The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 November 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Climate Action and Rural Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Good afternoon. Our first item of business is portfolio questions. To accommodate as many questions as possible, I ask for concise questions and answers.

New Oil and Gas Drilling (Net Zero Policy)

1. **Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is regarding the compatibility of its net zero policy with new oil and gas drilling in the North Sea. (S7O-00425)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government remains fully committed to delivering net zero by 2045. Decisions on the licensing and consenting of offshore oil and gas developments are reserved to the United Kingdom Government. Direct emissions resulting from North Sea exploration and extraction are not counted as part of Scottish territorial emissions but are included in the UK-wide greenhouse gas emissions inventory. Rystad Energy data shows that UK continental shelf oil and gas production in 2025 had an emissions intensity of 22kg of CO_2 equivalent per barrel of oil equivalent, which is lower than the global average of 33 kgCO_2e/boe.

Duncan Massey: Based on that summary, will the cabinet secretary confirm whether she now supports Jackdaw or Rosebank—yes or no?

Gillian Martin: First, Duncan Massey's question shows his lack of knowledge about what is in my portfolio—indeed, I am not the Government minister who gives licences out for exploration of oil and gas. Secondly, he mentioned our net zero policy. I head up the climate change plan for the Scottish Government, which looks at our territorial emissions. I find it incredible that Duncan Massey, who I believe is the convener of the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee in the Scottish Parliament, does not realise, first, that I am not the energy minister; secondly, that the energy policy that he referred to is reserved to the UK Government; and finally, that I am in charge of a climate change plan whose central point is the usage and burning of fossil fuels, not their production.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): How is the Scottish Government supporting the 30,000 people who are currently employed in Scotland's renewables and how does it plan to grow that number? What role will the cabinet secretary play in unlocking the prize of £150 billion of added economic value by meeting our net zero targets?

Gillian Martin: I am delighted to give Jack Middleton that information. Our offshore wind investment programme has committed more than £191 million—which has crowded in further public finance and private investment—to offshore wind and supply chain projects, with the potential to support up to 5,000 jobs.

Furthermore, the investment of more than £40 billion in Scotland's transmission network over the next five years will support clean energy projects to power our economy. Jack Middleton is absolutely correct in his quoting of the economic worth of and the number of jobs in net zero sector-related projects in Scotland.

Future Farming Investment Scheme

2. **Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what lessons from the delivery of the future farming investment scheme 2025 have been applied to the 2026 scheme, including in relation to the opening of the application window. (S7O-00426)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): We undertook a substantive lessons-learned exercise following the FFIS in 2025, in which we engaged with farmers and crofters and listened to the feedback from that scheme. As a result, we made several changes to the 2026 scheme, reinforcing the commitment to support our competitive, sustainable and resilient agricultural sector.

We have revised, with stakeholder input, the list of investments to be funded. We have published the specifications, costs and scores in the scheme guidance, so that applicants can see clearly what is eligible and how investments will be prioritised. We have removed the priority groups, with all eligible businesses now able to apply for up to £20,000. We have published the guidance ahead of the opening of applications to give farmers and crofters time to plan.

Senga Beresford: Can the minister give farmers a date today, or should they expect this to become FFIS 2027?

Jim Fairlie: The publication of the guidance happened on 19 October, and we will give a date for when the applications can start by the end of this month.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): The future farming investment scheme was said to prioritise small farms, crofters and tenant farmers, but of the small farms that applied to the Golspie and Thurso offices, just six were successful. I welcome the review that has been undertaken by the Scottish Government and the minister's engagement to date, but he will appreciate that, as has already been said, farmers and crofters need a sense of certainty.

I add my calls to those of Senga Beresford for confirmation of the application date. I appreciate that the minister has said that the date will be provided by the end of the month. Can the minister reassure my constituents about the engagement that he has had, particularly with stakeholders in the far north?

Jim Fairlie: As I said in my answer to Senga Beresford, we have had extensive engagement with farmers across the constituency. The scheme demonstrates that we are still supporting investment in farm and croft businesses to improve efficiency and sustainability, protect and enhance the environment, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help to mitigate climate change. We have had long and extensive conversations with the sector, and, as I said, we will have a date for when people can apply by the end of this month.

Flood Response and Resilience (North Ayrshire)

3. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with North Ayrshire Council regarding flood response and resilience. (S7O-00427)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government works with councils throughout the response to flooding events. Indeed, in Largs last Monday, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport heard about the impacts directly from the council and those who were affected.

We are working with councils on the national support that is available following such events, including activation of the flood recovery framework, which provides grants to affected households and businesses.

Local authorities are responsible for flood protection. However, the Scottish Government continues to support them through sustained investment, with more than £600 million invested since 2016 to support the delivery of flood resilience, including in North Ayrshire.

Katy Clark: Many communities across North Ayrshire are at risk of coastal flooding by 2050 due to rising sea levels. As the cabinet secretary has indicated, there was extensive damage in Largs, Saltcoats and many other parts of North Ayrshire from flooding in the recent storm.

I have also met North Ayrshire Council, and it is clear that there is a need for better co-ordination between the council and the Scottish Government, given the significant challenges that we face. Can the cabinet secretary confirm more detail of the discussions that are taking place to ensure that we protect coastal communities for the future?

Gillian Martin: As Katy Clark alludes to, many agencies are involved with any kind of weather event, including the Met Office and the emergency services, as well as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, particularly in relation to warnings associated with surges out at sea.

We gave £1 million of support for coastal wave buoys to be deployed around Scotland. Most of the ones on the east coast are in the water; the rest of them on the west coast will be in the water by the end of this month, I am told. SEPA is also looking at a review of the information that it was able to give to local authorities and local resilience partnerships. When we activate the Scottish Government resilience room, all those partners are in the room throughout the entire process. At the end of any SGoRR activation, there are lessons learned for the future.

I assure Katy Clark that everything associated with what happened as a result of storm Boelo is being analysed and looked at, so that we can ensure that when we put resilience measures in place, they are the right ones.

Artificial Intelligence Data Centres (Environmental Impact)

4. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any environmental impact of artificial intelligence data centres in other countries. (S7O-00428)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government has assessed the experience of countries with similar climates and demographics that host data centres, and that has helped to shape the Scottish Government's approach to ensure that data centre developments in Scotland are sustainable, protect our national resources and deliver tangible benefits for communities and the wider economy. International experience has demonstrated the value of setting clear expectations before development becomes concentrated and aligning the growth of data centres with energy system planning, land use and environment considerations.

On a visit to Brussels during the October recess, I met representatives of the United Nations Environment Programme, European subnational Governments and other partners. We discussed the need to ensure that increasing digital infrastructure demand is managed sustainably, including through energy efficiency, renewable energy use and consideration of wider environmental and social impacts.

Carol Mochan: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the on-going concerns regarding the impact of artificial intelligence data centres in Ireland. Data centres accounted for almost a quarter of Ireland's energy use last year. The Irish Climate Change Advisory Council has warned that the growth in data centres' energy demand is threatening Ireland's ability to meet its climate change commitments. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that climate action is central to any planning or decisions that we make in relation to AI data centres, particularly considering the experience around energy commitments?

Gillian Martin: Carol Mochan mentioned the experience of Ireland. I believe that the Parliament's Climate Action Committee is taking evidence on data centres at the moment. I know that the convener is sitting behind me, and he told me the other day that he is reaching out to Irish colleagues in order to get exactly those kind of lessons from what they are doing.

On the development of the regulations, I note that Hannah Mary Goodlad, the Minister for Public Finance, is taking that forward. I am of course feeding into that, in my role as cabinet secretary for climate action.

To go back to Carol Mochan's first question, I am feeding back the experience of other countries that are wrestling with the issue. In Brussels, one particular presentation was given by my counterpart in the Lombardy region of Italy, in which he talked about the regulations that they have put in place. We are all sharing our experiences in the group that we are involved in—the Under2 Coalition—because we are all wrestling with the same challenges.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): We have been promised by various Government ministers that full planning guidance on data centres will be released by the end of this year. Can the cabinet secretary assure Parliament that MSPs will have time to review that guidance before Parliament closes for winter recess?

Gillian Martin: As I said to the chamber in my last answer to Carol Mochan, Hannah Mary Goodlad, the Minister for Public Finance, is taking forward those regulations. She has given assurances to Parliament that the guidance will be revised and ready by the end of the year. I have nothing more to add, given that it is not my initial responsibility.

Food Supply Chain (Security and Resilience)

5. **Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure Scotland's food supply chain is secure and resilient. (S7O-00429)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): Scotland is blessed with landscape and seas. We have a fabulous larder, which gives us strong domestic production. That system is resilient right now and there are no immediate concerns about food supply. However, global and domestic events, including developments in the middle east, continue to demonstrate the vulnerability of supply chains.

We closely monitor food security and work with the industry through our food sector resilience group. That group shares intelligence, identifies emerging risks and vulnerabilities, and supports co-ordinated responses. We also support preparedness and planning through monitoring, stakeholder engagement and participation in resilience exercises. That is complemented by the wider cross-Government preparedness activity through the crisis preparation oversight programme.

Food resilience is a shared responsibility, so we will continue to work with the United Kingdom Government and the other devolved Governments, as well as industry, to strengthen our preparedness and ensure that Scotland's food supply chain remains resilient.

Pauline Stafford: I thank the minister for that comprehensive answer. Production costs are rising in the farming industry as we continue to see the impact of extreme weather, volatile energy markets and, just this week, further cyberattacks on commercial refrigeration systems in supermarkets across Europe. Will the

minister advise what steps the Scottish Government is taking to support the sector and to ensure that we can increase and protect domestic food production and supply?

Jim Fairlie: That is a good question. The previous budget committed more than £660 million to transform farming and food production. The funding maintains direct payments to Scotland's farmers, crofters and land managers at a higher rate than anywhere else in the UK, and it shows that we have listened to the calls for continued support. The Scottish spending review in 2026 set out expenditure plans up until 2028-29, and the draft budget for 2027-28 will be presented to the Parliament in early December.

We continue to work with the agriculture sector to support a sustainable and thriving future for farming in Scotland. However, I am extremely disappointed that the UK fishing and coastal growth fund was not allocated properly to our fishing and coastal communities, because it would have allowed us to invest in even greater resilience for our seafood sector.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

The minister rightly mentioned direct payments being important to Scotland's food security. Last week, the Scottish Government announced a change to the Scottish suckler beef support scheme conditionality, with plans to reduce the calving interval threshold from 410 days to 400 days. Although it was widely understood that the threshold would be reduced over time, the sudden change has come as a shock to the industry, with NFU Scotland, the Scottish Crofting Federation, the Scottish Beef Association and others all expressing concern. Will the minister provide details of any analysis that has been undertaken by the Government of the impact of the change to 400 days? Does he regret not engaging with the industry prior to the announcement being made last week?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please respond as relevant to the original question, minister.

Jim Fairlie: My apologies, Presiding Officer. I was up on my feet before Donald MacKinnon had a chance to finish, in my enthusiasm to give him a robust answer.

The calf scheme is a £40 million ring-fenced fund that we put into the production of calves every year. We had an agreement with the industry that we would not accept the Climate Change Committee's recommendation to reduce our national herd and national flock by 26 per cent. That should give a clear signal to the sector that we are taking actions that protect the sector and that we are putting money directly into the system that supports beef production in Scotland. However, it means that the industry has to work with us, and it means that a scheme such as the calving interval reduction allows us to demonstrate that we are taking action to reduce our emissions while, at the same time, protecting the productivity of the national herd.

Air Departure Tax (Rates and Bands)

6. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that the setting of rates and bands for air departure tax, including any proposed private jet supplement, is consistent with its net zero policy and objectives. (S7O-00430)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government is committed to implementing a private jet tax within our devolved air departure tax from 1 April 2028. Private jets generally carry fewer passengers than commercial flights and, therefore, produce significantly more emissions per person. That is why we will be taking action to ensure that the wealthy few who choose to fly by private jet will pay their fair share. The Deputy First Minister will set out the ADT rates for 2028-29, including those for private jets, at the Scottish budget on 3 December.

Patrick Harvie: I think that the minister may have intended to say that there will be significantly higher emissions per person rather than significantly lower emissions. However, the tax will be most consistent with net zero as a policy if it contributes to reduced emissions through reduced unnecessary flying. The biggest source of the problem in that regard is not people taking an occasional family holiday; it is very wealthy frequent flyers. Will the minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs make the case in Government that the setting of rates and bands should be along the lines of a frequent flyer levy, whereby the rates and bands increase based on the number of flights that are taken? That would not only disincentivise unnecessary flying but raise money that could be spent on reducing the cost of sustainable public transport.

Jim Fairlie: The Deputy First Minister has heard all the arguments, and she will make a decision on how she will take that forward.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): Does the minister agree that the aviation sector is crucial to Scotland's economy, particularly the tourism sector, and that Government policy should be working to promote it rather than seeing it as an issue that should be managed?

Jim Fairlie: Again, the Deputy First Minister will take all those matters into account when she sets her budget. She will take a decision on how she approaches that.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I can well remember the former Scottish National Party tourism minister Fergus Ewing coming to the chamber week after week demanding the devolution of air passenger duty so that it could be cut in order to give Scotland a competitive advantage over airports elsewhere in the United Kingdom. What modelling has the Scottish Government done on the economic opportunity that is presented by making targeted cuts to air departure tax to attract more visitors to come and support the Scottish tourism sector? Will the minister just follow the lead of the anti-business Greens?

Jim Fairlie: I find such conversations in the chamber really frustrating. A budget is coming up and everybody has their views. I have said it three times: the Deputy First Minister is taking all those things into account, so members should have such conversations with the Deputy First Minister as the budget is brought forward. I do not remember the Tories ever having anything in a budget that has been delivered in the chamber. Perhaps now is the opportunity to knock on the door of the Deputy First Minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member who lodged question 7 is not able to be in the chamber, and an explanation has been given to the Presiding Officers.

Flood Prevention Measures (Assessment)

8. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the effectiveness of flood prevention measures delivered since storm Frank. (S7O-00432)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): As per previous responses on the issue of flooding, I repeat that the Scottish Government continues to support local authorities, which are responsible for flood protection schemes, through substantial and sustained investment in flood resilience.

Since 2016, we have invested more than £600 million to help to deliver 21 flood protection schemes, including in Huntly, in the member's constituency, and in Stonehaven, in a neighbouring constituency. A further nine schemes are under construction and development. Those investments help to protect homes, businesses and communities across Scotland. In addition, we have funded the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to develop a national flood asset database and assess infrastructure that is critical to flood warning services. We continue to work closely with partners to assess outcomes, identify lessons learned and target our investment effectively.

Alexander Burnett: Since storm Frank, a decade ago, flood projects have either not started, remain unfinished or are dramatically over budget. Flood prevention used to have its own budget line, but that seems to have disappeared, which makes it hard for communities to know what funding exists and how it is spent. In Aberdeenshire West, Kemnay and Kintore are still waiting for their flood schemes, despite the completion of studies and approval by Aberdeenshire Council. Given that flood funding is being slashed, is it any wonder that communities live in fear of the next storm? Will the Scottish Government confirm when funding will be available for those schemes?

Gillian Martin: First, I need to correct Alexander Burnett about there being no budget lines associated with flooding. Several budget lines are associated with flooding in my portfolio.

The other thing that Alexander Burnett did not mention—I alluded to it in my first answer—is that councils are responsible for the implementation of their flood risk management plans. In the constituency that he represents, Aberdeenshire Council is responsible for that. This year, the council received £2.38 million in flood resilience funding, which was an increase of around £2.13 million on the previous year. Of course, the decision as to how that funding is deployed and whether the flood schemes are taken forward by local authorities is up to the administration of the council, which, last time I looked—albeit that it is hanging by a thread—is led by the Conservatives.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the Scottish Government has committed an additional £15 million for flood mitigation and prevention, with resource targeted to areas that are most impacted by flooding, and will she outline the Government's priorities for that investment, including how it will help local communities to play more of a role in reducing flood risk? [*Interruption*.]

Gillian Martin: I want to hear myself speak, but there is some chuntering by the Conservatives. Maybe they are annoyed that I pointed out that their administration has done next to nothing when it comes to the Aberdeenshire flood scheme.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Settle down, please.

Gillian Martin: Paul McLennan is right that £15 million has been pledged. Indeed, I am using that £15 million to improve Scotland's flood resilience through actions such as supporting communities to prepare for and respond to flooding; the community flood resilience fund; the £3 million fund to support nature-based and blue-green solutions; the £2.5 million fund to help local authorities, on top of the money that they already get through their block grant for flooding preparedness and resilience, to improve and extend the life of existing flood protection assets; and about £1 million of funding for supporting innovative coastal resilience projects, one of which I referenced in my answer to Carol Mochan.

Proposed ScotWind Wealth Fund

9. **Kristopher Leask (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made towards establishing a national ScotWind wealth fund to invest in projects that support Scotland's climate change and net zero objectives. (S7O-00433)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): As set out in our programme for government, the Scottish Government will establish a ScotWind wealth fund during the current session of Parliament to ensure that future generations can benefit from our wealth of renewables. There are different ways that we could do that in practice, and officials are currently assessing a range of options and working with the lead ministers to develop models to ensure that the fund delivers long-term benefits while taking into account fiscal, legal and implementation considerations. Decisions on the fund's establishment and governance and on future allocations of ScotWind revenues will be taken at future fiscal events, with further details to be published as our policy development progresses.

In the meantime, ScotWind revenues have provided valuable fiscal flexibility in a challenging financial context. As with all sources of Scottish Government funding and everything associated with them, information will be given in the budget next month.

Kristopher Leask: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but just over a month ago, the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy, speaking to *Energy Voice*, said that

"the biggest single failure"

with oil and gas was that

"There was never a futures fund established".

Early in September, the Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of my amendment to establish, in the current parliamentary term, a wealth fund to substantially increase the proportion of community and publicly owned energy in Scotland.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with me, and with the Our Power Scotland coalition, that the fund must deliver on our shared priority to keep Scotland's energy wealth in Scotland's hands?

Gillian Martin: To put it succinctly, I agree with every single word that Kristopher Leask has said, and I also agree with what the energy minister said in *Energy Voice*. We have had so much energy wealth going through Scotland for decades, most of which has not really touched our communities here, unless they were directly employed by the oil and gas sector, as in the case of the funding that Mr Gethins talked about in the comments that Mr Leask quoted.

The wealth fund that we create has to leave a legacy for those communities, with long-lasting legacy benefits. However, I point out that the new United Kingdom Prime Minister has mentioned that he wants to create a wealth fund, too, from the proceeds of taxes associated with oil and gas tax revenues. That may be an opportunity for him to make up for the loss of those revenues that did not go to Scotland in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Given that, as the cabinet secretary acknowledged, most of the ScotWind money has been committed or allocated, what will the Government actually put in as the fund's initial endowment, what recurring revenue stream will replenish it and what proportion of future seabed rental income will be ring fenced so that it cannot be raided to balance the annual budget?

Gillian Martin: Those questions are really about future budgets, and for the Deputy First Minister. Indeed, the ScotWind revenues—[*Interruption*.]

I believe that I was asked a question, so I would like to be able to answer.

ScotWind has generated more than £9 million in option fee revenues and accrued interest for the public purse. It is right and proper that the Government takes time to look at funding models and models associated with wealth funds that are going to deliver for generations of Scots, unlike—

Liam Kerr: They have no idea.

