected a film script by an unknown 20-year-old social sciences undergraduate, which would undoubtedly have been the finest Scottish production since "Gregory's Girl", does not alter my view in that regard. In fact, it makes my point, because, despite my youthful arrogance in submitting it, somebody took the time to read it, review it, critique it and provide me with detailed feedback. I have never forgotten that generosity, because supporting emerging talent is exactly the kind of role that organisations such as Screen Scotland perform. Through its investment in filmmakers, independent cinemas, festivals and audience development, Screen Scotland helps to ensure that people across Scotland can access, enjoy and participate in film. As Professor Nick Higgins noted in the briefing that was circulated to members earlier, widening access is central to the growth of Scotland's screen sector, if it is to reflect the diversity of Scottish society.

The fact is that cinema and screen remain among our most accessible and powerful art forms. They tell our stories, they reflect our communities and they project Scotland's voice to audiences at home and abroad. In Aberdeen and the north-east, we are very fortunate to have creative businesses such as Signal, which recently won two gold awards at the Telly awards, and an organisation such as Station House Media Unit—SHMU—which plays a vital role in developing media skills, nurturing local talent and widening access to opportunities in the creative industries.

However, production companies, creative talent and audiences are all part of the same ecosystem. If Scotland's screen industry is to contribute £1 billion annually to the economy, we must not focus solely on production. Films need places in which to be shown. That is why I was pleased to hear Michael Marra talk about why the future of the Belmont cinema matters so much. For generations, the Belmont was Aberdeen's home of independent cinema—a place of film, education and community. Since its closure in 2022, there has been the sustained campaign to reopen it that Mr Marra referred to, not simply to restore a building but to protect a vital piece of cultural infrastructure. Reopening Aberdeen's only independent cinema would strengthen the city centre; increase footfall for local businesses; support jobs, volunteering and skills development; and restore access to independent and international films that are rarely available elsewhere.

When, rightly, we speak about regeneration and creating vibrant city centres, cultural institutions such as the Belmont, and others that were mentioned by Lloyd Melville in his intervention and Michael Marra in his response, must be recognised as part of the solution. I therefore ask the minister to say how the Scottish Government will work with local partners to secure the remaining funding that is needed to reopen the cinema, continue to invest in cultural infrastructure and ensure that funding programmes better align with local regeneration priorities.

If we are serious about supporting Scotland's screen sector, we must support not only the making of films but the places where audiences come together to experience them. I am pleased to support the motion. I am also pleased to remind members and any viewers that my script is still available for consideration.

18:27

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Meal do naidheachd—congratulations—to my colleague Alyn Smith on securing this members' business debate on the importance of the screen industry in Scotland.

As members will know, I believe that my constituency is Scotland's most beautiful, because of its land and seascape and its people. Collectively, those elements make Argyll and Bute—and Scotland—a perfect location for the film industry.

I will set the scene in land and seascape. A plethora of films have used the rugged, rolling scenery of Argyll. Mull and the Corryvreckan were the location of the 1945 classic, "I Know Where I'm Going". Walt Disney's film "The Three Lives of

Thomasina" was set in the picture-perfect town of Inveraray. The brutalist, concrete structure of the Cruachan dam, which resembles Darth Vader's mask, played a starring role in the Disney+ Star Wars prequel series "Andor".

However, as others have said, film is nothing without its cast, whether in front of the camera—the man of the small and silver screen, Sylvester McCoy, was born in Dunoon, and Ashley-Anne Lilley of Rothesay made her film debut in "Mamma Mia!"—or in the crew, production team and writers. Screen Argyll on Tiree provides opportunities for communities to connect through film. The Sea Change film festival is Scotland's only annual film festival that is dedicated to empowering women in film and celebrating women behind the camera, with funding from Sgrin Alba—Screen Scotland.

