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

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 12 November 2026

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:30]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many questions as possible, I ask for concise questions and answers.

Education (Use of Artificial Intelligence)

1. **Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to ensure that artificial intelligence is used responsibly within education at all levels, both as a teaching resource and as a tool to support learning. (S7O-00495)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): AI is a challenge to us all, as well as an opportunity. In March, the Scottish Government published guidelines and guardrails to support the fair, safe and ethical use of AI in Scotland's schools, which include practical examples for learning and teaching. The guidance supports a consistent national approach while recognising that local authorities are responsible for the delivery of education and that they retain flexibility to respond to local needs and circumstances.

We continue to work with education stakeholders to build understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by AI, supported by research resources and professional learning through the centre for teaching excellence's digital education and AI resource hub.

Zen Ghani: The minister will be aware that Mearns Castle high school, in East Renfrewshire, recently appointed a principal teacher on AI literacy, who, when speaking to the BBC, said that his mission is to ensure that pupils can question, challenge and use AI responsibly.

When does the Scottish Government expect every young person in Scotland to have the opportunity to develop a basic understanding of AI as part of their educational journey, regardless of the subjects that they study?

Alyn Smith: I commend Mearns Castle high school on that initiative. We are watching it closely and it is something for us to build on. There are some good online resources in this space. The Data Lab hosts a programme called "Living with AI", which we are looking to boost and augment.

We need to up our game on the AI discussion in Scotland, and that is about providing information to the general public about the opportunities and threats. Anything that we can do in that space will be taken forward, and I look forward to making some announcements on that really quite soon.

Scottish Emergency Heating Oil Scheme

2. **Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how many households have received support from the Scottish emergency heating oil scheme to date. (S7O-00496)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): The member will recognise that, although energy pricing and regulation are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government established the Scottish emergency heating oil scheme to provide additional support for households that are experiencing financial hardship. The scheme supports households that rely on heating oil or liquefied petroleum gas, particularly in rural communities, including parts of Angus. I am aware of how important that will be to many of Lloyd Melville's constituents.

As at 10 November, 5,235 households had received support through the Scottish emergency heating oil scheme, and a total of 8,443 payments had been made, including 438 payments in Angus.

Lloyd Melville: Those figures really matter. Last week, I met an elderly constituent who is living with a serious illness and who has just paid £1,000 for heating oil. To make it last, they are heating their home for just one hour a day, and winter has not even properly started yet. They are already self-rationing, but they tell me that they are not eligible for the scheme because they are not in debt. Will the minister urgently ask officials to review how hardship is assessed, so that people who make those difficult choices to stay out of debt are not excluded from support?

Stephen Gethins: I thank Lloyd Melville for raising that issue. I know how strongly he feels about the fact that people are struggling with their fuel costs in Angus. If he writes to me, I will be very happy to ask officials to look at that case.

We keep the issue under consistent review. In September, the Scottish Government extended the scheme into winter, to maximise the support that is available to eligible households. However, I would be grateful if Lloyd Melville would write to me about that case.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the minister will know, many of my constituents' homes in Argyll and Bute are oil heated, and they face unique challenges in relation to decarbonisation. Will the upcoming heat in buildings legislation retain the core elements of the draft bill that was published during the previous parliamentary session and give off-grid consumers a choice in how they decarbonise, including through the use of biofuels?

Stephen Gethins: Jenni Minto is quite right about her constituents in Argyll and Bute. The heat in buildings delivery plan and the heat in buildings bill will be published in due course, and, during that process, I look forward to engaging with Jenni Minto on how they will benefit her constituents.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I thank Lloyd Melville for lodging the original question. For many in the Highlands, heating oil is not a choice but the only practical way to heat homes, so I welcome the Scottish Government's emergency heating oil scheme. Of the 1,916 applications across the Highlands, only 899 had received support by early August, so will the minister look again at the eligibility criteria, to ensure that the vulnerabilities of rural households are properly reflected? Does the minister recognise that the minimum order requirement of 500 litres creates a significant barrier for people who are already struggling with the cost of living crisis?

Stephen Gethins: This is a really important issue for David Green's constituents. More than 1,300 payments worth more than £400,000 have been made in the Highland Council area, but I understand the challenges that people face, including the amounts that people have to pay as a one-off payment. I look forward to continuing to engage with the member, but I am also engaging with the companies involved on those issues.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Around half of my constituents rely on heating oil or liquid petroleum gas to heat their homes. Unlike customers on the gas grid and those who rely on electricity to heat their homes, they have to pay up front for their fuel, with minimum orders costing hundreds of pounds. Given the figures that we have heard today and the apparent underspend, based on the Government's commitment to make £10 million of support available, why is the cabinet secretary not taking the opportunity to review the assessment criteria, widen eligibility and get the allocated money out the door?

Stephen Gethins: I know that the issue is important to our island communities, not least in Na h-Eileanan an Iar. Almost 400 payments have been made, and, as I mentioned earlier, we have extended the scheme and will keep it under review. If the member wants to raise issues with me, as other members have done, I will be very happy to respond to those and to look at individual cases.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): Further to members' questions on the impact of the scheme, can the minister give an assurance that adequate support will be provided to the research and development sector in the north-east, to ensure that any developments maximise the opportunity to support the wider supply chain and energy jobs?

Stephen Gethins: That is obviously a big issue in areas such as Aberdeenshire, which is an important part of the supply chain because it has supplied so much of the product historically. I am happy to engage on the impact that the scheme has had in Aberdeenshire, where we have made almost 1,600 payments. I know how hard people in the member's constituency work to provide us all with a secure energy supply.

The Presiding Officer: I call Morven-May MacCallum.

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): I wish to declare that I have done voluntary work for various charities. I would like to ask the Scottish Government what action is being taken to improve the earlier diagnosis of Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses.

The Presiding Officer: I do not think that that is really related to the original question that was asked, so it is not within the minister's remit to respond, although he can if he wishes.

Stephen Gethins: The matter is not within my gift to address, but I am sure that one of my colleagues will be happy to write to the member on the issue.

Victoria Quay

3. **Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its current utilisation of, and plans for, its Victoria Quay building and car parking facilities in Leith. (S7O-00497)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Published data from the Scottish Government for Victoria Quay indicates occupancy levels of around 25 per cent for the previous nine months. Since the mandatory hybrid working policy has been in place, that has reached 40 per cent this week. We continue to keep the matter under review in order to make efficient and appropriate use of the building. I welcome Mr Macpherson's previous work on the matter and his questions today.

Ben Macpherson: It is great to hear about more civil servants coming back to work in Leith. They always make such a positive impact when they are in the community, and they are obviously providing a public service. If the Scottish Government comes to the position that parts of the building are surplus to its requirements, there are so many opportunities, working with the people of Leith, to provide extra facilities from Victoria Quay for the benefit of the local area. For example, it could provide affordable creative work spaces and spaces for technology start-ups, including by, potentially, housing those currently in St Margaret's house who are now being displaced. We also need a new police station in Leith, to allow police to move out of the old building they are currently using, and there is strong demand for more car parking facilities, especially to support local hospitality.

I would be really grateful if, together with relevant officials, the minister would commit to having a meeting in Leith to hear about those suggestions and how, if we work together, Victoria Quay can offer even more to the people of Leith.

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I thank Mr Macpherson for his creative thoughts. Looking at our estates across the board is exactly what we should be doing with public assets, in relation both to the people working there and to the public funds that are going into those assets.

There is a review going on right now on the opportunities to use Victoria Quay more efficiently, and I am interested in hearing about Mr Macpherson's range of suggestions involving the police, the tech industry and start-ups. We will continue to progress the work, and I would be happy to engage with Mr Macpherson on the matter, which I know is a long-standing issue for him—as, indeed, it was for my predecessor. I would very much welcome receiving more information from Mr Macpherson and would take a meeting.

The Presiding Officer: The member asking question 4 is not in the chamber, so we will move to question 5, from Morven-May MacCallum.

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and apologies to members for my enthusiasm earlier. I pressed my button at the wrong time.

The Presiding Officer: We have all done it.

Morven-May MacCallum: I am sure that it will not be the last time that I do that—so, apologies in advance for that, too.

Tick-borne Illnesses

5. **Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD):** I note that I have done voluntary work on Lyme disease for various different charities.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve the early diagnosis of Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses. (S7O-00499)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government is taking forward a range of measures to support the early diagnosis of Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses and to raise awareness among the public and healthcare professionals. That includes promoting educational resources for healthcare professionals, such as the "Introduction to Ticks and the Diseases they Carry" eLearning resource, which is aimed at all health and social care professionals including general practitioners and is intended to help to improve awareness, recognition and diagnosis of those conditions.

We continue to raise public awareness of tick bite prevention through campaigns and public health messaging carried out during the summer months, especially during Lyme disease awareness month in May. In addition, we work very closely with Public Health Scotland and expert partners through the Scottish health protection network to strengthen preparedness for vector-borne diseases.

Morven-May MacCallum: Lyme disease blood tests are widely acknowledged to be unreliable, and the true number of those suffering with Lyme disease is therefore unknown. However, UK research indicates that

it could be at least three times the recorded figure, meaning that thousands of people are being misdiagnosed and refused treatment.

How can the Scottish Government improve research so as to improve the accuracy of the blood tests? Will the minister commit to carrying out the action that is needed to save those people's lives?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government recognises the importance of research in improving the understanding of Lyme disease and other vector-borne diseases. Any proposals for additional funding for that type of research would need to be considered alongside wider budget priorities.

I know that the member is in the smallest party in the Parliament, but the Lib Dems do have some power to ask for things in the budget and to see whether we can shift Government spending to the issue.

Public Finances (United Kingdom Budget)

6. **Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of the recently announced UK Government Budget on public finances in Scotland. (S7O-00500)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government's budget next year will be cut in real terms by around £650 million. That means that our funding for public services and infrastructure will not keep pace with inflation, at a time when costs are increasing. That fact should concern every member of the Parliament, and it means that we face a very challenging Scottish budget for next year.

The UK budget did not go far enough in helping people with the cost of living. At a time when revenues from Scotland's energy are going to be billions of pounds higher, we have a UK budget that cuts our funding and leaves the people we all represent paying energy bills that are hundreds of pounds higher than the Labour party promised they would be when it came to office. That is the consequence of decisions taken in Westminster. It shows us exactly why we need to take decisions here in Scotland and make our energy wealth work for us.

Patricia Gibson: I share the Deputy First Minister's concern that, at a time when construction inflation has risen faster here than in the UK economy as a whole, the UK's capital allocation to Scotland will be lower in 2029-30 in real terms than it was under the Tories in 2022-23. Can the Deputy First Minister say a little more about what she thinks that will mean for construction employment and for investment in roads, schools, hospitals, housing and harbours in Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much share the concerns that Patricia Gibson has raised. It is absolutely right to point out that the cut to Scotland's capital budget for 2027-28, for example, is now £100 million lower than we expected at the time of the Scottish spending review; the capital block grant from the UK Government is not sufficient to build and maintain the infrastructure that Scotland needs; and our capital block grant funding is projected to fall by 6.1 per cent in real terms between 2026-27 and 2029-30.

That is going to impact on infrastructure investment with regard to securing economic growth, tackling the climate crisis and—as Patricia Gibson rightly pointed out—investing in our schools and hospitals. The real-terms reduction in funding from the UK Government means that really difficult choices will need to be made as part of the 2027-28 budget to ensure that limited funding is targeted towards our highest priorities.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Is it not the case that the UK Labour Government is now making precisely the same mistakes as the Scottish National Party Government? By freezing tax thresholds over the longer term, it is pushing more and more working households into paying ever-higher rates of tax in order to pay a ballooning benefits bill. Does the Scottish Government intend to follow suit, or will it finally see sense, cut tax and cut the benefits bill in Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: I have already enjoyed some engagement with Mr Hoy ahead of the budget, and I look forward to more meetings with him to talk about some of those issues.

On taxation, however, I am afraid that we shall have to agree to disagree. The Scottish Government takes a progressive approach to taxation that allows us to raise on average an extra £1.8 billion in Scotland, which we reinvest back in our vitally important public services. If Mr Hoy wants to make the case for tax cuts, he will have to come and engage with me on the areas in which he would like to see cuts in the Scottish Government budget, because that is the reality of tax cuts and what they would deliver in terms of spending in Scotland.

During a cost of living crisis that we all know is affecting our constituents, we should be thinking more about how we can reinvest in our public services, rather than taking money away from the vital front-line services on which our people rely.

Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister will know that, outside times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the global financial crisis, public spending as a share of UK national income is at its highest level in decades. That is in no small part because of the new fiscal rules that have been adopted by the Labour Government and its tax-and-spend decisions—many of which, I have to say, our SNP colleagues lined up with the Tories to oppose.

The challenge is to maximise the value from public spending and to address the drivers of demand on public services. With the Chancellor of the Exchequer announcing proposals for a budget line for preventative departmental expenditure limits, and debates on preventative spending taking place in Parliament next week, is the Government prepared to seize the moment and secure a decisive shift towards prevention that is both financially sound and socially progressive?

Jenny Gilruth: Of course we want to take an approach to the budget that reflects our preventative approach to spend, and we will work with the UK Government on some of those issues.

More broadly, however, the UK budget was an opportunity for the new chancellor, on coming into post, to reverse some of the austerity policies, such as the bedroom tax, the benefits cap and the local housing allowance freeze, that are harming our constituents in Scotland. We are spending millions of pounds from our taxpayers in Scotland to mitigate their impact, which means that we have reduced spending power here. However, I very much look forward to engaging with Mr Fagan ahead of the budget on all of those substantive issues.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Yesterday, the Finance and Public Administration Committee heard from the Office for Budget Responsibility that an accounting change to how hedge-fund executives pay their tax, from capital gains tax to income tax, will create a £250 million-a-year block grant adjustment to the Scottish budget.

What discussions has the Minister for Public Finance had with the UK Government about the impact of a further £1 billion burden on Scottish taxpayers if that change goes ahead?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Brown will appreciate that we are currently engaging with the Scottish Fiscal Commission on a range of issues ahead of the budget, so I will be happy to come back to Parliament in the coming weeks and set out the detail of the budget to answer the member's substantive point at that time.

The Presiding Officer: Question 7 has not been lodged.

Public Service Reform (Trade Union Meetings)

8. **Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with public sector unions to discuss its proposed public service reform programme, and what was discussed. (S7O-00502)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Strong and constructive relationships with trade unions are essential to successfully delivering reform and we want to ensure that trade unions and the workforce have a meaningful voice in shaping change.

To that end, Scottish ministers and officials engage regularly with public sector trade unions, including in order to discuss public service reform. That happened most recently at the biannual meeting between the First Minister and the general council of the Scottish Trades Union Congress on 2 November of this year, where public service reform was part of a broader discussion about Scotland's priorities. The Deputy First Minister and I have had regular dialogue with the trade unions, including a further follow-up meeting today, and I expect that to continue as we move forward with the reform agenda.

Craig Hoy: Is it not clear to everyone that the public sector unions are running rings around the Government? We can take as an example the ghost workers—those on the so-called "priority movers" list. In an answer to me yesterday, Mr McKee confirmed that

"The Scottish Government has not calculated the total salary and pension costs of staff engaged in redeployment across the public sector."—[*Written Answers*, 11 November 2026; S7W-04534.]

What we do know is that the number of core civil servants in ghost worker roles has more than doubled since 2024 and is costing millions of pounds. If the Government does not know the full scale of the costs and consequences of its policy of having no compulsory redundancies, does that not simply reinforce the point that this Scottish National Party Government is not serious about cutting waste in the public sector?

Ivan McKee: I reassure Mr Hoy that we are very serious about making public services more efficient, more integrated and joined up, and more focused on prevention. His remarks today will be news to the trade unions, with whom we have had constructive but robust conversations about how to work together to best deliver public service reform that will improve our public services within fiscal constraints. He, and all members, can rest assured that this Government is very much focused on delivering the task in hand.

The Presiding Officer: We move to supplementary questions.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I begin by thanking the cabinet secretary for the importance that he places on working with the trade unions and those who work in our public services.

The three-month engagement period on public service reform will end before Christmas, so will the cabinet secretary provide further detail about how exactly the Government's discussions with trade union staff and local government are being used to meaningfully inform the reform agenda? When will the Government publish details of those discussions?

Ivan McKee: There is a lot in that question. As I indicated already, there is extensive engagement with trade unions, which are taking part both collectively and bilaterally as part of the process.

The member rightly articulates that the initial three-month period comes to an end at the end of this month, but the Government will continue to engage and there will be opportunities for organisations and individuals to contribute. Indeed, we will launch an online portal for that very purpose in the next few days. The Government intends to take on board all the feedback and contributions that come from that process and from the other engagement that we have had and to return early in the new year with an update on how we anticipate taking the agenda forward.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary accept that many public sector workers are extremely worried about what the public sector reform agenda might mean for them? They are worried about the possibility of job cuts and of cuts to services. Many members of the public are also extremely worried about what is to come.

Can the cabinet secretary give any reassurance that we will not be looking at wide-scale public sector job cuts and that the emphasis will be on improving the service that the public receives?

Ivan McKee: The emphasis is very much on improving the service that the public receives. It is about making sure that services are more integrated and joined up and are more focused on prevention and it is about reshaping the workforce so that we have the right people in the right roles to provide those improved services.

As I indicated, we are working closely with organisations representing the workforce to ensure that they are fully informed as we take the proposals forward.

It is important that we move quickly for the very reasons that the member has outlined, in order to ensure that there is clarity on the proposals and that that is communicated to the workforce as soon as possible.

The Presiding Officer: The member who lodged question 9 was not here for the start of this item of business, so we move to question 10.

General Practice (Edinburgh and Lothians East)

10. **Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to invest in general practice provision in the Edinburgh and Lothians East region, in light of projected population growth in the area. (S7O-00504)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Responsibility for planning and delivering local services rests with NHS Lothian, which monitors population growth and change in demand and works with practices and local partners to ensure that services continue to meet the needs of communities across Edinburgh and the Lothians.

To support functions held by NHS boards such as NHS Lothian, the Scottish Government is investing a record £531 million in core general practice over three years, in addition to its annual recurrent investment of more than £1 billion. That funding supports GP practices to deliver sustainable, high-quality care and helps to ensure that primary care remains at the very heart of our national health service.

Miles Briggs: Research that was commissioned for me by the Scottish Parliament information centre has shown that the registered patient population in Lothian has increased by 14 per cent over the past decade and that, because the number of GP practices has fallen, the average practice size has increased by 22 per cent.

Given the unsustainable pressure that we are seeing on GP practices, what population-based investment in GP practices will ministers make during this session of Parliament?

Angela Constance: I have outlined our current and present investment in general practice, but it might be of interest to Miles Briggs that core GP funding is distributed through a national GP workload formula, which

takes account of expected practice workload and the needs of registered patients. That helps to ensure that resources are directed towards practices that experience increased demand and serve growing populations.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Mr Briggs will be well aware that last year's Scottish budget provided £531 million of landmark investment in core general practice—a budget that his party took no interest in whatsoever. Ahead of this year's Scottish budget in a few weeks' time, will the cabinet secretary join me in reminding the Tories that, if they want record investment in our NHS, they will have to vote for it?