Gillian Martin: To be honest, the Conservatives have got a cheek—[*Interruption*.] No, they really do. When I was growing up in Aberdeenshire in the seventies and eighties, the Conservatives—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Can we hear the minister, please?

Gillian Martin: The Conservatives were in charge of the tax receipts associated with energy wealth in Scotland, and they did nothing to bring back any community wealth and nothing to protect those communities. To be quite honest, with the greatest respect to my friend Liam Kerr, he has got a bit of a cheek.

Decarbonisation (Residential Buildings)

10. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the contribution that the decarbonisation of residential properties will make towards meeting Scotland's net zero targets. (S7O-00434)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): Emissions from buildings currently account for 20 per cent of Scotland's emissions, so meeting net zero will require homes to transition to clean heat. Our document, "Scotland's Climate Change Plan: 2026–2040", which we published in March this year, sets out the clean heat policies and proposals that will help us to achieve our climate targets. The collective impact of those on emissions reductions from the residential buildings sector, for each carbon budget period, is as follows: 0.2 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2026 to 2030; 1.8 metric tonnes of CO_2e in 2031 to 2035; and 8.9 metric tonnes of CO_2e in 2036 to 2040.

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy will publish a heat in buildings delivery plan and take forward our heat in buildings bill in the current session of Parliament.

Bob Doris: I welcome that the heat in buildings bill will be taken forward in this session. However, Glasgow City Council has its own climate plan, covering the period from 2026 to 2030. It identifies district-scale heat networks as a key part of the city's route to net zero but I note that it is awaiting Scottish Government legislation to establish its own statutory framework for heat network zones and clarify the implications for building owners.

Given the particular challenges associated with decarbonising Glasgow's extensive pre-1919 tenement stock, will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the timetable for the legislation and indicate how the Scottish Government intends to support and encourage households to connect to heat networks where appropriate?

Gillian Martin: First, I want to use this opportunity to commend Glasgow City Council on the work that it has done more broadly in terms of decarbonisation and reducing its emissions.

Bob Doris is right: the Heat Networks (Heat Network Zones and Building Assessment Reports) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 have provided local authorities with the powers to designate heat network zones. The heat in buildings bill that the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy will introduce in year 1 of this session aims to create more powers to require public building owners and others within those zones to decarbonise their heating systems where appropriate. That will de-risk investment in those crucial projects.

For a number of years, households have been able to access funding from Home Energy Scotland for help with the installation of clean heating. However, through the grant and loan scheme, they will also be able to access funding and finance to connect to a local heat network. Public buildings are supported to connect through the green public sector estate decarbonisation scheme, and many other non-domestic buildings can apply to our small and medium-sized enterprise loan and cashback scheme.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes portfolio questions on climate action and rural affairs.

Education, Culture and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next portfolio is education, culture and Gaelic. I ask members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Neurodivergence (Education Workforce Training)

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

1. **Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to ensure that specific training on autism and other forms of neurodivergence is embedded across the education workforce. (S7O-00437)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): All teachers are required to undertake additional support needs training during initial teacher education. That is a requirement to meet the professional standards for registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. All teachers therefore have competences in meeting the needs of neurodiverse pupils and pupils who have additional support needs of all kinds.

Through Education Scotland, we have introduced a national professional learning offer to strengthen ASN knowledge, inclusive practice and leadership. We are also expanding the GTCS-accredited dyslexia and inclusive practice professional recognition programme, and we continue to fund the autism toolbox and digital learning tools for teachers across Scotland.

Joe Long: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a former director of Scottish Autism.

Having resources and training available is one thing, but they are available now and we still see significant need. It is not the same as ensuring that teachers are well trained and confident in putting that learning into practice. Does the cabinet secretary recognise the value of ensuring that high-quality training is mandatory for all teachers and that they are supported to undertake that training?

Màiri McAllan: I appreciate the importance of mandating training. That is why I am keen to stress that all teachers, as a requirement for GTCS accreditation, must undertake ASN training during their initial teacher education. However, that is not enough for me. I want to encourage, support and fund continuing professional development, which we are doing in the various ways that I listed in my initial answer.

I will give a little more information on the Education Scotland package. Our new professional learning offer for teachers is delivered through Education Scotland. It supports practitioners working in a range of settings, including ASN and special schools. It is helping to build ASN knowledge, inclusive practice and leadership capacity. There has been a strong uptake in engaging with that work. It has proven to be very popular, and I hope that it will be possible to expand the offer's reach.

It is also worth highlighting that we fund the centre for teaching excellence, which is based at the University of Glasgow and which, among many dedicated hubs, has one for diverse classrooms, with a focus on ASN.

I recognise the importance of ASN training as both a foundation of initial teacher education and a continuing professional offer.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): Ensuring that sufficient, accessible support is available for young people with additional support needs requires co-ordinated, cross-portfolio efforts. What assessment has the cabinet secretary made of how the national staged intervention model is working in practice? What role do local authorities play in that?

Màiri McAllan: Ms Haughey is absolutely right to mention the national staged intervention model as one of the key policy developments in the coming years that will make a significant difference to young people's and families' engagement with education and to the management of young people's additional support needs.

Last week, when I visited Forehill primary school in Ayr, in the constituency of the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, I was able to speak directly with educators, children and young people and their parents and carers about how staged intervention operates in practice.

We are collaborating on that complicated work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others. At its core, the work is about intervening in a young person's learning journey at the earliest possible stage with the most predictable support that can be offered. That means that young people with additional support needs will be supported early on no matter where they live in the country.

Classroom Violence

2. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports of increasing classroom violence against teachers, staff and pupils in Scotland's schools. (S7O-00438)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Violence towards teachers, staff or pupils is entirely unacceptable. However, the vast majority of pupils are well behaved, and recent programme for international student assessment results demonstrate that, overwhelmingly, pupils feel safe in schools.

Local authorities, as the statutory providers of education, are responsible for ensuring that appropriate systems are in place to respond to any violent incidents. To support that, since 2024, we have been implementing the relationships and behaviour in schools action plan. Actions in the plan include the publishing of new guidance on consequences; the development of risk assessments for violent, aggressive and dangerous behaviour; and decisive action to end the presence of mobile phones in the learning environment.

Liam Kerr: I am afraid that that is just not good enough. In 2024-25, there were more than 35,000 physical assaults on school staff. That represents a 55 per cent increase in just two years. Last month, Aberdeen school staff described being hit, kicked, bitten and subjected to misogynistic abuse on a daily basis. They have heard the warm words that we have just heard about action plans and promises for years, but the situation continues to deteriorate. The cabinet secretary has now been in post for six months, so can she tell our school staff what specific and measurable reduction in the number of assaults she is committing to deliver, and by when?

Màiri McAllan: I will never underestimate the difficulties that can be faced as a result of disruptive behaviour, violence and aggression in schools, and members will never find me doing anything other than condemning such behaviour.

I acknowledge the concerns, but I am absolutely clear that the vast majority of our young people are conscientious and well behaved and feel safe in schools, as this year's PISA results demonstrate, so—

Liam Kerr: That was not my question.

Màiri McAllan: We must therefore be prepared to take action when evidence suggests that it is needed, but I will never allow the writing off of Scotland's young people, as has been done by that question.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): No one has suggested that.

Màiri McAllan: It is worth putting on the record that our recent behaviour in Scottish schools research demonstrates that violence and aggression were most commonly reported among the youngest learners—learners in primaries 1 to 3—which indicates that those children had difficulty in managing and regulating their behaviour at that very young age. We must take action on that.

Liam Kerr: You have been in power for 20 years.

Màiri McAllan: The Conservatives love shouting over women in the chamber.

Another interesting part of that research was how frequently secondary teachers spoke about the disruption caused by mobile phones in schools. Liam Kerr wants decisive action. I will bring to the chamber legislation that will ban the presence of mobile phones in the learning environment, so I hope that he will support it.

"Shaping the Future: Strengthening Scotland's Education System Through Empowered Schools"

3. **Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent report by the independent professional advisor on future school reform on strengthening the education system. (S7O-00439)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): I welcome the report from John Wilson, the independent professional adviser, who was appointed by Scottish ministers to provide a school leaders' perspective on how schools are supported to improve, funded and governed. I am grateful to him and to all those who contributed to its development.

As Joe Fagan will know, the Scottish Government is currently in dialogue with local authorities and others on local governance reform. I have just left a meeting with the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and leaders from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on that matter. As part of our work on it, we will consider the recommendations in Mr Wilson's report.

Joe Fagan: I refer to my register of interests, as I am a councillor in South Lanarkshire.

I am sure that when the Government publishes its response it will agree that although some of the adviser's recommendations have merit, others are utterly absurd, not least the one about plans for school authorities that are outside of council control—that is a charter for more, rather than fewer, silos, and for less, rather than more, democracy. That recommendation will appease neither those who believe in a fundamental shift towards school autonomy nor those who believe in the fundamental principle of democratic accountability. It is also divorced from the need to drive excellence and improvement in public service reform.

Will the education secretary act now to protect local democracy, the drive for excellence and the reputation of her own Government with public service leaders and educators? She should not wait, so will she bin those recommendations now?

Màiri McAllan: No, we absolutely will not bin the recommendations. They are a very valuable contribution to our discussions with local authorities. Mr Fagan is a South Lanarkshire councillor, and I am a South Lanarkshire MSP, so I hope that we both have an interest in ensuring that the schools in our area and throughout Scotland can pursue excellence alongside equity and the highest standards. I want to see the unwarranted variation in academic outcomes closed. Much of what was contained in Mr Wilson's report can help us to do that.

John Wilson spoke of inconsistencies in the collection of data and of metrics; we have to question whether doing something 32 different ways across Scotland is the best approach. He also identified a lack of clarity of spend and made recommendations on governance. All of those recommendations are being closely considered as we engage with local authorities and COSLA on the future shape of local government and education, which is a core part of that.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): In the report, the argument is made that funding for school education is the most powerful way for our country to invest in our future. Does the Government acknowledge that any changes to the structure of the education system need to be met with additional support and funding?

Màiri McAllan: Katherine Sangster is right to highlight John Wilson's point about how funding for education is perhaps the greatest preventative investment that we can make in the future of our nation. I wonder how her acknowledgement of the valuable contribution that was made on that in the report is reconciled with Joe Fagan's call for the whole thing to be disregarded, which I have said that I will not do. I appreciate that reform and change of any kind requires careful consideration and resource, which the member challenged me on, but maintaining the status quo and doing nothing are also costly.

Mobile Phone Use in Schools

4. **Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of its recognition that inappropriate mobile phone use in schools can lead to increased distraction, online bullying, exposure to harmful content and a rise in antisocial behaviour, what measures it will take to ensure that any new legislation restricting mobile phone use in schools supports the mental wellbeing of young people while reducing these harms. (S7O-00440)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The evidence that mobile phones disrupt young people's education is undeniable, and it can go much further than that. Phones can disrupt sleep and wellbeing, and usage can also contribute to harms including bullying, harassment, radicalisation and grooming. Our schools must be safe, nurturing environments where pupils can learn free from distraction and from the wider harms of mobile phones.

Again, I draw on the behaviour in Scottish schools research that I mentioned to Mr Kerr and the frequency with which secondary school teachers raised the disruption that mobile phones are causing. We are currently consulting on the scope and extent of the restrictions that I intend to bring forward, and on any exemptions that might apply. All that is being done to inform legislation, and I will be engaging with members across the chamber as part of that process.

I highlight that—and this speaks directly to the question of the mental wellbeing of young people—young people's voices will be heard in the development of the legislation. Whether we like it or not, their lives are heavily influenced by the online world, and they must be part of how we design support for them in response to that.

Amanda Lindsay: The minister says that the Government wants to reduce distraction, bullying and harmful content, yet it has still not set out a clear national position. If the evidence already shows those harms, will the minister explain why the Government has not simply required schools to restrict mobile phone use during the school day? What specific evidence is the Government still waiting for before it acts to protect young people's mental wellbeing?

Màiri McAllan: I will be succinct in responding to that: the law in Scotland does not allow us to do that. That is why I have to introduce legislation, on which I am currently consulting.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Cabinet secretary, 27 per cent of young people have seen pornography by the age of 11, often on their own or other children's smartphones. However, if a parent does not give their child a smartphone, it can leave that child socially isolated. The campaign by Smartphone Free Childhood allows parents to commit collectively to not giving their child a smartphone so that no child is left out. Will the Government support the campaign to inform parents and give them options to better protect their children?

Màiri McAllan: I assure Mr Dunlop personally, and on behalf of the Government—including my colleague the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, who has responsibility for online harm—that we are very seized of the potential harm that can accrue to young people from the intense use of mobile phones, social media and various platforms, which have significantly increased in recent years.

I have said in the chamber before that I remember being in high school when the first smartphone went off in class and disrupted it. I think that the type of content to which Mr Dunlop alludes was being shared around the class. I was about 13 years old.

The intensification of such behaviour in recent years means that Governments must be prepared to take action. I have spoken about the legislation to restrict mobile phones in schools, which will be introduced soon. My colleague Siobhian Brown is engaging with social media companies. We are also engaging with the UK Government, because we have no powers in this Parliament to regulate technology. The UK Government must do that, and it must do so fully.

School Buildings

5. **Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with local authorities to ensure that school buildings are safe and fit for purpose. (S7O-00441)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Local authorities are responsible for managing and maintaining their school buildings, and we work closely with them, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Futures Trust to support a school estate that is safe and fit for purpose.

That work is guided by our learning estate strategy and backed by our £2 billion learning estate investment programme, which is benefiting tens of thousands of pupils across Scotland. Virtually every MSP in the chamber should be able to point to capital projects having been delivered in their constituency, and I was pleased to discuss that at length yesterday when I attended the Learning Places Scotland conference.

We are seeing real progress. A record 93.1 per cent of schools are now in good or satisfactory condition in Scotland, which is up from 62.7 per cent when the Scottish National Party came to office.

Adam Harley: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the alarm that was caused to many parents as a result of the hoax email threats that were sent a fortnight ago. My constituents have told me that more thorough communication from all levels would have helped to put minds at ease sooner. What has also concerned them is that some East Dunbartonshire schools have not received an inspection for almost a decade.

Clearly, we need to ensure the reliability of our school buildings, including their fire safety and security. What is the Government doing to guarantee that schools across East Dunbartonshire are up to standard? Will she ensure that they are inspected regularly and in a timely manner?

Màiri McAllan: Adam Harley is absolutely right to highlight that, on 19 October, a number of schools and local authority departments across Scotland and Northern Ireland received an email containing a threat involving an explosive device. Most schools were closed for the October break, but a small number were open and were evacuated as a precaution.

Police Scotland assessed the threat as a suspected hoax and took appropriate operational action, including providing clear public messaging. At my request, my officials reinforced that messaging through local authority networks and encouraged local authorities and schools to keep parents and carers fully informed. I can imagine very clearly the worry and the concern that arose for parents and carers across the country, and I will strive to ensure that we improve those communications and give confidence to parents across the country.

In respect of inspections, I am currently, in collaboration with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, considering advice on the frequency of inspections, on which I hope to update members shortly.

Drug Education Programmes

6. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what evaluation it has made of the impact of drug education programmes delivered in schools. (S7O-00442)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): Our curriculum educates young people about substance use and the impact that it can have on their life and health, in order to help them make positive choices. Education alone will not turn the tide of substance use, but it is an important strand of wide-ranging measures across communities that are designed to tackle the issue.

For example, since 2023, one of the Scottish Government's measures has been the investment of £2.3 million in Planet Youth Scotland, which supports a whole-system approach to preventing substance use

among young people. Schools take a preventative, data-driven and community-based approach, and learning is complemented by action to improve wellbeing, strengthen relationships and create positive opportunities for young people.

Jackie Baillie: A lot of the guidance for schools and teachers increases demands on them to come up with materials and lesson plans, and teachers tell me that that is a considerable burden. I understand that a national review of teaching resources on substance misuse is under way. The minister will appreciate the urgency of the drugs crisis that we face, so can she advise the chamber when that review will be published and whether it will be accompanied by materials and ready-made lesson plans to ensure consistency of approach?

Siobhian Brown: The new curriculum framework will be published today, but I would point out that new national guidance to support education authorities and schools to respond specifically to substance use was published in March 2026.

University of Aberdeen (Industrial Action)

7. **Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the prospect of further industrial action at the University of Aberdeen, following a breakdown in relations between management and trade unions regarding staffing reductions and redundancies. (S7O-00443)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): The Government is aware of the dispute, and we encourage the University of Aberdeen and University and College Union Scotland to engage constructively and make every effort to seek resolution to the dispute in line with fair work principles.

Although the University of Aberdeen is autonomous, independent of the Government and responsible for its own strategic and operational decisions, I expect compulsory redundancies to be considered only as a last resort, after all other cost-saving measures have been fully explored.

Jack Middleton: As the constituency MSP for Aberdeen Central, I am deeply concerned about the treatment of university staff, the reputational damage to one of Scotland's most historic universities and, above all, the impact on students and on their education. I wholly appreciate that the Scottish Government is unable to step in and resolve such an industrial dispute, but what more can be done to protect students' education in a publicly funded institution?

A breakdown in negotiations must not mean a breakdown in student learning. Will the minister join me on a visit to the University of Aberdeen to hear directly from students and ensure that their concerns are heard at the highest level of Government?

Alyn Smith: I am sympathetic to the points that Jack Middleton makes. He is a ferocious advocate for Aberdeen, but he is also sensitive to our position that universities are independent of Government. I need to be strict—I have no appetite to involve myself in individual disputes in individual institutions—but we are paying attention. I was at the University of Aberdeen just a couple of weeks ago, when I met a number of students and staff. If there is a visit upcoming, I am more than happy to accompany the member and speak to anybody who is interested.

Arts Funding (North-east Scotland)

8. **Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD):** I remind members of my registered interest as a trustee of the Barn, a charity that is in receipt of arts funding in the north-east.

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Aberdeen City Council's recent report, "Mapping the creative industries in North East Scotland", which recorded that the north-east receives only 44 per cent of the Scottish average of regular arts funding. (S7O-00444)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Scottish Government investment has enabled a significant expansion of Creative Scotland's multiyear funding programme. The number of organisations across Scotland that receive regular multi-annual core support is now 262, which is more than double the number that were previously receiving grants. Fifteen organisations located in Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire will receive almost £9 million of that multiyear funding across the three-year period. I am absolutely cognisant of the extent to which culture and cultural investment enrich lives, and I should of course always like to see every part of the country supported in that regard.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: A recent review of Creative Scotland recommended that

"A regionalised approach to cultural investment, where Creative Scotland works with partners at local and regional levels could help address the apparent underinvestment outwith the Central Belt."

The people of the north-east have not needed exact figures to see what is right in front of them. Arts funding is centralised in the central belt, to the detriment of people who live in the north-east.

Might the minister consider outlining in writing how the Government intends to meet the recommendation in that report on Creative Scotland? Furthermore, what consideration has been given to the north-east as a potential home for the proposed new traditional and folk music national performing company?

Màiri McAllan: Taking the last part first, I should say that we are not yet at the stage of deciding the location of the new national performing company, but I will add the member's name to the list of those who have made that recommendation for their areas. Such suggestions are always welcome.

