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DRAFT

Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

**Comataidh na Roinn Eòrpa,
Cùisean Taobh A-muigh
agus Cultar**

Tuesday 1 September 2026

Session 7



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EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP)

Jenny Young (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Stephen Gethins (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy)

Simita Kumar (Minister for Equalities and International Development)

Elliot Robertson (Scottish Government)

Rachel Sunderland (Scottish Government)

Katherine White (Scottish Government)

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Tuesday 1 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Scottish Government Priorities

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the second meeting of the Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee in session 7 of the Scottish Parliament. We have no apologies to record for today's meeting. The only item of business is an evidence session on the Scottish Government priorities regarding Europe, external affairs and international development.

I would like to welcome to the meeting our witnesses: Stephen Gethins, who is Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy, Simita Kumar, who is Minister for Equalities and International Development, Rachel Sunderland, who is deputy director, international relations, population and migration, Katherine White, who is deputy director for international development, and Elliot Robertson, who is head of the European Union secretariat. I thank you all for attending and thank the ministers for providing some written evidence in advance.

I ask the ministers to make some opening remarks for, I suggest, up to three minutes each—do not feel that you need to use all three minutes—after which we will move to questions. I offer you the floor, Mr. Gethins.

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): Thank you, convener, and thanks to colleagues on the committee for having us along. I very much look forward to working with all of you.

You will understand that it is a particular privilege for me to take up this ministerial position. My background and professional interests involve working in areas that are affected by conflict, working in the international non-governmental organisations sector, working in Ukraine, the western Balkans and the Caucasus and working with Brussels and the European institutions, as well as my past role at the University of St Andrews and two terms as a member of the Westminster Foreign Affairs Committee, so it is quite something to be on the other side of the table this time.

This Government was elected on a manifesto commitment to strengthen Scotland's relationship across democratic Europe, maintain alignment with European partners and ensure that Scotland

remains an open, welcoming and outward-looking nation. The programme for government will be announced later today and will make clear that we will be unrelenting in delivering for the people of Scotland.

Scotland's engagement internationally is vital as a means of delivering on those priorities. Our relations abroad, particularly with the European Union, drive growth, attract investment, support our transition to net zero and reinforce Scotland's resilience in an increasingly volatile world. We are living through a period of profound global change. Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, conflict in the middle east, other geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty show just how important this work and the work of the committee has become.

Closer to home, the disastrous decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU has caused needless economic, social and political damage. There has never been a greater need for Scotland to strengthen partnerships, deepen bilateral relationships, engage with our diaspora and work with other countries that share our commitment to the rule of law, democracy and human rights. That means that we have the task of rebuilding our relationship with the EU.

We welcome the moves to reduce regulatory friction and revisit the post-Brexit regulatory changes, especially the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, given the Prime Minister's commitment to devolution. We still have a huge contribution to make in strengthening Europe's energy security and through the global reputation of our universities and research institutions and our contribution to wider international security co-operation.

Our international work is not optional; it is vital to delivering for people at home and building a modern, confident and prosperous nation. I look forward to our discussion today.

The Convener: We will question Stephen Gethins first and then Simita Kumar, but I would like to give both ministers the opportunity to make opening remarks before we get into questions. Would Simita Kumar like to give her opening remarks?

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): Good morning, convener, and good morning, members. It is so wonderful to have this opportunity to discuss the Scottish Government's international development priorities alongside minister Gethins. I am so proud to take on the responsibility of a portfolio that reflects Scotland's values and its long-standing commitment to global solidarity.

Across the world, there is conflict, climate change and poverty, and those things are placing

increasing pressures on communities, not least in our partner countries, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan. Against that backdrop, I am deeply concerned by recent significant reductions in the official development assistance that is provided by the UK Government and others. The cuts risk undermining hard-won development gains and reducing support for those who need it most.

By contrast, the Scottish Government has committed to increasing funding for the international development fund by 25 per cent by the end of this parliamentary session. That sits alongside the continuation and growth of our climate justice fund, which is led by the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs. Through our international development and climate justice programmes, Scotland seeks to deliver on its intention to be a good global citizen. Since the international development fund was established in 2005, Scottish Government-supported programmes have delivered tangible outcomes across health, education, equalities and humanitarian action.

There are so many things to talk about, but the ones that I want to concentrate on today include our transformational work on oral health in Malawi. Through the MalDent project, we have seen the graduation of the country's first home-grown dentists, and the project has secured major World Bank investment for a state-of-the-art teaching facility in Blantyre. With the new dental school, the national oral health policy and a growing cohort of students, the partnership is laying the foundation for lasting change.

Alongside that, we are ensuring that we are tackling violence against women and children globally, so our police force is working with partners in Malawi and Zambia. As part of that, we are shifting attitudes on gender-based violence and child protection. Through our Scottish peace programme, we continue to recognise the importance of the role of women peace builders in conflict prevention and resolution. In that vein, we have supported about 360 fellows from around 40 different countries and regions within the women in conflict 1325 fellowship.

Looking ahead, my priority is to ensure that Scotland's international development work remains rooted in equality and in collaboration, including with members around this table. Our work continues to be shaped by the perspectives and priorities of people in our partner countries, so I really look forward to today's discussions and I welcome the engagement to work collaboratively in this space. Thank you very much for listening.

The Convener: Thank you both very much. Let us turn to questions, first for Stephen Gethins.

You talked a little bit about the changing world, which I think we are all extremely aware of, and the anxiety that its challenges cause people. The Government's international strategy is now a couple of years old. Can you tell us how, or to what extent, the strategy is updated, or does the Government intend to replace it with a new strategy to take account of changing events? Is the process more iterative or is there an attempt to produce a completely new strategy for current circumstances?

Stephen Gethins: That is a good question, and that point is under consideration. The point will be discussed in this afternoon's statement on the programme for government, but let me talk about the broader themes that inform me and that might inform the work going forward.

You are right that we sit in a changing world and, although I know that you know this, it is always worth stressing for the record that international affairs have a deep impact on domestic politics. It is why we do this and why your committee is here. Going forward, I will be looking at the overall picture. I will consider whether to refresh the strategy, but that discussion will be ongoing.

I am the minister for energy rather than for culture. Energy is of extreme concern to people, and I have already touched on that, as well as on the broader security situation. We have talked about Ukraine, but we also saw what happened at Leipzig airport this week. We are in a very uncertain world that is changing very rapidly, so we will continue to assess that going forward.

The Convener: The Government's international presence has developed gradually, I think, over many years—

Stephen Gethins: Many years, yes.