Angela Constance: Ms Haughey makes a fair point. As we are a Parliament of minorities, the Government of course has an open door. The Deputy First Minister stresses day in, day out that there is an opportunity for us all to work together to deliver a budget that delivers for the people of Scotland.

Strategic Spatial Energy Plan

11. **Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of the strategic spatial energy plan on the onshore and offshore renewable energy industry and its supply chain in Scotland. (S7O-00505)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): The SSEP will have a significant impact on Scotland's renewable industry and supply chain, and we have been clear that the final plan must reflect Scotland's full renewable energy potential to secure jobs, investment and supply chain opportunities. The United Kingdom Government must produce that plan as soon as possible, so that we can deliver our transition to net zero. Anything less risks jeopardising billions of pounds in investment, jobs across Scotland and energy security.

Alex Kerr: There is serious concern in the industry about the damage that many of the pathways that are proposed by the National Energy System Operator would do to Scotland's renewable energy sector and the associated supply chain.

Westminster has squandered one of Scotland's energy booms and looks set to consider doing so again. Given the seriousness of this issue for Scotland's economy, I must ask the minister for clear and unambiguous reassurance on the matter. Will the Scottish Government refuse to sign up to an outcome from the SSEP that harms our energy industry and the businesses that rely on it?

Stephen Gethins: Alex Kerr is right. Scotland has massive renewable energy potential. I was in Glasgow just yesterday announcing yet more jobs in that regard.

The Scottish Government's position has not changed. I want to be clear: we will support only an SSEP that reflects Scotland's full energy potential. I made that clear when I wrote to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, and I made that clear again when I spoke to the minister of state, Michael Shanks, earlier on today. The UK Government must now hear us and act quickly to back our energy industry.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): Can the minister assure residents of the north-east that there will be opportunities to support harbours and ports and so ensure that skilled workers are able to find opportunities in the long term?

Stephen Gethins: The member is right: the reason why we have this massive energy potential and a competitive advantage is, in part, because of the skills and expertise that exist in the north-east, which is the area that she and I represent. We have this huge potential, but we need the UK Government to act now.

The Presiding Officer: That ends general question time. I note that we had a minister who arrived late, a member whose question was not taken because they arrived late, and a member who did not appear at all. I urge all members who wish to participate in general question time and portfolio question time to be on time for the appropriate sessions.

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. That minister was me. I apologise to you and to members.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The next item of business is First Minister's question time for party leaders. Before we begin, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Karen Spilka, president of the Massachusetts State Senate, and her colleagues. [*Applause*.]

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

First Minister's Question Time

Party Leaders

14:00

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Michael Marra has seven minutes for questions and answers.

NHS Grampian (Healthcare Improvement Scotland Report)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Parents of sick children will be horrified by the inspection report on NHS Grampian that was published today. All parents will be shocked. At Dr Gray's hospital, operations for sick children continued despite the fact that they were known to be unsafe. How many of those operations on children were carried out?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The contents of the report from Healthcare Improvement Scotland that was commissioned by NHS Grampian are appalling reading, and I echo the concerns that Mr Marra has expressed about how the report will leave parents feeling.

It is crystal clear that the requirement to end the surgery in question for children at Dr Gray's was not followed by NHS Grampian, which is reprehensible. I understand from my reading, assessment and interrogation of the report that there have been no negative consequences of that process, but, regardless of that, it is unacceptable that arrangements that should have been stopped for proper patient safety reasons were not stopped—hence the findings of Healthcare Improvement Scotland's report and the dramatic changes that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care and I expect to take place at NHS Grampian to address the legitimate concerns that Mr Marra puts to me about patient safety, which will be of acute concern to parents in the Grampian area today.

Michael Marra: The First Minister is right to condemn what has happened in the strongest possible terms. Children were put at risk. The board also failed to investigate properly why a patient died on the operating table. I see absolutely no reason why the board of NHS Grampian should remain in place. The First Minister should call for it to go now.

The Government might be taking limited action today, but, crucially, issues at NHS Grampian have been known about for years. Repeated reports in 2014, 2016 and 2023 all raised the alarm, and the health board has lurched from crisis to crisis. None of it should be news to the Government. When John Swinney was Deputy First Minister in 2014, the Scottish National Party said that it was

"confident that NHS Grampian can turn the situation round".—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2014; c 22.]

Well, that did not happen.

I will say this again. The First Minister has acknowledged that operations were carried out on children in unsafe conditions, despite the fact that the Government has known about issues at NHS Grampian for well over a decade. How on earth has the Government let things get to this point?

The First Minister: There have been various stages at which the Government has intervened to require improvements to be made at NHS Grampian. There has been a long history, and improvements have been made over time at different stages.

The most recent issues are of a much greater and escalated level of severity. The Government started its most recent engagement of concern about NHS Grampian in May 2025, when we escalated the board to level 4 for finance, leadership and governance concerns. An external assurance board was put in to support the NHS Grampian board. It was clear that some of the requirements that the assurance board asked to be taken forward were not being implemented, which is why Healthcare Improvement Scotland—the independent inspectorate—has undertaken the work that it has carried out.

The health secretary will set out to the Parliament, in a statement that the Government will make on Tuesday, the full range of actions that require to be taken in this case. However, I note that there have already been changes to the leadership of NHS Grampian. There is a new chair of the board, John Connaghan, who is an experienced healthcare professional who held a very senior role in the Scottish Government on healthcare issues. There is a new chief executive in place, who initiated the Healthcare Improvement Scotland report. A large proportion of the board has been replaced and, today, changes have been made to the senior leadership of NHS Grampian that, in my view, are necessary as a consequence of the report.

I hope that that assures Mr Marra that the Government is taking incredibly seriously the contents of the Healthcare Improvement Scotland report. Changes have been made immediately in relation to the leadership of the board, and we will leave no stone unturned to ensure that services and the safety of patients in NHS

Grampian are at the centre of the steps that the Government takes to strengthen the position in the Grampian area.

Michael Marra: The First Minister recognises that there have been problems in recent years, but he does not recognise the fact that the reports go back as far as 2014 and 2016. There has been a long-term challenge over the governance and operation of NHS Grampian that the Government has failed to get on top of, despite repeated challenges from outside bodies and from parliamentarians in that period of time.

There is a broader culture problem at the top of our health service that is not confined to one region of Scotland. It should not take an independent, judge-led inquiry to get justice for the families of those who were made sick and who died because of failings at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow. It should not take an independent, judge-led inquiry to get justice for the hundreds of victims of Eljamel in Tayside. Labour members have been saying for years that those cultural issues have been widespread.

At the top of too many of our health boards are managers who are not accountable to citizens, who act with impunity and who are too often concerned about headlines rather than delivering care. Does the First Minister agree?

The First Minister: I begin by reiterating a point that I made in my earlier answer. Mr Marra is correct to say that there have been a number of examples of issues in NHS Grampian, but the Government has intervened at different stages and the position has improved. However, we now have a report that raises the most serious issues, which I am certain will have a detrimental effect on staff and patient morale and on confidence in NHS Grampian.

As First Minister, I must be careful to ensure that there continues to be public confidence in the services provided by NHS Grampian. I believe that there is that confidence, and I want the public to hear loud and clear from their First Minister that dramatic action has been taken to provide an assurance on that.

Mr Marra raises a wider point about culture in our public services. He and I are in agreement on that, because I believe in what he has put to me—the importance of members of the public having confidence in our public services, those leading our public services being accountable for them, and our being transparent about the weaknesses that are there.

Today, I am being absolutely transparent about the weaknesses in NHS Grampian. I am not trying to defend a thing. A lot must change at NHS Grampian in order to address the legitimate issues that have been raised. Public attitudes and public confidence are at the heart of all of this. I assure Mr Marra of the Government's determination to lead a culture whereby that is the case.

The Presiding Officer: Malcolm Offord has seven minutes for questions and answers.

United Kingdom-India Trade Deal

Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): Last week, I, together with a number of members of this Parliament, attended the Scottish Chambers of Commerce annual dinner in Glasgow. The central theme of that dinner was trade with India. The First Minister was a guest speaker and was feted for his recent trip to Delhi.

Speaking as a former exports minister at the Department for Business and Trade who was part of the team that negotiated 95 per cent of the United Kingdom's trade deal with India, I am delighted that we got that trade deal signed, and I am delighted that tariffs on Scotch whisky have gone down from 150 per cent to 75 per cent, and that they will fall to 40 per cent.

However, I remind members that the free trade agreement with India happened only because of Brexit. The European Union has been trying to get a trade deal with India for 20 years. The United Kingdom got one done within five years of Brexit.

John Swinney told the Scottish National Party conference that the UK had boxed itself into a corner on Brexit, but, four days later, in Delhi, he said that the trade deal with India had created for Scotland

"an opportunity of an entirely different scale".

Will the First Minister now acknowledge that, without Brexit, he would not have had last month's trade mission to India?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have to hand it to Malcolm Offord: he is at the courageous end of the spectrum today—my goodness. Honestly, it is actually quite difficult to keep a straight face about all this kind of stuff.

I am glad that I was in India. We might be making a bit of progress here in that perhaps one of the Opposition parties sees that there was some value in my going to India and trying to boost trade and economic opportunity for Scotland, which is one of the roles I perform as First Minister.

When I met the Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry, he told me that advanced dialogue was going on with the European Union and that there was expectation of a trade deal being secured in relatively short order. It is important to recognise that countries will be making trade agreements and that we have to focus on our trade. One thing that I am certain we can all agree on is that trade for Scotland has been made much more difficult because of the consequences of Brexit.

Malcolm Offord: I remind the First Minister that Brexit was, in fact, a trade deal with Europe. Today, we have tariff-free trade with the EU, and 45 per cent of UK exports still go to the EU. In fact, right now, most of the UK is trading very strongly with the EU. For example, in the past 12 months, exports to the EU from England went up by 5 per cent, exports from Wales went up by 11 per cent and exports from Northern Ireland went up by 7 per cent. It is only in Scotland that exports to the EU have gone down—by 13 per cent—because we have stopped trading our most valuable asset: North Sea oil and gas.

Does the First Minister agree that getting our energy prices down by using Scotland's oil should be a bigger priority for this Government than replaying Brexit?

The First Minister: What might have had an effect on export trade from Scotland to the European Union is the export of Scotland's fish stocks being made significantly more difficult because of the barriers put in place by Brexit.

The argument that Malcolm Offord and his associates put together, which was that there would be an open bonanza for the fishing industry as a consequence of Brexit, has turned into an unmitigated disaster for the agreements that were negotiated by the Conservative Party, which Malcolm Offord used to support.

If Mr Offord wants my advice about energy, it would be that we should create opportunities to ensure that we have sustainable, clean, green energy in Scotland through the involvement and expansion of the renewable energy sector. It is the decisions of the United Kingdom that hold Scotland back.

Malcolm Offord: Staying with the Indian theme, those exciting post-Brexit international trade deals will continue to strengthen our economic position with the Commonwealth, but that does not mean that Commonwealth citizens with limited right to remain should be permitted to stand for elected office in Scotland.

The Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 was waved through in Holyrood by the cosy consensus of the Scottish National Party, the Greens, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Tories. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me—let us hear the question. [*Interruption*.] Let us hear the question.

Mr Offord, please continue.

Malcolm Offord: The First Minister will be aware that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has urged the Scottish Government to reconsider allowing foreign nationals with limited right to remain to stand for election. That reflects that 77 per cent of the public who responded to the consultation are opposed to extending candidacy rights to foreign nationals. The First Minister might choose to ignore a parliamentary committee, but does he intend to ignore the strong opposition of the people?

The First Minister: It would stretch most people's credulity to think that I would be involved in a cosy consensus with the Conservatives. That feels completely and utterly unlikely.

Let us talk in the real world. The bill that is coming before the Parliament this afternoon, which I hope members will support, is to correct an omission in a bill that was agreed on unanimously by the Parliament in 2024—when it is possible that Mr Offord was a member of the Conservative Party that voted for it. If I am wrong about that, I will correct the record, but I think that he was probably still in the Conservative Party at the time.

The Conservatives voted for the original legislation; there was an error in that legislation and, this afternoon, the Government is seeking to revise it. In our response to the parliamentary committee's report, we said that, if the Parliament wishes to reconsider those issues, it is free to do so. We are correcting an anomaly in a piece of legislation that was approved by the Parliament, so I am not ignoring anybody; I am respecting the views and decisions of the Parliament.

Let us be candid about what this is about. This is another of Malcolm Offord's weekly attempts to spread division in this Parliament and in this country and to pitch citizen against citizen. My Government will have nothing to do with it.

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

The Presiding Officer: Ross Greer has six minutes for questions and answers.

Oil and Gas

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Presiding Officer,

"fossil fuel interests keep making a killing while killing our planet."

Those were the words of the United Nations secretary general at the 31st UN climate change conference of the parties—COP31—yesterday. He also called for a windfall tax on oil companies, saying that, "Polluters must pay."

The First Minister disagrees with that. He thinks that the energy companies that are cranking up our fuel bills and killing our planet should not pay windfall taxes. He has backed drilling of the Jackdaw gas field and is pushing for the Rosebank oilfield to be opened up. Last week, he announced that the Scottish National Party backs more oil and gas extraction. To top it all off, his Government has approved a new gas-fired power station at Peterhead. The leader of Reform said that he was delighted with all that, but many SNP members are not. Some have resigned and others are speaking out. Councillors in Glasgow Southside, who will be up for re-election next year in a constituency that the Greens won this year, immediately distanced themselves.

When it comes to the climate, the First Minister is now out of step with the United Nations, out of step with the climate science and out of step with many in his own party. Is he sure that this sudden lurch to a pro-oil-and-gas position has the support of all his MSPs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me set out the position that my party conference took a few weeks ago. It recommitted itself to the journey to net zero, which is one of the key pillars of the Government's programme—I reiterated that when I spoke to the Stop Climate Chaos Scotland event in the Parliament on Tuesday evening. It recommitted to our country's renewable energy journey, which, as I have just explained to Malcolm Offord, has been thwarted by decisions that have been taken by the United Kingdom Government.

If we are going to be using oil and gas for years to come—I know that Mr Greer wants to stop oil and gas use now; I have to look at the reality that we still have to use oil and gas and will be doing so for some time—I take the view that we should legitimately assess whether extracting the oil and gas in our own jurisdiction can deliver lower emissions than the oil and gas that we would import from other jurisdictions. That is the position of the Government.

Mr Greer characterised that very differently. He is entitled to set out what he thinks about my views. I am also entitled to set out the reality of the position of my party and my Government.

Ross Greer: That was not my characterisation of the SNP's position—that was elected representatives of the SNP who were distancing themselves from the First Minister's position. The difference between the Greens and the SNP on the issue is that we want a transition away from oil and gas as quickly as possible, because that is what the climate science demands, while the Scottish Government seems to be doubling down on dependence on that oil and gas.

The First Minister mentioned his remarks to the Stop Climate Chaos coalition. He talked up this Government's achievements—in fact, on the eve of COP31, he published a video that listed the Scottish Government's climate achievements. I found that video quite entertaining, because every measure listed in it was brought forward by the Scottish Greens. I was proud to work with the SNP and the First Minister to deliver those, but he and I both know where the ideas came from in the first place.

We both remember when Scotland was genuinely a world leader on the climate. In fact, four years ago, the SNP condemned the UK Government for approving a new coal mine the week after hosting COP27, saying that it was

"climate vandalism …on a scale difficult to believe".

Now, a Scottish Government minister is flying off to COP31 a week after approving a gas-fired power station. Can the First Minister explain how the Scottish Government has now found itself engaging in the same kind of climate vandalism that it condemned the Tories for just four years ago?

The First Minister: Part of the decision that has been taken on the Peterhead power station involves enabling the development and delivery of the Acorn carbon capture and storage project. I know that the Greens do not value that project, but it is part of the climate change plans that the Government has put to Parliament, the delivery of which we believe to be important. We want those plans to be delivered, and therefore, as a responsible Government, we are trying to enable that so that we can continue our work to reduce our emissions.

Mr Greer has talked about the approach that has been taken on energy. My record as a minister for nearly 20 years will testify to my complete commitment in that regard. Indeed, under an SNP Government, electricity in Scotland has been largely decarbonised because we have given priority to renewable energy, which we continue to support. As Mr Gethins has just told Parliament, we are concerned that some of the steps in the strategic spatial energy plan will thwart our journey towards renewables, but those decisions are not in our hands; they are for the United Kingdom Government to make.

I understand the policy priorities that Mr Greer has set out in relation to the work of the SNP and the Greens when we were both in government, but all the policy announcements and developments that have taken place could not and would not have happened without the leadership of the Scottish National Party. If a budget is to pass in the Parliament, it needs that SNP leadership. Our budget provides for concessionary travel, the abolition of peak fares and the expansion of renewable energy. All that has happened under an SNP Government.

Ross Greer: Fossil fuel companies are desperately pushing the idea that carbon capture and storage is the solution to the climate crisis because it is one that conveniently allows them to continue raking in billions while burning oil and gas. As the First Minister has just confirmed, the Scottish Government's entire climate plan depends on it. The problem is that no carbon capture and storage plan is operating at commercial scale in the UK. The technology is unproven and basically does not exist. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee described that way to tackle the climate crisis as "high risk". Although the operators of the Peterhead gas-fired power station have said that they will capture 90 per cent of its emissions, no existing carbon capture project captures anything like that.

The First Minister must have looked into the matter. If he is confident in that technology, will he tell me how carbon capture and storage will work in Scotland at that scale when it has not done that anywhere else in the world?

The First Minister: First, our entire plan does not depend on carbon capture and storage but on a variety of interventions, such as the significant expansion of renewable energy capability, a large amount of which has already happened. To date, Scotland has reduced its emissions by about half, but we have managed to grow our economy by a greater amount.

Secondly, the key point that I want to make to Parliament and to Mr Greer is that we have a journey to make on renewable energy, for which Scotland has all the ingredients. All we need is a supportive approach from the United Kingdom Government, because it controls energy policy. That is what we are pressing to deliver, so that Scotland can have a clean, green energy future, delivered by an SNP Government.

The Presiding Officer: Russell Findlay has six minutes for questions and answers.

Members of the Scottish Parliament (Eligibility)

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I confirm that we are not part of any cosy consensus with the Scottish National Party—or with any of the rest of the parties, for that matter.

Migrants who do not have the right to stay in the United Kingdom should not be members of the Scottish Parliament. Does John Swinney agree?

The First Minister: I think that it is becoming more obvious daily that the only cosy consensus that Russell Findlay is part of is that which exists between the Tories and Reform. It absolutely disgusts me that that is what the Conservative Party has reached for.

What I would say to Mr Findlay in relation to his question is that I am perfectly satisfied with the approach to the rules that apply to the eligibility for individuals to stand for election. The Government is trying to correct an anomaly this afternoon.

Russell Findlay: I cannot win. Malcolm Offord says that I am in a cosy consensus with the SNP, and then the First Minister says that I am in a cosy consensus with that lot—Reform. Neither of those is true.

People in the real world can see that Holyrood—that is, all of us—made a mistake, and the Scottish Conservatives want to fix it with a right to stand bill. Only British citizens, such as me and Mr Swinney, and permanent residents should have the right to stand for elected office. Will John Swinney back our commonsense bill?