The idea of a visualisation of where support from Creative Scotland and the Government is going across Scotland is sound. If we had such a map, it would show Aberdeen Performing Arts as having the highest multiyear fund in the north-east, as well as the investment that goes from that to His Majesty's Theatre, the Music Hall and the Lemon Tree. It would also show the support for six festivals—Delve, Granite Noir, Light the Blue, International Season, the Aberdeen comedy festival and the Aberdeen queer arts festival—as well as £300,000 of investment in the Aberdeen culture collective project, and support for the Aberdeen project Touch of Love Outreach, which is funded through the creative communities fund.

I think that a visualisation is a good idea, and I hope that it would demonstrate the spread of investment across Scotland.

Cultural Events (Support for Towns and Cities)

9. **Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a Falkirk councillor.

To ask the Scottish Government how it supports towns and cities to strengthen their offer of cultural events and activities. (S7O-00445)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): As I said in response to a previous answer, we recognise the absolutely vital role that culture plays in transforming lives in communities. We are now £70 million towards our commitment of an additional £100 million for culture annually by 2028-29. Of course, that follows the increase of more than £34 million in the financial year 2025-26, which notably is the largest rise in culture funding in the history of the Parliament, outside of Covid support.

The support includes more than £200 million between 2025 and 2028 to the Creative Scotland multiyear-funded organisations and programmes such as culture collective, creative communities and the expanded festivals fund. Those programmes are about supporting locally driven and relevant cultural activity and helping to overcome barriers to participation where they exist.

Gary Bouse: Culture-led regeneration is revitalising our communities, including in Falkirk, where Scottish and United Kingdom Government investment is supporting a new town hall and arts centre and other high street improvements. Given culture's contribution to economic and social renewal, it is disappointing that Inverness, the only Scottish long-leet contender for UK city of culture 2029, missed out on the shortlist for that. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, with the world-renowned festivals that we have, with *National Geographic's* recognition of Dumfries and Galloway as one of the best destinations in the world in 2027 and with our four United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization creative cities, Scotland remains a world-leading nation in culture?

Màiri McAllan: I agree with Gary Bouse about Scotland's world-leading cultural and heritage offer. We are known throughout the world for it, and it is to be celebrated.

However, it is always our responsibility, too, to continue to build on that offer and, as I alluded to in a previous answer, to continue to pull down barriers to cultural participation and to personal and national expression. I was equally disappointed that the Inverness and Highland bid was not shortlisted for the UK city of culture 2029. The bid demonstrated the strength of culture, heritage and community across the region and was indicative of Scotland's whole cultural offer, which is very significant.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I must appeal for quick answers and supplementary questions.

Schools (Promoting Positive Relationships, Equality and Safety)

10. **Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP):** I point to my entry in the register of members' interests as a sitting councillor on Renfrewshire Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support schools in promoting positive relationships, equality and safety among young people. (S7O-00446)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Our education system supports every learner to reach their full potential. We fund a range of programmes that provide guidance, resources and professional learning in order to uphold children's rights and to tackle prejudice and discrimination in schools, including the equally safe at school programme and the digital discourse initiative.

The First Minister has committed an additional £1 million through the respect fund to build on work that is already under way in order to ensure that high school pupils can access third sector programmes that teach young people how to reject misogyny, while primary school pupils will receive age-appropriate learning on respect.

Michelle Campbell: Renfrewshire has taken a leading role in implementing equally safe at school across all secondary schools and in expanding the mentors in violence prevention programme into local communities. What lessons can be drawn from that work and how might it help shape prevention efforts across Scotland beyond what the cabinet secretary has already mentioned?

Michelle Campbell: I welcome Renfrewshire's commitment to fully embedding equally safe at school, and I expect all local authorities to do the same. It is an excellent programme that has already supported many young people across our country to navigate the world around them and to understand their rights and the rights of others. The First Minister has placed emphasis on such support by requiring every school across Scotland to provide age-appropriate anti-misogyny education.

We talked earlier about mobile phones and online harms, and how they manifest themselves in the classroom. We need to support our young people to navigate what can be an overload of information. In addition to programmes such as equally safe at school, I would like to see young people lead that work, because they are excellent messengers in how to protect themselves.

Economic Growth and Prosperity

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Our next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01851, in the name of Angela Ross, on economic growth and prosperity.

15:03

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am a business owner and I built a closed artificial intelligence large language model system.

We are trapped in the trough of an economic long wave. History teaches us that capitalism moves in cycles, in which surges of innovation are followed by down cycles. Although a down cycle is a natural macroeconomic reality, remaining trapped at the bottom is a political choice. We need to remove the weight of our looming £5 billion black hole because it forces decisions to be made on the back foot, which we all know is not an effective place to start from. There is high public spending, together with a fiscal gap, flat growth and high inflation. To drive the next upward wave, our nation needs agility, vision and a fierce commitment to productivity.

Instead, here in Scotland we are being anchored to the ocean floor—which we sold off at a low fixed price—by a Government that is intent on managing decline rather than engineering growth. The Scottish Government is driving the economy towards ruin, and it is doing so with alarming speed. It has a strategy not of wealth creation but of short-term political survival, short cuts and debt accumulation. We see an obsession with expanding the state apparatus by layering quango upon quango—bodies that are distanced from decision making and accountability. Worse than that bureaucracy is the absolute failure to hold value in Scotland.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The member mentioned debt accumulation. How can Scotland accumulate debt when, under the fiscal framework, it is not allowed to?

Angela Ross: We are subject to United Kingdom-wide debt, which influences everything that we do. [*Interruption*.] We are spending more than we are bringing in. We have a fiscal gap, which is a real problem.

Look at what happened to our seabed. In the ScotWind leasing round, the rights to our precious marine assets were sold off for £755 million. [*Interruption*.] The ministers on the front bench are laughing. I do not think that that is funny.

What did the Government do? [*Interruption*.]

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

Angela Ross: According to Audit Scotland, the Government began tapping into that money to plug short-term day-to-day budget gaps instead of anchoring a permanent intergenerational wealth fund. Our future prosperity is being frittered away on immediate inefficiencies.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Does the member agree with the view of the Scottish National Party and the current UK Chancellor of the Exchequer that, if Scotland had been independent and set up its own wealth fund—indeed, even if any wealth fund had been set up—we could have had more than £1 trillion in a sovereign wealth fund just like Norway's, which could have been reinvested? That would have meant that the tough decisions that we are going to have to take could have been avoided, as has happened in the Republic of Ireland.

Angela Ross: Quite frankly, I would not trust the Scottish Government with anything at the moment, because it is not generating wealth. There is no wealth creation and there is no productivity. The economy is in dire straits.

We must pivot away from our deficits and move towards productivity. More than 98 per cent of Scotland's private sector businesses are small businesses, which have reached the point of diminishing returns and are ripe for transformation. Productivity in Scotland is weak—it is the weakest among the UK countries. Productivity is the main driver of higher wages and better living standards, and we need to aggressively raise productivity across our small business ecosystem through adopting technology-enhanced processes, including AI. Rather than replacing people, we should automate the administrative grind to free up our people to focus on what humans do best: innovation, production, practical work, networking, sales and creative growth. We must transform low-growth enterprises into scalable, high-value generators and we must cause spin-outs to scale up.

We need to reward growth, not inhibit it. When an organisation expands, it is likely to pay more in non-domestic rates. That disincentivising aspect must change. Policy must incentivise growth. Property tax needs to be reworked.

However, tackling productivity is only half the battle; we must change how we benefit from that value. For too long, Scotland has excelled at aspects such as inward investment but failed at wealth retention.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Angela Ross: I want to make some progress.

Each year, billions in corporate profits flow directly abroad. Foreign ownership means foreign extraction. We need to support Scottish ownership so that wealth that is generated here stays here.

Look at our energy. We could produce a portfolio of cheaper energy—from nuclear, renewables, oil and gas—and harness that energy here, to power initiatives. Using our power locally saves transmission losses and gives our Scottish manufacturers a competitive advantage. We need to produce more here.

When Scotland produces high-quality raw materials, we should not just export them raw; instead, we must capture the high-value elements—the branding, packaging and processing—right here on Scottish soil and promote Scottish goods in a competitive market to build a more resilient local economy. Let us take the example of our fishing industry: in Peterhead, the raw product goes to France or Spain, which put a stamp on it with their flag—

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

Angela Ross: Let us keep it here, do it ourselves and put our flag on it. Monetary handouts, runaway fiscal gaps and plugging structural deficits with sold-off national assets do not equal economic progress; they are an admission of failure. Let us stop drowning in the down cycle; let us choose growth and efficiency and catch the next wave.

I move,

That the Parliament notes Scotland's weak economic growth, stagnant living standards and persistent fiscal deficit; believes that successive Scottish Government decisions to increase public spending and impose higher tax burdens have failed to deliver sufficient economic growth, productivity improvements or rising prosperity; recognises the need to support more young people into work, to improve business productivity, to help Scottish firms grow and scale up, and to strengthen food and energy security, and calls on the Scottish Government to present to Parliament detailed proposals to create more wealth, capture more value from Scotland's economy and retain more of that wealth for the benefit of the people and businesses of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Tom Arthur to speak to and move amendment S7M-01851.3, for up to seven minutes.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

15:10

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): There is an important challenge at the heart of the motion before us. Scotland must create more wealth; raise productivity and living standards; help more of our businesses to start, grow and scale; and ensure that more of the value that Scotland's people, businesses and natural resources create stays here and benefits the people who live here. I hope that there can be common ground on those ambitions across the Parliament.

However, the real question before us is not whether Scotland needs stronger economic growth—it does—but how we can achieve it. The Government is focused on delivering such growth through attracting investment, backing home-grown businesses, embedding fair work, removing barriers and delivering growth across Scotland.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Tom Arthur: I will make a bit of progress before I come to Mr Hoy.

The Reform Party argues that public spending and taxes are too high, that Government is too big, and that if we simply reduce all three, economic growth will follow. However, economies do not necessarily become more productive because the Government lowers tax, spends less and reduces in size. Businesses need skilled and committed people who are paid fairly for the work that they do. We need functioning infrastructure, good transport links and homes for the workforce; world-class universities and colleges that produce skills, innovation and new ideas; access to capital and to affordable and secure energy; a Government that is prepared to remove barriers to investment; and access to markets in which we can compete and grow.

Craig Hoy: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Tom Arthur: I will take Mr Hoy's intervention, then Mr Johnson's.

Craig Hoy: I thank the minister for giving way. Perhaps he could take this opportunity to provide clarity on where the Scottish Government stands—for example, on defence manufacturing, which is developing into a home-grown industry. What message does it send out to potential defence investors to say that Scottish Enterprise cannot invest in munitions development?

Tom Arthur: We have set out our proposal for a responsible defence industrial growth programme. I want to recognise how vital the defence sector is in Scotland. We have a world-class defence sector, which creates skilled jobs and supports supply chains, and we should be proud of it. The Scottish Government is committed to working with the sector and to supporting the opportunities that are before us.

Daniel Johnson: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): [*Made a request to intervene*.].

Tom Arthur: I give way to Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I am very grateful. Does the minister agree that the formal definition of gross domestic product is that it is the totality of private and public sector expenditure? Cutting along the lines, which was suggested, might actually prevent the growth that Reform seeks.

Tom Arthur: The member makes an important point. We talk about private sector investment, net exports and consumption, but the important point about Government expenditure is often absent. The Government plays an essential role in ensuring that we have a dynamic market economy, whether it be through regulation, addressing externalities and asymmetries or by providing the critical infrastructure that facilitates growth. The Government has a vital role to play, and that should be recognised by all.

I will give way to David Linden.

David Linden: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. He referred to the part of the Reform motion that mentions "higher tax burdens". Would it surprise him to know that Reform-led Worcestershire County Council recently passed on a 9 per cent council tax rise? It might be the case that rhetoric and reality are often different things when it comes to the crypto party over there.

Tom Arthur: I do not think that I can add anything to Mr Linden's comments, which are now on the record. They rather show the dissonance between Reform's rhetoric and the reality of its actions when it is in a position to govern.

The serious question is not simply about how much Government spends but about how every pound that we spend, every institution that we support and every intervention that we make help Scotland to become more productive and prosperous. We should be challenging ourselves relentlessly on that.

First, we need investment. Scotland has enormous economic strengths, including our renewable energy resources, our highly skilled workforce, our world-class universities and colleges, our innovative businesses and our globally recognised sectors. Our job is to translate those strengths into productive investment, good jobs and rising wages. For example, this summer's Commonwealth games in Glasgow illustrated the economic value of what Scotland has to offer, with an independent evaluation estimating £223 million in economic activity across Scotland. Our major projects office, which is forthcoming, will unlock private investment by tackling barriers that are holding back nationally significant projects and help them to move more quickly towards delivery.

Secondly, we need more Scottish businesses with the confidence and capacity to scale. Scotland has entrepreneurs, ideas and innovation. The challenge lies in helping successful companies to grow, employ more people, export and build lasting economic value here in Scotland. That means addressing access to finance, skills, infrastructure, regulation and planning. Our high-growth unit will support our programme for government's scale-up ambitions through co-ordinated wraparound support, building on the work of the enterprise agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank to help ambitious businesses to grow and remain in Scotland. Last month, we announced £2.92 million through our university proof of concept fund to help promising research projects to develop into new companies.

Thirdly, we need more people from all backgrounds to participate in that prosperity. On one part of Reform's motion, I am very clear: I agree that we should all want more young Scots to have a route into good, productive and well-paid work. That means having world-class education, but it also means having apprenticeships, technical and vocational learning, and stronger links between our skills system and the jobs that our economy needs. That is why our programme for government contains commitments to expand apprenticeships and develop a new apprenticeship accelerator grant to strengthen routes into skilled, well-paid work for young people and support their participation in Scotland's economy. The prize is not simply higher employment levels; it includes higher productivity, higher wages and more young people seeing a prosperous future for themselves here in Scotland.

Angela Ross: The minister talks about young people. Yesterday, during our debate on the not in education, employment or training—NEET—figures, I said that the minister's figures were not comparable with those in England, but I managed to dig and find a comparable figure, which is 27 per cent. What is the minister's reaction to the fact that 27 per cent of young people are locked out of work?

Tom Arthur: Our recognition that, collectively across the UK, we face a challenge on youth employment and on young people who are not in education, employment or training is exactly why the Government proposed yesterday's debate. I was grateful to members from across the chamber for their contributions. That is also exactly why we are engaged closely with Alan Milburn in his review work and why we are committed to working constructively with the UK Government, where that is in the interests of people in Scotland. On the forthcoming publication of the review's findings, we will be happy to continue to engage with members on that work.

The fourth point that I want to make, which has already been touched on, is that Scotland must retain more of the economic value that we create. That point is particularly important when we consider energy. Scotland possesses extraordinary renewable energy resources. However, simply possessing those resources is not enough; we need the investment supply chains and high-value jobs that come with them. Scotland's vast energy wealth must ultimately deliver a direct benefit to the people who live here, including through lower energy bills. That is why our programme for government commits to securing economic and community benefits for the energy transition. The test of our economic strategy should not be simply what Scotland produces but rather how much of the value that is generated by those assets is captured in Scotland.

That brings me to highlight the greatest contradiction in Reform's argument today. Reform tells us that it wants Scottish firms to "grow and scale" and that it wants stronger food security. It also says that it wants higher productivity and investment, yet it remains wedded to Brexit—the most calamitous, self-inflicted act of economic harm in recent UK history.

Angela Ross: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I am going to make some progress.

The economic damage caused by Brexit is not an incidental question in this debate. For this Government, rejoining the European Union is therefore not simply a constitutional position, it is an economic one. It is about access to markets, talent and investment.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The minister should be winding up, so he will not be able to take any interventions.

Tom Arthur: It is about giving Scottish businesses the best possible platform on which to compete.

We want faster growth and higher productivity. We want more successful Scottish companies scaling right here in Scotland. We want more young people entering well-paid work, and we want the immense economic value that is generated by Scotland's people, ideas and natural resources to benefit the people who live here.

Let us capture more value, retain more of that value in Scotland and ensure that the prosperity that Scotland generates is reflected in higher wages, stronger businesses, lower bills and better living standards. That is a serious agenda for economic growth, for which this Government has a clear plan.

I move amendment S7M-01851.3, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises the importance of improving living standards, creating opportunities for young people, supporting fair work and higher wages, and strengthening public services, to Scotland's economy; agrees that Scotland must make full use of its economic strengths, including its renewable energy resources, highly-skilled workforce, world-class universities and colleges and thriving business sectors; believes that Scotland's vast energy potential must deliver economic benefits directly to people who live in Scotland by bringing down bills; condemns the economic damage caused by Brexit, and agrees that rejoining the EU is the best way to deliver lasting benefits for Scotland's economy."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Daniel Johnson to speak to and move amendment S7M-01851.5.

15:20

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am someone who is unapologetically pro-growth. I have a firm belief in the good that business can do and in the critical role that business plays in generating growth and, indeed, tax receipts. I am also someone who hates public waste. However, I also believe that we need strong public services and a strong public sector, and that we must focus on where public sector waste gets in the way of public sector delivery.

There is a contradiction right at the very heart of Reform's motion for debate, because it completely ignores the vital role that the public sector plays in the economy and in creating growth. To put it quite simply, how can we have skilled, knowledgeable workers if we do not have a good education system? How can we have a well-functioning economy if people cannot rely on the health service to get the right treatment when they get ill? How on earth can we expect the economy to work if we do not have investment in our roads, rail and public infrastructure?

Angela Ross: I put on the record that we appreciate the role that the public sector provides. We appreciate schools, the health service and all of that. We simply see so many quangos building up and so many processes that get in the way and that cause so much inefficiency and bloat. That is our problem.

Daniel Johnson: The fact that Reform needs to put that on the record says something. It is clearly not in its motion.

More importantly, Reform presents the false dichotomy of private sector and public sector. Indeed, many of the things that it sets out as being important require public policy interventions. I absolutely agree that young people need to be given routes to work and opportunities for advancement. However, how do we do that? We do that through public policy interventions and public expenditure.

I see that Mr Massey wants to agree with that point.

Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform): Will Daniel Johnson acknowledge that Scotland has a £5 billion black hole, that the UK as a whole is borrowing about £150 billion a year, and that our annual interest costs are now up to £100 billion, making it the third biggest expense category in the country? Will he acknowledge that that is simply not sustainable and that we massively need growth and public sector reform?

Daniel Johnson: Not only are Reform members having to compensate for their own motion, they clearly did not read any of ours. We absolutely need reform. However, there was not one suggestion from Reform in the whole of the opening speech. What would Reform members do? What are their alternatives? What are their interventions to do these things?

Ensuring that public policy works in tandem with industry and the private sector is one of our missed opportunities. It is about ensuring that we have industrial policy, which is what devolution is meant to be about: namely, decision making close to the point of delivery, so that those things can be aligned. However, there was not one suggestion from the Reform speaker in her opening remarks.

I would like to address the amendments that have been lodged by the other parties. I agree with the minister's contribution, in that Brexit has been a disaster. The Prime Minister was right to set that out.

Angela Ross: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I have already taken one intervention from the member opposite. I will continue to address these points.

I agree with the Prime Minister that Brexit has meant that we have lost control: we have lost control of the ability to work with our partners across the European Union and we have lost control of our economy. We absolutely need to explore the options as to how we can address that.

Mark Simpson: Will Daniel Johnson give way?

Daniel Johnson: I probably need to close very shortly.