Sgrin Alba also had a vision to embed film and screen education and qualifications in Scotland's schools. I had a fabulous visit to the Rothesay joint campus with you, Presiding Officer, in the previous session of the Parliament. Having worked at BBC Scotland—very much behind the camera—and having a husband who works in the industry, I am excited that that education is now at the heart of Scotland's curriculum. As Outlander actor Sam Heughan has said,

"Film and Screen storytelling is at the centre of developing a child's imagination, a way for communities to represent their identity and individuals to connect with others."

That is certainly what Q Manivannan contributed.

Sam Heughan is not from Argyll and Bute, but Grace Wallace is. This is what she told me about her learning experience at Rothesay academy:

"The Film and Screen course made me certain of my future. It gave me the opportunity to learn and experiment in all areas of the film industry: from pre to post production, both in front of and behind the camera, and working with people already in the sector. I have been given the skill set and confidence to seek further opportunities in this area, which as a young woman from a small island originally seemed impossible."

That is definitely a five-star review.

We also need places to watch films, as Liam Kerr, Michael Marra and Lloyd Melville have all noted in the debate. Later this summer, Screen Machine 3 will return to its west coast venues, with £1.49 million raised, £500,000 of which was from the Scottish Government. Ten years ago, the wee picture house in Campbeltown was lovingly restored with thanks to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Scottish Government and Highlands and Islands Enterprise and played a starring role in "Cinema Gadelica"—a BBC Alba production that showcased films that were shot in iconic Scottish locations. Studio Cinema Dunoon opened in 1976 and is part of West Coast Cinemas. The Isle of Bute Winter Garden cinema is a community-owned single-screen cinema. As others have said, cinemas such as those are full of laughter, crying, horror, and excitement. They are at the centre of communities and bring people together through cinema. As Liam Kerr highlighted, they need investment.

The Scottish film industry is booming. We should build on that success and be even more ambitious for the sector. We have skilled and talented people who are building the foundations of an independent Scotland's film industry. I will finish with more of Grace Wallace's words:

"I believe that this sector needs to grow and thrive, to allow young people, like myself, to pursue their dreams, no matter where they come from, and open doors for demonstrating their talents and expressing their creativity."

18:31

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I enjoyed the debate and all the speeches; what a contrast from the previous couple of hours. I congratulate Alyn Smith on securing the motion for his first members' business debate. I hope that this does not destroy his credibility with his colleagues—

Alyn Smith: Such as it is. [*Laughter*.]

Stephen Kerr: I thought that he gave a very good speech. I think that we are aligned on the idea about brass nameplates. It is important that we extract investment into Scotland. We both live in a place that is benefiting from inward investment and the exciting future that Stirling has in the sector, which is quite mind blowing.

I want to comment on Liam Kerr's speech. The longer I have known him, the more that I have been astonished at the depth and direction of the fella's talents. I am not entirely surprised that he wrote a screenplay at the age of 20 and sent it to wherever he said he sent it to. Nothing would surprise me about Liam Kerr at all.

I make special mention of Michael Marra and Q Manivannan's speeches, which highlighted some of the issues. At the end of session 6, under the Deputy Presiding Officer's convenership, the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee conducted an inquiry into the sector and I recommend its report to members. Although there are many bright spots, there are also areas that warrant the attention of parliamentarians, particularly in relation to the direction of public funding. I will mention some other aspects of that report in my brief remarks.

There is no question that Scotland's screen sector is one of our most exciting economic opportunities. I know that we do not measure everything in economic terms, but it is worth noting that it supports thousands of jobs, generates

significant economic activity and showcases Scottish talent and creativity to audiences around the world. As Alyn Smith said, it is a global sector; Michael Marra described it as a "content-hungry" industry.

Alyn Smith mentioned Stirling; I respect the fact that he is the member for Stirling, but I, too, have a great love of the city. Stirling has a proud screen heritage. The historic landscapes and locations in Stirlingshire have featured in productions such as "Outlander", which has already been mentioned, "Game of Thrones" and—dare I say it—"Braveheart". Local businesses such as Combat International in the Falkirk area have played their part, too, by providing the specialist expertise that those productions require.