The First Minister: I understand that the Conservatives have announced a right to stand bill. Parliament will, of course, give due consideration to the issue and the Government will consider the bill's terms when it is published.

Russell Findlay: The bill is needed because of the election of Q Manivannan, who played by the rules, but the rules are wrong. No one who comes to a foreign country on a temporary basis should make the laws of that country. The SNP convener—

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): The nasty party.

Russell Findlay: The nasty party? I am talking about the SNP convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, Jenni Minto, who said that the law must be reconsidered because it is out of touch with public opinion and risks eroding public trust. Why does John Swinney think that she is wrong?

The First Minister: I have simply said that the Government will consider any bill that is introduced. The issues of eligibility to stand for Parliament are determined in legislation and the rules that are put in place in that respect are not under the control of the Government.

I am not familiar with the comments that Russell Findlay allegedly quotes from Jenni Minto, but I suspect that he is putting more than a little bit of malicious interpretation on her comments.

I have reflected a lot on the Conservative Party over the many occasions on which I have defeated it in Perthshire over the entirety of my political career. I have thought a lot about the Conservative Party. I respect many people in that party. There are many Conservative voters in my constituency who are personal friends of mine and who I respect. However, I am absolutely disgusted by where Russell Findlay is now taking the Conservative Party, and I urge decent Conservatives in the country to teach him a lesson.

Russell Findlay: Mr Swinney should read Jenni Minto's comments. It is quite clear that she is calling for a reconsideration of the legislation.

If John Swinney's SNP will not back our bill, hostile foreign states could attempt to place their people in our Parliament. The security services routinely warn about espionage in our universities, businesses and politics. Even the SNP-led committee highlights the risks of foreign meddling in our democracy here in Scotland. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me. Let us hear the question.

Russell Findlay: Why is John Swinney willing to take that risk?

The First Minister: As I have said, the Government will consider any bill that is introduced on the question. However, the issue that Russell Findlay raises with me does not strike me as the most significant issue that the country is facing at this moment. I suspect that it just tells us a little bit more about the fact that the Conservative Party, week by week, has become less relevant to the political debate in Scotland and more of an irrelevance than it was at the elections in May.

I simply remind Russell Findlay that the tactics and the leadership that he delivered for the Conservative Party put it in fifth place in the Scottish Parliament elections. That tells us that the Conservative Party is a dying force in Scotland, and that is the work of Russell Findlay.

The Presiding Officer: Alex Cole-Hamilton has five minutes for questions and answers.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): In 2008, not long after the Scottish National Party came to power, 62 people waited more than 12 hours in accident and emergency across Scotland. How many people waited more than 12 hours this summer?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not have that number to hand, but it will be more than it was in 2008, by a significant margin. The Government is concerned about A and E waiting times, which represent a focus of the dialogue that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care and I are having with health boards around the country to ensure that people have access to A and E treatment at the earliest opportunity.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am happy to help the First Minister. In the summer of 2008, 62 people across the whole country waited more than 12 hours in accident and emergency. This summer, 19,000 people waited more than 12 hours. Let me say that again: 19,000. That is enough to fill Tynecastle.

Many of those people were waiting on trolleys in hospital corridors. This year is already worse than the whole of last year, and there are still two months left. The people who are watching this will want to know: if it was that bad this summer, what on earth will the winter look like?

The First Minister: Part of the work that the Government takes forward in relation to A and E is to ensure that a range of options are available for members of the public to access healthcare when they require it. Part of the foundation of that is the work of pharmacy first in our communities, part of it is the work of our general

practitioner practices and part of it is the expansion of access to GP services that the Government has presided over through the walk-in GP centres.

We have also instituted reforms in our A and E departments to create frailty units to ensure that frail members of the public are supported with priority and do not have to experience lengthy waits in A and E. In addition, the Scottish Ambulance Service has increasingly been dealing with incidents in which they are called out but the individual does not require to be transported to hospital, and it is providing solutions in the community that meet the needs of the public.

I acknowledge that people are waiting too long in A and E, and the Government is focused on ensuring that we have a range of interventions in place to make sure that that is minimised.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The range of interventions that the First Minister has described are not working. He does not need to take my word for it—the numbers speak for themselves. Failure to tackle this crisis has consequences, and they are deadly. So far this year, there have been 600 deaths associated with long waits in A and E—600 avoidable deaths.

I began by asking the First Minister what A and E looked like when his party came to power. When his party came to power, virtually nobody died like this, so will the First Minister accept that people are now paying for those waits with their lives?

The First Minister: I understand Mr Cole-Hamilton's point. I urge him to be cautious with the data that he is using, because those statistics are not verified to make the point that he makes to me. I understand his argument, but those statistics do not have the validity to prosecute the argument that he is making.

What I am saying to the Parliament is that the Government has recognised that there is increased demand on A and E services. We are trying to deliver the public service reform agenda of maximising interventions in the community and ensuring that that range of services—pharmacy first, GP walk-in clinics, GP services, the frailty units and the work of the Scottish Ambulance Service—are able to support individuals and minimise any delays to the discharge of members of the public. Ninety-seven per cent of individuals are discharged from hospital without delay, and the Government is trying to improve that performance to minimise the delays in the patient care that people experience.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Is the First Minister questioning the validity of the professionals who compiled the statistics that say that there have been 600 excess deaths because of avoidable waits in A and E? Is he questioning the validity of the grief of the families of the 600 people who have died?

The First Minister needs to listen to the professionals who are sounding the alarm. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine says that our A and E departments are

"in a worse state than this time last year"

and are at

"risk of collapse."

Does the First Minister agree that those excess deaths are not just unacceptable but entirely avoidable?

The First Minister: I have set out the caution that I think has to be applied to those statistics. I do not question anyone's professional credibility, and I do not question anybody's grief; I simply explain that Mr Cole-Hamilton should be careful about using those statistics, because of the argument that he uses to reinforce them.

What the Government will do—I can assure Mr Cole-Hamilton of this, and the health secretary has explained all of it to Parliament—is take steps to ensure that our national health service is equipped for the winter pressures that we experience, and to ensure that we minimise the delays that people experience and that members of the public receive the quality of care to which they are entitled. We will do that across a range of areas of activity and in a fashion that meets the expectations and needs of patients and families around the country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions from party leaders.

Point of Order

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

14:37

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I will follow this up in writing, but I want to apologise to you and to the Parliament for missing my general question—it was a genuine mistake.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Thank you, Mr McLennan. That is now on the record.

Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01988, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill at stage 1. Members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:37

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): I am pleased to open the stage 1 debate on the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill, which is a single-issue bill that fixes an inadvertent gap in existing legislation.

In December 2024, the Scottish Parliament unanimously approved the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill at stage 3. That bill included provision that was intended to extend candidacy rights in Scottish Parliament and local government elections to all foreign nationals with limited leave to remain. Earlier this year, it was discovered that, regrettably, an error meant that Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain were unintentionally excluded from the extension of candidacy rights at local elections. As a result, those individuals do not currently have the right to stand as candidates in local government elections in Scotland. It is important to be clear that that is a limited and specific gap that applies only in relation to local government—there is no equivalent gap affecting members of this Parliament. The oversight affects only Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain who wish to stand for election to and hold office in local government.

The current situation is not what the Government intended, and it is clear that it was not the intention of Parliament in unanimously agreeing to the changes to candidacy rights in 2024. During the evidence sessions that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee had on the bill, administrators and academics agreed that there was no logical reason for a difference in rights between Commonwealth and other nationals. I do not believe that that difference should remain in place. The law should be changed to be clear and consistent in time for the local government elections in May next year. The bill will mean that Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain will have the same rights as all other foreign nationals who are resident in Scotland for the upcoming elections in May.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): I am curious to understand the minister's thoughts on the Scottish Government's consultation, which showed that 77 per cent of the public are against the measure.

Jamie Hepburn: Thomas Kerr asked me a question on that the other week. It is important that we engage during the process of undertaking to legislate in this place. We go through a process of thorough consultation; we put out a consultation and ask questions to inform the legislation that we take forward. In this case, the consultation informed the legislation in a number of ways.

We initially intended to legislate to enable 16 and 17-year-olds to stand for both Parliament and council elections. People responded to that and opposed it, and our decision in that regard was informed by the views of a range of organisations, which set out reasons why we should not do it. We reflected on those and changed our position.

Beyond that, in general terms, I think that it is beneficial when candidacy rights reflect those who are enfranchised. I think that that is a sensible approach, and that is why we have taken forward the legislation as we have.

However, I recognise that, in its stage 1 report, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee did not agree with the general principles of the bill. I have considered the committee's recommendations and responded to them in writing. However, I reiterate that the bill deals with only a single issue: it fixes an oversight in legislation that affects a very specific, and small, cohort of people.

I will briefly address one of the committee's recommendations in its stage 1 report—I should say that I am grateful to the committee for its scrutiny of the bill so far. I will make some observations on the committee's

recommendation that the Government reconsider its wider position on allowing those with limited leave to remain to stand for office in this country. First, the committee is asking the Government to reconsider not simply its position but the wider law on candidacy rights—a law on the statute book that was agreed to by Parliament.

The bill before Parliament today has the extremely narrow purpose of correcting an oversight in legislation that Parliament unanimously approved in 2024. It is not intended to revisit the broader policy framework governing candidacy rights. I remind members that the bill was introduced on an accelerated timescale because of the proximity of May's elections. I maintain that it is not a vehicle for a substantial change to the law.

The Government would not propose or recommend making substantive changes to candidacy policy so close to an election. We are committed to upholding the Gould principle under which changes to electoral law are expected to be made at least six months prior to a major election.

However, as I set out in my response to the committee's report, we will give consideration to its recommendation in that regard. I also note that the committee, and indeed the Parliament, is entitled to consider the wider policy on candidacy rights more generally. As I said to the committee in giving evidence and reiterated in my response to its report—and as I set out again today—should the committee choose to undertake work in this area, the Scottish Government will, of course, engage in the process. However, a wider assessment goes beyond the purpose of the specific bill before us, and we should remind ourselves that that is what we are considering today.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): The minister described the bill as a formality. However, can he confirm whether the Government has made any assessment of how many people would be eligible to stand in the upcoming elections in May, given that the change is quite a significant development in our democratic process?

Jamie Hepburn: To make an assessment of how many people would be entitled to stand, we just need to look at the electoral roll, which is about 4 million people.

I think that the question that the member intended to ask was how many more people will be able to stand. We do not have that specific number, because this area is controlled at United Kingdom level, but we estimate that it would be a very small number indeed.

On the wider point of how many people might stand, which is probably the more fundamental point, we already know that a fairly small proportion of the overall population choose to stand in any election. In the 2022 local government elections, there were 2,548 candidates out of a total of 4 million people who might have been able to stand. I respectfully suggest, therefore, that the change that we seek to make today for a very small cohort of the population is not likely to lead to a massive upsurge in the number of people seeking to hold elected office.

The point that I was making is that we are considering a very narrow area today, and it is important—indeed, it is incumbent on us—to try to fix mistakes when they arise, which is what the bill seeks to do. Failing to address the issue ahead of May's election would risk confusion.

Rejecting the bill would mean that a Canadian citizen with limited leave to remain would not be able to stand in the election next May, but an American citizen with the same leave to remain could; an Australian citizen with limited leave to remain would not be able to stand, but an Indonesian citizen with the same leave to remain could; and a New Zealand citizen with limited leave to remain would not be able to stand, but a Philippines citizen with the same leave to remain could. If the bill is not passed, urgent action will be required to change election guidance to make that clear.

The issue of foreign interference in elections was discussed during the evidence sessions on the original bill—the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill. I understand and recognise that it is important that we are alive to the reality that there are those who would seek to undermine our democracy, but let us be clear and serious about the fact that there is no evidence that our candidacy rules have opened the door to interference in Scotland.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): If a change has to be made six months before an election, how can the change that the Government is bringing forward be made in time, given that it is less than six months until the election in May? The bill would make a change.

Jamie Hepburn: The fundamental point is that the change that we are seeking to make now is what was expected. People were proceeding on the basis and the understanding that those with limited leave to remain, whether they were Commonwealth citizens or nationals of another country, would be able to stand. To respond to the member's question, that is why we need to do this now. I go back to the point that there is no

evidence to suggest that our candidacy rules have opened the door to significant foreign interference in Scotland.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Like me, the minister was probably surprised that returning officers and their staff do not conduct any checks on whether somebody is eligible to stand for election. Does the minister not think that that opens the door for people to mistreat the system?

Jamie Hepburn: Actually, I was surprised that Ms Baillie was surprised, because she has been standing in elections for an awful long time—I say that respectfully.

Jackie Baillie: I thought I was checked.

Jamie Hepburn: She thought she was checked. Well, I do not know what Ms Baillie is worried about if she thinks she should be checked. I have every faith that, although Ms Baillie is here to hold me robustly to account, she is probably not here to undermine democracy.

Jackie Baillie: This is not The Stand comedy club. I am making a serious point about the integrity of our electoral system, and I would be grateful if the minister would treat it seriously.

Jamie Hepburn: I do treat the matter seriously, but the point that I was making, respectfully, is that I was genuinely surprised that Ms Baillie was surprised, because that has been a feature of our electoral system for a long, long time. The member says that people should be checked. This is not directly related to this specific bill but is a wider issue, but I have said in response to the committee's report that the Government will give consideration to that matter. We have a consultation coming on wider changes to electoral law, and we will consider the matter as part of that. That is what I will do—

Jackie Baillie: That is very big of the minister.

Jamie Hepburn: I agree that it is very big of me to do that. That is the type of person I am. If a recommendation is made, I will consider it. That is what we are going to do.

I return to the bill. On concerns about foreign interference, I reiterate the point that the bill relates to enabling Commonwealth citizens to stand for election. Commonwealth countries are our friends and allies. On the idea that enabling people from the various countries of the Commonwealth to stand for election is going to undermine our democracy, I would say that I am starting from a very different place from people who have such a perspective. The fundamental point, of course, is that I see no justification at all for there being a difference in rights between Commonwealth citizens and those from non-Commonwealth countries.

We are also not alone in taking this approach. Since 2019, the UK Government has signed five reciprocal treaties with countries that allow—

Mark Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The minister will have to wind up and is not able to take any more interventions.

Jamie Hepburn: The treaties allow the citizens of those countries to stand in local government elections in the UK. Those are in place across the UK, and what we are doing here is not unique.

Jackie Baillie: That applies to five countries.

Jamie Hepburn: I heard Ms Baillie say that it applies to five countries—I have just said that it applies to five countries. Yes, it is five countries. The point that I would make—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The minister needs to wind up, so it is not helpful for comments to be made from a sedentary position.

Jamie Hepburn: The point that I would make is that, if we were not to pass the bill and we were not compliant with wider treaty obligations, we would need to think through alternative primary legislation, which we do not have time to pass between now and the elections.

I look forward to hearing what members have to say, and I am sure that we will have a full, thorough and frank debate. I look forward to responding to comments at the end of the debate.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Jenni Minto to speak on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

14:50

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I wish to add some personal thoughts, given what has just happened in First Minister's question time. This absolutely underlines the importance of committees reviewing legislation. The personalisation of the questions that were directed at the First Minister earlier shows the lack of understanding of how the Parliament operates. This is a committee report. I have found the process uncomfortable. I have questioned my role in it, and I have questioned how I conducted myself. I take my role as an MSP and a committee convener extremely seriously. As far as I am aware, neither Mr Findlay nor Mr Offord has had the responsibility of being a committee convener, and I hope that they never do. I note that neither of them was part of the committee deliberations.

I am pleased to speak on the general principles of the bill on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. As the minister has said, it is a very short bill that intends to fix an error. Its principles, which I will touch on later, were considered and debated when the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill went through the Parliament in the previous parliamentary session. Despite that, the new bill still must be robustly scrutinised. We took evidence from three panels of witnesses: electoral administrators, academics and, finally, the minister. We are very grateful to all those who provided evidence to us.

The bill has been introduced because of a drafting error. It does not help that the law in this area is unnecessarily cluttered. That, in itself, carries an increased risk of legislative reform becoming, in part, a story of mistakes waiting to happen. As a letter that the committee received from the Electoral Commission Scotland explains, the electoral framework is

"fragmented, outdated and increasingly complex, spread across at least 25 major statutes and is the responsibility of three legislatures".

It is in that context that the error in the 2025 act occurred. I am pleased to note that the minister accepts, in principle, the clear case for consolidating electoral law into one clear statute that everyone can rely on, as we recommended in our stage 1 report.

Before discussing the central aim of the bill, I will touch on two general issues about elections that were raised in evidence. First, witnesses told us that enforcement of the rules relating to the nomination process relies in large part on the good faith of candidates. Electoral administrators usually accept nomination forms at face value without further compliance checks.

Secondly, witnesses reminded us that we live in a time of growing geopolitical tension and that, in some respects, the rules of the game in electoral politics are under ever-increased challenge. International actors increasingly have the tools and motivation to intervene in domestic public affairs. On whether the current arrangements for verifying candidates' eligibility remain fit for purpose, I welcome the Scottish Government's willingness to reconsider those as part of its consultation on electoral reform, which will be published later this year.

Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Given the fact that individuals and foreign nationals on limited leave to remain go through rigorous criminal records checks, and no MSP goes through such checks, does Jenni Minto agree that MSPs should be subject to similar criminal records checks to prevent foreign interference?

Jenni Minto: I think that that was the point that Jackie Baillie was considering. Like her, I was surprised to learn that that does not happen, because I know the stress of filling out those forms correctly and how my agent felt when she delivered my forms to the local authority.

I will now turn to the main point of the bill. It intends to put Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain on an equal footing as candidates in Scottish local elections. The committee accepted that there is a logical case for doing so. Professor Toby James told us that

"the inconsistency"

in the law

"does represent an inequality".

Nevertheless, the bill has prompted us to reopen the discussion on the principle of extending candidacy rights, given our duty, under the standing orders, to question the principles of the bill. We concluded that we did not support the general principles of the bill, because we did not accept the premise that there should be a general right for non-UK citizens with limited leave to remain to be councillors or MSPs.

What led us to that view? First, Scotland's approach to candidacy rights for foreign nationals appears to be unusual by international standards. Professor Alistair Clark told us that he had tried to find other countries

that extended candidacy rights to those without a permanent right of residence but, in the data sets that he had looked at, he had

"struggled to find any such countries".—[*Official Report, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee*, 8 October 2026; c 5, 11.]

Secondly, the committee did not discern a clear evidence base to justify extending candidacy rights to people with limited leave to remain when the 2025 reforms were introduced.

We also heard that the right to be represented does not directly correlate to the right to be a representative. MSPs and local councillors are elected to serve all constituents, regardless of their constituents' eligibility to be candidates.

Finally, we live in a time when confidence in politicians and state institutions is fragile. Governments looking to reform electoral law must take the public with them. The consultation on electoral reform that preceded the 2025 act showed that 77 per cent of respondents disagreed with extending candidacy rights to people with limited leave to remain.

Q Manivannan: In 1958, only 4 per cent of people in the US agreed with interracial marriage. Does the member believe that public opinion is the only decider of whether a law is legitimate?

Jenni Minto: I believe that what the committee has done is listen to and reflect on the evidence that we were given. I could turn that around, but I think that that was the important conversation that we had in the committee.