The Convener: —and is now relatively substantial. Can you give us a sense of how the Government sees that presence continuing to develop, and how its role needs to change to take account of changing circumstances? For example, not so long ago, it might have been inconceivable that the US would be openly threatening the sovereignty and security of NATO allies.

Stephen Gethins: Look—the world is changing so dramatically. First of all, you are right; I get a little bit frustrated by the discussion and debate about our international presence, when, in fairness, and to give credit where it is due, I should point out that it was, I think, Ian Lang who way, way back opened the first office in Brussels. That was before this Parliament even existed. There was the office in Brussels, which I think was formally opened after the Scottish Parliament was established by Donald Dewar, and there was also the work that Jack McConnell and Henry McLeish

did with the Beijing and Washington offices. Obviously, that has since been expanded.

There is also the Scotland house 40 manifesto commitment that you will be aware of, and that is also something that we will have to look at. However, the model has to be dynamic. Given how rapidly the world is changing, and given some of the issues that you have alluded to, we need to look at the whole estate. Where are the opportunities?

I am not going to make any commitments as we review things, but India, for example, which I think the First Minister has been to, is a really interesting place with regard to opportunities for universities and research institutions. We can also look elsewhere in Europe, such as at the Nordics and the Baltics, and what we have got to learn there. Scotland houses are great when it comes to our engagement in attracting foreign direct investment, but they are also valuable when it comes to seeing what we can learn from each other, and they might lead people to think that they have something to learn from Scotland, too.

The Convener: But there have been times when the relationship with the UK Government has facilitated good operation of Scotland's international footprint, and there have been times when things been a little bit more strained.

Stephen Gethins: That is fair.

The Convener: There might have been a lack of trust, perhaps—not necessarily between the officials on the ground but at a political level—that has inhibited the way in which Scotland's international presence has operated. You are fairly recent in post, as are the UK ministers, but what is the state of play?

Stephen Gethins: Because I previously sat at Westminster, there are a number of ministers there with whom I have a good working relationship. Stephen Doughty, for example, has responsibility for devolution at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and he and I worked very closely over the Brexit years. Indeed, I have already had bilaterals with my UK colleagues.

One thing that I have always been clear on is that, where I can work in partnership with UK ministers, I will do so. It is always my preference to work in that way; it is a personal preference, and it is how I have always conducted my politics. However, where we disagree, we will disagree.

Perhaps I can give you just two examples. First of all, I was chatting to officials this morning about the situation in Nepal; we will be in touch with FCDO officials, and we wish them well in what is a really difficult set of circumstances. There are so many areas on which we can agree. The war in Ukraine, and the contribution that we have made

in relation to Russia's war of aggression—a war that threatens each and every one of us—will be areas where we find common ground.

Questions over how we engage with the European Union will be different and distinct, because this is a Government that believes that we should rejoin the European Union. The UK Government does not share that ambition, so we will have differences of opinion, and we will want to seek alignment wherever we can. That is not to say that we cannot work with the British Government on this matter. A renegotiation is taking place, and we want to make a contribution to it, given the impact that it will have on the Scottish Parliament and its responsibilities.

This will always be about striking a balance, but my preference always is to work collegiately as far as possible.

The Convener: I will now open it up to members. Who would like to begin with questions? I call Keith Brown.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): My question relates to the point that you have just made. I will come back to intergovernmental relations in a second, but I would just commend to both ministers the legacy report of the committee in the previous session and our investigation into intergovernmental relations. It showed that, although, as the minister has said, personal relationships can be extremely effective, we cannot rely on them, because otherwise we will just have dead areas where there are no such relationships.

For example, we can think about how poor the relationship between the Scottish Government and the Secretary of State for Scotland is currently. You cannot just say that there is no way of underpinning a constructive relationship, so the architecture is very important.

09:15

Before I come back to that point, I would like to get the view of Stephen Gethins on two things. First, this week, Iceland voted not to continue discussions with the EU, so what is the Scottish Government's response to that? Earlier in the summer, I was lucky enough to be in Boston and Rhode Island—just for a wee cultural visit that I fancied. Often, these discussions can end up being quite negative, but what is the Scottish Government doing, positively, to capitalise on the enormous good will and soft power created by the conduct of the tartan army? Dismissing that or not capitalising on it would be criminal, so what is the Scottish Government doing in relation to that? I have seen that exchange programmes, bagpiping initiatives and all the rest of it have been starting up, but what else is the Scottish Government doing

or thinking about doing? What are your views on the Iceland vote?

Stephen Gethins: I will take those issues individually. On relationships, I will work collegiately where I can—that has always been the way in which I have worked, whether in Westminster or elsewhere—but, as Mr Brown knows better than anyone on this committee, I spent a number of years working in Brussels and I have my own networks elsewhere in the world. That is not the be-all and end-all, but that has allowed me to see up close the work that Scotland house colleagues do in Brussels and elsewhere. That is a fantastic network. I went to Brussels at the end of June, as my first and, so far, only trip overseas. It was so good to see so many people engaging with Scotland house for the summer reception. That included the business community, the institutions and members of the European Parliament from the other representative offices. We have vast connections, which can only benefit Scottish business and Scottish sectors, such as higher education and energy. Therefore, first of all, I must commend colleagues in Scotland house in Brussels. Over the past couple of years, I was also a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, working closely with MPs from every single Parliament across the rest of democratic Europe.

We have always been clear that the future of Iceland is a matter for the people of Iceland. That is one of the benefits of being an independent country. I would not express a view on the Icelandic referendum, but I will make the observation that Iceland remains a member of Schengen and that it is effectively a member of the single market, through its membership of the European Free Trade Association and the European Economic Area. Being integrated into the single market does not somehow affect your independence, as I have heard some Westminster politicians say. In fact, people in every other capital city around Europe do not think that that interferes with your independence. Iceland remains heavily integrated into the European institutions but, as one of our neighbours, it also remains a crucial partner for the Scottish Government.

There is a bit of work ongoing on how we can benefit from the huge amount of good will in the United States. I want to put on the record that I thought that the First Minister should absolutely have been there. You will have seen his schedule—it was so busy—and what an opportunity that was. It was, first of all, to be fair, put forward by the tartan army, but it was a chance for the Scottish Government to be on top of the investment opportunities that were created. We saw some of that with the First Minister's visit, not only to Boston but to Kentucky, which was

important. Some members here will have whisky distilleries but also other sectors in their constituencies, and jobs rely on those kinds of relationships and visits. That is an investment, like anything that you do in government, and it is absolutely the right thing to do. We have got a huge amount of work going on to build on that good will, which you, along with thousands of others, contributed to, Mr Brown.