We on the Labour benches are convinced that we must set out what the options are and what the process is. Although I personally believe in rejoining the EU, that cannot be done overnight, so the Prime Minister is right to explore the options and to win those arguments with the British people. That is very important.

On the Green amendment, I note that the distribution of wealth is fundamentally why we on the Labour benches—

Mark Simpson: Will Daniel Johnson take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member cannot take any interventions.

Daniel Johnson: I am closing. Mark Simpson should be able to read the clock and not just his own motion. I will close there.

I move amendment S7M-01851.5, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"believes that a growing and innovative Scottish economy depends on the strength of both its public and private sectors, working in partnership to create prosperity and opportunity for all; recognises that investment in health, housing, education, skills, transport infrastructure, roads and local government provides the foundations for thriving businesses, successful industries and productive workplaces, and calls on the Scottish Government to tackle waste, to prioritise outcome-focused public service reform and delivery over bureaucracy and to ensure that decisions about public spending are taken locally wherever possible."

15:25

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It seems to me that some of what we have heard in the debate rests on the rather bizarre assumption that protecting public spending is somehow bad for the country, for people's wellbeing or for their lives. It is an assumption that protecting and investing in public services, in a strong social security safety net and in the country's shared priorities is somehow a drag on the economy. Even those who share Daniel Johnson's view that the private sector is the backbone of the economy surely accept—I think that Daniel Johnson does—that the private sector itself depends on the foundation that is provided by public investment, public services and decent communities. Investing in those things builds a society that is worth living in.

It is a matter of factual statement that the decision that Scotland has made to raise enough revenue to invest in those things to a greater extent than would otherwise have been possible over recent years is one of the things that have successfully made Scotland an attractive place where people want to be or to move to and where people value the social contract that is provided. Funding the investment in social security, public services and public infrastructure through fairer taxation on high earners is entirely justified.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Will Patrick Harvie give way?

Patrick Harvie: No, thank you.

I want to go back to the 2016 election, when it was the Greens who developed and put forward a proposition—not just a broad principle, but a detailed proposition—for a five-band income tax system.

Mark Simpson: Will Patrick Harvie give way?

Patrick Harvie: No.

At that point, no other political party was proposing to do anything other than tinker at the edges of the income tax system.

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): Will Patrick Harvie take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member has made it clear that he is not taking interventions.

Patrick Harvie: The Greens were the ones who set out in detail how we could have a change to the income tax system that would protect all low and middle earners. Under the proposition, no one would pay a penny more unless they were earning more than the average full-time wage. Even if they were beginning to earn more than the average full-time wage, they would pay only a very tiny amount more. It was only the very high earners who would pay significantly more. That is more or less the approach that the Scottish Government adopted two years later, and, since then, it has put billions of pounds into public services and investment. Our proposition in 2016 was the basis of what became Government policy.

I acknowledge that there are different visions of what progress looks like in a society. The Greens question the assumption that growth is an unquestioned good. We do not suggest that growth provides no benefit to society or the economy, but we say that it often comes with unintended consequences, and it often comes with unfair distribution of the material benefits that are generated. I am sure that there are those who think that growth is welcome even if all that it buys is a seventh or eighth house or yacht for Malcolm Offord, or if the only effect that it generates is to have more millionaires and billionaires in our society while others go without food, heating or homes. I do not think that that is progress. To the Greens, that kind of wealth hoarding is simply indefensible.

I wish that we could have gone further in the past decade or so than we have, but we still can go further. Full-scale wealth taxes might be reserved, but a replacement of council tax could mean that property wealth was fairly taxed.

Finally, I welcome what is in the Government's amendment about recognising that EU membership is not only for a stronger economy but for a more decent society and restoring to young people the rights and freedoms that were stolen from them by people who enjoyed those freedoms in their own youth yet stole them from the next generation. That is a critically important argument and I am pleased that it has been brought into the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member may wish to move his amendment.

Patrick Harvie: I move amendment S7M-01851.2, to leave out from "Scotland's" to end and insert:

"that economic growth alone does not guarantee improved living standards for all people or shared prosperity, and is of the view that it often comes with unintended consequences such as social and environmental harm; believes that Scottish Government decisions to increase public spending and set more progressive tax rates have been, and remain, necessary to achieve a more equal society and to protect public services and investment; recognises the need to build a sustainable, fair and ethical economy that prioritises the essential needs of all people instead of the greed of the wealthiest, and calls on the Scottish Government to present to Parliament detailed proposals to ensure that the wealth generated in Scotland's economy is fairly shared for the benefit of current and future generations."

15:30

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): There is so much to talk about in the economic difficulties that we face in Scotland, including of course the £5 billion black hole that has already been mentioned. The Scottish Fiscal Commission has identified an £888 million gap in income tax performance. That reflects on Scotland's weaker growth in earnings and employment compared with the rest of the United Kingdom.

The figures tell their own stories. In 2025-26, 1,219 Scottish companies entered insolvency. There were 4,000 fewer employees on payrolls in September 2026 than there were a year earlier. The 42p higher rate of income tax now kicks in at just £43,663. That applies to a classroom teacher with five years of experience, who now earns, on average, just over £54,000. Since when did an ordinary classroom teacher grow the broad shoulders to bear the brunt of the SNP's tax and spend decisions? Scotland cannot tax its way to growth.

Alex Kerr: In Scotland, as a result of our progressive taxation system, that same person will be able to send their children to university for free and benefit from free prescriptions. Thanks to the progressive taxation system, the Government offers the people who live here a whole host of wraparound care from cradle to grave. That is a good trade-off.

Rachael Hamilton: Alex—I cannot remember his surname. Alex Kerr has just made a statement that is not backed by evidence. That shows his inexperience in the Parliament.

Members: Oh!

Rachael Hamilton: While the SNP lectures us on all the freebies, as Alex Kerr has just tried to do, it has to be responsible about public spending. This week, we have learned that 800 public sector ghost employees await deployment. That involves an estimated cost to the taxpayer of at least £27 million a year. That is a failure of public sector workforce management, not of those individual employees, who probably want to work.

Meanwhile, ministers have found £2.7 million for a school bag scheme, with the backpacks being manufactured in China. How good is that for the Scottish economy?

Even the First Minister admits that Scotland's economic growth has been

"too low for too long."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; c 30.]

After 20 years of the First Minister being at the heart of the Government, he has certainly had long enough to notice the decline in economic growth in Scotland.

I had to read Reform's motion a few times, as other members have suggested they had to do. First, I thought, Reform members agree with Scottish Conservative policies—because they are aping us—about higher taxes and weak economic growth. Of course, I agree. However, Reform then calls for the Scottish Government to produce detailed proposals to create more wealth and capture value from Scotland's economy. Reform's grand economic plan is to ask the SNP to interpret its asks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will need to start winding up.

Rachael Hamilton: After nearly two decades of SNP failure on economic growth, the only thing that it knows how to do is tax and spend. I therefore advise Reform to go back to the drawing board and create a more succinct and clear motion that other parties could support.

I move amendment S7M-01851.4, to leave out from ", and calls" to end and insert:

"; believes that the 2027-28 Budget must break the cycle of higher taxes, weaker growth and increasing pressure on the public finances, and calls on the Scottish Government to cut taxes on workers and businesses and curb unsustainable welfare spending to create the conditions for growth."

15:34

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I think that there is a general consensus around the fact that not just Scotland but the wider UK has experienced weak economic growth over a number of years. To be fair, the minister seemed to accept that. There are many factors involved, and I will touch on some of those, but I think that that is a fairly unarguable fact.

In the meantime, the gap between public spending and tax revenue in Scotland has been wide and growing—again, as the Government acknowledges—yet, as the Finance and Public Administration Committee reported yesterday, there is still an alarming lack of clarity and transparency over how the Government proposes to close that £5 billion gap.

On living standards, growth has been sluggish over the past decades. The 10 per cent of households on the lowest incomes have seen their disposable income drop significantly and, as the Office for Budget Responsibility reported in conjunction with the UK budget last week, looking ahead, it is predicted that, over the course of the 2020s, we are going to see the lowest rate of growth in living standards since the 1950s. That presents a profound challenge not only for us all in the chamber, but for politicians across the continent and beyond, who are facing up to some of the shocks to the global economy. We are seeing that play out in the streets of towns and cities across France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere.

Although those global shocks are perhaps beyond the control of any single Government, I think that it is fair to argue that the Scottish Government has not necessarily made things easier and must take its share of responsibility for Scotland's economic performance. Its relationship with business has been strained at times, and last month's Scottish business monitor survey indicated that seven out of 10 firms believe that the Scottish Government does not necessarily understand the business environment.

The absence of a clear framework for and, importantly, limitations on the changes in tax policy have played their part in that. Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies noted that, while some of the changes that have been made have been positive, the Scottish Government's tax strategy is not really a strategy at all and does not answer many of the key questions. Again, that is something that the Finance and Public Administration has heard pretty consistently from witnesses over the past couple of months.

As well as calls for using tax reform to promote economic growth, the committee has heard a consistent message about the need to grow the tax base if we are to have any hope of plugging the £5 billion black hole. That will involve increasing participation in the labour market—a topic that we covered at length in the debate yesterday. Although that debate was focused on how to increase opportunities for young people, including those who are economically inactive as a result of ill health, the issue extends across the generations.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission has noted that

"long-term sickness has been increasingly dominant among people who are not working nor looking for a job."

That will be caused by a range of factors, but addressing the long waiting lists for assessments and treatment has to be a large part of the solution. That speaks to the point that Patrick Harvie and, indeed, the minister made, that our investment in public services is important not just in terms of the outcomes for individuals but for increasing the productivity of the workforce across our economy.

As was suggested yesterday, it is about not just the impact on the economy but treating people with dignity, care and fairness. Nevertheless, the win-win is that we can also reap the benefits of a more healthy and sustainable fiscal position.

In closing, I note that, although the Reform motion is very wide ranging, there are some glaring omissions. There is no mention of the transition to net zero, which is not only essential to meeting our climate change commitments but a source of growth in our economy through the creation of jobs, wealth and opportunities across the country in supply chains made up of small businesses. The motion similarly ignores the vandalism that has been wrought on the economies of Scotland and the wider UK by a disastrous Brexit. Whether one accepts the OBR's assessment of a 4 per cent hit to long-run productivity—

Angela Ross: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam McArthur: No.

Whether one accepts the OBR's view or the views of other economists who have estimated that the economy is between 6 and 8 per cent smaller thanks to Brexit, the verdict is clear: restoring our economic relationship with our neighbours and partners in the EU is the single most important step that the UK Government could take to improve our economic prospects. Recent moves to agree closer ties between the UK and the EU, including the proposed removal of checks on food and agricultural exports announced this week, are very welcome, and Daniel Johnson made an important point about the incremental nature of securing closer ties, but there is a need for greater ambition. Scottish Liberal Democrats support the establishment of a new customs union and rejoining the single market, but the direction of travel—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member cannot take an intervention.

Liam McArthur: Those omissions from the Reform motion are picked up in my amendment, which I take pleasure in moving. I hope that Parliament will support it.

I move amendment S7M-01851.1, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"considers that the Scottish Government should focus on using its powers more effectively to support sustainable economic growth; believes that a closer economic relationship with the EU represents the single largest opportunity to increase Scotland and the UK's economic growth and improve productivity; welcomes the reported progress made in negotiations between the UK Government and the EU to remove checks from food and agricultural exports, to link their emissions trading schemes and to agree a youth mobility scheme, and calls for greater ambition from the UK Government, including working towards a new customs union with the EU and rejoining the single market."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the open debate. Business is running late, so I ask members to respect the time limits that have been agreed with their business managers.

15:39

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): I am somewhat encouraged by today's debate—not by the Reform motion or the Conservative amendment, but by the other amendments, including the one from the Scottish Government. If we look at those four amendments in the round, we can see that a considered, thoughtful and balanced position is starting to emerge in the Parliament.

I will consider the Labour amendment first. As the convener of the Public Service Reform Committee, I was interested to see that the amendment focused on that. There is much to like and agree with in the amendment. However, I want to focus on one bit of the wording. This is not intended to be critical, but I have an issue with its terminology when it talks about tackling "waste" through public service reform. I do not necessarily disagree with the intention. However, as we restructure our public services and, as the amendment says,

"prioritise outcome-focused public service reform and delivery over bureaucracy",

we need to be slightly careful in the words that we use. Those workers who will see their roles change under public service reform, or who will perhaps be redeployed within the public sector or participate in a voluntary severance scheme, will have been playing valuable roles and have not been wasteful. There might be improved ways of structuring service provision that can deliver savings by tackling duplication and bureaucracy, but the employees themselves have made a valuable contribution to our public services, and we should thank them. It is important to put that on the record as we move forward with that process.

Daniel Johnson: I reaffirm what Bob Doris is saying. Redeployment needs to be the central focus, and we should seek to find new work for public sector workers who may find their roles changing.

Bob Doris: I look forward to a constructive discussion on that matter as public service reform progresses.

The Liberal Democrat amendment asks the Scottish Government to

"focus on using its powers more effectively to support sustainable economic growth".

Any Government, including our own, should seek to do that.

Mark Simpson: Will the member give way?

Bob Doris: One moment, please.

That is not incompatible with my desire to see all powers reside in Scotland with independence. On growth, I note that Scotland has the fastest-growing start-up rate of businesses anywhere in the United Kingdom; that we are the top location for foreign direct investment outside London; and that our productivity is twice that of the UK average. However, there are other areas in which we are weaker, as Liam McArthur noted. Of course, we have to use the powers that are available to us to maximise our economic performance. I think that we can do that on a cross-party and collegiate basis.

The Liberal Democrat amendment also calls for

"greater ambition from the UK Government, including working towards a new customs union with the EU and rejoining the single market."

Again, that is to be welcomed. Importantly, that approach is an example of the increasing trend of parties in this place moving ever closer to the SNP position, as outlined in our amendment this afternoon, which

"condemns the economic damage caused by Brexit, and agrees that rejoining the EU is the best way to deliver lasting benefits for Scotland's economy."

That is my position, and I think that it is a very reasonable one to have. A report earlier this year said that the loss to Scotland's economy due to Brexit comes to £30 billion a year, and the impact in Scotland has been greater than it has been in any other part of the UK.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I can understand the idea of independence, but I am really curious about the idea of Scottish independence in a big European conglomerate. Can Mr Doris explain to me how that is independence?

Bob Doris: Let me do so briefly now and perhaps in more detail later, given the time constraints. All nations are interdependent. They reach treaties with other nations. The European Union is something that I believe in, and that interdependency is a natural course to take in the world today.

I want to focus on the Scottish Government's amendment. It is clear that economic growth does not sit in isolation. The Scottish Government recognises the importance of improving living standards, creating opportunities for young people, supporting fair work and higher wages and strengthening public services and Scotland's economy. Economic growth is not an end unto itself; it must go hand in hand with the kind of society that we all want to see—the Green amendment touches on much of that as well. I commend the Scottish Government for its promotion of the real living wage and its approach to public sector pay, which pushes public sector workers into higher tax bands because they are paid more generously in Scotland than they would be in other parts of the UK.

Only yesterday, during a debate in the Parliament, I was encouraged by the Scottish Government, which has a strong record on providing apprenticeships for young people, saying that it is open to considering improvements in investment in apprenticeships, in order to support members of the workforce throughout their careers.

Deputy Presiding Officer, before I proceed, can I check whether I can get time back for the interventions that I have taken?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Yes—the member can get the time back for both interventions.

Bob Doris: Thank you.

Mark Simpson: Will Bob Doris take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member cannot take any more interventions.

Bob Doris: I apologise to Mark Simpson. I need to conclude.

We are all only too well aware of the impact that the cost of living is having on many of our constituents. Fuel bills and food prices contribute greatly to those pressures. Therefore, it is right that the Scottish Government has clearly stated in its amendment that Scotland's vast potential must deliver economic benefits directly to people who live in Scotland by bringing down bills.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will need to wind up.

Bob Doris: There is an ongoing debate in the Parliament about renewables, oil and gas, and nuclear. I would completely rule out nuclear.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will need to wind up.

Bob Doris: Let me make this final point, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Sometimes, that debate happens in isolation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Will the member wind up, please? We are short of time, so I will have to cut him off.

Bob Doris:—but, irrespective of the energy mix, the energy wealth must come to Scotland, to protect our most vulnerable people and tackle fuel poverty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Business is running late. We have used all the time that was allocated for interventions, so speakers will have to keep within their allocated times. We encourage interventions and allow additional time for them, but we ask members to stick to the agreed time limits.

15:46

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Aberdeen was once the undisputed oil capital of Europe—the place that highly skilled workers from across the world flocked to for high-paid and high-skilled jobs. Today, it has been deliberately starved of investment, jobs and the prosperity that it should be generating for Scotland and the entire United Kingdom. Successive Governments have treated our oil and gas industry with contempt and as a problem to be wound down rather than as an asset to be maximised.

We must be clear on when the damage began. It was Tory Prime Minister Theresa May who, in 2019, put achieving net zero into law, and it was Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak who, in 2022, introduced the energy profits levy. The Green Party must have been looking on with delight at those radically harmful policies, which are wrecking the north-east.

Lloyd Melville: Will Mark Simpson take an intervention?

Mark Simpson: Am I allowed to take an intervention, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Yes.

Mark Simpson: I will happily take an intervention, then.

Lloyd Melville: Mark Simpson is placing responsibility for much of the trouble in the north-east of Scotland on the Conservative Party. Does he want to have a word with the person sitting right next to him about his responsibility for all of that, too?

Mark Simpson: I have a wild idea: instead of asking me to speak for someone else, perhaps Lloyd Melville could ask the person he wants to speak to himself. I will speak for myself, and I will let Malcolm speak for himself. [*Interruption*.] I am not here to speak for anyone else. I will speak for myself and for Reform. [*Interruption*.]

I am aware that we are short of time—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Simpson, sit down for a moment. Mr Simpson must be heard. I also ask that members always refer to colleagues by their full name.

Mark Simpson: There is a reason why Malcolm Offord is no longer a member of the Conservatives, but I will let him speak for himself later.

It is very unfortunate that Labour has continued in the same vein as the Tories, with Rachel from accounts upping the energy profits levy and blocking new licences. However—credit where credit is due—Labour at least approved Jackdaw.

Sadly, the result is plain to see. In Aberdeen and across the north-east, we have cancelled projects, lost contracts, skilled folk leaving and supply chain companies shedding staff to the tune of about 1,000 jobs a month.

Reform UK's economic plan is clear. We will unlock the North Sea and bring the boom days back to Aberdeen. First, we will immediately approve Rosebank and begin exploration for more sites. Secondly, we will restart oil and gas licensing, so that companies can, once again, plan and invest with confidence. Thirdly, we will abolish the energy profits levy—the tax that the Conservatives created and that Labour has clung to—so that the tax regime rewards production instead of punishing it. Fourthly, we will restore the maximum economic extraction as the objective of the regulator and return it to its proper name and purpose as the oil and gas authority. Reform UK will extract every last barrel and every last drop from the North Sea. Scotland must drill.

For the north-east, this is not some abstract thing; it is thousands of highly skilled, well-paid jobs—offshore workers, engineers, fabricators, logistics firms—and the businesses that depend on them.

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

Mark Simpson: It is tax revenue that should be flowing into the Scottish and UK public finances.