For the reasons that I have set out, the committee recommended that the Scottish Government reconsider its position on allowing foreign nationals with limited leave to remain to stand in Scottish Parliament and local government elections.

In session 6, I was one of the MSPs who voted in favour of the changes to candidacy rights. However, we can sometimes choose to exhibit strength as individuals and humility as parliamentarians by reflecting on and revisiting our decisions. I hope that that goes some way to explaining my response to Q Manivannan's second intervention.

The minister's response to the committee indicated an openness to reflect, too. He framed that as being in response to any further scrutiny that the committee may undertake. I suggest to him that there is space for the Scottish Government, within its resources, to do the necessary work here, including in its upcoming new consultation on electoral reform.

I want to end with a clear message. This Parliament has benefited from having representatives with different voices and different life experiences, and so have council chambers across Scotland. I know that, personally, I have, too. The committee strongly supports the principle that our elected representatives should be diverse and, collectively, should look like the communities that they represent. I therefore look forward to listening to the views of the rest of the MSPs in this debate.

14:58

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Although I am opening the debate for the Scottish Labour Party, I am also a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I am grateful to the convener for outlining the thinking of committee members who heard evidence about the bill. I will repeat many of her points, and I make no apology for doing so.

I acknowledge at the outset that the bill is to correct an error in legislation that was made by the Scottish Government. We can all agree that that error is regrettable and that more care should be taken when drafting legislation, although I accept that, as the convener has pointed out, there is complexity in electoral law.

I turn to the substance of the committee's consideration. In so doing, I make it clear that I am in no way questioning the right of any current member to be elected to this chamber but that I want to talk about the potential and unintended consequences for the future.

The basic premise of the Government's position is that anyone with a limited right to remain in the UK can stand for election. That was part of the Bute house agreement between the Scottish National Party and the Greens and was, as I understand it, suggested by the Greens. If that right to remain were to expire, the individual would cease to be an elected representative and there would be a by-election.

Three main issues concern me.

The first is security. We are living in increasingly uncertain times, the threat of global conflict is real and we know that there are bad-faith actors in every walk of life. In that context, there is a real possibility of foreign

interference in Scottish elections. Two electoral experts, Professor Toby James of the University of East Anglia and Professor Alistair Clark of Newcastle University, both gave evidence that the risk of foreign interference in our elections has become more prominent, that there are no mitigations in place and that we are not even asking questions about it.

I will illustrate the scale of the potential risk. This year alone, there are 17,770 students from mainland China in Scotland and they have limited leave to remain. There are 6,140 students from America who have limited leave to remain and more than 3,000 students from Arab nations who have limited leave to remain. It is a testament to the strength of our university education that that is the case, but does that mean that they should all be eligible for election? The American intern in my office, who is here for four months, has limited leave to remain and could stand for election if she chose to do so.

Q Manivannan: Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain currently have the right to serve in our armed forces. Does Jackie Baillie condemn that as a security threat too?

Jackie Baillie: No, but we are talking about elections to the institutions that have the power to shape policy across the country and that spend substantial sums of money. I do not think that is comparable.

My second concern is that no one is checking. I know that, like me, many members will have painstakingly filled in their applications to stand for election and will have triple checked those before submitting them to the returning officer. I was genuinely shocked when, in evidence to the committee, returning officers told us that they do not make any eligibility checks at all and do not even carry out identity checks, and that that is apparently left to the candidates. So, someone can be in the country on a student visa with limited leave to remain and can stand for election even if they are not eligible, because no one is checking. We are not being serious about this.

My third concern is that Scotland appears to be an outlier. No other UK country does this. Professor Clark told us that he could not find any international examples at all of countries doing it. As the minister was right to point out, we have a limited number of reciprocal arrangements—five in total—with countries such as Portugal, but that is not in any way equivalent to the wholesale extension of rights that is being proposed. Instead, those arrangements were subject to negotiation, discussion and agreement.

I understand that the Government's argument is that someone who votes in an election should be able to stand in that election, but people do not need to be eligible for election to be represented. Members are responsible for representing all the people in our constituencies.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Q Manivannan: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: No, I am not taking any more interventions, because I need to get on with making my remaining points.

It does not follow that someone should have candidacy rights because they have voting rights.

As with so much of the Bute house agreement, I think there is genuine regret among some SNP members about where they find themselves on this and other issues. People have referred to the 77 per cent of respondents who disagreed with the Scottish Government's approach, and that is one factor. If members have concerns—as I know they do—we should not double down but instead should be honest enough to acknowledge that we might have got this wrong and to review the 2025 legislation.

The committee's decision was unanimous and did not come just from the Tories or Reform. SNP members, and I as a Labour member, exercised judgment based on the evidence that we were given. Our conclusion was cross-party and informed by the evidence. Members of the Parliament should not ignore that strong consensus because their party whips have told them to do so.

For all the reasons that I have outlined, we should not agree to the general principles of the bill, even though, as I acknowledge, it seeks to correct an error in drafting, because what it actually does is compound an error that we made in the first place.

15:05

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): I, too, may repeat some points that have already been made. Today, I speak not as a Reform UK MSP but as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, which has been tasked with undertaking a rigorous examination of the bill.

I am genuinely pleased that, on the first bill in the current session of Parliament, the committee has been able to reach a clear cross-party consensus. I hope that that can set a more positive precedent for how we

work collaboratively as we move forward, taking party politics out of the equation where possible for the good of the communities that elected us in May. That will not always be easy, but it is worth recognising when it happens, and the benefits that it can bring.

Across party lines, we agreed that, while the bill technically corrects a drafting error, the committee does not accept that there should be a right for those in Scotland with limited leave to remain to stand as councillors or MSPs. As such, we have recommended that the Scottish Government reconsider its position.

Public opinion on the matter is clear. The Scottish Government's own consultation on the legislation showed that 77 per cent—

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Mark Simpson: I am not taking interventions.

Members: Oh!

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member does not have to take interventions.

Mark Simpson: The Government's own consultation showed that 77 per cent of individual respondents were opposed to extending candidacy rights to foreign nationals with limited leave to remain.

It would be remiss of the Parliament not to take that into account, even if it was overlooked in the previous session of Parliament. Given the unintended consequences that have emerged since the election and the reaction of those who elected us to this chamber, I believe that it is reasonable to assume that opposition on this issue has only strengthened further.

Limited leave to remain is temporary; it does not provide the secure lasting connection that should be expected of someone who is seeking to hold elected office for a full term. The practical risks are real. A visa could expire during a term of office, which would mean that a member of this Parliament could find themselves attempting to conduct their duties as an elected MSP from another country. Surely we can, across the chamber, agree that that would be at best unfortunate and at worst farcical, and that it would risk—[*Interruption*.] It would risk bringing this Parliament into disrepute—[*Interruption*.]

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

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way, like I did for him?

Mark Simpson: I will not—[*Interruption*.] I have already made—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member has indicated that he will not be taking interventions.

Mark Simpson: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The current system means that eligibility relies heavily on candidates acting in good faith when submitting their paperwork. Evidence to the committee confirmed that the Electoral Commission does not carry out detailed checks on candidates. That opens the door to the risk of potentially hostile foreign actors standing for election on limited leave to remain.

Further evidence that we gathered confirmed that Scotland is an international outlier—[*Interruption*.] No other country in the world allows those with limited leave to remain—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mark Simpson, can you sit down for a moment, please? Thank you very much. I remind the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans that courtesy must be extended to all members at all times.

I call Mark Simpson.

Mark Simpson: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The further evidence that the committee gathered confirmed that Scotland is an international outlier. No other country in the world allows those with limited leave to remain or its equivalent to stand in elections in this way.

Public trust in politicians and political institutions is fragile and continues to be tested. These are not minor concerns that we can ignore; we must be responsive to both the practical realities and the public view.

The committee's position is measured and practical. It is not about the contribution that people make while they are in Scotland but about ensuring that those who stand for election, and those who are elected, have a sufficiently stable status to enable them to serve the people who elected them.

I therefore support the committee's recommendation that the Scottish Government reconsider allowing people with limited leave to remain to stand in Scottish Parliament and local government elections. Cross-party agreement on that principle is welcome, and I hope that the Government's approach will now reflect both that consensus and the clear public view.

15:09

Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): The purpose of the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill is to correct an error in the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025.

The Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill was passed at stage 3 without a single opposing vote on 17 December 2024, before receiving royal assent on 29 January 2025. The Scottish National Party, which introduced the legislation as a Scottish Government bill, voted in favour of it at stage 3. The Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party voted in favour of the bill at stage 3, after successfully pushing for stage 3 amendments to prohibit dual mandates for MPs and peers. Scottish Labour voted in favour of the bill at stage 3. The Scottish Green Party voted in favour of the bill at stage 3, and it backed the amendments to ban dual mandates. The Scottish Liberal Democrats voted in favour of the bill at stage 3. A consensus position was reached by a Parliament that was very involved in shaping the bill and that agreed on its principles and contents.

It is right to be frustrated by drafting errors in legislation that the Scottish Government has presented to Parliament, although all of us parliamentarians are equally culpable for not catching the problem. We all unanimously agreed on the principle of the bill and on its implementation. It is a sound democratic principle that there should be no taxation without representation, and I am very disappointed in those members who have changed their minds on their democratic principles and have used a drafting error as an excuse to leap on Reform UK's anti-immigrant bandwagon.

The Scottish Greens will support the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill at stage 1 tonight. In fact, as Jackie Baillie said, the expansion of the democratic franchise in Scotland has been led by the Scottish Greens, and we are very proud that 16-year-olds can vote in Scotland, too. Because it is the right thing to do, we will support the bill at stage 1 tonight. It is the right thing to do to correct a drafting error that implements the unanimous intention of this Parliament. It is the right thing to do to resist the hateful anti-immigrant pressure of the far right. It is the right thing to do to implement the principle of no taxation without representation.

Jamie Langan: Is the member really saying that 77 per cent of the Scottish public are far right?

Lorna Slater: What I am saying is that, since entering the Scottish Parliament, Reform UK members seem to have disgracefully pulled other members in their wake by making fear-driven statements that thousands of these people will be eligible for election and that Commonwealth citizens who have had to have background checks to get leave to remain somehow present more of a danger to our democracy than the Reform UK representatives who have been accused of—and, I think, sentenced due to—having links with Russia, even though they are full UK citizens. It appears that, for Reform UK, full UK citizens with links to Russia are okay, but Commonwealth citizens are not okay. I am very disappointed in the colleagues who have fallen into Reform UK's trap on this.

Kate Campbell: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Simpson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We have just heard a blatant lie and mistruth. Not a single one of my colleagues has any connection with, or has been charged in connection with anything relating to, Russia. Will the member correct the record?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): That is not a point of order.

Lorna Slater: I will take an intervention from Kate Campbell.

Kate Campbell: The 77 per cent figure has come up quite a few times. It relates to the consultation responses, from which it is clear that the main concern was about people not being able to remain for the whole parliamentary session. The changes that Labour has made to immigration law mean that many people have to wait 10 years before they can even apply for indefinite leave to remain. Ten years is equivalent to two council terms. When it comes to the 77 per cent figure, the concern that was raised is actually being addressed—sadly, in a way that we would not like it to be addressed—by the cruel policies of Labour immigration law.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Interventions must be short.

Lorna Slater: I thank Kate Campbell for that very pertinent and helpful intervention.

It is a matter for the consciences of other members—and, indeed, the consciences of their constituents—whether they would be willing to vote for a person who has limited leave to remain, but to try to block such people from standing and being able to serve their communities is shocking. Shame on all of you who allow Reform UK to pressure you into voting against these democratic principles and letting down your constituents in that way. I hope that your constituents who have limited leave to remain will take note that you think that they should be second class and not have the same rights as everybody else, and I hope that they think about that the next time they vote, too.

15:14

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): You know, I think that I will actually live quite happily with Lorna Slater's shame and disappointment. I do not need to be told in this chamber that I cannot think for myself. However, that was the usual type of personalised comment that I would expect from the Greens in such a debate.

Presiding Officer, for the interest of the chamber, I declare that I am a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I understand why ministers introduced the bill—there is a logical argument for correcting a drafting error in the legislation before next May's council elections. However, as the chamber has heard, the committee has unanimously concluded that we should reconsider the policy itself around who can stand for elections. That, for me, deserves a considered response, because committees do an incredible amount of work to produce their reports, and respecting Parliament means taking their conclusions seriously, including those conclusions that are uncomfortable for some of us in the chamber.

I recognise that the legislation on who can stand in an election was passed only two years ago—we have heard plenty on that point already. However, the debate has moved on over those past two years, and this May's election brought the practical implications of that into focus.

Jamie Hepburn: I might misquote the member slightly, but I agree with him that although there is an understandable rationale or logic for seeking to correct the legislation, the committee has made wider recommendations. Does he not consider that it would be perfectly possible for us to pass this straightforward and narrow bill to correct the mistake? Then, by all manner of means, if Parliament wanted to reconsider how it approaches the matter, it would be well capable of doing so.

Tim Eagle: The convener of the committee—I will correct the record if I am wrong, but I think that I am right in saying that it was the convener—noted that. That point was widely debated in committee and, although I cannot speak for the latter, my view was that our doing that would mean that we entrenched the policy, which, as is quite clear from the evidence that we have taken, needs to be rediscussed. Although I get what the minister has said, it was the committee's view that doing what he described would entrench the policy, and that point is in the report.

I want to talk about the wider security context. I know that I will be challenged on that point, but I think that it is important. In October 2025, MI5 reported a 35 per cent increase in the number of people whom it was investigating for state threat activity, including espionage against Parliament. In October 2026—just last month—Sir Ken McCallum, director general of MI5, said that its state threat case load had quadrupled over the past decade, and that it was

"devoting more resources to countering state threats than during the Cold War."

He went on to say:

"Since I started in this role in 2020, there has been another generational shift. We have again entered a new era of national security—requiring a new response."

That changing security context deserves serious consideration when we review our electoral safeguards.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): I do not disagree at all that the espionage threat to this country in particular is far greater than at any time many of us have known. However, does the member recognise that hostile states will not put all their evil, malign hopes on the backs of people who have limited leave to remain, who might not be here next year and might swiftly be sent packing?

Tim Eagle: Of course, I do not think that hostile states will put all their—what was it—evil-aligned hopes on to the back of people with limited leave to remain. However, foreign states are interfering in this country's election process—we heard that from the Electoral Commission at committee this morning. It is very hard for anybody in this chamber to claim that hostile states could not use this as a vehicle to do so.

Lorna Slater: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Roddick: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: I will make a tiny bit of progress, then I might come back to the members.

Let me be clear that that does not make someone on a temporary visa a security threat, that foreign interference can involve people of any nationality and that the Government has not reported interference arising from those candidacy rights. However, growing threats make reviewing safeguards sensible, particularly when candidate eligibility depends heavily on self-declaration—a point that Jackie Baillie made. That self-declaration concern has been brought out in the committee report, and I urge the Government to think about it carefully.

Emma Roddick: Will the member take an intervention?

Lorna Slater: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Tim Eagle: I do not know who was first. I will take Emma Roddick's intervention.

Emma Roddick: I share the member's concern about foreign interference in elections. In recent years, we have seen that much of that has been through cyberattacks, misinformation and disinformation online. Should we not consider that issue when it comes to members of the Parliament changing their views because of pressure on social media—pressure that is coming from a far-right campaign that in many ways is racist?

Tim Eagle: I just do not buy the argument that this is a far-right campaign. I point out that, at committee, we heard evidence from a wide range of different people. To suggest that this is from the far right is just dangerously wrong.

Scotland is an outlier in this area of elections. No other UK nation extends candidacy rights to all foreign nationals with limited leave to remain. Indeed, in evidence, Professor Clark could find no international example of such an expansive approach.

Q Manivannan: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: I will make a little bit of progress before I come back. I do try to take as many interventions as I can.

As has been pointed out, 77 per cent of respondents to the Government's 2023 consultation opposed the extension of the rights. After the committee's decision, I had thought that ministers would pause the bill and perhaps bring parties together, given the cross-party consensus at the committee. I recognised that that would leave the Commonwealth issue for local elections unresolved for next May, but the committee's argument was that correcting it now risked entrenching that policy. The Government should have listened to that, but, as usual, where the Government will not listen, the Scottish Conservatives always will. We will listen to the 77 per cent of people who do not agree with the extension of rights to stand in an election and to the information about the increasing national security threat.

I have taken action. I have started the process of introducing the right to stand bill. To be clear, a person who does not have the right to permanently stay in the United Kingdom should not be able to stand for election here. That is just common sense. Our simple right to stand bill will fix the law. The current rules leave our democracy vulnerable to interference from hostile states, especially in an increasingly volatile world. The bill would restore the position that existed before August 2025, meaning that only candidates with indefinite leave to remain or pre-settled status would be able to stand as MSPs or councillors.

Given the Government bill's narrow scope, I am pursuing a separate legislative route. I know that a member's bill will take time, but if the Parliament agrees to the current bill's general principles today—although I hope that it will not—I ask ministers and colleagues to help my proposal to progress alongside it as far as possible to allow for the fullest debate and discussion with respect to the committee decision.

I cannot support this bill and its principles today. It is clear to me—and, I hope, to many others, that the world has changed, and we must be brave enough to reflect on our previous decisions. The committee was brave enough in the light of the evidence to point that out.

Lorna Slater: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: I am really sorry, but I am out of time. What I seek, if the bill does pass at stage 1 today, is the right for a full debate in the Parliament, and I seek that debate through the new right to stand bill.

15:22

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): I declare an interest in that I am a dual national with British and Canadian citizenship. My mother was, for a time, exactly the kind of person whom we are

talking about here—a Commonwealth citizen with limited leave to remain. She is now a full legal alien in this country.

This is a short and technical bill. It is quite surprising that it has fomented such discord, but I understand why. The provision should have been passed as part of the previous legislation. We recognise that there is much about that legislation that we did not necessarily have a full focus on or time to discuss, and I agree with the Scottish Government that this bill closes the gap. The cabinet secretary was right to point out the odd dichotomy. An American citizen with limited leave to remain would be allowed to stand in the forthcoming council elections, but my mother, 40 years ago, would not have been. The bill closes that loophole.

Even though some of our laws are imperfect and we need to revisit them, we must make sure there is a level playing field until we have time to do that. The diversity of this chamber—

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will give way to Jackie Baillie.

Jackie Baillie: Did I pick the member up correctly that he thinks that the original legislation was not as it should be?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will come on to that. We are starting to understand that there are aspects that might be imperfect, which is why, as I go through my remarks, I will say that there is a desire among the Liberal Democrats to see a review. I will speak in more detail about what I mean by that.

The diversity in this Parliament is its greatest strength, and the Parliament should absolutely reflect the communities that we seek to represent. I am pleased that we have made some progress to that end in the past 27 years, but I recognise some of the challenges on which the committee has cast light, as well as its recommendations and the concerns that it raises. There are practical issues that we need to be mindful of. To be frank, when we passed the 2025 act, we did not adequately consider the challenges of someone with limited leave to remain serving a full term of office.

Let me be clear that many people who are here with limited leave still make a contribution, and sometimes an enormous one, to this country's economy and society.