Keith Brown: On the point about Boston—I included Rhode Island in my remarks because many of the Scottish fans were there—it would be useful to have a written account. The impact of that is a fairly intangible thing, and it can be lost very quickly. I would like to have something in writing, so that I know that it is being properly capitalised on.

Of course, I should say that my constituency has more whisky in it than any other constituency or any other place in the world—it does not make it, but it stores it.

I go back to my original point about intergovernmental relations, and I appreciate what you said about the work that is being done in Brussels. The point that I was trying to make is that, although personal relationships are, of course, important and can be very effective, we cannot rely on just those. There must be an architecture and a structure that allows negotiations and discussions between the Governments. In the past, we have discussed what role this committee might have in relation to that. For example, UK Governments are increasingly exercising powers in devolved areas, so where does the scrutiny come from? If a matter affects devolution, where is the scrutiny of this committee and other committees exercised?

I know that some of this will come under the Deputy First Minister's remit, but I want to get a feel for whether work is going on to look at those structures, which are pretty appalling and often observed more in the breach than anything else. Is the Government looking at those structures in a formal way, or is that just happening on the basis of discussions between individual ministers?

Stephen Gethins: First of all, on the United States, we will get you something in writing, and I think that you made a fair point. We have also recently got a new head of post out in Washington, John Devine, who has come from Ottawa. We are giving him the chance to bed in, but he brings fantastic experience of Ottawa into Washington. It is good to have a bit of that, but we will get something in writing for the committee on that.

I do not want to go too much into the DFM's portfolio, but of course we know that the lack of architecture causes issues—we saw that throughout the Brexit years. I have already written

to Hamish Falconer, the new minister at UK level who is dealing with that. However I do not know how on earth you can talk about devolution and the importance of devolution when we still have the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. As the think tank UK in a changing Europe said, based on its analysis, the effect of the internal market act has been

“to erode the legal authority of the devolved parliaments and inhibit their ability to introduce distinctive legislation that regulates goods and services.”

We can see how the issue is dealt with in other countries. For example, I was with the German ambassador over the weekend, and you can see where they have structures at the federal level and the Länder level for how sub-state entities engage. We have also seen it in Denmark, in the way that it engaged with the Faroe Islands and Greenland, for example. It is to Denmark's benefit, too, to be really clear about how that process is set out. Rules need to be written down, because, when there are disputes between Governments—there will be disputes; that is why we have elections—and we do not have some of these structures in place, it causes difficulties, including for stakeholders who are trying to engage.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I want to pick up where Keith Brown left off with regard to the world cup. There has been a media flurry about the cost of the tickets for the First Minister and the colleagues who went with him. Is there a job to do for the Government to get ahead of this and demonstrate value for money, regardless of people's views on the issue? You highlighted the importance of jobs, and you highlighted the whisky industry, which is important for my constituency. Is there a case to say that the Government can do more to demonstrate value for money in this area?

Stephen Gethins: You have to demonstrate value for money in everything that you do. We know what the circumstances are, financially. I am going to come to your point in a minute, but I do not think that Brexit is value for money, because it is costing us £250 million every day—£90 billion a year. To be fair, those were Lib Dem stats from the House of Commons. That is more than the Scottish Government's budget for everything, every year, and that is a waste of the public purse. When you are working within those strictures, of course you have to show value for money in everything that you do. That is why I talk about our international engagement as an investment.

For the past 10 or 11 years in a row—officials will correct me—Scotland has had the second-highest level of foreign direct investment outside of London and the south-east of England, which is a significant achievement. I like to think that the Scottish Government and our international

networks have played a role in that, but the excellence that we see in our higher education institutions, our businesses and the industries in your constituency, Mr Green, have all contributed to that.

When I was teaching, I would always say that the biggest driver of international affairs is domestic politics, because we have to show the benefit back home.

That is why I said at the end of my opening comments that our international work is not optional but is integral to everything that we are trying to do. International engagement requires investment, but in a world in which democratic European countries are moving closer together because of the threats from outside—not least the threat that is posed by Russia—it is an economic and a security imperative. That has always been the case.

I thought that some of the coverage of the First Minister's visit was unfortunate. We should always look at value for money, but I would love to be discussing issues such as whether we are doing the right thing in this portfolio. I know that colleagues will bring a constructive approach to that. I want to have an open discussion, and if I am able to engage with the committee regularly, as I hope that the convener will allow me to, that will add value to that work.

David Green: That was helpful. You touched on the £90 billion that Brexit is costing us. You and I agree that Scotland's best future lies in our being in Europe. We also agree that the UK Government should pursue membership of a customs union and the single market. There will be issues on which we disagree—we certainly disagree on the constitutional question in Scotland—but, regardless of that, as the minister for Europe, how do you see yourself bringing together different parts of civil society in Scotland in order to pursue our future in Europe?

Stephen Gethins: In talking about the EU, I have always seen it as beneficial that, although there might not be unanimity on the European question in Scotland—it would be unfair of me to say that that is the case—there is greater alignment around it here than is perhaps the case in other parts of the United Kingdom, for various reasons that we do not need to go into. I think that that helps us in looking at investment, and it helps our institutions and our debate.

For goodness' sake, we are talking about freedom of movement. We are in a situation in which the generation that has come after me will not have the same opportunities as I did. We are all here to create more opportunities for those who come after us. We will disagree on some things, but it is the case that we are in a situation in which

there are fewer such opportunities. We need to consider what work we can do in that area. There is also a role for us to play in convening meetings with businesses so that we can talk to them. When it comes to things such as renegotiation, I will push the British Government to go much further. I do not see how it can make a huge amount of progress within its red lines. I think that its red lines around a customs union and the single market are unfortunate, and I wish that it would go much further.

The economic analysis is there. We know what Brexit is costing us every day. It is also making things more difficult for business. I want to be as constructive as possible, but I want the UK Government to be much more ambitious than it is being at present. We see the benefits of being in Europe. We have had a decade of damage. If there is work that we can do to push that agenda, we will do it, but I have to say that, at Westminster level, I find it tricky. I wish that the parties there were a bit more ambitious. I know that your party has talked about having a customs union. I wish that it would go further by advocating for the single market and EU membership as well.

The fact that, in Scotland, we have a greater amount of consensus on how we engage with Europe certainly makes my life a bit easier, although there will always be areas where you will think that I could be doing more. I am always open to suggestions. I put on record the fact that I am really keen to engage with organisations that have been affected by Brexit so that we can learn day and daily. A European partnership bill is due to come through, and I would like the internal market act to be looked at again. I would also like to find out what impact the current negotiations are having on our industry. I know about that from the energy part of my portfolio.