Building on that success, as is alluded to in the motion, is the development of Stirling studios, which will have around 200,000 square feet of studio space and brings the prospect of thousands of jobs. It could be transformational, not just for Stirling but for Scotland, and it could genuinely make Stirling the Hollywood of the British isles—that is what we want.

What makes that development particularly significant is how it all came about—Government had a role to play. The studios will be built on the site of former Ministry of Defence barracks. The land was transferred by the UK Conservative Government through the city region deal, followed by £19 million of levelling-up funds—again, granted by the Conservative Government—to help prepare the site for development.

Those decisions helped to unlock a major economic opportunity for Stirling and Scotland. They also demonstrate something that I know that I have gone on about before in speeches that I have made to the Parliament, which is that, when our Governments work together—when they focus on delivery, growth and investment—great things can begin to happen.

Scotland has so many advantages. I have already mentioned our location, and our creative talent and growing international reputation for high-quality production have also been mentioned. However, if we are serious about becoming a leading destination for film and television production, it is clear that our next challenge is skills—a point that was highlighted in the committee's report.

Throughout my business career, I have learned that investment follows talent. Studio space and infrastructure matter. However, businesses invest where they can recruit skilled people. That means strengthening links between industry and education. We can do better in that area. This is an industry that is about far more than actors and directors; it is about electricians, engineers, technicians, designers, builders, transport providers, caterers and countless small businesses. That is where the wider economic impact can be felt, which is why the sector matters, and I welcome support for it.

I understand that I am past my allocated time, so I will just say that, if we get this right—which we must do—the rewards, which include creating jobs, supporting businesses and driving economic growth in communities across Scotland, will extend far beyond the studio gates. One thing that I know that we can agree on—it is nice to have a debate in which there is a degree of consensus; there is increased consensus in session 7 of this Parliament—is that we need economic growth in Scotland. The screen sector has the power to deliver that economic growth.

18:37

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): I thank and congratulate Alyn Smith for securing this member's business debate, and I also thank members for their speeches. As Stephen Kerr has just reflected, this debate has been positive, and it has given all members—including me, as the new Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic—an opportunity to celebrate the enormous success that is Scotland's screen sector.

We have long been a great cinematic nation: from Sean Connery's James Bond and the film, "Gregory's Girl", which has been mentioned, to modern classics like "Trainspotting" and so many more examples, we have played a defining role in the global story of film and television. However, this debate is not just about celebrating that legacy; it must be about acknowledging what we are achieving today and looking at how we can build on that in the future.

Today, Scotland's screen sector is not only culturally authentic and significant; as members have reflected, it is also an economic powerhouse and a global creative force. Alyn Smith spoke of the sector's value, and I will put some of that growth in context. In 2019—just a year after the creation of Screen Scotland—film and television contributed £567 million in gross value added to the Scottish economy. By 2023, that had risen to £718 million, and, as members have reflected, we are now on track to reach £1 billion of GVA by 2030. That growth reflects sustained investment, strong partnerships and a clear vision for the sector.

The Government's manifesto commitment to make Screen Scotland a distinct body with increased funding will be central to realising that vision. It will allow us to accelerate growth, attract inward investment, expand domestic production

and build the skills and infrastructure that all members have said are needed for long-term success.

I want to say a little about Screen Scotland, which has been at the heart of the sector's progress since 2018. The next step will involve strengthening what works to ensure that Screen Scotland is equipped for the future. We are determined to continue that work.

Many members have reflected on the need for a skilled and diverse workforce. Working with Education Scotland and others, Screen Scotland has begun that work from the ground up by embedding screen and TV skills in the curriculum so that young people across Scotland can forge a pathway to being the television and film makers of the future. As my portfolio brings together education and culture, that is something that I will be keen to pick up and champion. I was pleased to hear Jenni Minto say that her constituent Grace has given the curriculum changes a five-star review.

Having embedded film and screen in the curriculum, we are committed to working with Screen Scotland and others on plans to embed a dedicated film and TV school in a Scottish university, building on the training programmes that have been so fundamentally linked to productions such as "Outlander", "Dept Q" and others.