Emma Roddick: Given that we are not even a year into this session of Parliament and a member has left, does Alex Cole-Hamilton recognise that we can never be sure that someone will be able to carry out five years of service, no matter what their background is?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Make no mistake, I am not suggesting that that challenge might be a disqualifying criterion, but I think that we have not looked at the issue properly. That is why I suggest a review, which I will come on to in a moment.

People with limited leave to remain work in our public services. They are the backbone of our health and care service. They raise families here, they pay taxes here and, as Q Manivannan rightly pointed out, they sometimes fight and die for us. They invest in this country by setting up businesses and attending our universities, yet they now face a long wait before they get the security and, arguably, the recognition that that contribution should come with, through indefinite leave. Indeed, the wait has been made even longer by the Home Secretary's most recent announcements.

That frustrates me deeply for a number of reasons. I will not go into all of them, but we should confront, with empirical analysis, the challenges that the committee has put before us. There has been talk of the security threat, for example. I am not sure that we will mitigate any perceived security risk by voting down this tiny loophole bill. As I said in my intervention earlier, I do not think that hostile actors would put all of their eggs in the basket of spies who do not have the right to stay here for very long. Part of the problem is that we are trying to legislate in the dark. As the committee's report highlights, there is a lack of collection of data on candidates in Scotland. We should recognise that and get to grips with it.

Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the bill at stage 1, but we will do so to allow further exploration. I am keen to work with clerks on a stage 2 amendment that would introduce a review of the provisions of the bill. A post-legislative review of any practical issues of extending candidacy rights for Commonwealth citizens would serve as a proxy for a review of the 2025 act. It would highlight deficiencies in that legislation and the need for change, or it might help to allay the concerns that have been raised.

I understand where the concerns about the 2025 act have come from and where they first came to light, but hard cases make bad law. If there had not been a news storm in the summer about the immigration status of Q Manivannan—who, by any metric, is an asset to this Parliament—I do not think that we would have noticed this bill, and it would likely have just gone through on the nod. I do not think that 77 per cent of the public would have responded to the consultation in the way that they did without the right-wing pile-on that

we saw Q suffer. As evidence for that, I point out that Reform UK said absolutely nothing about either repealing or amending the 2025 act in its 2026 Holyrood manifesto. It has no electoral mandate to drive opposition to the bill.

I will close with a plea. It is now clear that the 2025 act may be imperfect and, as such, could benefit from review and even amendment, but it is important for the standing of the Parliament that the rest of the debate this afternoon is about the bill that is before us and that we resist the urge to challenge the status or legitimacy of parliamentarians who have been duly and legally elected to this place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the open debate.

15:28

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a serving councillor in Dundee City Council.

Due to our shared history and long imperial past, Scotland still lives with the legacy of the Commonwealth, an association of 56 countries around the globe. The benefits of that association were enjoyed in Glasgow this summer, with the successful Commonwealth games, which brought together more than 2,700 athletes from across the globe and gave 177 of our athletes the rare opportunity to perform and compete under our own flag, the saltire. The games also gave us the opportunity to demonstrate the shared values and ethos that hold the Commonwealth together.

I am also proud of the fact that, over the history of the Parliament, we have taken steps to extend the franchise to those who live and work here, and who choose Scotland as their home. In 2020, voting rights were extended to 16-year-olds, and the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Foreign Nationals) Act 2022 ensured that UK Government treaties were followed in order to give nationals from Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and Spain the right to stand for election here.

To give members a flavour of the discussion four years ago, I will read an extract—which I found last night—from the *Official Report* of the debate back in June 2022. Unfortunately, the member who said this is not currently in the chamber. That member said:

> "I would like to mention the importance of helping and supporting people to become candidates for election, including the citizens who will be impacted by the bill and others. It is important that we facilitate that so that people—our friends and neighbours and others in our communities, including those from other countries—feel that they can stand for election. It is incumbent on us, who enjoy the privilege of elected office, particularly in this place, to make that possible."—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2022; c 90.]

Just for the record, those words were spoken by the Parliament's very own Stephen Kerr MSP. I am sure that he will stand by his words today.

The Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 gave foreign nationals with limited leave to remain in the UK the right to stand for election in Scotland, but, as has been said repeatedly, it failed to include Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain the same right. That is the anomaly that the bill seeks to rectify. At present, as the minister has indicated, that means that an American with limited leave to remain can stand in a Scottish election in May but a Canadian in the same circumstances cannot. To someone like me, with deep ties to Canada—a country that was built by Scots and where many of my relatives displaced themselves many decades ago—that does not seem fair.

Unlike members at Holyrood, councillors have to live or work in the council area that they seek to represent, so it matters that our council chambers fully represent all the people who live in those communities.

Lorna Slater: Does Heather Anderson agree that it is absurd that we would allow Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain to fight and die for us but not to make decisions about licensing and bins?

Heather Anderson: That is an anomaly that has been pointed out.

If someone is standing as a councillor, certainly for the Scottish National Party, they have to pledge to serve the full term. It is not just that they have to be eligible; they also need to make a commitment to serve the party. The anomaly has to be rectified.

We know that we have to do better in securing fully representative cohorts of candidates. It is still the case in Scotland that only 35 per cent of serving councillors are women and only 2 per cent are from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities. We need to make sure that our communities are fully represented, so I encourage all Commonwealth citizens to become involved in politics and play their part.

Councils work better when all voices are represented around the table. In this sometimes jaded world, it sometimes takes someone from somewhere else to remind us of how amazing where we live is. A few weeks

ago, I was lucky enough to spend some time with Leticia Gonzalez, a Welsh-Argentinian member of the Welsh Senedd for Plaid Cymru. Her passion and enthusiasm for Cardiff were breathtaking.

The passion for an adopted home is palpable. As a councillor, I was lucky enough to be able to attend citizenship ceremonies at which the pride of new Scots shone through. Witnessing someone who wants to make Scotland their home and who wants to make their contribution to the place that they now call home is heartwarming. Sometimes, hostility towards our country comes from closer to home.

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

Heather Anderson: Let us correct the anomaly through the bill. My party's nationalism has always been civic, not ethnic. My good friend Alyn Smith used to say, "If you're here, you're one of us," and I agree with him.

I will close with some words from Maurice Lindsay, the broadcaster and poet, who wrote in "Speaking of Scotland":

> "Scotland's a sense of change, an endless
> becoming for which there was never a kind
> of wholeness or ultimate category.
> Scotland's an attitude of mind."

Our nationalism is civic. Please support the bill at stage 1 and be inclusive.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I kindly ask members to stick to time. I am afraid that we have no time in hand for the debate. I call Kate Campbell.

15:35

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): I was not intending to speak in this debate because, honestly, I thought that it was going to be a non-event. I read the report: the bill is just correcting a drafting error in previous legislation that was unanimously supported by all parties in 2024, during the previous parliamentary session. Obviously, we have one additional party this session, but still—I thought that the bill was uncontroversial. So, I was pretty surprised to learn that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee recommendation was that the bill risks

"undermining trust in the democratic process."

I cannot get my head around that.

The facts are that the law was changed but a drafting error meant that it was not changed for everyone. Previously, people had to have indefinite leave to remain in order to stand for office. The agreement was unanimous—I say it again: it was unanimous—that the law should be changed so that candidacy rights would be extended to include people with limited leave to remain. In error, Commonwealth citizens were not included in the new rules about who could stand in local government elections. That has resulted in the bizarre situation whereby an Angolan citizen resident in Scotland with limited leave to remain can stand for election but a Ghanaian citizen cannot. An American can, but not a Canadian; someone from the Solomon Islands can, but someone from the Marshall Islands cannot. All that we are meant to be doing today is correcting that fundamental inequality.

I disagree with the view set out by the committee that we should not allow people who have limited leave to remain to stand for election. I will go on to explain why. I also think that the point should be made that the committee's logic is flawed. Far from entrenching the policy and principle that people with limited leave to remain should be allowed to stand for election, not passing the bill would entrench an inequality. The bill would not change the law for MSPs or for people with limited leave to remain who come from all the countries in the whole world, apart from the 53 Commonwealth ones. Those rights were agreed on in 2024—I say it again—unanimously.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): Will Kate Campbell take an intervention?

Kate Campbell: We should not forget that the primary reason that the law was changed was to embed the Scottish Government's principles to align with the "New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: 2024" and have meaningful integration from day 1.

I will take an intervention from Thomas Kerr.

Thomas Kerr: Kate Campbell has mentioned a couple of times the word "unanimously". I reiterate that that was in the previous parliamentary session. The Parliament is no longer unanimous about the provision because Reform UK is totally against it. Does she accept that?

Kate Campbell: Indeed—at the start of my speech, I made the point that there is an additional party now but that I still found the controversy a little strange.

The principle of meaningful integration from day 1 was to empower individuals who have chosen to make Scotland their home and encourage them to participate fully in the democratic process. The secondary benefit was that it would help encourage diversity, so that our political representation could look more like the communities that we are meant to reflect. I will let you in on a little secret, guys—we are not doing great at that at the moment.

What has changed since 2024? What has convinced those who supported the principles of integration, participation and representation to about-turn on a policy so uncontroversial that not only was it voted for unanimously back in 2024, but there were not even any abstentions? Is it the arrival of Reform in our Parliament? Is it the media storm that Reform has managed to kick up? I seriously hope not. I am looking at the Labour Party, in particular, when I say that.

Is it the—frankly—cruel changes that the UK Government is making to immigration rules? Far from supporting integration—

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Kate Campbell: I will.

Carol Mochan: I thank Kate Campbell for taking the intervention and greatly value her contribution. One point that I will make in my contribution is about the committee's scrutiny and the importance of taking on board what the Parliament's committees highlight. It is important to make sure that we understand the committee's evidence.

Kate Campbell: I agree. I read the committee report and I found lots to disagree with in it, which is why I am standing here, making this speech in support of the bill. We should certainly listen to what committees say, but it is part of democracy that, when we disagree with them, we should take them to task.

I am disappointed by the position that Labour is taking, and I am also disappointed that, since 2024, its new rules have made it harder for people to get indefinite leave to remain. Those rules make most people's wait longer. It used to be five years, but it is now 10 years, and that is just to start the application. Some people will be waiting for decades before they can get indefinite leave to remain. That means that there will be more people with limited leave to remain. They may have settled in their communities, opened businesses, started families and built lives around the communities that they live in, and they should be able to represent those communities. They should be encouraged to represent those communities—and, frankly, we need them, because we are failing to represent those communities at the moment, given how utterly undiverse we are.

What has changed? I—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am afraid that the member must come to a conclusion.

Kate Campbell: I am coming to a conclusion, Deputy Presiding Officer.

What has changed? I really hope that the answer is not a slow creep of capitulation to the culture wars that are being waged by a small number of very vocal people in this chamber, because, if that is what we are witnessing today, trust in our democracy is seriously at risk.

15:41

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I have been really disappointed by much of the rhetoric around this debate. When I first came to this place, in 2021, I knew that I was going to disagree with some people. I was prepared for the fact that my views are not universal and I knew that debate was going to happen, that it would often be robust, and that there would be times when arguments were difficult to hear as well as to understand. However, I did not expect to be standing here five years later and frequently having to call out blatant racism from colleagues who are here to represent everyone who lives in their constituencies. I cannot separate the change of tone on the issue from the mentions of "strangers" and banning religious headdresses that we have heard since the election in May.

The bill corrects a drafting error in the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025. I remember the bill that became that act going through Parliament in the previous session. Why there was a drafting error and why the bill that we are discussing today is not the first bill that corrects an act that we have had to vote on during my time here, or, indeed, in the past 12 months, are valid questions that I reckon some should be reflecting on.

However, the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill went through unanimously and it gave people rights on the basis of which they may have taken life decisions. In many cases, those people have lived here for years, paid taxes and worked hard, and they will have played a part in returning the 129 people who sit in this chamber. Some of those people may even be stepping up to work hard for their communities as a local councillor next year, and they will be putting themselves forward for election knowing the kind of insidious rhetoric that they are going to expose themselves to. They do not deserve to have the rug pulled out from under them. They deserve only our support and encouragement.

I turn to the earlier comments from the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. In response to an important point from Q Manivannan, she noted that a right to vote should not necessarily correlate with a right to stand, and she was echoed by Jackie Baillie. I reflect that we have all sat here and listened to those members' comments. I ask those who are listening to this debate to ask themselves whether, if they had limited leave to remain, they would have confidence that they were represented by this Parliament as things stand, never mind in a future where their right to come here had been taken away.

That brings me to a huge piece of context that has been missing from some of the arguments that have been made. Whatever members' views are on the checks and balances that exist in paperwork when someone puts themselves forward for election, another strong check and balance exists, and that is that people still have to vote for them. Generally, a party has to vet them, and they then have to convince the people they want to represent that they are the one that those people should vote for. They will be subject to hustings, correspondence and media scrutiny. Even in the case of the regional list, the party has to decide that they deserve to be in a position to be elected.

Parties that were in this place at the time when the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill was considered are giving different excuses for their heel turns and different reasons why a simple correction to a bill that was passed unanimously is worth their taking the matter up at First Minister's question time and putting out deeply concerned statements. That is a response to a far-right campaign that has, as we heard earlier today, been whipped up largely to have a go at a minority ethnic member of this Parliament—one of our colleagues—who not only deserves respect and courtesy as a genuinely lovely, hard-working, friendly and intelligent person, but is also due those things under the code of conduct that we are all subject to.

I encourage all members to think very hard about their principles, to be clear in their own minds about what their views are and to decide which of their beliefs are real. This will not be the last culture war that the Parliament is dragged into and it will not be the last time that colleagues wonder whether it is just easier to give in, due to social media pressure, but if that is what is going to drive a member's decision making, they should not be here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to closing speeches.

15:45

Lorna Slater: I have only a few closing remarks to make in response to some of what has been said. Jackie Baillie is particularly distressed about the lack of scrutiny, apparently, of people standing for election in Scotland. The member has apparently forgotten that we have a free press, which very energetically scrutinises candidates, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds. Tim Eagle was concerned that his position is not a far right position, but I say that stirring up fear of immigrants and suggesting that immigrants are a danger to us, our country and our way of life is absolutely a far right position.

I am very happy to clarify my remarks for colleagues across the chamber to say that Nathan Gill, 53, the

"former leader of Reform UK in Wales has been ordered to pay more than £22,500 after accepting bribes to make pro-Russian statements in the European Parliament."

Therefore, it is not necessarily immigrants that we need to be worried about. Drumming up fear of immigrants and using this drafting correction to do so is deeply shameful, and I am very upset by the debate we have had in the chamber today.

The Scottish Greens will continue to work to expand the franchise, welcome new Scots and support democratic principles.

15:46

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): First, I commend the many thoughtful speeches that we have heard today. It is easy to see that a number of people have been honest and that they have changed their minds. I thank the committee for its report, which shows the importance of the committee work that takes place in the Scottish Parliament. It is very difficult for any individual, not least a politician, to admit

when they are wrong, but the ability to do that is essential if we want to see good and consistent laws passed for the benefit of our citizens living in Scotland. That is what it is really about when it comes down to it—making sure that our citizens are properly represented.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Julie MacDougall: Therefore, here is the question that we need to ask at this first stage—

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Julie MacDougall: Will the principles behind the bill enhance the quality of our democratic system in Scotland—

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Minister, Ms MacDougall is not taking an intervention.

Julie MacDougall: As a sitting Fife councillor, I am aware of the view that those principles will not do that. Having lived abroad myself, I would not expect to be given the right to stand without being a citizen of the country. Over the years, I have gotten to know my own community and I know the concerns of local residents, organisations and businesses. I am not saying that every councillor needs to have lived in an area for a certain amount of time to do a good job, but it definitely helps with being able to represent constituents and their interests much better.

I feel that that is what our voters want at the end of the day. They want to elect people they know and who understand their issues. As my colleague Mark Simpson and others have highlighted, 77 per cent of people who were initially consulted on the changes completely disagree with opening up candidacy rights in that way, and that is key. If we are all being honest, which, in fairness, I think we, across the chamber, are now trying to be, it goes against all common sense to wish the people concerned to sit in these positions of power.

Emma Roddick: Will the member take an intervention?

Julie MacDougall: Fundamentally, we cannot reasonably expect foreign residents, without any long-term assurances that they will remain in the country—

Q Manivannan: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: She is not having a debate.

Julie MacDougall: —to be properly able to represent communities as a local law maker. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Can we not have comments from sedentary positions, please?

Julie MacDougall: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I have tried, unsuccessfully, on numerous occasions to intervene, so I would like my moment, please. [*Interruption*.]

No other countries allow citizens from abroad to stand for elections in this way. When he appeared before the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, Professor Alistair Clark said:

> "Candidacy rights do not naturally follow from voting rights"

He also said:

> "Eligibility for election is not necessary in order to be represented."—[*Official Report, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee*, 8 October 2026; c 6-7.]

I believe that Jackie Baillie touched on that point earlier, and I think that it was quite a powerful statement. As a councillor and an MSP, I deal with casework from constituents regardless of which country they come from and treat each case with the same dignity and seriousness that all of them deserve. I have no doubt that everyone across the chamber will feel the same way.

This is not a question of exclusion; it is a question of whether we genuinely believe that our families, our communities and our country are better represented by those without a permanent right to remain. I do not believe that that is the case, so I will be voting not to carry the bill through to stage 2, and I sincerely hope that all members in the chamber will do the same.

15:50

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the members who have spoken in the debate. I also thank the committee and, in particular, Jenni Minto, the committee's convener. Having worked with her in the

previous session, I know—as will many members—that what she said at the start of her speech was 100 per cent correct and that she takes her role extremely seriously.

The committee is made up of two SNP members, a Labour member and a Conservative member. Having listened to the committee members who have spoken today, I think that they took the relevant evidence sessions very seriously. In its scrutiny of the bill, the committee explored the impact of the bill's principles more widely. I think that all of us can understand the committee's role in that scrutiny, so we can appreciate the reasoning behind having further scrutiny of candidacy rights in Scotland and gain a better understanding of the implications of some of the changes made through the bill.

I would like to put on record my support and Scottish Labour's support for the premise that the Scottish Parliament and local government should include representatives of all demographics in society and that elected members should come from diverse backgrounds that reflect our society. I thank the members who raised that point in their thoughtful contributions. However, I gently point out that it is the role of the committee and members to do the right thing and reflect on legislation.

I understand that the bill that we are discussing seeks to address a narrow technical error. However, after the evidence session that explored the policy of expanding candidacy rights to foreign nationals with limited leave to remain more broadly, the committee came to the conclusion that we should consider the issue further. The committee took evidence and then did not agree to move the bill on.

Jamie Hepburn: The member acknowledges that the bill has been produced in order to fix an error. She must accept that we could fix that error, and the work that she talks about could still happen.

Carol Mochan: There are two views on that. There is a commonsense approach that suggests that, if we are questioning some of the changes that were made by the 2025 act, it would be counterproductive to support the bill at this stage and correct that error. That would be my view, but I completely understand that there is another view within the Parliament.

Q Manivannan: Considering that there has been a lot of conversation about people with limited leave to remain not being able to serve their whole terms, I draw the member's attention to the following Labour councillors who have resigned, causing by-elections: David Russell, who resigned in September 2025; Kirsteen Sullivan; and Scott Arthur, who resigned when he became an MP. Further, Mary McNab was found to have been ineligible to stand, and her disqualification also caused a by-election. Are the same scrutiny criteria going to be extended to such individuals or only to Commonwealth citizens?