David Green: I reassure the minister that the Liberal Democrats believe in our membership of the single market and a customs union and, ultimately, in our having a place in Europe. That is where there is common ground, so let us focus on that.

I know that colleagues will come on to ask about alignment with the EU, so I will ask just one brief question on that, because it is the path to the end destination that we have spoken about. In your written evidence to the committee, you referred to the fact that the discussions on a youth experience scheme have proved quite challenging. Could you unpack that as a way of starting the conversation on EU alignment?

09:30

Stephen Gethins: There are two issues regarding the youth experience scheme. First,

those in the higher education sector have some concerns about the scheme and its funding, which I think are legitimate. If you are considering having a cap and restricting the youth experience scheme, it will never be as good as freedom of movement. I am somebody who benefited from freedom of movement and from Erasmus. I will invite colleagues to contribute further or to talk about anything that I miss, but there will be real frustration that we are seeking to restrict our young people from enjoying the benefits that you and I had, Mr Green.

I find it deeply frustrating that we have taken away rights from our young people to live, love and work across Europe, together with the benefits that that brings to Scotland when they come back with skills and expertise, as well as the huge contribution that European nationals make and have always made to Scotland. I find that hugely frustrating.

Rachel, is there anything else on youth experience?

Rachel Sunderland (Scottish Government): Youth experience will never be a replacement for freedom of movement, nor will it be a replacement in terms of the UK Government's immigration system. Those are the two challenges that exist, and the Scottish Government has a position on both of those issues. Youth mobility agreements are already in place, but they are limited in allowing young people to maximise their benefits.

The Convener: Colin Beattie wants to ask some issues related to this point, so we will come to Colin first, and then to Pauline Stafford, if that is okay.

We are not running short of time, minister, but if we had slightly tighter answers, that would ensure that we have plenty of time for Simita Kumar as well.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): I am interested in anything to do with the EU, and the Scottish Government's policy is to align with EU policy wherever possible. How effective has that been? As time passes, will we get more divergence, simply driven by UK legislation and so forth?

Talking about UK legislation, does the UK Internal Market Act 2020 affect our attempts to keep aligned with EU policies and so on?

What sort of contacts have we had with the UK Government in this area? An EU-UK summit was due to take place in July, but there was a change of Government, so it did not take place. Are we aware whether that particular meeting will happen? If it does, are we expecting Scotland to be involved? Will we be at the table?

The Convener: If I could add to that, there is also the question of the European partnership bill, and we would be grateful for any clarity that you may have, minister, about the UK Government's current direction of travel on that.

Stephen Gethins: I will try to be more concise, although there was quite a lot in the questions.

We will seek to align as far as possible. The UK now finds itself more isolated than at any time since the 1960s—at a time when we cannot afford to be isolated. We are seeing the whole of democratic Europe coming closer together. Mr Brown brought up the Iceland vote, but Iceland still remains integrated into the single market. That is a really important point. Alignment helps our sector.

There will be divergence in areas that are the responsibility of the UK Government. That is unfortunate, as it makes it more difficult for business and research institutions, and it makes it more difficult for individuals to engage in what remain our most important and reliable markets.

I have written to Hamish Falconer, and I had a bilateral with Chris Elmore, who was the minister with responsibility here. However, we do not have the formal structures in place, as may exist in other states. It is tricky, within those strictures.

On the renegotiation, my colleagues and I will push the UK to go much further with regard to that alignment. It was unfortunate that the high-level meeting did not take place on 22 July, but we all know that was because we had to change the Prime Minister—and I can see why. Although that was unfortunate and disappointing, I have urged UK Government colleagues to use the additional time to be more ambitious, for example in relation to electricity, which would really help the Scottish industry.

On the partnership bill, we will be looking for certainty on the matter but we do not have that yet. We do not even know when the next leaders summit will be—we thought that it might take place at the end of October, but I suspect that it is more likely to be into November. That would be our assumption—again, we are working on assumptions.

Colin Beattie: Is it your assessment that alignment with EU policies has been successful, or has it been limited by the legislation and actions of the UK Government?

Stephen Gethins: It has been successful in so far as this Parliament's responsibilities are concerned, which not only makes life easier but sends out a positive and powerful message about our willingness to engage with the EU. You do not need to go to many EU capitals before you realise that people get deeply frustrated by the ongoing

damage of Brexit, so it is exceptionally important for us to be able to say that we have a broad consensus about where we want to go. Although we might not agree on everything, we have—in fairness to Mr Green's point—that consensus.

However, we know that significant challenges exist in areas that remain the UK's responsibility. We see the impact not only on the public purse but on things such as energy costs, in relation to which

"the British power market has had less efficient trading arrangements"

with the rest of Europe. That quote came from Montel analytics, which also said that, in relation to energy, the situation

"has added significantly to consumer costs in Britain."

We see that kind of damage. I can also talk about the drop in exports from the food and drink sector, which will have a profound impact on farms in Mr Beattie's constituency and elsewhere. When we do not have that alignment and that relationship, there is a price to be paid back home.

Colin Beattie: The keeping pace power, which expires in March next year, has been used three times, and a decision could be taken to extend it to 2031. What do you expect as regards that?

Stephen Gethins: I will come back to you about that a bit more formally in due course, but my ambition is to be as aligned with the rest of Europe as we possibly can be and to minimise the disruption of Brexit, within the limited powers that the Scottish Government has. Can Elliot Robertson add anything on timeframes for that?

Elliot Robertson (Scottish Government): We will come back to Parliament towards the end of the year, or possibly around the new year, once we have a settled position from ministers.

If I may go back to your question about the success of the alignment policy, Mr Beattie, there are three quick points to make. The first is that the policy has ensured that developments in EU law can be tracked and have been taken account of as policy making has taken place in Scotland. The second point is that although, as you said, the keeping pace power has been used only three times, it is seen as a backstop—there are other legislative and non-legislative routes by which EU alignment is pursued, and the continuity power is used as a backstop, as I said.

The third point is that the independent analysis that was carried out in the previous parliamentary session by the committee's predecessor concluded that the commitment to align has largely been upheld and that the divergence over the last period of that session was very limited. As an assessment of the success of that policy, that committee's report is quite useful.

The Convener: We could probably spend longer on this, but we will continue to track and monitor the extent to which alignment is happening.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): Minister, one of the priorities that you outlined in your correspondence with the committee was the high north. A lot of that policy area is reserved under defence and foreign affairs but, geographically, Scotland sits at the gateway to the high north.

In general terms, what is Scotland's strategic role in supporting stability and security in the high north and the Arctic? I appreciate that you are just in post, as are your UK counterparts, but what has co-operation on Arctic affairs been like with the UK Government? Are there areas where you are looking to achieve greater alignment?