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

Mark Simpson: It is energy security at a time of global volatility.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I will cut the member off if he does not wind up now.

Mark Simpson: Scotland's north-east is a wonderful place, but I am ambitious to make it even better. Reform UK—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I will have to cut members off if they do not wind up when they are asked to.

Alex Kerr, you have up to five minutes, and I ask you to respect the time limit that has been agreed.

15:51

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I will start by addressing Angela Ross's opening speech. If I heard correctly, she stated that Scotland has the worst productivity in the UK. Unfortunately for her, the most recent Office for National Statistics figures show that Scotland outperforms every English region except London and the south-east. Scotland is a leader in productivity across these islands, so will Ms Ross apologise for talking down Scotland on a false premise?

Angela Ross: I do not think that you can stand there and say anything about that, because your performance during the past two decades means that GDP growth per person has been around 0.6 per cent on average. That is pathetic.

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

Alex Kerr: I do not think that Angela Ross understood me. She might have inadvertently misled Parliament. The figures that I quoted are from the ONS's most up-to-date report. What I said is a fact. She might not like it, but it is the truth. I urge her to go and have a look at the report.

Mark Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Kerr: I am running behind time, so I have to get a move on.

I have put this on the record before, but given that the unionists find it impossible to avoid painting an apocalyptic picture of Scotland's economy, it is important to highlight it again in today's debate. The "EY UK Attractiveness Survey Scotland" shows that Scotland's appeal to investors is at a record level. Despite a global slowdown in investment, Scotland remains the UK's leading destination for foreign direct investment outside of London—securing 108 projects. We should be extremely proud of that—I know that I am.

Since 2007, Scotland's GDP per person has grown by 10.2 per cent, compared with 7.8 per cent in the UK, which shows that Scotland's economic growth is increasing. Those on the benches to my left—the Conservatives and Reform—might hate it, but those are the facts, which they should brush up on for an economy debate.

That sustained success is built on Scotland's world-class workforce, strong infrastructure and leadership in key sectors such as digital technology, renewable energy and life sciences.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Alex Kerr: I will see whether I have room to take interventions later, but I need to make progress now.

High-quality jobs support communities across the country and drive regional economic growth. It is therefore vital that the Scottish Government continues to work closely with industry to maintain Scotland's competitive edge on the global stage. The challenges that Scotland's people and businesses have faced during recent years have been unprecedented. We have had Brexit, years of austerity from the UK Government, a global pandemic, soaring inflation, rising energy costs and a cost of living crisis, which have all had a profound impact. Those challenges have come in under successive UK Governments—first Conservative and now Labour—while Scotland continues to deal with the consequences of decisions that are not made here.

In my constituency, I am fortunate to have some fantastic businesses that have chosen Scotland as their home. Companies such as Probe Test Solutions, which is based in Hamilton, and DFDS, which has a large depot in Larkhall, make incredible contributions to the local economy, Scotland's national economy and, indeed, the global economy They demonstrate confidence of the kind that I have in our businesses in Scotland. Probe Test Solutions has chosen Hamilton as its base while operating in markets across the world. I am incredibly proud to have such an innovative company at the heart of my constituency, creating opportunities locally and competing internationally.

The programme for government set out by the First Minister contains a range of measures that are designed to support economic growth and investment across Scotland. Those commitments include: increasing the number of apprenticeships to 150,000 during this session of Parliament, delivering an average of 5,000 additional apprenticeship opportunities each year; advancing the £1.5 billion Scottish Government bond programme to attract new investment; driving innovation in health and social care through stronger partnerships between industry and NHS Scotland; continuing to explore how a range of levers, including non-domestic rates, can be used to support regeneration and revitalise high streets across Scotland; and, crucially, our party leader's expansive programme of public service reform.

I am particularly excited about the potential for economic growth that we could see with the establishment of regional authorities. There is the potential to address so many of the barriers that I hear about from businesses in my constituency.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Alex Kerr: Yes, I will.

Rachael Hamilton: I apologise that I did not use Mr Kerr's full name earlier. I genuinely was listening intently to his question—

Mark Simpson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Rule 7.2.4 of the standing orders confirms that members are allowed time back. There seems to be some confusion in the chamber about that. Could we have some clarification? Is my understanding correct?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I presume that the member is asking whether there is time back for interventions. As I have confirmed a number of times this afternoon, there is time back for interventions.

I call Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: When the Scottish Conservatives speak to businesses, they tell us that they are confused about where the £750 million in business rates revenue that came to the Scottish Government has gone in the budget. Would Alex Kerr like to say whether he believes that that money should be spent directly to support businesses?

Alex Kerr: I thank the Deputy Presiding Officer for the clarification on interventions.

My focus on non-domestic rates revenue is on how it can be used at a regional level to stimulate economic growth, particularly by rebalancing the incentives for regional economic development and encouraging investment in regions across Scotland. Innovation is a huge opportunity for us, and I am lucky to have the Built Environment-Smarter Transformation organisation in my constituency.

The people of Scotland elected the SNP to serve a historic fifth term in government, because they know that our party is committed to building a fairer, greener and more prosperous nation. They know that the SNP is determined to make Scotland one of the most successful economies in the world among nations of our size.

The election of a pro-independence majority to the Scottish Parliament also demonstrated that many people in Scotland continue to believe that decisions about Scotland's future are best made by those who live and work here. Independence is not an end in itself but an opportunity to build an economy that fully reflects our

priorities, harnesses our immense potential, gets us back into the European single market and delivers prosperity for generations to come

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Paul McLennan is the final speaker in the open debate.

15:58

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): Economic growth matters only if it improves living standards, creates genuine opportunities for young people and supports fair work and higher wages, and strengthens the public services that people rely on. That is in the Scottish Government's motion.

Scotland has real strengths, as we have heard: our renewable energy resources, highly skilled workforce and, of course, our world-class universities. I see the potential for opportunities in the energy sector along the coast of East Lothian, as well as the agriculture and tourism strengths of the Lammermuirs and, of course, the talent coming through our local schools. We also have major housing and infrastructure projects under way.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The member mentions energy and East Lothian in the same sentence. Will he explain to members in the chamber and to his constituents why he is against the continued presence of the nuclear power plant at Torness? Why is he against young people in East Lothian having a career in a vibrant global sector that is unlike anything else on earth? Why is he—a so-called Scottish nationalist—against young Scots having such an opportunity?

Paul McLennan: There are a number of points in there. I mentioned renewable energy jobs. Research carried out by the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit shows that there are between 1,500 and 2,000 jobs in the green energy sector in East Lothian already. There has been support and investment in East Lothian from the Scottish Government in relation to those green jobs. I am happy to discuss that further with Mr Kerr.

Potential is not enough. Scotland's vast energy resources must deliver tangible benefits to the people who live here. That must mean lower energy bills. Households and businesses across Scotland are still paying the price of high energy costs. It is simply not right that a nation that is so rich in renewable energy should see its people struggle with bills while economic gains flow elsewhere.

Our energy potential must work for Scotland's people. As I said, a number of people are employed in the sector in East Lothian, yet too often, the benefits do not reach the people who live there. Our vast energy potential has to deliver lower bills for households and businesses across Scotland, and we have heard about the benefits that independence would bring in terms of lowering energy bills.

Once the new energy cap comes in in January, energy bills will be nearly £1,000 higher than when Labour came to power in July 2024.

Mark Simpson: I am curious to hear the member's thoughts about extraction at Rosebank and drilling in the North Sea.

Paul McLennan: The decision on that is to be made by the UK Government, which has to be respected.

We cannot ignore the damage that Brexit continues to cause: higher costs, barriers to trade and lost opportunities. I will take an intervention from anyone on the Reform benches who can tell me one economic benefit of Brexit.

Angela Ross: We have seen benefits in our whisky industry. In the UK, we have seen VAT decreases, including on sanitary products—I mention those as a woman. Brexit gave us the right to do that. We could not have done that in the EU. I, for one, am grateful for that.

Paul McLennan: If that is the economic benefit of Brexit, God help us.

Rejoining the EU remains the clearest route to achieving lasting economic benefits for Scotland. We heard Daniel Johnson talk about Andy Burnham, who needs to provide more than warm words with regard to Brexit. All we have at the moment is virtue signalling—nothing more.

A successful economy also needs people, yet the current UK Government's approach to migration is actively harming growth.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: Let me progress with the point first.

The Office for Budget Responsibility's methodology points to a fiscal cost from reduced migration of between £5 billion and £7 billion a year. That is almost certainly an underestimate, and it does not even take account of the Home Secretary's new plans on earned settlement. People with indefinite leave to remain—

the very people who help staff our universities, national health service and other key sectors—are now questioning their future in this country.

Jamie Langan: I want to go back to Paul McLennan's point on Brexit. Is it not slightly hypocritical that he is pontificating about access to markets when he and his party's guiding mission in politics is to remove us from the single market that accounts for 60 per cent of our exports?

Paul McLennan: The UK removed us from the EU. The member's point offers no benefit.

The relentless demonisation of migrants is damaging Scotland's economy and our growth industries. For refugees, the situation is even more damaging. Subjecting people to repeated reviews every two and a half years for 20 or 30 years creates permanent uncertainty, which deters employers from investing in training and skills. Scotland already faces sharper demographic pressures and deeper shortages in health, social care and hospitality than the rest of the UK. That is lost potential for individuals and our economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Come to a conclusion, please.

Paul McLennan: That is why the Scottish Refugee Council is right to call for the right to work for people seeking asylum in Scotland.

I will conclude by referencing the Scottish Government's amendment, because

"improving living standards … supporting fair work … strengthening public services"

and making

"full use of its economic strengths"

requires taking a serious approach to the workforce that Scotland needs. Our amendment is clear about the economy that we need: one that works for the people of Scotland. Supporting fair migration policies that allow people to contribute is part of delivering that. I urge members to back the SNP amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes the open debate and we move to closing speeches. I inform members that there is no time in hand, so any interventions must be absorbed within the speaker's allocated time.

16:05

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I wanted to get up and say that this has been an important debate, but I do not think that it has been. That was evident from the fact that one in three Reform members could not even be bothered to turn up for the opening speech. At the end of the day, the motion before the Parliament says absolutely nothing. If Reform's big idea is to outsource finding big ideas for growth to the SNP, we are in a pretty weak position in Scotland.

When I came back after the recess, I wondered what all those eager beaver Reform researchers were doing standing along the corridor staring at blinking screens. It looks like a cryptocurrency trading floor, and it might as well be one, because they are clearly not coming up with the big solutions to answer the problems that we face in Scotland. If the big idea is to ask John Swinney to come up with the solutions, we are in serious trouble.

It was John Swinney who said that Scotland's growth has been too slow for too long.

Daniel Johnson: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Craig Hoy: I will go into why it has been too slow for too long, but I will take Daniel Johnson's intervention first.

Daniel Johnson: Does the member agree that Reform members seem to have more cut-outs in their offices than they have ideas?

Craig Hoy: I have not yet seen one of Malcolm Offord in there, but maybe it is on order.

Why has Scotland's economy grown too slowly for too long? It is because the SNP has been running Scotland for 19 years. Our taxes are too high and our earnings growth is too low. I question the Green Party's commitment to growth—I do not think that I heard anything to change that today—but, fundamentally, I question the SNP's commitment to a coherent industrial strategy.

What message does it send if we turn our face against Scotland's oil and gas sector and our energy security, as the SNP did for the majority of the previous session of Parliament? What message does it send when the Government tells our enterprise agency that it cannot invest in defence manufacturing, which is a fundamental part of the Scottish economy? What message does it send to the Scottish whisky industry that, during the

previous session of Parliament, the Government wanted to shut down distillery tours because of alcohol marketing and sponsorship rules? What message does it send to Scotland's farmers that we are going to turn our back on gene editing, which would enhance food security in Scotland? What message does it send that the SNP does not support the Trident base in Scotland, which brings tens of thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of pounds to the Scottish economy?

If we hang a sign outside the door saying "Closed", it is no wonder that we are not growing in the way that other parts of the country are. Fundamentally, it is within the Scottish Government's grasp to deal with the issue and to do so quickly. We need to reduce tax. We need to be more agile in inviting inward investment into the country. We need to say that we are open for business with a growth-first policy, not a woke-first policy whereby we turn our back on productive industries that could be providing jobs, tax receipts and growth for the Scottish economy.

16:08

Patrick Harvie: We have heard some familiar and legitimate differences of political vision during the debate. We have also heard some examples of misplaced confidence beyond a scale that would embarrass even Liz Truss. In the limited time that I have available, I will pick out a couple of arguments.

I have sympathy with one argument that we have heard from some advocates of the motion: that the Scottish Government has been too attracted by foreign direct investment and that the result has been corporate wealth extraction. I agree with that. Presumably, those who advocate that argument would also agree with me that we should be keen to pull the rug out from under the crypto billionaire class who fund the far right in this country.

As a side note, was it not delicious to see Elon Musk lose so much money last night in failing to buy himself a docile pet senator in Texas? I wish the crypto billionaires who fund the British far right every bit as much success in the years ahead as Elon Musk found in Texas.

Another serious argument that was made during the debate—perhaps the most serious one—came from Liam McArthur, who reflected on a point that was also made in yesterday's debate. Liam McArthur repeated the argument that, if we want people who are currently economically inactive to move into paid work, that must be done through empowerment, enabling them to make choices in their lives that make sense and ensuring that working life is inclusive and supports people's needs. That is the only serious way of achieving that effect, instead of bullying people into low-paid, insecure and demeaning work.

When I looked at the amendments once they were circulated last night, I thought that I clearly wanted to advocate for what is in the Green amendment. I, and the Greens, will continue to make the case that the vision of a sustainable economy is not optional, because it is the only vision of a viable economy that is available to us.

However, when I looked at the Scottish Government's amendment, I recognised that it is far more likely to be agreed to than the Green amendment—I will be honest about that. The idea of a Reform debate resulting in a clear and decisive resolution by the Parliament in favour of joining the European Union is just a funnier outcome, is it not? I thought to myself, "I know that the Scottish Government amendment is going to pre-empt the others, and I'm relaxed about that." If the Scottish Government amendment falls, I will happily press my own amendment, but the Greens will back the Scottish Government amendment and the proposition that our future lies as an independent member of the European Union.

16:11

Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): Robin Cook, a fine member of Parliament and once a representative of Edinburgh, said:

> "The right stands for the politics of me. The left stands for the politics of we."

That observation was about the ethical perspectives that shape how we view society and the economy, and it resonates today, not because the left should reject the moral value of autonomy or efficiency, but because there is moral value in solidarity, and it is often such solidarity that empowers people.

Earlier, Daniel Johnson asked us, in effect, to step back from the idea that the strength of our public services and the strength of our economy are competing ambitions—they are not. A strong economy is the foundation upon which to build good public services that do more than just meet those needs that markets can or will not meet. They are services that underpin the social contract and can drive social and economic change.

The challenge for this parliamentary session, as we face a £5 billion fiscal gap, is to unlock the potential of the Scottish economy and good public services, and to do so through the practical and institutional reforms that will make that possible.

Rachael Hamilton: The premise of what Joe Fagan has just said is that businesses need to be supported in order to pay for public spending and support public sector services. However, Labour has hiked employer national insurance contributions, which are costing Scotland £2.2 billion. That has had a cost for jobs and livelihoods, and businesses are going to the wall. What does Joe Fagan say to that?

Joe Fagan: I remind the people who stand for the politics of me that those of us who stand for the politics of we had to restore some sanity to the public finances of this country. I know that not every decision that the Government has taken was popular, but I am concerned that there are some people in this Parliament who looked at how Liz Truss crashed the economy and did not think that she had gone too far—indeed, she had no gone far enough. We should reject those arguments today.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Joe Fagan: I am afraid that I do not have time.

I want to respond to some of the points that have been made throughout the debate. Bob Doris made a very constructive speech. He will know from our all-too-brief time together on the Public Service Reform Committee how determined I am to retain a focus on outcomes. Waste is not just about inefficiency; it is about the cost of inaction, a point that I will come on to address.

I thought that Liam McArthur made a very balanced contribution, and I especially agree with his point about labour market participation.

I even found areas of agreement in Angela Ross's speech. For example, I agree with what she said about the need to reform property taxes. Scottish Labour has told the Scottish Government that we are willing to talk about council tax and business rates. I even agreed with Angela Ross, as Patrick Harvie did, on her point that there has been too much wealth extraction from our economy. As someone who has always advocated community wealth building, I have to wonder whether Reform is as concerned about foreign interests buying up our politics as it is about foreign interests buying up our economy.

Scotland's economy has huge potential, but, as I will not have time to make all the points that I had intended to make about that potential, I will turn to our public services and the need to retain a focus on outcomes. Our trade unions, councils and public service leaders are all clear that genuine public service reform must be driven by outcomes, not structures. The reform process is about more than the administrative map of Scotland; it is about how we redesign public services to deliver better outcomes for people and address the structural drivers of demand. There is a profound danger that the Scottish Government's proposals, which should be rooted in the Christie commission principles, are becoming increasingly divorced from them.

I make this point as an appeal to members across the chamber. Outwith periods of crisis, public spending as a share of our national economy is at its highest level since records began. What is driving up spending is not just energy prices or interest rates, but the long shadow of underinvestment, falling satisfaction and worsening inequalities that austerity casts. Austerity costs us all more in the long run. That has been compounded by a systemic failure to deliver the transformational change in our public services that Christie envisaged 15 years ago.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must conclude.

Joe Fagan: I appeal to the left and the right to focus on where we can find a consensus and where the push for efficiency meets the push for social justice.

16:16

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I have certainly enjoyed listening to elements of the debate up until now, especially the contribution of Alex Kerr, who rightly highlighted the fact that, despite its coming to the chamber to talk about Scotland's economy, the Reform party could only peddle mistruths. It had the opportunity to rejoice in the fact that Scotland's productivity levels have outshone those of the UK, but it chose not to do that, because when the truth meets reality, it runs from it, just as it runs from all the other levers that are in front of us that could unlock economic growth.

Let us go through some of those issues—and I have some uncomfortable truths for my friends to my left. The first is our lack of membership of the European Union.

Julie MacDougall: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Stephen Flynn: I will not, because I do not have the time.

The reality is that, as part of the United Kingdom, we were dragged from the European Union—the world's largest single market—against our will. Who was the biggest cheerleader for that? It was the leader of Reform. Despite knowing the damage that leaving the EU would do to each and every business in this land, Reform chose to push through with that direction of travel. Reform members come to this chamber and blame all our people for the economic challenges that we face. How dare they?

The same applies to their position when it comes to migration. There is a common understanding that, if we are to have a productive and growing economy, it is necessary to have a workforce that is able to meet the challenges not just of today but of tomorrow. We know that Scotland has a declining working-age population, that we need more people to work in Scotland and that migration has a crucial role to play in that conversation, yet each and every Reform member vilifies every migrant in Scotland. They do not want freedom of movement or the positive contribution of the benefits that migrants can bring to Scotland's economy.

I will not stop at Brexit and migration. Let us look at net zero. I do not know whether the members to my left are aware of this, but the economic opportunity from net zero is huge. Earlier today, I was with SSE in Glasgow for the opening of its new offices. Its workforce has grown from 419 employees to in excess of 3,000 in just a few short years.

Stephen Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The cabinet secretary has already said that he is not taking interventions.