Carol Mochan: The points that we have debated about the scrutiny of candidates are probably quite relevant, so I appreciate that intervention. I would probably come on to that point if I had time, but time is marching on. I would certainly have a discussion with the member on that point.

Our committees have an important role in the scrutiny process, and I think that dismissing or ignoring their calls and concerns would undermine that.

There are three main points in the debate that I think are important. One concerns the technicalities and the practical issues around whether there could or could not be a by-election if someone did not have the right to remain for their full term. Secondly, there is the issue of public trust, which this Parliament cannot dismiss—we have to think about that. Thirdly, I think that we are all agreed on the need to revisit the way in which eligibility criteria are checked.

I recognise that my time is up. Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call the minister, Jamie Hepburn, to respond to the debate.

15:55

Jamie Hepburn: This has been a lively debate, and I am grateful to members for their contributions. Although the provisions in the bill are very limited—I reiterate that point—I understand that there are a variety of views among members across the chamber on the wider policy that underpins the change that it seeks to make. I accept that, but I reiterate what I said earlier: the bill has been introduced for one single, simple purpose, which is to correct an oversight in existing legislation.

I have to say that Julie MacDougall, very much like Mark Simpson, seemed very reticent to engage in any actual debate. I understood that Reform UK members were here to shake the Parliament to its foundations. If they are seeking to do that, they might want to try engaging in some form of interaction when we are having a debate. Although I agreed with Julie MacDougall when she said that there should be consistency in the law, I would simply put to her the point that it seems rather inconsistent to have a position whereby some foreign

nationals with limited leave to remain will be able to stand in the council elections next year while a very small cohort who are Commonwealth nationals will not have the same right. That seems inconsistent to me, and the way in which we can resolve that is by passing the bill today.

I agree with Alex Cole-Hamilton that it seems surprising that the bill should have caused such a furore, given that it is a very simple proposition to fix a mistake. The bill is printed on four pages—if we strip out its title, the blank page that we always seem to need to include in any bill, for some inexplicable reason, and the names of those who have signed it, it comes to one page of A4 to fix a simple mistake.

Its purpose is to ensure that the law operates as Parliament intended when it unanimously passed the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill in 2024. I hear it said, and it is true, that Reform UK was not elected to Parliament as a party in the previous session. However, the party has on its benches a representative who was elected in the previous session, and, if ever there was a member who was engaged in consideration of that bill at that time, it is Graham Simpson. He was fully engaged in that regard, although he seems rather less involved in this session—he seems to be hidden away by Reform UK these days, for some reason. He voted in favour of the bill, too, and we should get that on the record.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, in its stage 1 report, noted that it disagrees with the underlying policy on candidacy law relating to people with limited leave to remain. As I have set out, the Government will, as members would expect, consider the report that the committee has produced. Nonetheless, I go back to the point that I made in my opening remarks, which I also made at the committee and set out in my response to the report: if the committee wants to look at the issue again, the Government will engage with that process. Mr Eagle says that he is going to propose a bill—if he does so, it is incumbent on the Government to engage with that process, too.

However, we are in the chamber today to discuss one issue: the candidacy rights in local government elections for Commonwealth citizens with limited leave to remain. The bill that is before Parliament today seeks to bring the law into line with the stated intention of a bill for which Parliament voted unanimously less than two years ago. The bill before us does not seek to address the wider merits or otherwise of aspects of our candidacy law; it is about making sure that the law is clear and consistent ahead of the May 2027 local government elections.

I will turn to some of the issues that were raised during the debate. Jenni Minto talked about the challenge presented by the cluttered landscape of elections legislation, which ranges across a large number of different acts passed by different Parliaments. I recognise that, and I agree that it is a challenge. We have responded to the report that the committee produced, and we will give some consideration to that task. I should say, however, that doing so would be no small undertaking. Indeed, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, leading on the UK Government's Representation of the People Bill, which is currently going through the UK Parliament, said in a debate that

"A full-scale consolidation and simplification would need an in-depth review and modernisation alongside consolidation, which would be the job of more than one Parliament to achieve."—[*Official Report*, *House of Lords*, 14 September 2026; Vol 859, c 1057.]

We should, therefore, go into that with our eyes wide open.

On checks on nomination forms, which Jackie Baillie raised, I have already said that we will consult on that. However, I go back to the point that I made earlier: although the number of candidates in previous council elections is a small proportion of the overall population of Scotland, it would be no small undertaking for returning officers to check the nomination forms of, say, 2,548 candidates, which is the number who stood in 2022. Again, we should go into that proposal with our eyes wide open, because that would be a significant task for returning officers.

As an aside, on the great concern that opening up candidacy rights will lead to a big upsurge in the number of candidates, I note that, in 2007, when candidacy rights were more restricted, there were more candidates for local government than in the most recent election, in 2022.

Lorna Slater: Trust in politics has been raised several times in the debate. Does the minister have any thoughts on whether a Commonwealth citizen wanting to serve their community is more likely to undermine trust in politics than a former leader of Reform UK who took bribes from the Russians?

Jamie Hepburn: The next line that is written here in my notes is on public trust in politics, so I turn to that. I absolutely agree with Lorna Slater's point. Nathan Gill, as the leader of Reform UK in Wales, utterly breached public trust in politics. As far as I am aware, he is a UK national, and he is now serving time in jail for the crime that he committed, acting as an agent for Russia.

I could also mention, as an aside, that the Good Law Project has shown that, since 2010, the Conservatives have accepted £3.5 million from donors with links to Russia, including some after the invasion of Ukraine—but perhaps I will not mention that.

Tim Eagle said that we should not pass the bill, because it will entrench the issue. That is not the most convincing argument; otherwise, we would say that any bill that we tried to take forward would entrench something into the law. We are able to come back to and reconsider the law—that is what we do. We know that laws can be changed. Mr Cole-Hamilton suggested that he might lodge an amendment to introduce a form of review clause. I do not know whether that would be in scope, but I am happy to engage with him. To go back to the point that I made earlier, we will, of course, give consideration to the recommendation of the committee.

This is a simple proposition. I take seriously the issues that have been raised about foreign interference, but it seems somewhat overstated to suggest that a Commonwealth national seeking to be elected to Clackmannanshire Council will do so to be a fundamental threat to the state. The bill is about fixing a mistake that was made in legislation. We want to have consistency and clarity for our electoral administrators ahead of next year's council elections. We should pass the bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes the debate on the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill at stage 1.

Armed Forces Community (Remembrance)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Our next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01993, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on remembering the service of the armed forces community.

16:03

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): It is a privilege to open today's debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. Each November, people across Scotland come together to honour the brave men and women of our armed forces who, across generations, have served to protect our country and the freedoms that we enjoy today.

On Sunday, as I do each year, I laid a wreath in my constituency to honour those killed in war. The war memorial in Cumbernauld village lists the names of 61 men from the Cumbernauld district who were killed in the first world war and 24 men who were killed in the second world war. Cumbernauld was not a new town of more than 50,000 residents then; it was a small village surrounded by farm steadings with a population just in the hundreds. As in so many communities across Scotland, the loss to the locality was significant.

Yesterday, all party leaders gathered with our Presiding Officer and other elected members in the Parliament's garden lobby to come together in a two-minute silence as a signal of our shared commitment to honour and remember all those who lost their lives in conflict—both military personnel and civilians. We pay particular tribute to those from Scotland, across the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and our allied nations, whose courage, service and sacrifice helped to secure the liberties and relative peace that we enjoy today.

Although remembrance holds profound national significance, members from all parties will bring their own personal reflections and connections to today's debate, because it is deeply personal for many families and communities.

At this time, as many will during the debate, I particularly think of family members who served. During world war two, one grandfather served on the home front and another served in the 51st Highland division of the Seaforth Highlanders in North Africa, Italy and France, while my great-grandfather served in the first world war. I do not doubt that we will hear of similar family experiences from other members, and that is a reminder of the deep-rooted familial links with military service in Scotland.

Scotland is home to a large and vibrant armed forces and veterans community, and the contributions of charities and third sector organisations are essential in providing support, advice and advocacy across the country. I am sure that I speak for all members when I express our gratitude to all those—whether volunteers, fundraisers, staff or supporters—who contribute to that work.

At this time, we particularly recognise the poppy appeal and the vital work that it funds throughout the year. The appeal provides practical care, advice and support to serving personnel, veterans and their families across Scotland. This year, for the first time and in a symbolic moment that I hope will become a lasting tradition, the First Minister made the first donation to the Scottish poppy appeal and received the first poppy.

The appeal's success depends on the commitment and dedication of volunteers in communities across the country and on the generosity of the Scottish public. Through their endeavours, every penny raised in Scotland directly supports veterans and their families here in Scotland, and I offer my sincere thanks to all those who collect, organise, volunteer and give. Through their efforts, remembrance is translated into practical support.

As ever, the work of Legion Scotland is invaluable in leading remembrance activity across our country. I am grateful for all that it does, not only to ensure that those who served are remembered with dignity but to support veterans and their families throughout the year.

The events that Legion Scotland organises, alongside the many local services and commemorations that take place throughout Scotland, provide an important opportunity to honour those who have fallen, and to recognise those who continue to serve and those who support our armed forces community.

On Sunday, the First Minister attended the national service of remembrance at the city chambers in Edinburgh and the Deputy First Minister attended the service of remembrance at George Square in Glasgow. I was privileged to attend Legion Scotland's festival of remembrance at the Usher hall last weekend. It was a moving and memorable occasion focusing on those who served in Afghanistan, combining moments of reflection with the recognition of service and sacrifice. That evening, we heard from the mother of a young man who served in Afghanistan with the Royal Army Veterinary Corps and, tragically, lost his life in conflict. She told us how the military working dog that he served alongside also died while being transported back to base. Amid unimaginable grief, she found some comfort in knowing that he was not alone in his final journey.

The wife and son of a veteran carried the book of remembrance on to the stage. Their loved one had served in the army for a number of years prior to being injured during his service in Afghanistan. He was brought back to the UK and received excellent care and rehabilitation but, sadly, passed away less than a year later as a result of his injuries, with his son still unspeakably young at the time when he lost his father.

Those experiences remain with me, because they speak to something at the heart of remembrance. Behind every name etched in stone, every wreath laid and every poppy worn, there is a family whose loss never leaves them. Their experience reminds us of the impact of war, not only on those who serve but on those left behind.

The consequences of conflict do not end when the fighting stops but can echo for generations. Legion Scotland also plays a vital role in helping younger generations to understand the impact of conflict and the true cost of war. Through commemorations and opportunities to engage with veterans, the experiences and sacrifices of those who served are brought vividly to life, ensuring that history remains personal, relevant and meaningful.

As the years pass by, the events of wartime pass further into history. In the past week, we lost one of Scotland's last surviving D day veterans with the passing of Charlie Horne, whom the First Minister met at the Normandy commemorations in 2024. In our time, we have seen the passing of the generation who served in the first world war and are now seeing the passing of those who served in the second world war. It therefore becomes ever more important that we preserve their lessons and continue to honour those who sacrificed their futures for our tomorrow.

Remembrance calls on us to recognise the experience of civilians whose lives were irrevocably altered by conflict, the communities shattered by war and the families left to endure uncertainty, anxiety and loss. At a time when conflict continues to affect communities across the world, it is ever more important that we reflect on the courage shown by those who came before us and on the lessons that history teaches.

Remembrance is not about glorifying war and it is not a celebration of conflict; rather, it is an act of collective reflection. It is an opportunity to honour courage, service and sacrifice while recognising the profound human cost that war inflicts. In remembering the past, we renew our commitment to a more peaceful future. At time for reflection in the chamber on Tuesday, the Rev Dr Alistair May said to us:

"we mark armistice day. We do not celebrate; we remember."—[*Official Report*, 10 November 2026; c 1.]

Those few words capture the spirit of the season perfectly.

I move,

That the Parliament pays tribute to all individuals across Scotland, the UK, the Commonwealth and Allied Nations who were harmed or killed in war; is grateful to those who served and sacrificed to build the relative peace and freedoms that people enjoy today; acknowledges the enduring importance of the Remembrance period to families and communities and the importance of maintaining awareness amongst younger generations as events become more distant; remembers all victims of wars, those that happened in the past as well as those happening now, and recognises Scotland's Veterans and Armed Forces community and the significant contribution that they continue to make to the nation.

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

16:11

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to open for Labour in this year's debate and also to have signed the Government's motion in a spirit of consensus. I thank the minister for his opening remarks and, in particular, for his personal reflections on what this time of year means to him and his family.

With 176,000 veterans across Scotland and about 14,000 currently serving in our armed forces, and considering the family and friends networks, this cuts close and is very meaningful for a huge swathe of the Scottish population. It is a sober period of reflection for our country and it is right that we come together in the Parliament today to mark it.

The motion asks us to pay tribute to all those

"who were harmed or killed in war",

and it asks us to keep awareness alive among younger generations as the events of major wars become thankfully more distant. The emphasis in the Government's motion is the right one, and it is also a reminder that the wars of the past are not all in the past. We must remember victims of wars that are being fought today and those who continue to carry the enduring scars of their experiences.

On Sunday, I attended the service at the Glasgow cenotaph in George Square to remember all those who left the familiar tenement closes of my home city to serve their country but never came back. Remembrance services are a moment of sadness and pain at lives lost too soon, but they are also a moment to get together and celebrate absent friends. For many of us who have served in the armed forces, remembrances are as much about catching up with old pals as they are about solemn reflection, which is a powerful form of therapy in itself. Over the years, I have found that that allows many of my friends who are struggling in ways that they find hard to explain, even to their comrades, to find some comfort. There is still a culture, particularly in the army, of people not talking about their difficulties. That is why this debate matters so much to me personally.

More than 100,000 people from across the UK served in operations Telic and Herrik in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are people of my generation and they are not only the veterans of a distant war; many of them are our neighbours or colleagues in our workplaces, and they contribute to their communities every day. Many are carrying more of a burden than we might be able to see or fully appreciate.

I am reminded of my own experiences almost every day when walking past the Canongate kirk, because, in 2013, that was where we carried out one of my best friends, Robert Hetherington, who was killed in Helmand province, in Afghanistan, at the age of just 25. At this time of year, I often reflect on what he could be doing today. This was a man who was captain of the Scotland lacrosse team, who was excelling at university and who thought that going to serve on a tour as a reservist in Afghanistan would be a great experience for him before considering going off to serve in the regular army. Sadly, his potential as one of the finest figures of my generation was never fully realised. That wasted potential is often at the forefront of my mind at this time of year.

I am sure that many members in the chamber today will pay tribute to the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Lieutenant Commander Susie Hamilton. I am grateful that she will continue in her post until June next year, and I thank her for holding both the Government, and the Parliament as an institution collectively, to account with such diligence and good grace.

An eighth progress report has been published that covers all of her recommendations, and I will be candid and say that it is a more sober read than last year's. Last year, I noted with some pride that there were no red actions, which showed a Parliament united behind the Government's efforts. This year, the commissioner has told us that progress has slowed. She describes a "muted picture overall" and says that she is disappointed. As we are early in a new parliamentary session and the Government has only just set out its programme, I take that as a challenge to be met in the coming months, not as a verdict that we should necessarily feel despair about.

Several areas stand out. On mental health, the commissioner acknowledges that some significant milestones are being reached this year. The national framework was published in March, the wraparound service is due to begin this month and the digital hub is expected in the new year. I welcome all of that, but, as I have said before in Parliament, the concern is how long it has taken to get here.

We know that veterans can wait many years before asking for help. Having asked for help, they should not have to wait again and continually have to relate their difficulties. Where in the country a veteran lives should not determine whether they can get support. I hope that the minister will be able to confirm that veterans first point services will not be left with a gap as the new model beds in.

On homelessness, I welcome the new local housing strategy guidance, which asks local authorities to consider the needs of veterans as well as those of spouses, partners, children and the bereaved. I also

welcome the changes in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 that bring forward the point at which councils must act.

However, the commissioner is clear that minimal progress has been made on the veterans' homelessness prevention pathway. I raised that issue two years ago, when progress on the pathway was already described as slow. Three years on from that point, no one who has served should be facing the prospect of sleeping rough. I support the commissioner's call for a working group to give the work rigour and focus, and I hope that the Government will say today that it will establish one. The minister still has an opportunity to say so in his closing remarks.

The commissioner is clear that much of the progress that has been made has come from partnership with the third sector, and that is my experience, too. The increasing of the Scottish veterans fund to £600,000 a year and the extra funding for Veterans Scotland will help. The SSAFA Connect service in Glasgow remains the model that I want to be implemented everywhere in Scotland, because it is the one place where a veteran can walk in and get help with housing, benefits, employment and health in a one-stop shop. There is lots to be done, but we must celebrate SSAFA Connect's success. I am pleased that the UK Government has supported that model through a £1 million grant from the Valour scheme, which will allow it to expand across the M8 corridor. That expansion will greatly reinforce the model.

This is the 10th time that we have had this debate, and I am conscious that members' contributions can sound very familiar from year to year, but that is partly because the problems are persistent and partly because the good will in the Parliament is real. Labour will support the Government's motion, and we will keep working with the Government, the commissioner and the charities to deliver. Those who have served our country deserve nothing less.

16:17

David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): Because I am a former submariner and because Faslane sits in my region, my speech will be mainly about the submarine service.

Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson, former First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, made this famous statement condemning submarine warfare in 1901. He declared that submarines were

"underhanded, unfair and damned un-English",

and he suggested that captured submariners should be treated as pirates and hanged. Of course, he was not referring to Royal Navy submariners, but our submariners delighted in that characterisation and readily adopted the Jolly Roger.

One of the earliest examples of that occurred on the morning of 13 September 1914, when RN submarine HMS E9 torpedoed and sank the German cruiser SMS Hela. To mark the crew's achievement—and, one suspects, to thumb their collective noses at the admiral's characterisation—E9's captain, Lieutenant Commander Max Horton, proudly, and perhaps defiantly, flew the Jolly Roger while returning to port.

The submarine community has always been a very small one in comparison with the rest of the Royal Navy. The submarine losses during the first and second world wars were devastating. During the first world war, we lost 54 submarines and, during the second, we lost 79. Submariners hold their remembrance weekend the weekend before remembrance Sunday events.

The official story of how that came to be is that, because of the devastating submarine losses during the first world war, submariners were provided with a separate day on which to remember those they had lost, in their own silent way. That is the official party line. Another version is that, at the time, the Admiralty was not especially fond of submarines or submariners. They were often viewed with an element of distrust, and they were not particularly liked by other parts of the armed forces. Therefore, they were deliberately excluded from official remembrance events. Yet another version, which might also be true, at least in part, is that submariners were a scruffy bunch. They often smelled of diesel and were really bad at marching. There is not much of a requirement to march on board a submarine, and there is nowhere to hang up your number 1 uniform, so that story is more than credible.

.This year, I was incredibly privileged to attend a dedication to the submarine service on Saturday 31 October at Westminster abbey and then the submariners' remembrance service at Middle Temple gardens in London on 1 November, where I laid a wreath on behalf of the Scottish Parliament. At the service on the Saturday, "The Diesel Submariners Prayer" was read out. I would like to share it with members, just to get it on the record:

"Our Captain, who art in the control room,
hallowed be thy aim.