Stephen Gethins: That is a really important point. I have been writing about the high north for a long time and have done so outside politics, too. I think that the UK is catching up a bit on its importance. Scotland is the most northerly non-Arctic country, and economic opportunities come with that. I was in Shetland over the summer, and you really see that relationship there.

I understand that "Sutherland" in the name of Mr Green's constituency means south land, which, when you are sitting in Edinburgh, does not make sense. However, that perspective is valuable for us to think about—this is all a matter of perspective. On my first day at secondary school, my geography teacher told me that there is no right way up for a globe, and that is really important to understand. When you go to Shetland or Thurso and look at the globe, you see how important the relationship is.

More than that, given the security situation and Russia's aggression, the high north has become exceptionally important. That is not new—Scapa Flow was the seat of the high seas fleet. High north security has always been a thing. However, given our energy infrastructure, food and drinks links, and cultural links with the high north, it is personally very important to me.

We have worked on that matter but, as with Mr Brown's question about the United States, I would like to come back to the committee on elements of the issue, because it is a really important bit of work.

Pauline Stafford: That would be great. I think that we are all reassessing our ideas of the north at the moment.

I have one further issue to follow up on. We have talked a lot about Scotland's soft power and international footprint. The Arctic connections framework came out in 2019, but we are in a very different situation now. Do you have plans to

renew that framework, or will it be rolled into a wider piece of work? Some of the cultural links and relationship building in that are so important.

Stephen Gethins: I will come back to you on that. I know that you have talked about the Nordic-Baltic strategy in the past, which is important, too. We talk about the high north, but the Baltic is really interesting in this space as well. We will come back to you on that, unless you want us to add anything further at the moment. That is a really good point—I thank you for raising it.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Unless there are any final questions for Stephen Gethins, it is time to move on to Simita Kumar, who I thank for her patience.

Would Jenny Young be okay to lead off on questions for this part of the meeting?

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): Happily. Minister, thank you for your statement and your written evidence, which was really helpful for preparation. The first area that I will ask about is the Scottish Government's strategy for international development policy. There was a review in 2021 and, as I understand it, there has not been a new strategy since then. You and Mr Gethins have talked about the changing world in which we live, and I know that these things are dynamic. Will you talk a wee bit about your plans to update that strategy in this parliamentary session?

Simita Kumar: Absolutely—thank you very much for your question. My answer is similar to what Mr Gethins said because, if we are to look at international development strategy, we will be doing so with a holistic lens.

As you are aware, I am newly in post. I have been getting up to speed on what we are doing and what our priorities should be. Our programme for government will be announced this afternoon, but part of my role is to go back and review whether our frameworks are still fit for purpose, what we are doing and what we are planning for the future. One of the things that I will want to establish, with officials and through collaboration with the committee, is whether we need to create a new strategy and what that would look like. That is very much part of my planning process, and I hope to come back to the committee if that is the route that we take.

As I said, that will be a collective piece of work done alongside the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs, so there will be a holistic understanding. I appreciate that our strategy perhaps needs a refresh, and it does need a rethink and a relook. I am keen to understand it and to see what the committee wants to get out of the strategy.

09:45

Jenny Young: We would be happy to feed into that area. Can you put any timescale on that? With reviews and consultations, it can take a long time to produce such documents—rightly so, sometimes—but it would be helpful for us to have even a rough timescale.

Simita Kumar: Absolutely, and I am happy to come back to the committee on that point. As I said, we have the programme for government this afternoon and I do not want to pre-empt anything that is in that, but I assure the committee that, if we are looking at any timelines, you will get information on those at the next or subsequent opportunity.

I have been in post for only about three months, and one of my tasks is trying to understand the scope of our international footprint. Before coming into post, I had not realised how vast it is. We should be enormously proud of that.

You are absolutely right, and I make a commitment to informing you and the committee of any timelines once we are a wee bit more aware of them.

Jenny Young: Thank you. An area that I want to touch on—you both touched on it in your opening statements—is the fact that, in the world in which we live today, and in our country, there are people who question the value of international development. I do not think that anyone around this table would question its value—I hope that that is the case—but I wonder whether there is a piece around better education to show people why it is important. I say that not just as a former teacher.

I have looked at what you have said about the Scotdec development education centres. Do you have any data on how much those are being used? I am a former teacher and I had never heard of Scotdec, so how widespread is its use? Are there other ways, and not just for schools and young people, through which we can prove the worth and value—which we all know is there—of international development work?

Simita Kumar: Your questions are spot on. There was a time when we would have had unanimous support for our international development role and for Scotland's role and value as an outward-looking nation and country. I am incredibly proud of that work but, unfortunately, we are no longer in that space with regard to support, and it saddens me that we are not.

You asked if we could highlight the value of our international development work, and I want to reflect on that. I will take Malawi as a quick example. People in Malawi are experiencing some of the most extreme levels of poverty known to man, and we should be incredibly proud that

Scotland is playing its part to make sure that people all around the world, including in our partner countries such as Malawi, are being supported.

I will look at Pakistan for a minute and how we support women and girls there. Our specific programme of work in Pakistan is about scholarships and getting women and girls educated. Again, I am incredibly proud of that piece of work.

We also focus on health and health inequalities. If I walk into any toilet in this building, I know that, as a woman, I will be able to access period products. What a privilege that is. It is a travesty that, in some sub-Saharan African countries, women do not have access to period products. It is almost unthinkable that young women do not have such basic needs met. We do not realise that the access that we have is a privilege.

You mentioned Scotdec, and we have some data on that. Our lovely director is just giving me some information. You asked about tangible numbers; in 2025-26, we supported more than 91,000 practitioner engagements. I commit to giving you further information after the committee meeting.

We are doing so much globally but you are absolutely spot on—and this is something that I will take away—that we must ensure that, as a Government, we are much more proactive in sharing examples of that work.

Moreover—and this reflects your previous role as a teacher—this is something that our young people, too, need to know, and I would be proud and willing to support such an approach being taken by our Government and our officials. After all, we want children and young people who are global citizens. That, again, is something that we should be incredibly proud of.

Jenny Young: You referenced this in the written evidence, but your manifesto proposes an aid match scheme with the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund. Where are we at with that? I do appreciate that it is not that long since the election, but what discussions have you had with SCIAF? Where has that got to?

Simita Kumar: I have not had a meeting with SCIAF yet, but I know that officials have, and there is a meeting in the diary. Do not quote me on the date, but I think that it is in a few weeks' time.