Stephen Flynn: Each and every Reform member would stop that. They would immediately put a halt to that £29 billion-worth of investment in Scotland's economy. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Members! I have already ruled that time for interventions has to be absorbed by the speaker. The cabinet secretary has said that he is not taking interventions.

Rachael Hamilton: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We are now wasting time because of that explanation. On 21 May 2026, the Presiding Officer ruled on measures to make the Scottish Parliament more efficient, including on

"time taken for interventions",

which will be

"added to protect the time of speakers who most engage."—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2026; c 30.]

It goes on to say—actually, I will not waste the Parliament's time by going through it, because we all know the rules, and they are not the ones that the Deputy Presiding Officer has just stated.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I will not accept a challenge to the chair. We have a timescale for those interventions and the minutes were agreed with the business managers. We are significantly over time, so we will not take—

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I rise to defend my colleague Rachael Hamilton. She is not challenging the chair; indeed, she is quoting the chair—the Presiding Officer—who has said that he wants there to be debate and that he will protect time for those speakers who accept interventions. I think it unfair, frankly, on the debater—the cabinet secretary—that he does not get to take interventions—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr, please sit down. Additional time has already been given to the issue. We are now running out of time. I, as the convener of these proceedings in the Parliament, have ruled that interventions must be taken in the allotted time that the business managers agreed. I hope that this is the end of the matter. Can you continue, cabinet secretary?

Stephen Flynn: Thank you very much, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Where was I? Oh yes, net zero. Each and every single one of the Reform members would seek to withdraw that £29 billion of investment that SSE alone is seeking to make. Indeed, they would deny tens of thousands of Scottish people the opportunity to have a good, productive, positive career. They would deny not just climate reality but each and every single opportunity to Scottish people. How very dare they talk about economic growth when they turn their back on the European Union, on the benefits of migration and on the job opportunities that net zero offers?

Of course, in their opening remarks, they completely diminished the importance of the role of the public sector in Scotland, which drives skills through our schools, colleges, universities and apprenticeships—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Members!

Stephen Flynn: Every single one of their proposals would strip money away from all those services, yet they would continue to complain. The reality is that the members on the Reform benches are the antithesis of growth. They do not understand the basic fundamentals of it—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Can you resume your seat, please, cabinet secretary?

Members, I have made a ruling about how the debate will be conducted. All you are doing is disrupting the chamber, not allowing it to hear from the cabinet secretary and preventing his ability to express debate and explore challenging views. He shall have courtesy and quiet from the chamber.

Stephen Flynn: I suggest that they are being a bit lively, Presiding Officer, because they do not like to hear the truth when it comes to their particular positions.

I am conscious of time. Indeed, I think that I am now over my allocated time, so let me finish with this: we are incredibly proud of the work that we continue to do to drive growth in Scotland, and we are proud of the investment that we are making in our young people and our future. I look forward to building on that success through the budget process and to continuing to ignore the doom and gloom of the members to my left.

16:24

Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): I must say that it feels like a parallel universe in the chamber today.

The sad reality is that there is no economic growth—not in Scotland, not in the UK and not even in Europe. In fact, in the purchasing managers' index figures that came out this morning, France, Germany and the euro zone are all down while the UK is up. Rejoining the EU is not a silver bullet. To address the cabinet secretary's point, any notional increase in GDP would immediately be taken away on a per capita basis anyway, because all the major economies are increasing their populations with low-skilled immigrants while losing high-skilled locals to retirement and emigration overseas.

What does this mean for Scotland? First, the experiment to increase the number of income tax bands to six bands in Scotland, versus three in the rest of the UK, and to push the rates up to 48 per cent has failed. The evidence lies in the £209 million less tax raised than the SNP forecast, leading to this year's £722 million deficit, which in turn leads to the £5 billion black hole that has been mentioned a few times today. The black hole is entirely of the SNP's own making, made in Scotland without girders.

Thank goodness for the UK Treasury, which underwrites Scotland's structural deficit of £25 billion with a block grant sent up from London with no strings attached. There is no austerity there, then. Why should Scotland spend 55 per cent of GDP when the UK spends 45 per cent of GDP? There has been no answer to that either this afternoon.

After six months in the chamber, I have come to the sad conclusion that the Scottish Government does not actually know how to grow the economy. Minister after minister stands up—

Alex Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Malcolm Offord: No, I am going to crack on.

Minister after minister stands up and says the words, but with no conviction and certainly no understanding.

So, what is to be done? This mess has been created by a succession of Labour, Conservative and SNP Governments in Westminster and Holyrood over 25 years. That is why Reform UK exists. The public know that they cannot trust the established parties any more. The public are demanding economic growth and prosperity, but instead, the uni-parties have consigned them to a nearly 10-year forecast of falling living standards and managed decline.

However, it does not need to be this way. The UK needs a 10-year turnaround plan. Fortunately, Reform UK is stuffed full of politicians who actually understand business and the economy. We need a Reform Government in Westminster that is working hand in hand with a Reform Government here in Holyrood.

Last week, the shadow chancellor, Robert Jenrick, set out more than 60 measures—

Craig Hoy: Will the member give way?

Malcolm Offord: No, I am going to keep going.

Last week, the shadow chancellor, Robert Jenrick, set out more than 60 measures to set the UK on the road to recovery. The most prominent of those are increasing the tax-free personal allowance to £15,000; cutting energy bills by £250 and by a lot more for business; increasing the VAT threshold to £150,000; reversing Rachel Reeves's jobs-killing national insurance increases; and scrapping tax on overtime. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Offord, could you pause for a minute, please?

I will not have conversations happening across the aisles. Please let the member who is speaking be heard.

Malcolm Offord: Those are real measures, and what do they actually mean? They mean putting more money into the pockets of workers and small business owners, who are the bedrock of our economy.

Alan Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Malcolm Offord: No, I am going to keep going. We have run out of time.

We know that those workers and small business owners will reinvest that money in their families and communities. It is a proven fact that reducing tax increases productivity and investment into businesses and people alike.

Craig Hoy: Will the member give way?

Malcolm Offord: No, I am not taking any interventions, because we have had so much rudeness across the chamber today. I will just crack on. [*Interruption*.]

We need Westminster to pull the reserved levers of growth in London by getting energy costs down, reforming welfare to make work pay more, and incentivising workers and business owners to be more productive. That is where Reform Scotland can get involved.

We can then kick on with a radical package of measures to boost the Scottish economy by, for example, aligning Scottish income tax back to the three bands in parity with the UK, and going a stage further and cutting each band by 1p, with a target of 3p; redesigning Scottish welfare to give a hand up, not just a handout; working with schools and colleges to get our young people into jobs and to get our home-grown Scots into meaningful work; and working with the 32 local authorities to push devolution down to local people—all the while protecting front-line services in health, education and policing.

Reform Scotland has a comprehensive, 10-year recovery plan for Scotland, which will see employers incentivised to hire more workers, workers incentivised to get skilled up and earn higher wages, business owners incentivised to expand their firms, and local authorities incentivised to improve local services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must conclude.

Malcolm Offord: That will be real devolution in action, and Reform Scotland will fulfil our pledge to make Scotland the most prosperous part of the United Kingdom.

Face Coverings in Public Places

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01844, in the name of Helen McDade, on face coverings in public places. Members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak buttons now. I call Helen McDade to speak to and move the motion.

16:31

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Reform believes in free speech, which was denied in this Parliament on 8 October 2026, when Reform had a members' business debate. Thomas Kerr introduced the motion on face coverings, and he was the only Reform member who got to speak. Five of our female MSPs requested to speak. The refusal to agree to a motion to extend the debate was a new low for the Parliament.

Ironically, the same day, the European Parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution, by 381 votes to 167, which supported national measures to prohibit full face coverings in public spaces, citing public safety and law enforcement. Face coverings are banned in many European countries. There are nationwide bans in France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Portugal and Austria. Many Muslim-majority countries have enacted bans or restrictions, including Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kurdistan and Uzbekistan. Chad enacted a complete ban on the burqa following suicide bombings in 2015. Of course, people can wear religious and cultural

clothing. However, as human beings, we want to see other people's faces. We in Reform are proposing that no face coverings should be allowed in public places.

Consider these four different scenarios. We have seen videos of groups of young men in Glasgow wearing balaclavas and causing mayhem and fear. We all agree that that is unacceptable and that police must take action.

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

Helen McDade: I will not be taking an intervention. I learnt that lesson when we did not get to speak last time.

Even in circumstances where there is no criminality, many of us may feel fearful when surrounded by people whose faces we cannot see. We, as humans, naturally observe facial expressions to gauge the emotions and intent of others.

There are examples of when face coverings protect the aggressor from justice. In Drumchapel, a 76-year-old man was injured in a hit-and-run by two youths wearing balaclavas on an electric motorbike. In Birkenhead, a woman in her 60s suffered fractured ribs and was unable to walk for weeks after being struck from behind by a masked e-bike rider. Masks are a great help to criminals.

Here is another aspect to consider: biological development. Research has shown that babies have an innate preference for looking at human faces, using them as vital ways to build language, emotional and social skills from birth. [*Interruption*]. That is not simply about interacting with their parents and carers; that is how children learn to engage with people all around them.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member give way?

Helen McDade: No. I explained that I will not take an intervention. [*Interruption*].

Everyone here has probably sat on a bus or a train behind a small child peeking over the seat. [*Interruption*].

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr, the member has made it clear that they are not taking an intervention.

Helen McDade: You smile at a baby when they look at you, and then they smile back. You give a big grin to them, and they give one back. That is how children become part of society. Even as adults, we continue to smile at strangers and expect, or hope for, a friendly smile back.

What about cultural dress? The shouting from other parts of the chamber on 8 October claimed that people should be entitled to wear what they like, yet no one is allowed to walk around the streets naked.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek clarity in the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Will you please quote the standing order on which you are making your point of order?

Stephen Kerr: I do not know the standing order number, but it is a valid point of order. The point of order is in relation to the ruling that you have made from the chair. Am I to understand that none of us will be allowed to take interventions without sacrificing our speaking time?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr, each item is considered as a whole in the Parliament. We have moved to a new debate. If we run out of time or exceed our allotted time for the debate, I will make a ruling.

Stephen Kerr: So, Helen McDade will get time back?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Yes.

Helen McDade: For clarity, I am not taking an intervention.

Even as adults, we seek to—[*Interruption*.] No wonder people look at politicians and think, “Oh, my God.” Even as adults, we continue to smile at strangers and expect or hope for a friendly smile back. I do not expect one here, but, in general, outside in the street, I do.

What about cultural dress? People do not get to wear what they like. You cannot walk around the street naked—a well-known naturist was jailed for doing just that—so we do make rules about what people wear.

I live in a rural Scottish village. I did not join Reform because of anything to do with the cultural changes that we are seeing, which did not affect me or my immediate area; I did not know anything about that. I joined because I was furious about the net zero brainwashing that we get from people.

So, why am I increasing my security risk now and putting up with this nonsense from the majority of MSPs? I went to the Gorton and Denton constituency to campaign in the election. The Scottish contingent was sent to Gorton. It was a quiet weekday afternoon, when it is usual not to see many people in the street or to have them come to the door when knocked. However, it is not usual to see no women at all in the streets for several hours or for the few doors that crack open to be opened by women who appeared scared and who quickly indicated that they did not speak English and shut the doors. The only women who we saw in the area that six of us canvassed were women in full burqas who picked up children from school and quickly disappeared off the streets. A man said to us, "How dare you come to this multicultural area?", but there was nothing multicultural about it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must come to a conclusion.

Helen McDade: It was clear that outsiders were not supposed to be there. Did I feel nervous at that time of day? No. However, if I was a lesbian holding hands with my partner, I would not walk there at dusk. It was a ghetto—whether voluntarily or not. I came away and thought, "I must be braver; I must speak out for girls who want to mix with other people in our country." The first step is to ban face coverings, whether on men or women. We are all members of society, and we want to say, "Hi," and smile, which is how people become friends and not strangers.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the ongoing debate across Scotland regarding the wearing of full-face coverings, including the burqa and niqab, in public places; recognises that legislation in Scotland already provides police with powers to require the removal of face coverings in specified circumstances where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are being used to conceal identity in connection with criminality or disorder; notes the Scottish Government's current position that existing police powers are sufficient; further notes that a number of European countries have introduced restrictions on face coverings in public places, and notes calls for the Scottish Government to set out its assessment of the potential benefits of introducing further restrictions on full-face coverings in public places, including consideration of public safety, individual liberty and community cohesion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Kirsten Oswald to speak to and move amendment S7M-01844.2.

16:38

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Here we are, yet again, with Reform UK members coming to the chamber and telling women what to wear. I will say this to them again: it is none of their business what women wear.

They have come here with the selfsame motion that they brought to the chamber for debate just a few weeks ago. Today's Reform motion again references precisely two types of face covering: the burqa and the niqab. Again, the motion does not mention balaclavas—not a single reference to balaclavas is written in the motion—so there is absolutely no good in Reform members suggesting that they have brought this debate to the chamber because of concerns about the wearing of balaclavas for criminal or antisocial behaviour. If that was their concern, they would have written it down; they would have written something—anything—about balaclavas in the motion.

I will come on to say a bit about the wearing of balaclavas, which is a topic of broad interest and concern and one that is worth discussing. However, that is not what their motion says, and it is not what it seeks to do. The motion tells us exactly what they are interested in: telling women—specifically, Muslim women—what to wear.

I will be crystal clear: the motion and the debate—which, after all, they already held just a couple of weeks ago—is deliberately divisive, racist, Islamophobic and designed to foster hostility. It is an attack on Muslim women. It is a disgraceful way for members of an alleged political party to conduct themselves, and they should be ashamed of themselves, but, of course, they are not. That is because they are, in their very essence, divisive. Today, they seek to stir up further division and fear.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): Is Kirsten Oswald really suggesting that France, Belgium, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland are racist? They have restrictions on face coverings, including bans. Is she seriously suggesting that all those European countries—which she wants to join—are racist? I say, seriously, get a grip.

Kirsten Oswald: I am seriously suggesting that Reform UK and its motion are racist. We heard that in the contribution that Helen McDade has just made—we all listened—connecting burqas with suicide bombing and suggesting that all face coverings are the same thing. They are not.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Kirsten Oswald: I do not have a great deal of time, so I will continue for now.

We all know that the debate is intended to foster division.

I will talk a bit about the amendment that we have lodged. That amendment has been backed by the Green Party and Labour, for which I am very grateful, because we need to speak with one voice on these issues. We need to be explicit that it is not for the Parliament to legislate on what women choose to wear, and that parliamentarians should lead by example in rejecting the language and actions of those who seek to divide our communities in person and online.

During the election campaign, this year, the First Minister made it clear that he would not co-operate with Reform members in the Parliament, due to their language, which seeks to incite racial hatred. On seeing the return of the motion, I say that it is very clear that he was right to take that stand.

All our communities deserve to live safely and to feel safe. They are entitled to expect that individuals who engage in violence, disorder and persistent antisocial behaviour will be dealt with. Those are legitimate concerns.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Kirsten Oswald: Not just now, Mr Kerr.

However, we all know who is not responsible for those kinds of behaviour. It is not women in burqas and niqabs who are causing the disorder, so I ask again why Reform is singling them out by referencing in its motion only those two types of face covering.

Balaclavas, which are sometimes worn to mask the identities of those engaging in troubling behaviour, have certainly been a focus of my attention and discussions over recent weeks. As things stand, Scotland has a range of powers available to address circumstances in which face coverings are used in connection with criminality or disorder. Those include powers relating to public order, protest activity, stop and search—where the legal tests are met—and powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which permit officers, in specified circumstances, to require the removal of face coverings.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way on that point?

Kirsten Oswald: Not just now.

Police Scotland has stated publicly that the powers that are currently available to officers are sufficient. However, the service continues to monitor the operation of new powers that have been introduced elsewhere in the United Kingdom and is gathering evidence to understand their effectiveness in practice, and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has said that he will do the same and will consider whether further targeted measures may be helpful where there is clear evidence that they would improve public safety, support operational policing and remain consistent with our obligations on human rights.

Our focus should be on tackling criminality and antisocial behaviour, not on telling women what they should or should not wear. We should not question what a woman wears. What matters is whether she is safe, whether her rights are protected and whether perpetrators of violence are held accountable. That is what the Government is focused on.

The sheer hypocrisy of Reform members, who talk about the protection of women and girls then fan the flames of hatred—which, in itself, endangers some women and girls—is eye-watering. They need to stop using the protection of women and girls as a cover for racism. We see what they are doing—and, I assure them, so do women and girls. They will not succeed.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Kirsten Oswald: I am not giving way.

Scotland is an inclusive, diverse and welcoming country. We have benefited enormously from our diversity, and we will continue to do so. Strong, cohesive communities, which work for all of us, are at the heart of our future. The Scottish Government will stand firm in rejecting efforts to sow division, suspicion and intolerance. We will remain focused on strengthening community cohesion, fostering mutual respect and understanding, and ensuring that everyone who calls Scotland home can live safely, freely and with dignity. I urge all members to reject Reform's dangerous and divisive nonsense and to support the Government's amendment.

I move amendment S7M-01844.2, to leave out from first "notes" to end, and insert:

"acknowledges that it is not for Parliament to legislate for what women choose to wear, and agrees that parliamentarians should lead by example in rejecting the language and actions of those who seek to divide Scotland's communities in person and online."

16:45

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is very frustrating, and I repeat what I said from a sedentary position: I do not know why we have debates in this place if members, especially those on the front bench, will not give way to other members.

In truth, if the minister had any guile, this debate would not be about telling people how to dress; it would be about the fact that there are people in our communities who feel afraid because other people deliberately cover their faces to conceal their identities while they intimidate people, commit crime or become involved in serious disorder. The question is straightforward: do our police officers have the powers that they need to deal with that? I am not convinced that they do.

Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 should be the focus of the debate, but let us be clear about what that power actually is. A section 60 authorisation has to be in place before officers have the power to intervene to ask people to remove face coverings. It applies to a defined area for a defined period, and the threshold is deliberately high. We are talking about anticipated "serious violence" or people

"carrying dangerous instruments or offensive weapons".

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I will.

Maggie Chapman: Can Stephen Kerr tell me how many people who wear niqabs or burqas are among those who have been caught carrying dangerous weapons in that context? The point that the minister was getting at, and the reason that she spoke about face coverings, is because those face coverings are named explicitly in the motion. That tells us what the motion is about, and what its intent is.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to Maggie Chapman for her intervention, and I know what drives her to make it, but I am addressing my amendment, which is about criminal activity, or the threat of criminal activity, by those who use face coverings to conceal their identity.

We on the Criminal Justice Committee have received evidence from Police Scotland and from police officers that they do not have the powers that they need to be able to intervene and act. I am trying to explain what section 60 of the 1994 act does: it creates a deliberately high threshold. What is a police officer supposed to do when a group of people are standing there with their faces covered, deliberately concealing their identities, and the officer has good reason to believe that trouble is brewing? Do we really say to that officer, "You do not yet have the power to act because the situation has not become serious enough"? At the point that it becomes serious enough, it is too late.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to the member for giving way, because I think that he is making an important contribution. These are important issues that need to be discussed, but they are not the ones that the Reform motion seeks to address. Most importantly, he makes an important distinction, in that not all face coverings are the same. There are instances where there is intent to commit crime or intimidate others, and that is the case when people are wearing balaclavas in those situations, but it is clearly not the case when women are wearing burqas or niqabs.