Thy targets come,
they will be done,
on the surface as in Neptune's kingdom.

Give us this day our daily tot
And forgive us our defaults,
as we forgive those who default against us.
Lead us into calm waters,
and deliver us from roughers.

For thine is the ocean
the power in the batteries
until we have to charge them again
Pipe down".

I attended the event with a small group of veteran peers. However, we were a cohort of veterans who were noticeably low in numbers. There were groups of cadets, which was lovely to see, and there were older veterans of the 60-plus cohort, which was also lovely to see. Standing shoulder to shoulder with them were serving members of the submarine service. The number of those wearing bomber pins, which distinguish those who have served on Trident submarines, was particularly low.

Those who serve in our armed forces, throughout their time in the services, learn all about the historic achievements and sacrifices of those who have gone before them. They also have a unique understanding of what it must have been like during the world wars, and with that understanding comes an even deeper respect, which they would never have gained had they themselves not served.

Many of the current cohort of service leavers are incredibly angry about the state of our armed forces. Defence gets hit hardest at the front line. Social and political commentary that attacks the armed forces and memorials is particularly offensive to our veterans. It is okay to disagree with political choices, but disagreement should never be directed at our armed forces or veterans.

Paul Sweeney: As a submariner, the member will appreciate that not all conflicts are fought in plain view. I am thinking, in particular, of our submariners who are now enduring patrols of up to 200 days under water without any contact with their friends or family. That requires a particular form of mental resilience that we can all truly admire.

David Smith: I totally agree, and I will come on to that in the next part of my speech.

I have witnessed grown men—outstanding men who have done more than 20 years' service—literally burst into tears because of the pressures of getting a boat to sea. I have witnessed a man have a nervous breakdown on board due to the pressures of trying to keep a boat at sea. I have had conversations with very impressive junior rates who we wanted to send for promotion but who declined it and then left the service. One of them even stated that he was leaving because he did not want to end up as miserable as we were.

Make no mistake: the intense pressures that our service members face come from political choices. They are the veterans of tomorrow. The reason why that is so important in this debate is that those service leavers are losing sight of remembrance. Many of them are disengaging and they are not being seen at remembrance services. What I ask of the Parliament is that, while we reflect on remembrance, we never lose sight of what those in our armed forces are doing now and that we take every opportunity to put our arms around them and show them all our support and respect, regardless of our politics.

16:23

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I thank the minister for his remarks. I also fully associate myself with the remarks of Paul Sweeney and offer him my heartfelt condolences on the loss of his friend.

I am deeply honoured to take part in this debate, in which everybody across the chamber has the opportunity to show consensus in our respect for those who have sacrificed more than any of us here could begin to imagine. Just over 80 years ago, Europe's darkest chapter came to a close. After years of fighting, struggling and pushing for the dignity of peoples, the horror of what had taken place across our continent and beyond it began to take shape. Men and women all round our country began to mourn not just the many who gave their lives for us but because of the sheer cruelty of humankind, which was exposed across our newspapers and news bulletins. We vowed that we would never forget, and we shall not.

However, as the numbers of veterans of that war become more and more sparse, it is now more important than ever that we keep their memory and sacrifices alive. During that time, many people—predominantly working-class young men—witnessed the horrors of the crumbling of democracy and the lack of freedom.

How far can a mob go when it is whipped up by language intended to other and harm? We should be proud that our ancestors stood against that, just as many of us continue to do today.

In that cohort stood my great-grandfather and grandpop, whose valiance and bravery I carry every day in their honour. What met them and others represented the worst of humankind: dehumanisation, bloodshed and the loss of the most important thing, which is the sanctity of life. They fought for freedom, democracy and hope, and, as the true, original anti-fascists, in the name of our families and the future that we are all now in the chamber to shepherd. We remember their sacrifice, not just because they did it but because of how much they gave to do it and how much they instilled those values in the society that we have now.

As the minister said, the war did not end when the last bullet was fired. Many people returned harmed, disabled and traumatised by the unspeakable horrors that they had seen and afflicted with what we used to call shellshock but is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. They came back to a Government that, in many cases, was willing to support them and was focused on their reintegration needs. As many members have mentioned, perhaps we should re-evaluate whether that is still the case as we look to the veterans of today. Some 50 per cent of surveyed veterans say that leaving the forces has left them socially isolated. Almost one in five has struggled with depression, and others claim that they are unable to sleep. Although we have a fantastic suite of post-forces charity organisations, perhaps our Government could do more to ensure that those who fought for us are fought for by the entire country.

As members will know, despite our best efforts, the effects of war did not end in 1945. Many other people, some from places close to home and others far away from here, have suffered and continue to suffer the horrors of war and bloodshed. Just east from here, our Ukrainian brothers and sisters once again face a dictator intent on harming for his own gain. Further afield, the genocide in Gaza continues to harm, scar and traumatise so many, and British veterans are murdered simply for trying to distribute food. War is the force of last resort, and economies of war are ones that we should not support. The good people of this country and this world should isolate those leaders, whether of businesses or countries, who support and work to catalyse war.

I am proud to take part in today's remembrance debate. As many other members do, I believe that remembering those who sacrificed for us and supporting our surviving veterans make it incumbent on us to eradicate war and destroy the possibility of creating another generation that has to mourn. Last Sunday, colleagues from across the political spectrum gathered in remembrance at Glasgow cenotaph, where the Rev Mark Johnstone reminded us that it is on us to be peacekeepers and to remember why we fought, why we must never let that happen again, why we must not dehumanise, why we must reduce war and conflict, why we must accept and welcome those who flee, and why we should harken far back as to why we gather every year to remember.

I remember so that future generations will not have to mourn; I remember to fight so that it never happens again; and I continue to remember so that our humanity is never forgotten and so that we never forget. I hope that colleagues in the chamber will remember as well.

16:28

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I pay tribute to those from across Britain and the Commonwealth and all our allies who fought for our freedoms.

On Sunday, I attended the remembrance service in Helensburgh, which is beside HM Naval Base Clyde. David Smith—who, I can confirm, does not smell of diesel—was also there. Faslane is home to Britain's nuclear deterrent, which I visited a few weeks ago. I take this opportunity to thank the people who work there, especially the Royal Navy sub-admirals who, as Paul Sweeney pointed out, can spend many months at a time submerged under the waves. I am also grateful to the families of Britain's service personnel—army, navy and air force. Forces families live a life of service, uncertainty and upheaval, going wherever their service takes them. It is those quiet, dutiful, unassuming men and women and their families who keep our country safe.

Our generation has been blessed by relative peace. Our peace, however, is not a given right but a hard-won privilege. That privilege has been earned by the blood and the sacrifice of others, which is why we take our remembrance seriously and why it must endure.

Almost 1.3 million British service personnel were killed during the first and second world wars combined. The numbers are so great that they are hard to comprehend, just as it is hard for any of us to truly comprehend the horrors of war. Today, we remember those slaughtered in the blood-soaked fields of the western front; those who perished on the high seas; those who took to the skies, never to return; and those civilians who were bombed in Clydebank and other parts of Britain.

Paul Sweeney: Russell Findlay makes a good point about how we fathom the scale of the destruction. One of the interesting things that was done during the centenary of the first world war was a walking tour of Dennistoun, in Glasgow. We had records of everyone who was killed in that community, and participants went to visit the tenement flats where they had perished. We saw that, in every close, a family had been bereaved. That truly brought the scale of it home. Perhaps more such community-based activities could help us to appreciate that.

Russell Findlay: I can only imagine how profound and impactful it would have been for people to see that on their own doorsteps. Last year, I was at a service in Kilmacolm, where the minister had taken the time to research the names on the war memorial. He brought those stories to life in much the same way, which made them much more impactful for local families and the local community.

So many young lives were extinguished during those times. When I was in Helensburgh on Sunday, I was asked to inspect the young army cadets of today. They were smart, engaging and inspiring. I asked one particularly youthful cadet what age he was, and he replied that he was 15 years and 10 months. He told me that on his 16th birthday he would be signing up, and I wished him all the best. Fifteen years and 10 months is exactly the same age as a young man called Rifleman Valentine Joe Strudwick, who was killed in Belgium during the first world war. It is hard to imagine, but, at that time, so many other 15 and 16-year-olds—mere children—went to war, never to return. They are the ones who gave their tomorrows for our today, and we must remember them

Although we all pray for no bloodshed in the future, we must also be prepared. We must look at Putin's relentless slaughter of the brave people of Ukraine; think of the fragility of the alliances that have kept us safe for so long; and listen to warnings from the security services and senior military figures about a new form of hybrid warfare through cyberattacks, bomb threats, drones, assassinations and dirty money in our elections. We all recognise that that is why we need to spend more money on our defence. As the ancient Roman saying goes: if you want peace, prepare for war.

16:33

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): I declare that I am a sitting councillor.

I would like to take a moment to thank Paul Sweeney for his incredibly moving speech and say that I am incredibly sorry for the loss of his friend.

As a councillor for the Black Isle, in Highland Council, I have worked very closely with people connected to the armed forces, past and present, so I am immensely grateful to speak in the debate.

Remembrance asks two things of us. First, it asks us to look back and to commemorate those who have given their lives for our freedom, pledging that we strive to never again return to the violence and the loss of the past, but the second ask is much harder. It asks us what we owe those who have served in the armed forces and returned to civilian life. That is a question that people in the armed forces community never wait for politicians to answer. When they see a challenge, they instantly rise to meet it—look at C company of the seventh battalion. They cycled more than 800 miles across Scotland over nine days to raise money to support serving soldiers, veterans and their families, and they are not alone.

One organisation that has been responding to that ask for over 100 years is Erskine Veterans Charity, which I know many members will be familiar with. This year marks its 110th anniversary, and in that time it has provided life-altering, and often life-saving, service to more than 100,000 veterans in Scotland.

Erskine has done extraordinary work in my region. Two years ago, Erskine took over the old Victoria hotel in Forres and turned it into a veterans activity centre. I had the pleasure of visiting the centre earlier this year. It offers counselling, a gym, art and information technology classes, and financial advice. Most importantly, it provides a space where veterans can feel welcome and safe, and where they can socialise with people who understand what it is like to leave the armed forces. The centre could not be better placed, as Moray has the highest concentration of veterans anywhere in Scotland. Around 9 per cent of the population have served in the armed forces.

The centre's reach goes much further than that. The staff go out of their way to ensure that no veteran is left behind, by allowing veterans from across the Highlands to access their services. That kinship is evident in the community around the centre. Staff have told us of the amazing donations and support from local residents. They have told us about the success stories of veterans who came to the centre at their lowest point, who now have a place where they feel they belong.

Sadly, staff have also told us harrowing stories, including of veterans sleeping in tents outside the centre, struggling to find a home and often feeling unable to ask for help.

Veterans are among the most capable people in our communities, and the great majority get on well with civilian life, bringing with them skills that all employers should want. For some, however, civilian life is more of a challenge. In cases where that happens, the failure is on us, as politicians, for not doing more to help them overcome those hurdles.

Around 800 homelessness applications are made in Scotland each year by households containing somebody who was in the armed forces. I suspect that the true figure is far higher. Indeed, Poppy Scotland has been clear that the existing data does not capture the full picture.

I appreciate that the Scottish Government is trying to make progress here. The difficulty, as colleagues have said in the chamber previously, is the pace. I understand that the challenge is a difficult one to overcome, but I go back to where I started: remembrance asks us, as politicians and as wider society, what we owe those who have served in the armed forces now that they have returned to our communities.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the words that Morven-May MacCallum is saying about our veterans. Paul Sweeney referred to Susie Hamilton, the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, who produces an annual report. Indeed, he mentioned the annual report in his speech. Does Morven-May MacCallum agree that we should ask the Minister for Veterans, who also happens to be the Minister for Parliamentary Business, whether there would be scope for a debate, in Government time, as an annual event, to consider the commissioner's report, so that the issues that Morven-May MacCallum is raising might be properly discussed in the chamber? I have lodged a motion, which some members have generously signed, for a members' business debate on the matter to be held in the chamber, but I think that such debates would be better sponsored by the Scottish Government.

Morven-May MacCallum: I thank the member for that valuable contribution. I would absolutely support that idea. Anything that we can do to highlight how we might better support our veterans is to be warmly welcomed.

Jamie Hepburn: This is a rather odd way to do this, but I am happy to confirm that, in the new year, I intend to secure a debate on these matters—with the agreement of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Morven-May MacCallum: I appreciate that—it is very warmly welcomed.

We owe our veterans and the organisations supporting them so much more than our gratitude. As much as I would like to give my personal thanks to all veterans and the organisations supporting them, I also wish to make a plea that we do more to support them.

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

16:39

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to mark remembrance and to pay tribute to those who have served in conflicts around the world. My Moray constituency has a long and proud association with the armed forces. Generations of local families have served, and the impact of conflicts has been felt by many of the people I represent.

The scale of the losses in Moray during the first and second world wars can be difficult to comprehend, and they changed the lives of families and communities for ever. That can be powerfully seen in the Cabrach. At the turn of the 20th century, it was a thriving rural community with a population of more than 1,000 people, but the first world war had a devastating impact on the population. A significant proportion of the young men and boys who called that farming community home left to serve and lost their lives. Homes and farms were left empty, and a ghost continues to haunt the community today.

One of those men was Corporal Norman John Robertson, an educated young man who enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders. He was sent to France in 1916. He was severely wounded while fixing wire entanglements under fire, and he died on 30 May 1916. The Cabrach soldiers cairn at Inverharroch ensures that he and all those who left for war and never returned are never forgotten.

In Moray, we do not need to travel far to see permanent reminders of how communities were shaped by the second world war. As we walk the beautiful beaches of the Moray coast, there remain coastal defences, pillboxes and anti-invasion fortifications—reminders that, for past generations, the threat of invasion was very real. In Burghead, the Shetland bus memorial stands as a reminder of the community's role in operations to support resistance against Nazi occupation and help people to escape occupied Norway. One of those involved was Ola Grotle—a Norwegian fisherman and resistance fighter. He was lost at sea in January 1943 alongside seven other men. The memorial at Burghead is a fitting tribute to Ola and a lasting symbol of the friendship between Scotland and Norway.

However, it is not just the contribution of the men that we must remember. Women, too, made significant sacrifices during times of war. The iconic Women's Land Army monument at Clochan commemorates the women who worked the land and helped to keep the country fed while men were serving overseas. The sacrifice of Nurse Mary Fraser, who was a member of the voluntary aid detachment, is listed alongside the names of the servicemen who are commemorated at New Elgin—another significant reminder that women, too, made extraordinary sacrifices.

As members will know, Moray's strong relationship with the armed forces continues today. RAF Lossiemouth remains one of the most important bases in the country, supporting operations at home and overseas, and Kinloss barracks is home to the Army's 39 Engineer Regiment. I am also very proud to be the MSP who represents the highest population of veterans in Scotland. Our armed forces and veterans community is at the heart of Moray's community identity and local life. It was an enormous privilege to join Moray's armed forces community in Elgin on Sunday to remember all those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country's future.

I close with the words of Mary Symon of Dufftown, whose poem "The Soldiers' Cairn" is a poignant reflection on the impact of war on rural communities:

"Lads in your plaidies lyin' still
In lands we'll never see,
This lanely cairn on a hameland hill
Is a' that oor love can dee".

We must never forget those who gave their tomorrow for our today.

16:43

Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am an elected councillor at Glasgow City Council.

Remembrance is a time to honour those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country. It is a time to reflect on their courage, their service and the freedom that their sacrifice helped to protect. Today, however, I want to reflect in particular on those whose contributions have too often been forgotten.

In my constituency, the Nitshill war memorial serves as a lasting reminder of those from my community who lost their lives in the two world wars. During some of the darkest periods in our history, people from across our nation came together, but we did not do it alone. At home, brave men and women volunteered to play their part in whatever way they could to protect their country. To see that, we need look no further than Pollock house in my constituency, which is now a National Trust for Scotland site. It was transformed into a hospital, and recovering soldiers of all ranks received care there, which helped to reduce the strain on hospitals that were supporting the war effort.

However, our wartime history extends far beyond our own communities and the shores of Britain. We must also ensure that the millions of people from beyond the United Kingdom who served and sacrificed in support of the allied war effort are not forgotten.

In world war one, nearly 1.5 million people from the Indian subcontinent served in the military and supporting roles. That includes Khudadad Khan, the first Indian soldier and first Muslim to be awarded the Victoria cross, the highest award for bravery on the battlefield. Despite being wounded, Khan continued firing his weapon as his fellow soldiers fell to the ground, helping to hold back the German forces until reinforcements arrived.

When the world was at war again, 2.5 million men and women volunteered for the British Indian Army, forming the largest volunteer army in history. Force K6 was a unit of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps during the second world war, which was predominantly made up of south Asian soldiers. After escaping Dunkirk and Saint-Nazaire in 1940, the men rebuilt their ranks and trained in Wales. More than 1,700 of them would later come to the Highlands of Scotland, where they trained in the rugged conditions of Badenoch. The story of Force K6 carries a particular personal significance. Among those who served was a soldier named Abdul Ghani—the very same name as my grandfather. It is a small but important reminder of how closely connected our histories are.

For Britain and the Commonwealth, victory brought relief and celebration but also immense grief for those who never returned. Some 87,000 personnel from the British Indian Army lost their lives during the second world war. At a time when division can too often overshadow what brings us together, we should remember that people of different backgrounds, faiths and communities stood side by side in defence of our country. Their sacrifice is not separate from our history; it is an integral part of it.

I thank Colourful Heritage and the many organisations and individuals across Scotland who work tirelessly to ensure that those stories and sacrifices are never forgotten. Colourful Heritage's work to establish a memorial at Kelvingrove museum to recognise the contributions of south Asian servicemen in both world wars is an important part of that effort. It will provide a place for reflection, learning and recognition.

Remembrance is about more than marking the past. It is about ensuring that the next generation see themselves reflected in our civic spaces, our museums and our collective memory. It is about inspiring pride and belonging.

We will remember them.

16:47

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): When I was little, I loved listening to my grandad, who I called Pa, who would tell stories about his time serving in the second world war. I remember that he had a Polish neighbour who had also served and who would chat with Pa for hours over the garden fence. They would laugh together and, sometimes, they would fall quiet. Then, they would be off again, sharing another story.

Back then, to me, they were just two old mannies having a blether and I didnae understand what they might have shared or what those silences meant—but I do now. Perhaps, in each other, they found someone who understood things that they could not easily explain to anyone else.

I have spoken before about visiting war graves in the north of France. I hope that members will indulge me in returning to my memory of that trip. I pay tribute to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for its work. I travelled to France with my dad and my son to visit three relatives who had died in the first world war. Two of them—Frank and John Mellis—were Pa's uncles. John was in the royal naval division and was killed at just 22; Frank, a Gordon Highlander, was killed at only 25. Both were from Keith in Moray. There we were—three generations of our family, remembering young men from generations before us, who were being visited by their family for the first time, far from their Scottish homes.

Before we had even stepped through the gate at the first cemetery, I was completely overwhelmed. We had planned the trip and I knew what was waiting beyond the gate but, somehow, I was not prepared to walk in. There was a stillness about the place that I still really struggle to explain. Whenever I hear the phrase, "the guns fell silent", I remember that silence, because there was something about it that seemed to hold the intensity of everything that had happened decades before.