The aid match proposal was in the SNP manifesto. However, although we will be working with SCIAF in trying to understand it, I should point out that it is also about other faith-based communities and organisations. As we know, a lot of our faith-based organisations do an incredible amount of work in other countries, so part of my

discussions with SCIAF and those other organisations will be about trying to understand how we can take this issue forward. Again, I give you a commitment that, as soon as I have my discussions with SCIAF, I can submit some written evidence, if that will be helpful to you—and, indeed, to other committee members. I can tell you that it is something that I am keen to develop more, and I want to have those initial discussions with SCIAF.

Jenny Young: Thank you.

The final area that I wanted to ask about was fair trade. I noticed that it was not mentioned in your written statement but, obviously, Scottish Fair Trade receives funding through the international development fund. I understand that the funding is about £161,000—£161,304—per annum. Is that right? How has that funding changed over the years? Can you say a little bit about what the Scottish Government plans to do in this parliamentary session to support fair trade?

Simita Kumar: I am really sorry that I did not mention fair trade in my opening statement, so I will reflect on that and ensure that we are giving it equal credence as well. However, you are absolutely right; one of my absolute ambitions is to understand all of our Scottish fair trade principles, and to ensure that, when it comes to anything to do with our procurement, we align with those principles, not just in that respect but in terms of supply chains for other organisations. Of course, there will be certain places where we will not be able to mandate that other organisations take that sort of thing forward, but we can certainly set out our principles.

I will pause and bring in Kat White to respond to the question on changes in funding.

Katherine White (Scottish Government): Part of our budget directly supports four organisations in Scotland that are involved with global citizenship and solidarity, and one of them is, as you have said, Scottish Fair Trade. I do not have the information on changes over time with me today, but again, we can write to you with that detail.

We are—and this brings me back to the value for money question—constantly considering the best use of our money and where it goes. We support these particular bodies in amplifying their messages, policies and positions; the funding predominantly supports staff in those organisations, but it also supports initiatives, and I know that Scottish Fair Trade has particularly engaged with young people in Scotland on supply chains, how they operate and where things come from.

It is also working with organisations in Africa, including in Malawi, to support women-led co-

operatives in considering, for example, fair trade routes back into the UK. We are proud of that work, too, but we can supply you with more detail on the specific issue of funding.

Jenny Young: My understanding is that it has remained fairly static over the past few years, but we will look forward to getting that update. Thank you.

The Convener: Of course, the minister will be very welcome to give us further information in writing after the meeting. I call David Green.

David Green: Thanks, convener. First of all, I should refer to my entry in the register of interests as a former employee of Christian Aid and the British Red Cross.

I welcome the minister to her role. We have not engaged on the record since she was appointed, so I just want to give her a warm welcome now.

Minister, I am pleased to hear your considerations with regard to the international development strategy, but I encourage you to take a view on the fact that we are now 10 years on since we published that strategy, and that it has been five years since the review. Now is the time to look at it again. The context with regard to funding across the world has drastically changed, and I think that the way in which we need to do our development work—particularly through the partnership approach demonstrated by SCIAF, to go back to the example that was raised earlier—is a world away from where we were 10 years ago. I am therefore looking forward to a commitment in that respect.

On funding, there has been the welcome news of the £16 million per annum that the First Minister announced late last year, towards the end of the parliamentary session, which was five years after the commitment was first made.

My question is in two parts: first, of that £16 million per annum in this current financial year, what commitments have already been made? Secondly, you highlighted your recent manifesto commitment to increase that budget by 25 per cent. Will you front load that and do it towards the start of this parliamentary session to ensure that the increase is in line with inflation? At the minute, the Government's watchword, particularly when it comes to public service reform, is "prevention". The sooner you spend money, the better it can be delivered down the line. That is particularly the case when it comes to development.

Simita Kumar: On the strategy, I do not want to repeat my answer to Ms Young's question, but I assure you that you have not only my and Mr Gethins's commitment but also that of the First Minister, who has given his personal commitment to it. He visited Malawi previously, and I know from

speaking to him in meetings that the visit changed him. He saw the impact of our investment in Malawi, Rwanda and other places, and the value of this work, so I reassure you that you have the Scottish Government's commitment to the strategy. As I said, I am newly in the post, but it will be a collaborative approach between me, Mr Gethins and the cabinet secretary, as well as other colleagues.

On the £16 million commitment, I have a whole page of details of how we have distributed the money, but it might be better for me to provide them to you in writing instead of going through all the spending now.

The second part of the question was on whether we will be able to front load that 25 per cent increase. One of the things that we have committed to is a gradual increase. I would not want to come to the committee and say to all of you, "By the way, we've increased the budget without due diligence, collaboration, engagement or conversation." I think that all of you would turn around and say, "Why did you do that? Did you absolutely have value for money?" I want to be able to increase that budget through an informed, stepped approach.

I was really pleased to find out that you have worked for Christian Aid, because humanitarian partners are the partners that I will want to engage with. In fact, I am having a meeting this Thursday, and those discussions will be the start of the many that we will have to understand the priorities and where our funding is best placed to be the most efficient and effective and the best value for money.

I absolutely understand where you are coming from; equally, I think that that stepped approach is useful. However, you have our commitment to the increased package of funding.

David Green: Thank you, minister. If you are intent on increasing the funding by 25 per cent over the course of the parliamentary session, I will continue to make the case about front-loading it. The point about its being in line with inflation is important.

Thank you, too, for the commitment to write to the committee. It would be helpful if, in doing so, you could also highlight what proportion of money is currently managed by organisations in Scotland through the international development fund.

My last question is around loss and damage. It is fair to welcome the fact that at COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—the Scottish Government was the first global north Government to commit finance to loss and damage. I think that we are at about the £10 million mark in totality since then. Can you set out

in detail how those funds have been spent, where they have been distributed and what the impact has been?

At COP30, there was a lack of a binding agreement around financial commitments on loss and damage. Given your record, do you think that the Scottish Government will continue to champion those binding agreements? Will that be a priority as we look ahead to the next COP?

Simita Kumar: Thank you very much for your question, which is crucial. I am aware that this is a new committee, but I will reiterate the point that Scotland was the first country in the global north to commit to the climate justice fund and to ensure that we provided loss and damage funding, because we recognised the impact of climate change. The impact of climate change is severely felt by people and countries in the global south, but most of the time it is not of their making—it is of our making. We are incredibly mindful of that.

10:00

You have asked about how much we have spent already. I will bring in Kat White in a second. I am not absolutely clued up about our COP30 commitments—I am very new in the post—but I hope that you will still be able to hold me to account.

I will pause there and bring in Kat White to elaborate further on loss and damage.

Katherine White: We should note that this is an area in which the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs leads. We work closely on climate justice, and my team covers both the climate justice fund and the humanitarian and international development fund.