Stephen Kerr: That point is being exhausted by repetition. I want to focus on my amendment.

I see that the Minister for Equalities and International Development is throwing her hands up in the air, but the reality is that there is a real issue with people wearing masks or balaclavas—call them what you like—while dressed in black and threatening other members of the public, and the police do not have the powers that they need to be able to provide guarantees of safety to the communities that they serve.

Let us take what the Scottish Police Federation has said, given that it represents the officers who actually deal with those situations on our streets. The SPF has been very clear. Its general secretary, David Kennedy, said that the circumstances in which officers can currently require the removal of a face covering are limited. His conclusion could hardly be clearer. He said,

"we need a law change,"

and

"we need to give police more powers."

That is what I hope that we might agree on across the chamber, because that is the issue that my constituents care most about.

The Police Federation has made it clear that it wants practical legal powers that can be used in situations in which officers reasonably believe that a face covering is being deliberately used to conceal identity in connection with criminality, violence or serious disorder.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr, you must conclude.

Stephen Kerr: That is almost precisely the issue that my amendment asks the Government to examine. I hope that the Government will support the amendment, because—despite her resistance to taking an intervention for clarity—the minister basically said in her speech that the Government understands that that is an issue that needs further exploration, which is what my amendment calls for. I therefore trust that members of this Parliament will support my amendment, so that we get the clarity and the powers that the police need to make our communities as safe as we all want them to be.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr, can you move your amendment?

Stephen Kerr: I definitely will.

I move amendment S7M-01844.3, to leave out from the first ", including" to end and insert

"in public places; recognises that existing powers may be insufficient to prevent crime and serious public disorder where individuals deliberately conceal their identities, and calls on the Scottish Government to review these powers in consultation with Police Scotland and police representatives, and to consider proportionate additional powers to require the removal of face coverings where there are reasonable grounds."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Pauline McNeill—sorry, we still have another amendment to move.

I call Yi-pei Chou Turvey to speak to and move amendment S7M-01844.1.

16:51

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): My amendment would replace the text of the motion with the words:

"recognises that legislation in Scotland provides police with powers to require the removal of face coverings in specified circumstances where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are being used to conceal identity in connection with criminality or disorder."

Some of those words are not just mine, of course; they are also in the Reform motion, so, on that point, we can agree. When required for reasons of criminality or disorder, it is good that existing legislation allows police to require the removal of face coverings. However, to ignore the bigotry that is only lightly veiled behind the motion is dangerous. I might add that I thank God that that such bigotry has been getting a bit of a beating at the polls as of late, if the successful results of our Democrat friends in the United States in the past 24 hours are anything to go by.

Stephen Kerr: I respect the speech that the member is giving. However, based on the evidence that has been placed before the Criminal Justice Committee of this Parliament, it is not true to say that the police have all the powers that they need to enable them to deal with people wearing masks, because the threshold in section 60 of the 1994 act that I quoted requires certain criteria to be satisfied. We in this party would like the police to have the power to intervene as early as possible to prevent threat and criminality. Does the member not agree with that?

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: The prevention part of the issue is important, but no—the fact is that a face covering can be put on in one second and taken off in the next. Policing that is very hard to manage.

I will address the motion, because I will not let this chance to speak up for those targeted by this motion pass me by. Reform's motion asks us to note

"the ongoing debate across Scotland"

about face coverings, and it especially mentions religious face coverings. However, I have yet to see evidence of any substantial ongoing debate that does not start and end with Reform members themselves. Evidence that the subject has been debated is not evidence that the public independently demanded that it be debated. The First Minister himself reminded us that, in his long tenure in this Parliament, discussion of banning religious face coverings started and will end with Reform.

Let us not forget that this is Reform's business day. Those outside the chamber will not necessarily understand the impact of that, but we do. We know that Reform has limited time to bring critical issues to the floor but, despite that, it has chosen to spend time today debating this non-issue.

As the self-styled champion of the working class, why does Reform not debate the lack of appropriate provision of further education and apprenticeships, which disproportionately affects young men? Why does it not advocate for an improved national health service? Why does it not fight for increased funding for the police

and other public services? Why does it not debate any of its numerous other campaign promises? Reform has not chosen to discuss those issues, and we in the chamber know why.

Thomas Kerr: I am aware that the member was not in the chamber for it, but I would like to make it clear that I secured a members' business debate in the Parliament on a motion relating to white working-class boys and the disproportionate consideration that the Scottish Government is giving to their educational attainment. It is a shame that the member was not there for the debate, but I did secure it.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: Will the member accept, though, that Reform has twice brought to the Parliament a debate on face coverings? That is a bit much.

The real work of governing will not grab headlines in the way that this kind of nonsense will, so Reform members have brought this inflammatory tripe to the chamber in an attempt to garner themselves more publicity instead of getting their heads down and doing real work for the benefit of their constituents. Is that fair to the people they represent? We need to keep in mind that we represent everyone in our constituencies and regions. That is what we do.

Reform asks us to consider the ban in relation to public safety, individual liberty and community cohesion, so let us look at those issues in turn. The biggest current threat to public safety is the underfunding of our police services. It has been shared with my office that Police Scotland requires at least an additional £80 million in next year's budget just to maintain its current levels of provision. Any suggestion that we consider further legislation on such a non-issue is an affront to the real concerns that have been shared with us by organisations. Again, would that not be a better topic for debate today?

Next, Reform asks us to consider individual liberty, which Lib Dems are very comfortable with. I am left confused as to why there is a suggestion that we should interfere with an individual's personal choice of clothing. We are here for those who choose to cover their faces as well as for those who might question whether they want to do so. Reform members pretend that they are champions of freedom for the masses—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Will the member conclude, please?

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: Yes. I took interventions, but I can conclude quickly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You have had extra time for the interventions.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: In fact, Reform wants an authoritarian state that tells people what to wear. Lib Dems proudly want the opposite.

Finally, Reform asks us to consider community cohesion. There is a hint of reasonableness in that, but enhanced community cohesion starts and ends with engagement, not with targeting, othering and isolating specific groups of people. Unfortunately, that is exactly what the motion does. I ask Reform to lodge a reasonable motion on an important issue next time. If it does, we will listen, but we will not listen to nonsense.

I move amendment S7M-01844.1, to leave out from first "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises that legislation in Scotland provides police with powers to require the removal of face coverings in specified circumstances where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are being used to conceal identity in connection with criminality or disorder."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We have reached the point in the debate when we have no more time in hand, so interventions must be absorbed within a member's debate time.

I call Pauline McNeill, who has four minutes.

16:57

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I am just going to keep talking until you tell me that my time is up, because, having listened to the debate, I have changed a lot of what I want to say.

Scottish Labour did not lodge an amendment to the motion, because we want to support the Government on what is yet another divisive debate. We want to be clear on where we stand. We are not for banning the burqa. This is a divisive debate that is about stirring up hostility.

This debate is not helpful, but my constituents have raised with me concerns about an emerging issue—which Stephen Kerr talked about—with people wearing face coverings such as balaclavas and, sometimes, riding e-bikes when they are seeking to intimidate others and have a motive to commit crime. That is where the real debate lies. I thought that Reform would want to discuss that, because it is a live debate.

For the record, and as has been said, there is no evidence that women who wear the burqa or the niqab have criminal motives in any sense. In fact, I know many such women, and they tend to live quite quiet lives. They look after their families and make a huge contribution to family life. That has been my experience, and no one has ever told me otherwise.

Helen McDade said that people live in fear of Muslim women who wear face coverings, because they cannot see their faces. I do not know whether I believe that she really thinks that, but I tell her what—

Helen McDade: I did not say that.

Pauline McNeill: Well, she did. She justified the French position by saying that people want to see other people's faces. That is fair enough, but I do not accept the idea that anyone would live in fear because they could not see someone's face.

Many of the communities in Glasgow that I represent are fed up with people who wear face coverings while riding e-bikes. There is a serious debate to be had on that issue, and the minister touched on it briefly. I understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has said that he will look at the issue, and rightly so.

During Thomas Kerr's recent members' business debate, I mentioned that the authorities in Nottingham have considered this issue and have acted on it. It is worth having a look at what has been done there, but, before we jump to the conclusion that it is the right thing to do in Scotland, we need to see what fits with our current laws.

As for face coverings worn by people on e-bikes, the chair of the Scottish Police Federation said:

"The number of options the police have to deal with people who are riding these types of vehicles dangerously is extremely limited".

He went on to say that the police need powers to

"stop people wearing face coverings and order them to be removed".

By that, he meant in situations in which those individuals present a risk to the public and when police suspect them of committing a crime.

I recently attended a rally—Iris Duane also spoke at it—where some people wore the type of face coverings that some football fans use. That action was designed to intimidate people. I am not for that, but I am for the police having the relevant powers when that is appropriate.

Nottinghamshire Police now have the power to issue £70 on-the-spot fines, Police officers can also confiscate face coverings and refer individuals to the immediate justice programme, which instructs young people in carrying out community work such as litter picking or graffiti removal in the city centre. In Nottingham they are trying to do something positive rather than just criminalising young people.

Crucially, the initiative in Nottingham does not introduce a blanket ban on face coverings, and the restrictions do not apply where face coverings are worn for legitimate reasons, including for religious dress. That is an important safeguard. It is possible to legislate and also safeguard the interests of those who choose to wear face coverings for peaceful reasons. The face covering ban is part of Nottinghamshire's operation reclaim, which is a partnership approach to tackling youth antisocial behaviour.

I hope that we can have a serious debate about whether the wearing of face coverings is a criminal matter, the topical subject of e-bikes, and what the Parliament needs to do to ensure that, as regards law and order, the police have the tools that they need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Maggie Chapman to speak for four minutes.

17:02

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Max Bannerman: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Under rule 8.14.3 of the Scottish Parliament's standing orders, I seek your guidance on whether I can move a motion without notice to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes, because of your ruling on further interventions being curtailed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am not minded to accept a motion without notice on this issue. The timings were agreed with business managers prior to both debates.

Maggie Chapman: Take two.

Most MSPs come to the Parliament wanting to help people, to tackle the poverty and inequality that hold so many back from what they could achieve, to give a voice to those who are seldom heard or easy to ignore,

to give people the means by which to access their human rights—including the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of religious expression, and the right to dress as they wish—and to build a country where everyone is welcomed and loved, no matter who they are or where they are from. However, it appears that some MSPs arrive here with entirely the opposite agenda—to punch down on the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society, to tell people that they do not belong and to say that the way someone lives, loves or dresses is not welcome here.

Unfortunately, the motion reflects exactly that nasty, narrow-minded and racist agenda. It is racist because it specifically targets people of colour—women with a specific cultural background or religious belief. The motion specifically mentions the burqa and niqab and not other items such as masks, balaclavas or motorbike helmets. The items of clothing that are mentioned in the motion are worn almost exclusively by women of colour, and certainly by women who practise their Islamic faith in a particular way. That tells us precisely what MSPs on the other side of the chamber are here to do.

The motion is not driven by genuine concern for public safety. We are not being inundated with requests for action on a burqa ban by our constituents in the same way as our constituents ask us and express their concerns about the national health service, the environment or schools. There would be genuine, widespread public campaigning for a ban if that were the case, but there is not. There would be substantial evidence to suggest that the wearing of face coverings for religious or cultural reasons facilitates crime, but there is not. This is not about public safety. The motion calls for an assessment of the benefits of further restrictions on public safety and community cohesion grounds, but it does not present any evidence that people who wear burqas or niqabs, which are the only two face coverings mentioned in the motion, are disproportionately involved in any criminal activity.

Other countries have done what Reform is asking, so we know what the consequences might be here. Far from producing community cohesion, such bans have marginalised people from their communities. Evidence from the 16-year ban in France shows that women who wear religiously significant clothing have experienced increases in verbal abuse, public harassment and physical assaults, including having their veils forcibly removed and being spat on. So, the ban has made those women less safe. That is what Reform is about. As a result, many women go out less frequently, socialise less and face heightened anxiety or depression due to fear of fines and public hostility.

This racist, hate-mongering motion does, however, leave us in no doubt about one thing. It demonstrates that far-right hatred and fascism are forces in our country—and not just in our country, but in this very Parliament. That is a challenge to all of us. It demonstrates that every member in this chamber who wants to see the better country that I spoke about, in which everyone is welcome and nobody is singled out for hate, needs to work harder to combat the sentiment that we have seen from Reform today. We need to do more to combat the social problems on which the far right feeds—the issues that it exploits and for which it blames the most marginalised: poverty, inequality and a lack of hope. That is scapegoating, and we will not have it.

There is a well-worn mantra that the enemies of working people in this country do not arrive in small boats—they fly in by private jet. I am reminded of that today. The enemies of ordinary people in this country do not wear niqabs or burqas—they wear smartly ironed, shiny new suits, and they are sitting right over there. I urge the chamber to reject them and everything that they stand for at decision time today.

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

17:07

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): People wear face coverings for all sorts of reasons, including health, safety at work, privacy and adherence to religious practice. I cannot fathom how much someone must hate a religion for banning the burqa to be more important to them than safety at work, safety within the national health service, making it socially acceptable to wear personal protective equipment and respirators, or simply having something that provides a bit of protection from a Highland winter. Maybe looking miserable and drenched in a dreich winter could be argued to uphold traditional British values, but I am not up for it, and I do not think that most of my constituents are either. Yes, there might be parents out there tonight who beg their adolescent children to put on a jacket, and maybe those children will be wrong to go out without one and will catch a cold, but it is not for us, in this place, to tell anybody what they should be wearing.

The motion that is before us today references European countries introducing restrictions. So, a party whose members have spent a decade warning us that Europe is an authoritarian superstate is now arguing that we should be nicking and—let us be honest—exaggerating the most restrictive policies that are being introduced elsewhere. Let us look at one of them for a moment. In Austria, a ban on veils that was aimed, like Reform's motion, at Islamic dress resulted in the police having a showdown with a man dressed as a shark, who was advertising a local business, and that business was fined. Maybe I have misunderstood Reform's

point. Maybe its members want to come to Inverness with me this weekend and have a go at Nessa and Nessie. Maybe they have a personal grudge against Kingsley—I do not know.

The motion also suggests that the Government should publish an assessment of the benefits that restrictions on face coverings can bring for individual liberty. I do not think that it will take much work to determine whether curtailing rights and freedoms improves individual liberty. However, inspired by Reform, I wonder what else we could spend parliamentary time and money assessing. Perhaps we could assess the democratic benefits of replacing public elections with board meetings. Perhaps we could measure how much freer party members feel when they cannot vote on their own constitution. We could look at the cultural benefits of Santa Claus being unable to deliver presents to children in Canada because he is busy chatting to the police in the UK about how they cannot see past his beard.

The motion is absurd. The campaign is racist and I will not take it seriously.

Stephen Kerr: I understand the point that Emma Roddick has made with humour, but, as I described in my speech, there is a serious issue in many of our communities in respect of face masks and coverings. Does she agree that it would be important for the police to have the necessary powers to act when individuals are using face coverings to conceal their identity in order to threaten or commit crimes? Does she agree that the police should have those powers? That is the serious point that lies behind this afternoon's debate on face coverings.

Emma Roddick: I agree that the police should be able to identify people who they believe are about to commit crimes or who have just committed crimes, but I believe that they already have those powers. A ban that would see police time being taken up by them going up to children who are guising or people who are wearing personal protective equipment while working would not be in any way helpful or proportionate in tackling the issue that Stephen Kerr has raised.

Earlier, we heard that we should all be showing our faces for the sake of babies. I do not have children of my own, but I have looked after plenty of them. I point out that, if we are going to start making law on the basis of what confuses infants, we will probably end up in a pretty silly place.

If Reform members were concerned about child development, they could have talked about wraparound childcare and the need for more support for parents or about how climate change will impact today's youth. If the motion were about reducing violence and criminal damage, it would have focused on the tools that people actually use to carry out such crimes, not what they are wearing while they do it. If Reform members were concerned about police on the ground, they would not be trying to implement a requirement for folk who are meant to be addressing actual crime to instead go around policing what folk are wearing.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I want to provide clarification, because there seems to be a bit of confusion among some members about what the motion actually states. The motion is about face coverings in public places—it says "including" in relation to what the member has mentioned. I think that she needs to re-read what is actually in front of her. The Scottish Police Federation would welcome an open debate on this subject, so I really do not understand what it is about the motion that has been lodged that is so difficult or divisive. It is very clear, in black and white, what the motion states. [*Interruption*.] Excuse me—I have not finished yet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must make her point.

Julie MacDougall: I say this to the people who are sitting over in the corner, calling us racist and fascist: they are the people who are creating division in our community. Shame on them.

Emma Roddick: I put it to you, Deputy Presiding Officer, that creating division is exactly what Reform was trying to do with this motion. I am not clear what is difficult to understand about anything that I have said. I appreciate that Reform members can use their time to debate whatever they like, just as the rest of us can choose to vote down the motion at decision time. However, I wish that Reform members would be honest instead of selling us this absolute nonsense that they are doing this for the sake of babies or the police or lesbians.

The motion is about targeting, stigmatising and whipping up hate against Muslim women. It is manufactured outrage and a culture war stunt, and I regret that it has taken up any parliamentary time, let alone two debates.

17:14

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): I suspect that it will come as no surprise to this chamber that I back the motion, in the name of my friend Helen McDade, to ban all face coverings in public places.

When I was elected alongside my Reform MSP colleagues in May, we promised that we would be the fox in the hen house. We are not here to play the game; we are here to fight for Scotland's forgotten working class, unlike this lot of absolute chancers. Just a few weeks ago, these hens in the chamber attempted—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Sorry, Mr Kerr, but I must remind everyone to speak to one another and refer to one another with respect.

Thomas Kerr: I think that calling somebody a chancer is very respectful compared to calling somebody a fascist, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Just a few weeks ago, these hens in the chamber attempted to silence me and my colleagues, because we dared to raise a debate that they did not like. The First Minister ranted at First Minister's question time that he had never been asked about banning the burqa until Reform arrived in the chamber. Yes—that is kind of the point, and why we are here.

Let us make one thing abundantly clear. The Holyrood establishment might not like us, but we are here to stay and no one who sits on the benches over there will ever succeed in silencing us. This debate might make some members uncomfortable but, frankly, I do not care. Our presence is supposed to make them feel like that, and it is probably best that they get used to it. Reform UK Scotland is here to represent the almost 400,000 Scots who are scunnered with politics and angry about MSPs from all the other parties shafting them, their families and their communities time and time again. That is why this debate is so important.

As I said a few weeks ago, a modern democratic society depends on people participating in public life openly. In our schools, our universities, our courts, our public services and our workplaces, communication matters. I do not care whether it is a balaclava or a burqa, it should be banned. Indeed, on the night that I raised the issue in the chamber previously, the European Parliament voted to ban the burqa. Of course, this lot do not want to hear that, nor do they want to hear that the burqa has been banned in at least 24 other countries around the world, including European countries such as France, Belgium and Austria, to name but a few.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): This is Scotland.

Thomas Kerr: I am hearing, "This is Scotland", but it does not matter. The SNP members are trying to have debates to talk about getting us back into the EU, and that is what the EU countries have done.