We are also continuing to support the growth of world-class studios and infrastructure so that productions of all sizes can choose to base themselves in Scotland. Members were correct to reflect on the fact that attracting production is key. Inward investment and international productions are a huge part of that. Such investment ensures that Scotland is attractive and globally competitive and is able to continue to attract productions such as the Oscar-winning "Frankenstein", "Dept Q" and Marvel's "Avengers". I was pleased to hear my colleagues Ben Macpherson and Q Manivannan recognise the good news that there will be a second season of "Dept Q".

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I very much share the sentiments of the cabinet secretary and, indeed, all members who have spoken in the debate. However, I want to sound a note of caution in relation to the frequent closure of streets in Glasgow. We know that Glasgow is a very Atlantic-oriented city that often doubles up for American cities because of its grid system, but there have been issues with local businesses being closed arbitrarily for long periods without receiving adequate compensation. Perhaps a more robust system of protocols for compensation and advance notice could be considered for occasions when big production houses come to Glasgow and streets are closed down and blockaded for weeks on end, which has a significant impact on local businesses.

Màiri McAllan: It is right to say that, with any kind of disruption—even when Glasgow's streets are being showcased in international film and TV—we must be considerate of businesses. I am always interested in hearing about ways in which we can do that better.

However, there is another angle to reflect on, which is that domestic production is just as important as, if not more important than, our ability to attract international pictures. David Torrance was absolutely right to remind us of that, and Alyn Smith was correct to mention the supply chain and all the behind-the-scenes jobs. When content is developed and owned in Scotland, the benefits go further and last longer. By supporting sustainable jobs, we can strengthen independent production companies, ensuring that value remains here in Scotland and that we have the ability to tell our own stories—something that has felt elusive for too long.

We have already seen what can be achieved in productions such as "Summerwater" and "An t-Eilean", which provided absolutely gripping Gaelic drama. Both those productions were supported by Screen Scotland's broadcast content fund. Independent Scottish production companies continue to produce work that reaches global audiences and reflects our distinctive voice—a voice that I am so glad is being heard in English, Gaelic and Scots.

To build on that, we need to do much more on intellectual property development. That includes backing Scottish writers, producers and creators to originate ideas here, to retain rights here and to scale those ideas for international markets. We must enable people to emulate the young Liam Kerr in that regard. It is essential that we have a strong pipeline from development through to distribution if Scottish-owned content is to play a larger role in the growth of the sector.

I also want to say a word about cinema. Michael Marra, Liam Kerr, Lloyd Melville and Jenni Minto are absolutely right to mention the importance of independent cinema. As well as strongly encouraging folks to enjoy their local cinemas, I want to acknowledge this evening the campaigners who are working to save their independent cinemas. In that respect, I must mention the success of the Screen Machine campaigners, and I am really pleased that the Scottish Government was able to support that.

Time is against me, but before I wind up, I just want to make it clear that public service broadcasting is absolutely central. It is critical that

Scotland's voice is heard in it, and, as culture secretary, I will be championing that.

Our ambitions are absolutely clear: we have a sector that, as members have reflected, has gone from strength to strength and is a real growth area for our economy. However, it also has intrinsic value in providing jobs and growth in Scotland's communities and in allowing us to tell the stories of Scotland and to put them on a global stage. I am so proud of the success that we have had to date, and I look forward to leading that further.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, cabinet secretary. That concludes the debate, and—this is my first time saying this—I close this meeting.

Meeting closed at 18:45.

Correction

Duncan Dunlop has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD):

At col 16, paragraph 5—

Original text—

Similarly to Mark Ruskell's data centre in Fife, a 150-hectare data centre that would cover an area larger than 200 football pitches is proposed for the wilderness of the Lammermuir Hills, in the Borders.

Corrected text—

Similarly to Mark Ruskell's data centre in Fife, a 150-hectare data centre development area that would cover an area larger than 200 football pitches is proposed for the wilderness of the Lammermuir Hills, in the Borders.

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