The loss and damage funding is a core component of our climate justice programme. The majority of the spend has gone into the climate justice communities grants in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia over the past three years. We have brought forward another one year of grants for £7.5 million this year.

The loss and damage funding was split between direct funding on loss and damage and non-economic loss and damage, so we attributed different elements to what we see as the irrevocable impact of climate change. That has been spread across not only our partner countries but a range of other areas: east Africa, the Pacific, the Andes and the Bay of Bengal.

We have published quite a few reports—which I will supply—on loss and damage learnings. Scotland is still seen as innovative and at the forefront of the loss and damage discussion. We are actively following the fund for responding to

loss and damage at the next COP: that is a priority for Ms Martin as she goes to the conference.

While not all the funding that is being drawn together from all the COP signatories has been fully activated, we are identifying the spaces where Scotland can contribute, not only to the debate on loss and damage, but to the real action, ensuring that there is access to funds—which is really important for communities—in contrast with some of the large United Nations funds, which are quite difficult for smaller entities to access.

The Convener: I know that Pauline Stafford is waiting to come in, but I will try to pin down some of the financial commitments that David Green was exploring.

I am sure that we all understand that the Government is not able to specify exactly what will be in its budget for subsequent years—we know it does not happen that way—but is it the Government's expectation that the 25 per cent increase is more likely to be smooth over the course of the session, rather than it all happening toward the back end? That would make a pretty substantial difference to the actual amount of extra money going in.

Simita Kumar: As I have said, we have a manifesto commitment to increase the funding for our international development by 25 per cent. It will be a stepped process to have those collaborative discussions, but I will ensure that it is a smooth transition.

As you have correctly pointed out, a lot of the discussion is about the budget process—and I will leave it at that. However, my ambition and aim is to ensure that it is not a matter of everything coming at the end of the parliamentary session. We will do our absolute best to ensure that the transition is as smooth and stepped as possible, with as collaborative an approach as we can possibly make it.

Kat White would also like to come in on that question.

Katherine White: On the 2021 review and the 2016 strategy, there was quite a lot of change in the 2021 review to institute multiyear programmes and contracts. Quite a bit reset happened in response to Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement, emphasising the need to engage our partner countries and our partners in sub-Saharan Africa so as to understand that we are contributing towards their needs, as well as those of the sector in Scotland and priorities here.

It was not just a small iteration in the 2021 review; it was quite a big change. We now have multiyear programmes lasting into 2028-29, and some of those financial commitments are baked in.

That goes up to the £10 million to £11 million that we had confidence in planning towards.

We have had two shifts in this year. We are currently looking at an increase in humanitarian spending as a proportion of our budget as a result of our review last year. We are also looking at attributing more of our spending to disabilities and people affected by disability in our partner countries. Those are two of the priorities that we are pursuing with the £16 million this year.

Thereafter, as the minister has said, we need to plan to create a sustainable trajectory, rather than making short-term changes.

The Convener: I do not think that you answered the question about whether the 25 per cent commitment is in real terms.

Simita Kumar: It will be a real-terms commitment, convener—

The Convener: So a real-terms increase of 25 per cent?

Katherine White: It will be subject to budget discussions.

Simita Kumar: Yes.

Katherine White: The 25 per cent was a value increase last year, so it will go into the financial planning and the next multiyear spending review.

The Convener: So it is to be confirmed.

Katherine White: Yes.

The Convener: Finally, the 25 per cent commitment applies to the international development fund, but you said that there will be an increase in the climate justice fund. Is there a commitment to a commensurate 25 per cent increase in the climate justice fund as well, or is there a different target in mind?

Simita Kumar: Again, that bit of the portfolio sits with Ms Martin's directorate. I will bring in Ms White on the climate justice fund.

Katherine White: We understand that lots of people would look for us to achieve parity between the two funds. We are analysing and considering that as part of the multiyear spending review and projections. Certainly, there is a commitment to grow.

Pauline Stafford: I start by associating myself with Mr Green's remarks about what an important point this is. We are looking at our international development strategy in the context of huge reductions from major players such as the UK Government and what that means for a small nation, including our role and how we can be most effective with limited resources.

I want to focus on one area that will always have an impact. We recognise that women play a vital role in global peace work, as recognised by UN Security Council resolution 1325. What is the Scottish Government doing to support peace-building efforts in that area, specifically working with women, to ensure that they have a central role going forward? You have touched on the women in conflict fellowship programme. Is other work being done on that and will it be a priority for you?

Simita Kumar: I note the committee's view on the strategy, which is shared by many members. I will take that away.

I will take your questions in the order in which they were asked. You mentioned the UK Government's cut to some of the international development spending. In percentage terms, there has been a 90 per cent cut in bilateral funding to countries such as Malawi, and an 80 per cent cut to countries such as Rwanda and Zambia. Rightly, the convener pressed me on our budget commitment of 25 per cent, which comes against a backdrop of a 90 per cent UK Government cut.

Again, although I appreciate the calls for a refreshed strategy, that is the setting in which we currently exist, but there is also an opportunity for us to cement Scotland's commitment as a good global citizen. I want to reflect on and draw out the two sides of that coin and how different we are in our priorities, values and commitments.

The other aspect that you mentioned was about women and girls. In my opening remarks, I mentioned Police Scotland and how we work with our partner countries. You will no doubt know that I am passionate about the rights of women and girls. We can have a huge impact when we reflect how that plays out for sub-Saharan countries.

I will focus on the UN resolution 1325 that you mentioned. During the summer recess, I met 15 women from many different countries, including Yemen, Ukraine, parts of the Caribbean—you name it.

They were fellows who come to Scotland for a week three times a year. They discussed not only some of the challenges they face in their countries, where there is conflict, but what each and every one of them is doing to change that narrative and be a global peace citizen.

Meeting those women was one of the most inspiring things that I have done in a long time, and the two—or, rather, three—words that I came away with were “solidarity of sisterhood”. That is what it felt like in the room, because they were all learning from one another.

I believe that those women will make a further visit to Scotland later this year. I do not know whether this would be possible, but if we could

facilitate a visit by members of the committee to meet them, I think that all members would benefit from that. Perhaps I am biased—I do not know—but I found it incredibly inspirational to hear what they are doing.

We can sometimes wonder what the impact of our work is. I ask members to speak to those incredible fellows, who are doing a vast amount of work in their own countries, especially in relation to women and girls. It was incredibly inspiring to understand the impact that each and every one of those women is having.

I hope that I have answered your question, but I would be happy to come back to you if there were any aspects of it that I missed out.

Pauline Stafford: No, that was great.