Members ask why this debate is here. It is here, because of the sheer brass neck of members in this so-called debating chamber who are petrified of dissenting voices having any say in modern Scotland. Just before recess, I sat here being lectured by sanctimonious MSPs from right across the chamber. They told me that I was silencing female voices and taking away their choices. They did that without a hint of irony, given that members then went on to silence not one, not two, not three, not four but five Reform MSPs. [*Interruption*.]

I just heard someone shouting, "Boo hoo." Is that really how members try to have debates in the chamber? I just noticed who it was, and it really does say a lot, actually. With this lot, it is always, "Do as I say, not as I do." That seems to be their motto.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must conclude.

Thomas Kerr: We need to ban all face coverings in public places, including the burqa and the niqab, both of which have no place in modern Scotland. I hope that, at decision time, MSPs will see sense and back the motion in Helen McDade's name.

17:17

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): I plan to speak for a short time to the motion that is before the Parliament and the issue of the niqab and burqa, which, frankly, I believe to be a smokescreen. I will set out why.

At the most recent census, there were 58,165 Muslim women in Scotland. In research from the British Future think tank, Sunder Katwala has said that the ballpark figure for the number of women in the Muslim faith who wear a niqab or a burqa is roughly 1 or 2 per cent. In reality, therefore, we are talking about probably 582 women in all of Scotland. It is important that we recognise that and understand that many of them choose to do that. That raises a much wider issue of freedom of religion and belief.

That is the only thing that I want to put on record about that, because I think that the issue that we are debating is not about the niqab or the burqa. I have quite a lot of sympathy for some of the points that have been made by fellow members of the Criminal Justice Committee, namely Pauline McNeill and Stephen Kerr, in relation to section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. My belief—I think that the evidence

that we are starting to get confirms this—is that section 60 is now deficient, given the challenges that the police face in relation to public order protests.

I know that Reform no longer has a member of the Criminal Justice Committee, because the one that they had has since left the party but, at this morning's meeting of the Criminal Justice Committee, I asked the Scottish Police Federation whether its members were having problems with women wearing the niqab or the burqa. It was very clear that they were not. That is what the evidence suggests is the case.

I want to touch on the deficiencies in section 60 of the 1994 act. Part of the problem is that its provisions can be put in place only for up to 24 hours, and the second issue is that it is done for a locality. In the criminal justice sphere, we are now experiencing last-minute protests that are being organised by the likes of the Scottish citizens army and all those other Temu Tommy Robinson groups. Section 60 of the 1994 act does not take cognisance of the fact that in these modern times, when protests can be organised at the last minute, those powers cannot be put in place. That is where the example of Nottingham comes into play. The issue that we are seeing on a regular basis—

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

David Linden: I will give way to Mr Harvie, who I think is seeking to come in.

Patrick Harvie: About 100 years ago, the UK Parliament recognised that, given the rise of fascism at the time, the use of political uniforms was a threat to society, and it passed legislation on such use. Would the use of the kind of dress that David Linden is referring to in far-right protests today not be better dealt with by an extension of that legislation, instead of having something that impinges on the human rights and freedoms of other people who have nothing to do with such far-right protests?

David Linden: I find it difficult to disagree with Mr Harvie. Having dispatched the culture war nonsense about the niqab and the burqa, which is a smokescreen, I want to make my point, which is about people who are dressed in black with balaclavas and ski masks and the things that we are seeing in association with e-bikes and e-scooters. That is the issue that the Criminal Justice Committee has received evidence about. I am sorry that it is more preferable for some members of this Parliament to indulge in petty culture wars rather than follow evidence and scrutinise actual legislation.

Mr Harvie raises the right issue, because a uniform is now appearing at these protests—that is the issue that police officers are needing to deal with. I believe that Scotland was, frankly, far too late in getting body-worn cameras for police. However, that uniform now presents a particular challenge for police officers, because we now have people rocking up to such protests in balaclavas and ski masks.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Will the member take an intervention?

David Linden: Yes. I am sure that it will be enlightening.

Graham Simpson: Mr Linden is making a serious point, which Stephen Kerr has also touched on, about generally young men who are going around wearing balaclavas and sometimes taking part in political protests and sometimes not. We have seen them on football pitches, too, and they are intimidating. Will the Criminal Justice Committee be looking into that point, and should the Scottish Government also look into it as well as the example of Nottingham?

David Linden: The committee has taken evidence on, and asked questions about, this particular issue as part of the scene-setting process that we went through in September. From the mood music coming out of Police Scotland, and from the words that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has used, we can see that everybody is now interested in the change that has been introduced in Nottingham, which I think is inevitably the direction that we will head in.

Mr Simpson is probably one of the more thoughtful members of his party, and he hit the nail on the head: there are issues to address in relation to balaclavas and ski masks, and I regret that there is no reference to that in the motion that his party has brought to the Parliament today. Any serving police officer will say that the issues that they are facing just now do not relate to mad Muslim women running about and creating crime—the issue is with people in ski masks and balaclavas. I find it incredibly regrettable that that is not recognised in the Reform motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must conclude.

David Linden: I will finish by saying that, in my constituency, I saw a masked gang parading through the streets of Shettleston, who were saying all sorts of anti-immigrant slurs and things like that, and who went on to assault a serving police officer. They were not Muslim women—they were white Scottish men. Let us never forget that.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

17:24

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): 1 August 1746. That was the day that the Dress Act 1746, which was part of the Act of Proscription 1746, came into force, banning men and boys from wearing the kilt, plaid and tartan. The act remained in force for some 36 years. It is now 2026 and we are here, quite shockingly and almost unbelievably, discussing mainly what women and girls should wear.

The timing of this afternoon's debate on face coverings is quite ironic, with it being Halloween just last week, when hundreds of thousands of children and young people had face coverings on for the night.

Politicians using parliamentary chambers to attack people's cultures and beliefs is nothing new, but I thought that we had moved on from that in Scotland. Indeed, we probably had, until the election, which brought us a Parliament with a new make-up.

As other members have said, we have already had this debate. Only a few weeks ago, there was a members' business debate on face coverings in public places. That debate made clear the agenda behind the issue, which involves an attempt to turn legitimate concerns about criminality and public safety into an argument for restricting the religious freedoms of Muslim women. We should be clear about what is happening here. There is no masking it. Although, today, we have amendments such as Stephen Kerr's, the motion represents a rehash of that debate—otherwise, there would be no need to give the examples that the motion gives. It risks reopening the same divisive arguments under the guise of public safety.

There is a fundamental difference between someone wearing a face covering for religious or cultural reasons and someone deliberately concealing their identity because they intend to commit violence, intimidation or a criminal act. Attempting to conflate those two groups is inexcusable. It is unfair, it is deeply damaging to community relations, and it places an unjust burden on people who have done no wrong. Nobody in this chamber should have any difficulty condemning violence or criminality. Equally, nobody should be comfortable using those issues to cast suspicion over an entire religious or cultural community.

The right to practise one's religion and express one's identity is a fundamental freedom. For some Muslim women, wearing the niqab or burqa is a personal expression of faith. That choice deserves respect. If there are concerns about coercion, those concerns should be addressed through support for women, education and the enforcement of existing protections. A blanket restriction on clothing is a wholly different matter.

As has been discussed, if members believe that the police's current powers are not sufficient—David Linden and Stephen Kerr both made a good case in that regard—let us have a serious discussion about that. It sounds as though the Criminal Justice Committee, of which I am no longer a member, is beginning to have that debate. However, we should not begin with a predetermined conclusion and then attempt to find a community to blame.

If we want to talk about the genuine problems associated with face coverings, I suggest that we look at where the evidence points. One of the most serious issues is the use of balaclavas and face coverings by individuals who are involved in violence and disorder, for example at football matches. There is a lot to tackle there, but there is a world of difference between tackling a masked individual who gets involved in violence at a football match or on our streets and placing restrictions on a woman who is walking through Glasgow wearing a niqab. The latter has no automatic connection to criminality. Her clothing is not evidence of wrongdoing and her religion is not a public safety threat.

We must be careful about the language that we use. When we repeatedly associate particular religious clothing with security concerns, we risk creating an atmosphere in which Muslim women become targets of suspicion and hostility. That has consequences for their ability to participate fully in public life. We in the Parliament should be leaders, and we must understand the consequences of our actions and our words.

Our diversity is part of our national story. People from different backgrounds, cultures and faiths have helped to shape our communities, our public services, our businesses and our national identity. We should all recognise and be proud of that fact. We are all Jock Tamson's bairns.

A particularly good example of that was provided by the recent "Traces of Empire" exhibition at Summerlee museum in Coatbridge, which was organised by the North Lanarkshire Muslim Women and Family Alliance, with help from Historic Environment Scotland. The exhibition brought together 34 co-curators to explore the continuing legacies of empire through art, poetry and storytelling. It gave people whose family histories are connected to colonialism an opportunity to share their experiences and their perspectives.

What I took away from that exhibition was that Scotland's history is complex and our present-day communities reflect connections across the world. Listening to people and understanding their experiences makes our country what it is. That is the sort of Scotland that I want us to build: a Scotland that is confident

in its identity and comfortable with its diversity, and a Scotland where people can practise their faith, contribute to communities and feel that they belong.

We should be addressing violence through effective policing and proper enforcement of the law, and we should be protecting individual freedoms and treating people fairly. Let us focus on the problems that actually threaten public safety, and let us stand up for the inclusive, diverse and welcoming Scotland that we should all be proud to represent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to closing speeches. I remind members that we have no time in hand. I call Stephen Kerr for two minutes.

17:29

Stephen Kerr: The convener of the Criminal Justice Committee helpfully clarified the real issue with which we should be concerning ourselves in the debate, which is the use of face coverings to mask criminal intent and criminality. That is exactly what my amendment is all about—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am sorry, members, but too many conversations are happening while the member is speaking.

Stephen Kerr: Uniquely, policing in this country is done by the consent of the population. The success of our criminal justice system is the absence of victims and crime. Policing is not only about turning up after a crime—it is about preventing a crime from happening in the first place. When officers see a threat or criminality or serious disorder developing, we should want them to have the powers that they need to make a sensible and proportionate intervention. That is all that my amendment asks Parliament to consider.

The amendment does not propose a blanket ban or prejudge the outcome of the discussion that I would like us to have in the Parliament; instead, it simply says that existing powers might be insufficient. We know that they are insufficient because of the evidence to which the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee and others referred; all my amendment does is ask the Government to sit down with Police Scotland and the police representative bodies and establish whether that is the case. If there is a gap in those powers, we should be resolved enough as a Parliament to strengthen the powers that the police have in order to close it. That is what my amendment is about.

I really think that there is consensus on the issue across the chamber regardless of where we are coming from, which direction we are facing and where we think we are travelling to. In the previous debate about the matter, Ben Macpherson, whom I cannot see in the chamber, spoke—typically rather well and sensibly—about the issues with the threshold for section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, which I described in my speech and David Linden in his, and which Graham Simpson captured in his intervention. We raised those issues with Assistant Chief Constable Catriona Paton before the Criminal Justice Committee and specifically mentioned the limitations of section 60—

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Can you conclude, please? You are well over time.

Stephen Kerr: When I raised the same issues with the minister, Kirsten Oswald, she replied that I was

"not a million miles away from what she just said"

and confirmed that the Government remained

"open to considering further proposals based on evidence." —[*Official Report*, 8 October 2026; c 119.]

In the limited time that I have, I will say that I am grateful to have been able to raise that issue, which is serious and should commend the attention of all of us as parliamentarians. Again, I hope that we will be sensible enough to support my amendment.

17:33

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): What a monumental waste of time this afternoon has been. Before I get into the meat and potatoes of the debate, I fully associate myself with Pauline McNeill and David Linden's remarks; something that you will perhaps not hear as often is that I think that Stephen Kerr's contribution has been quite astute.

I would not forgive myself if I did not say this to Helen McDade: although your opening speech focused mainly on the burqa, you made allusions to protecting lesbian women from Muslims. How dare you sit on the benches of a party that does not believe in gay marriage, is against gay adoption and the conversion therapy bill and has a leader who stands with people who call homosexuality an abomination, and tell us that you are protecting LGBT rights against Muslims? How dare you?

I considered many ways to approach the debate and looked at what I would focus on. I think that David Linden and I did the same quick maths—I, too, looked up the statistics, which show that 2.2 per cent of Scotland currently identifies as Muslim. An equal split between men and women would mean that there are 1.1 per cent or 55,000 Muslim women in the country; let us say, generously, that 1 per cent of them wear a niqab or a burqa—which let us be honest, is what the debate was about, although I agree that we need a further debate about face coverings and the powers that the police have. We get 550 women out of 5.5 million—a slightly different number from David Linden's. The Parliament has wasted more than an hour of its time today talking about what 550 women wear. Can you imagine? We are being asked to legislate about what 550 women wear. Earlier, there was an allusion to legislating on what babies should smile at on the bus—another strange allusion.

I say to the members on the benches opposite that, if they are so concerned about what women are wearing, they should retrain as stylists. They should go to our fantastic colleges and take up one of the many fantastic opportunities in our further education sector, which could use the money from their crypto billionaire friends.

Helen McDade: Will the member take an intervention?

Iris Duane: The motion says that there is an "ongoing debate" all around the country. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, the member is speaking, Ms McDade. Please sit down.

Iris Duane: The motion says that there is an "ongoing debate" all around the country. Perhaps none of us has been included in that debate. There is a debate to be had on whether the police should have more powers, which is one that I would welcome, and I am keen to pick that up with Stephen Kerr outside of this place. However, that is not the debate that we have had today. What we have had is an attempt to stir up division and to put lines between people. At no point have we said that women themselves should have a voice in what they should wear.

I will close very quickly, Presiding Officer, because I am aware that I have very little time. Tonight, I will return to my region, where one in three children live in poverty, one in three people live in fuel poverty and one in 10 people live in extreme fuel poverty, my constituents sit on endless NHS waiting lists, social housing is unobtainable and councils are still struggling to get funding. Instead of having time this afternoon to hold the Government to account on some of those issues after 20 years—

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude.

Iris Duane: —we have sat here and debated what 550 women wear. Is that the best use of our time? I will be supporting the Government's amendment.

17:36

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): In the previous debate this afternoon, Mr Hoy alluded to the contents of the Reform offices, noting that what is in there includes cardboard cutouts. I cannot help but notice also the various Union flags and pictures of the late Queen and the King. Reform is a party that appears to like to wrap itself up in the flag and in Britishness, but let me say this: it is not British for the state to tell people what to wear, it is not British to single out people on the basis of their faith, belief or conscience, and it is not British to direct the police to curtail the freedom of people who are simply minding their own business and going about their day-to-day lives, which is what Muslim women are doing. They are going about their lives, wearing the niqab or hijab in public.

I believe in the British values of tolerance, respect and liberty and, most important within the principle of liberty, I believe in the freedom of faith and to practise that faith as you choose. I would argue that those are Scottish contributions to British values, because it is due to the enlightenment that we have those principles of liberty, and it is because of struggles here in Scotland that we have the freedom to practise faith as we choose. That is why covenanters were incarcerated in Greyfriars kirkyard. Reform members would do well to remind themselves of that.

There is a serious debate to be had here today. Reform wants us to believe that it is about all face coverings, but if that is the case, why note only the burqa and niqab in its motion? In Reform's opening speech, why talk about only those examples? I say to Reform, we are not naive and we are not stupid—we know what you are up to, we see what you are doing and we will not accept it.

It is a true shame, because Stephen Kerr, Pauline McNeill and David Linden all made valiant efforts to talk about what is a very serious and delicate issue—one that is about the balance of liberties. Let us be clear that it would be a serious step to go further to ban the wearing of balaclavas; it would be a deprivation of liberty.

It also a principle of the law in Britain that intent matters—intent to commit criminality by intimidating others. We need to talk about that issue, yet we have this nonsense of a debate on the back of the previous debate, which was a waste of time and in which Reform had nothing substantive to say.

There is a deep irony to the fact that we are having this debate on this day. Perhaps Reform members did not look at their calendars and consider what election results we would be getting through today—but the results are clear. The politics of the right are coming to an end. There is a rejection of the politics of Trump, a rejection of the politics of division, a rejection of the politics of fear and a rejection of the politics of blaming others, because there are real problems out there.

Americans all over their country recognise that Trump has nothing to say to the problems around rising costs and the genuine issues that they face. They recognise that the attempt to blame others for those problems is shallow and empty and provides no answers.

That is the politics of Reform. Their decline in the polls is evidence that that same phenomenon is happening here. I urge members on the Reform benches to look long and hard at their politics. They are empty, they have nothing to offer anyone, and they certainly have nothing to offer in the chamber this afternoon.

17:40

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): I sincerely thank members for their contributions to today's debate. I have only five minutes, but I want to acknowledge that the collective solidarity and leadership that you have shown against Reform is truly appreciated.

This discussion has highlighted a number of important issues, not least the genuine public concern about the use of balaclavas to conceal identity in the context of criminality, disorder and antisocial behaviour. The Government recognises those concerns. Everyone should be able to live free from intimidation and feel safe in their communities.

My colleague Kirsten Oswald noted earlier the range of powers relating to public order, protest activity, stop and search and the removal of face coverings in specified circumstances. Police Scotland's position remains that those powers are currently sufficient. However, the Scottish Government is aware of developments elsewhere, including in Nottingham, which was mentioned, and Police Scotland continues to monitor implementation.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

Simita Kumar: I do not have time, so I will press on.

Let me address what this motion is really about, and what it is attempting to hide. This motion is Reform's continued attempt to sow fear, division and intimidation in our communities. If it was truly concerned about the safety of our communities, it would have, at the very least, mentioned balaclavas in the wording of its motion. It did not do that. However, it deliberately mentioned burqas and niqabs.

Can we stop pretending, and call this motion out for exactly what it is? It is racist, misogynistic and Islamophobic, and it is designed to divide our communities. We need this Parliament to be united and to reject narratives that seek to conflate issues of community safety with rights to personal belief and expression. We need to be united against racism and dog-whistle politics in society, online and in this chamber.

While Reform seek to divide communities, it is clear from today's contributions that we will not let them, and that we will stand against their rhetoric and language. [*Interruption.*] We already live in a patriarchal society, and now Reform will tackle violence against women and girls by telling women how to dress instead of educating boys and men. What is next? Will it be telling us whether we can cover our hair or not? Maybe it will police the shade of our lipstick, or tell us whether we can attend any religious place of worship. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, but we do not need a running commentary throughout the entire speech, Thomas Kerr.

Simita Kumar: The real question is not just what is next, but where does it stop? If Reform has its way, I fear that perhaps there will come a day when all forms of religious and cultural garments could become criminal. This motion is a thinly veiled attempt to sow racist and divisive values in our society, hiding behind community safety. Guess what? We see you, and we see you clearly.

The Scottish Government is committed to community cohesion. That is rooted in our values and in our belief that everyone who lives in Scotland should feel safe, connected, respected and able to fully participate in society. We will be guided by the principles of community safety, equality and human rights, and not by whatever Reform UK wants the public to believe through its scaremongering tactics.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

I ask that our Parliament accepts the Government amendment, because it makes clear that the Government agrees that it is “not for Parliament” and definitely not for Reform

“to legislate for what women choose to wear”.

In a free and democratic society, women should be able to make lawful choices about their clothing, including choices informed by their faith, culture and personal beliefs. Collectively, let us all reject the divisive language of the Reform motion and support the Government amendment.

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