The Convener: I do not want to stop you, Pauline, but as three other members have indicated a desire to ask questions, it would be good if we could keep things a little bit tighter.

Simita Kumar: Apologies, convener.

Pauline Stafford: I am finished, but I would really appreciate being able to visit that organisation.

The Convener: Thank you. Colin is next, followed by Keith and Senga.

Colin Beattie: I would like to ask one or two general questions, to give me a bit of background. The first is an obvious one. Given the sheer number of natural disasters that have occurred and conflicts that have opened up across the world, how does the Scottish Government evaluate on an ongoing basis where it should focus what, of necessity, is a limited aid programme? To what extent, if any, are we required to follow the UK Government's lead on aid outcomes? Connected to that, I would also like to know whether the UK Government counts Scottish Government aid as part of UK aid provision.

Over the years, we have seen the US pulling out of a lot of aid programmes, notably ones that are run by the World Health Organization, of which the US was a major funder. What impact has that had? Is there any sign that the US might reverse or modify that decision? Are alternative funders stepping up? Where does that leave us?

Simita Kumar: You have asked quite a few questions, which I will try to pick up while being concise.

We work collaboratively with the Disasters Emergency Committee. We do a lot of work to pool our funds so that we maximise the amount that goes out to affected countries. When I came into post, I was able to sign off on funding to help with the situation in Venezuela following the

earthquake there. That is one of the things that we are doing.

You mentioned UK aid work. As Mr Gethins said, that is a space in which we will be collaborating and working with our UK Government colleagues. There are challenges when it comes to that relationship, but we are setting our values to ensure that we respond, for example, to the increase in natural disasters. Such disasters will continue to occur, because they are a direct impact of climate change. We will continue to work with the UK Government on that.

Your final question was about the US pulling funding from a lot of its aid programmes. I think that that is deeply unfortunate, but, if we take a broader perspective, we can see that it is reflective of what other countries are doing. For example, the UK is pulling funding from its international development budget.

Again, this is where Scotland is doing things differently. We are absolutely mindful of our duties as global citizens. Our role and our values mean that we support and have solidarity with people who are in some of the poorest countries and experiencing the worst natural disasters.

I will pause there, convener, because I am aware that I was perhaps not concise earlier on.

10:15

The Convener: I have to ask that the final questions be fairly brief. We have other guests coming in after this formal meeting.

Keith Brown: I have just one question. First of all, though, it would be useful to hear any update you might have on Scottish Government involvement in Nepal and in what is going on there now.

In the previous two questions, the collapse of the UK Labour Government's support for international aid has come up. I wonder whether that has, of necessity, changed the profile of what the Scottish Government does. I am interested in Malawi. You mentioned the First Minister going there and the profound effect that it had on him. One of your predecessors, Christina McKelvie, went there as well when she was doing the job that the convener is doing now, and she was profoundly affected by it. Although those visits will always attract the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* having a go, I hope that they will continue to happen.

This is a bit like Colin Beattie's question. It would be useful to know whether you have had to change the profile of support that you provide because it was adding to, or done in conjunction with, UK initiatives that have now been slashed.

Simita Kumar: I want to put it on record that our work in the international development space will never be subject to what the *Daily Record* says, does or assumes—either one way or the other. We believe in Scotland's values when it comes to our impact in the international role, and that is really important.

With regard to the UK Government's change in funding and priorities, our priorities have always been quite clear. They are about supporting health initiatives, inclusive education, equalities, disaster response and humanitarian efforts, and also about climate change. Those are Scotland's priorities, and they are our priorities. Unfortunately, there has been a shift in what UK Government does. Although that has not shifted our own priorities, it does mean that the hard-fought developments that we have seen happen over decades are now at risk of almost regressing because the pace of investment, especially from the UK Government, is not keeping up. There is a real risk that some of the things that we have achieved and developed will not progress, or will not do so quickly enough, or will not have that greater impact. We will be looking at that issue.

As for an update on Nepal, I will just put it on the record that seeing some of the footage from there is truly distressing. I am mindful that there will be families out there, including the families of British nationals, who do not know the full news about their family members. I want to put on record the Government's empathy and our commitment to work collaboratively with FCDO and the UK Government.

In relation to the funding element for that situation, we have a global start fund of about £900,000. A portion of that is locally available through the start fund in Nepal, and they will be committed to using that fund in humanitarian efforts. Given that that situation is quite topical and is still ongoing, we will be having conversations with the Disasters Emergency Committee to understand whether there is a need for, say, a further appeal. As I said, the Scottish Government will, work collaboratively and we will seek to understand how we can respond with aid and further help.

The Convener: The final question is from Senga Beresford.

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): Was the international development fund underspent in any of the past three years, and, if so, what has happened to that money? Do the overseas offices carry out any development function, or is their budget separate from the £16 million budget? How do you assure yourself that funds are never diverted to countries with

significant corruption risk? Do you require a local independent audit?

Simita Kumar: I have just been collaborating with Kat White, as I am new in post. I do not believe that there has been underspend in international development. I see that Kat agrees with me, so that is correct—there has been no underspend.

On whether international development spend is separate from international offices spend, I believe that they are separate, as well as in terms of where we work.

Your third point is on corruption and the risks that are involved in some of our partner countries. That is a real risk, so whatever we do to ensure that we have proper policies and procedures in place is important. As part of that, we regularly monitor our safeguarding procedures, the outcomes of our programmes and their value.

The other important point to make is that we do not directly fund governments; we fund our partner organisations. Earlier, we talked about Christian Aid. The context to look at is the one around our partner organisations rather than governments—perhaps that point is sometimes lost in some of the conversations about this funding. I can assure you that the Scottish Government looks at safeguarding and any risks there are on a regular basis.

I will pause there to see whether my colleague wants to add anything.

Katherine White: Not particularly, minister. On underspend, there might have been something on accounting; I will check and we can supply a response, but there was no significant underspend. The climate justice fund was a £36 million commitment in the last parliamentary session, and in the years in which we have increased the international development fund we have deployed that. As the minister has done, I would just emphasise the importance of the rigour of our due diligence, and the fact that our partnerships are not directly with governments, although obviously we track and are aware of developments in country and in the different contexts where we work. That is where the British Government comes in, as we collaborate overseas with the high commissions in the four partner countries, especially to ensure that we share intelligence and understand how things are. That speaks to the importance of routine visits, of governance visits and of ministerial travel as well.

Senga Beresford: Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you all very much. I thank both ministers and also their Scottish Government officials for being with us for this evidence session.

I remind members that we will next have an informal discussion, which will start at 10.35. Our formal meeting is hereby closed.

Meeting closed at 10:22.

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