I stepped through the gate and looked across what seemed like endless rows upon rows of headstones. Then I glanced at my son. He was around the same age as many of the young men who were buried there. As I thought about my own boy, the realisation hit me that all those graves were of somebody's boys. What incredible loss. What incredible grief.

I wrote a little message of thanks on the back of a photograph to leave at one of the graves, but it hardly felt enough, and, when I left, I got to bring my boy home.

I am really grateful for that trip and for the little bit of understanding that it gave me of what Pa and his Polish friend had maybe carried with them. That is why I believe that remembrance asks more of us than remembering what happened. I worry deeply about the division and othering of people that we see today, the way that groups of people are blamed for the difficulties that others face and the way that the fear of those who are different is stirred up for political gain. History has shown us how dangerous that can become, and those of us who are in politics have a responsibility to recognise those dangers. We must certainly not encourage them.

I think about those two old mannies talking over the garden fence and the silences that they shared, and I think about that stillness in France and all those young men whose voices were lost. We have been given a gift of freedom and a voice, and we must not remain silent when we see hatred and division taking hold.

Every year we promise, "We will remember them", but remembrance should be more than a promise about the past. It should be a commitment to a peaceful future. Surely it is through the choices that we make, the hatred that we challenge and the peace that we work to protect that we truly honour their memory.

We will remember them.

16:51

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): I want to begin with an Angus story. The Rev Douglas Emslie was born in China in 1899. He came to Scotland, enlisted and won the military medal with the Argyll and Sutherland

Highlanders in the first world war. He became a minister and, in 1932, unsuccessfully stood for the National Party of Scotland in the Montrose Burghs by-election, having opened his campaign office in Arbroath railway station. When another war came in 1939, he volunteered as a chaplain to the Gordon Highlanders, dying the next year in Normandy while tending to wounded comrades.

As we know, war touches every aspect of life, every community, every tradition and every family. My family is no different. My dad joined the Black Watch at the age of 16; my granddad served with the Scots Greys during his national service; and members of my family fought against Rommel in north Africa and on the western front in the first world war. Like Karen Adam, one of the most emotional moments in my life was when I visited Maroeuil in France, where my relative, Private Thomas Malley, is buried. He was killed at the Somme in 1916, when he was just 19 years old. That is why I felt privileged to attend ceremonies on Sunday in Monifieth and Arbroath and to lay wreaths in memory of the fallen.

Today I am proud to represent RM Condor in Arbroath and, of course, Barry Buddon, which sits between Monifieth and Carnoustie.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I did not intend to speak this year—this is the first time in about 15 years that I have not made a speech in these debates, so I thank Lloyd Melville for taking this intervention.

Lloyd Melville will be aware of the incredibly beautiful memorial at Barry Buddon, which commemorates those who were lost in the Falklands. Four of them were in my troop, and I would just like to mention their names: Sergeant Bob Leeming, Corporal Pete Fitton, Corporal Andy Uren and Marine Keith Phillips. Marine Keith Phillips had the same first name as me and was the same age as I was when he died—about 19—he did not come back, and I did.

I will just quickly mention that, on Sunday, I attended the service at the memorial in Dollar. Earlier this year, I managed to get the name of Private George Alister Walker Ewan, whose remains were found in northern France last year, added to the memorial.

Lastly, I will just mention, because we should, First Minister John Swinney's uncle, Corporal Thomas Peck Hunter. He was also a marine, who won the Victoria cross in the second world war. Like me, he was a former pupil of Tynecastle high school. This year, when I went to play golf at Carrick Knowe golf course in Edinburgh, as I have done for 40-odd years, I saw a memorial to him just about the starter's dookit. Having been asked to speak to former pupils at Tynecastle, I have enlisted them to try to get the war memorial there refurbished. That would be a fitting testament to somebody who won the Victoria cross, and, more importantly, came from Tynecastle high school.

Lloyd Melville: I thank Keith Brown for his intervention and for so poignantly putting those names on the parliamentary record. I have indeed been to the Royal Marines memorial at Barry Buddon, and I found it very deeply affecting. I also take the opportunity to thank Keith Brown for his service to our country.

Recently, in my constituency, I met with Kate Sykes of the Naval Families Federation to hear about the challenges that local service families face, not least finding childcare that works around deployments and keeping children's education continuous when the family is posted somewhere new. Too often, they feel they are having to fight for the support that they need here and now, because too many services are not designed with service families in mind. That must change, because service families should be able to live normal and fulfilling lives while their loved ones work hard every day to keep us safe.

More broadly, we must continue to work for peace and to protect the rules-based order we all rely upon. As Russell Findlay said, we need only look at the extended killing in Ukraine to see that we cannot be complacent about that. Never again can we allow a generation to lose so much or to contemplate that scale of human suffering.

As Laura Mitchell did, I want to close with some poetry, with the lines of Violet Jacob, who lost her only son at the Somme. Her poem, "Jock, to the First Army" is a poignant reminder of the lasting sacrifice of those who give their lives in war.

"It's deith comes skirlin' through the sky
Below there's nocht but pain,
We canna see whaur deid men lie
For the drivin' o' the rain;
Ye a' hae passed frae fear an' doot,
Ye're far frae airthly ill—
'We're near, we're here, my wee recruit,
An' we fecht for Scotland still.'"

16:57

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Two weeks ago, the Parliament hosted a Scottish Veterans Residences stall and a reception for Poppyscotland, sponsored by you, Presiding Officer. Poppyscotland reminded us that the poppy has two purposes: to remember those lost in conflict and to support those still here.

This year's appeal focuses on the armed forces family. At the stall, I spoke with Scottish Veterans Residences about how few world war two veterans are still with us, but for an affa lot of folk, that is still the picture they have in their minds when they think of veterans. I have been thinking about that ever since, including at the remembrance parade in Aberdeen on Sunday. Our veterans had their medals proudly on show. I do not know medals that well, but I do not think I saw any like the ones my granda and other world war two veterans wore.

During remembrance, we often think first of those closest to us, and I started thinking about my dad. My dad was a Gordon Highlander, just like his dad afore him, and he was only weeks old when Granda left for France with the Gordons and was captured at St Valery. Dad was five before he saw his father again. I often think about what Granda went through, but my grunny must have had a time of it too—raising the family and running the household, not knowing whether her husband would ever make it home.

In the late 1950s, Dad did his national service with the Gordon Highlanders, serving in Germany and later in Kenya. They say "Once a Gordon, a'wis a Gordon", so, when his service ended, he stayed in Kenya with Mam and my sister, working as a farmer for the regiment, before finally coming home to the north-east. Thirteen years later, when I was just 10, Mam died of ovarian cancer. Dad was left to raise my sister, my brother and me on his own, which was unusual for a father back in the 1970s.

This year's theme asks us to remember the whole armed forces family and the sacrifices that are made by those left behind. I wish that Dad was here so I could ask him more about it. He spent the first five years of his life not knowing his dad, he served his country and then he raised his three bairns by himself.

Everyone who is serving overseas has family making sacrifices, too: partners filling the roles of both parents; bairns going months, and sometimes longer, without seeing their mum or dad, or sometimes even both; and parents worrying, as parents do. We need to look after those folk, too. Nobody who is serving our country should ever doubt that their loved ones are being supported.

I remember watching remembrance services on television with Dad, seeing row after row of veterans—most of them from the world wars, and many now gone. Dad was never involved in a conflict, and at some level, that is what we want for all our servicemen and servicewomen: a world where we do not ask them, or their families, to make those sacrifices.

We must keep remembering those lost in the world wars and in every conflict since. However, when it comes to support—the kind of support that our poppy donations help to fund—we must also recognise a new generation of veterans. Today's veterans, who are supported by Poppyscotland, Scottish Veterans Residences and many other forces charities, are often much younger than those who fought in the world wars, and the challenges that they face can be different. Perhaps that gives us a chance to change the picture in folks' minds, to remember the veterans whom we support today and to include the wider armed forces family in that picture, too.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): We now move to winding-up speeches.

17:01

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank all colleagues for their speeches, and I add to the parliamentary record the names of the members of this Parliament who are themselves veterans. I think that we all know about Keith Brown's service as a Royal Marine, including his active service in the Falklands. Vic Currie served in the Royal Navy, where I believe he was a helicopter pilot. Mark Griffin was a reservist with the Royal Regiment of Scotland and then the Royal Engineers. David Smith has already described his days with the Royal Navy, in the submarine service. Paul Sweeney was also a reservist with the Royal Signals and the Royal Regiment of Scotland. I am grateful, on behalf of the rest of us, for their service in the uniform of the armed forces of our country.

I was moved also by what Zen Ghani said about civilians who become involved in supporting our country in time of war. That brings back personal memories of two of my grandparents, one of whom was in the home guard and one of whom was in the air raid precautions service as a fire spotter in Birmingham. I also remember my mother, who was dug from the remains of an Anderson air-raid shelter after a German air raid in 1940, when she was just a little girl.

Lloyd Melville evoked memories of visits to Ypres, Tincourt and the Menin Gate. The feelings and the emotions evoked by viewing the rows and rows of Commonwealth war graves are incredibly powerful, and it is incredible to see the effect that that has on our children and on young people in general.

As a country, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have served, in particular in time of war, that we can never fully repay. Remembrance brings all that home to us: the debt that we owe and the responsibility that we carry.

I also want to say something about those who are still among us—our veterans, who have been mentioned. Those men and women served our country and did everything that was asked of them and, in some cases, they are still living with the consequences of their service. Some carry physical wounds; others carry wounds that are less visible, but no less real. For many, their families have also lived with the consequence of that service.

I speak also as convener of our Parliament's cross-party group on armed forces and veterans. I think that we have a particular responsibility to ensure that our gratitude is matched by what we actually do for our veterans, and I am grateful to the minister for agreeing, in our exchanges this afternoon, to hold a debate on the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's report.

What I say applies equally to those who are currently serving in our armed forces. We cannot separate remembrance, in my view, from our present-day responsibility to defend our country now. We have spent too long, as a country, taking our security for granted. We must be candid about that. Mistakes have been made, particularly over the past 25 years. The capabilities to defend ourselves as a country that we have lost cannot simply be recreated at the stroke of a pen. All the while, the threat to our country is becoming more serious, more complex and more immediate.

I conclude by simply saying that, as parliamentarians, we should feel a responsibility to the men and women who we ask to defend us today. That means making certain of the equipment, the training, the resources and the support that they need to do what we now ask of them. Their commitment to us is complete and total. Our commitment to them must be equally complete and total.

17:05

Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): We are taking the time in the chamber today to pay tribute to all individuals across Scotland, the UK, the Commonwealth and our allied nations who were harmed or killed in war. We are grateful to those who served and sacrificed to build the relative peace and freedoms that we enjoy today. We recognise Scotland's veterans and armed forces community and the significant contribution that they continue to make to our nation.

Some of my colleagues and I are wearing white poppies this week. They commemorate everyone killed or affected by war, including civilians, military personnel of all nationalities, refugees and the victims of colonial conflicts. The Parliament remembers all victims of war—those that happened in the past, as well as those happening now.

The majority of modern war casualties are civilians. Here is an extract from a United Nations Security Council report from May of this year:

"Civilians continue to bear the burden of proliferating armed conflicts worldwide and growing disregard for international law."

In 1999, the year that the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1265 as its first thematic resolution on protection of civilians, establishing the issue as a stand-alone issue on its agenda, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported 20 armed conflicts globally and estimated that between 35 and 64 per cent of conflict casualties were civilians. In 2024, the 25th anniversary of resolution 1265 and the most recent year for which there is complete data, the ICRC counted more than 120 armed conflicts, and the civilian casualty ratio was 95 per cent in incidents involving the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, which was the leading cause of the more than 36,000 civilian deaths that the UN secretary general's annual protection of civilians report recorded that year. That was an increase from the 33,443 deaths recorded in 2023, which already represented a 72 per cent rise from 2022, mainly due to the war in Gaza.

That drastic deterioration in the protective environment holds across multiple protected categories and patterns of civilian harm. The year 2024 was the deadliest on record for journalists, humanitarian personnel and healthcare workers in conflict. In June 2025, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned that civilian deaths in conflict are surging. The same report highlighted the alarming rise in deaths of women and children, saying:

"Violence against children and women in armed conflicts has been devastating over the past two years."

Peace and democratic government provide some protections for women, children and other marginalised and vulnerable people; war brings out the worst. In war, people who are already marginalised have it worse again. The veneer of peace and good government disappears totally when violence reigns. War should never be glorified. It is not a noble endeavour. It is, occasionally, an awful necessity to defend democracy and human rights against tyranny, but it is always horrendous and we must never, ever forget that.

We do not forget those who served in our military and lost their lives in the first world war, the second world war and conflicts since. Remembrance is their funeral. It is not a pageant, and it must always remain true to the spirit of "Never again". There can be no greater tribute to those who have died in war than to recommit ourselves to peace, democracy and the protection of all of our human rights.

17:10

Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): On remembrance Sunday just past, all the cenotaphs and war memorials around the country were bedecked with poppies by veterans, cadets and local people alike, as they paid their respects to the war dead. Many—probably most, if not all—of the MSPs in the chamber joined them to add wreaths on behalf of the Parliament and our local communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

Every year, we gather and, every year, we rightly say the words, "We will remember them." I take the opportunity to reflect on those words, and perhaps to say something slightly different today—the day after armistice day—not instead of remembrance but because of it. Those words were never meant to be just an annual ritual. They were a promise made by a grateful nation to the men and women who gave their lives and to those who came home carrying the horror of what they had seen. For me, remembrance is not just a question of what we feel on the second Sunday in November. It is also a question of whether we are keeping that promise on the other 364 days of the year.

In that spirit, let us reflect on where we might be falling short on that promise. The first aspect is how we treat those who have served. As we have heard from several members in the debate, we have veterans in this country who are sleeping rough, and we have veterans who are waiting months for mental healthcare. We have a covenant that says:

"Those who serve … should face no disadvantage".

Too often, perhaps, that is a document and not a reality. A country that can find a place for its ceremonies can surely also find a home for its veterans.

The second aspect is how we treat those who did their duty in hard places. For example, men who were sent to Northern Ireland as young soldiers, operating under orders and under fire, find themselves, half a century later in their 70s, facing courtrooms. Nobody is above the law, but justice that arrives 50 years late and that is aimed at the soldier and not the system that sent him is not justice. It tells every young person who is thinking of joining up to serve that we might not stand beside them.

The third aspect is whether we are ready. We meet today while war has returned to Europe. Russia has shown what it is willing to do and to whom. Yet, over decades, we have allowed our armed forces to shrink to a size that would have astonished the generations that we honour today. Our servicemen and women are as good as any in the world, but there are simply not enough of them, and they are not equipped for modern warfare that is dominated by drones, cyber, long-range ballistics and stockpiles that run out in weeks. Those who fell in both world wars paid the price for a country that was not ready. Remembering them honestly means refusing to repeat that mistake; it means looking after those who once served and standing alongside those whom we might ask to serve.

My final reflection concerns the simplicity of the words of the dedication that was carved into Sir Edward Lutyens's London cenotaph in 1920: "The glorious dead". Lutyens deliberately avoided religious and national imagery in his design. His point was to emphasise that those three simple words could have meaning for people of all races and of all faiths or none. In that spirit, it is imperative that future generations maintain remembrance Sunday as a symbol of unity and national pride.

17:14

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I, too, commend members from across the chamber for their contributions in the debate. It is right that we should always remember the service and sacrifice of the men and women of our armed forces—those who have served across generations who made the ultimate sacrifice and those who returned home carrying wounds, which are not always visible or obvious.

We also recognise the families who stood with them through separation, uncertainty and loss and whose contribution also deserves our gratitude. His Majesty's Naval Base Clyde at Faslane is in my constituency and I am proud of the work done there to protect us all.

Although remembrance offers a solemn moment for reflection, it must also be a commitment to honour those who serve through the support that we provide today and the choices we make for the future. The men and women who serve and who risk their lives for our country are at the heart of our security. They deserve the very best equipment, support and training, and they deserve to know that we will continue standing by them when their service ends.

The security challenges facing us are increasingly concerning. Defence experts tell us that they expect a Russian attack against a NATO country by 2030. We have already seen Russian aggression in Ukraine. That—along with the uncertainty of the Trump presidency, his rejection of the rules-based order, and emerging conflicts across the globe—reminds us that peace and freedom cannot be taken for granted. In remembering the past, we must be prepared for the future, because we have a responsibility to protect our people and to stand alongside our allies.

The UK defence investment plan mirrors those aims. Its inclusion of an additional £15 billion as part of almost £300 billion of investment over four years works to strengthen military readiness, equipment and technology and to support skilled jobs. It helps to ensure that our armed forces can best meet the threats of today and of tomorrow.

Our commitment to NATO must be unshakeable. It is the cornerstone of our collective security and an attack on one ally is an attack on us all, so we must invest in the capabilities needed to protect our shared security. Scotland is proud of our armed forces, whether the submariners at His Majesty's Naval Base Clyde or the Royal Air Force pilots at Lossiemouth, who all make a vital contribution to the security of the UK and of our NATO allies.

However, remembering those who serve also means recognising what happens when someone leaves the armed forces. Veterans bring leadership, expertise, resilience and teamwork to our workplaces and communities and are an asset to our country. The transition back to civilian life can be difficult and our responsibility does not end when someone hands back their uniform.

That takes me to the report from the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Susie Hamilton. I thank her for all her support for veterans. She tells us that progress in a number of areas is just too slow. It is too slow on the veterans homelessness prevention pathway and on the mental health and wellbeing pathway, and she also highlights the inadequate uptake of the general practitioner armed forces and veterans recognition scheme. In answer to a parliamentary question last month, the Scottish Government confirmed to me that only 71 GP practices, which is only 8.1 per cent of GP practices in Scotland, have registered for that scheme. We can, and must, do better.

Those who have sacrificed the most for our country deserve the best possible services, so Parliament and Government must turn commitments into delivery; must strengthen co-ordination between health, housing and employment services; and must work in partnership with the organisations that are already making a huge difference. Community groups and charities such as SSAFA provide invaluable support and the work that they do should be celebrated and treated as essential in delivering for veterans and their families.

Remembrance must be not only about looking back but about the responsibilities that we carry forward. We owe our veterans the opportunity to thrive after their service and the support to live healthy, secure and fulfilling lives. Today, let us honour their courage, remember their sacrifices and renew our determination to stand by all who have served.

The Presiding Officer: I call Kirsten Oswald to wind up the debate.

17:19

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): There are occasions in this chamber when the subject before us asks us to look beyond our differences and to speak instead about the things that we hold in common. As Jackie Baillie has said well, today has been one of those occasions. Members have reflected thoughtfully on the meaning of remembrance, and I hope to acknowledge some of those contributions in my speech.

I acknowledge what Keith Brown said. As somebody who grew up hearing the guns at Barry Buddon service personnel training area, I was really moved to hear him speak and mention his colleagues who are remembered on the memorial there.

Russell Findlay, Lloyd Melville and others reflected on their localities, and I will take a moment to reflect on remembrance Sunday in my constituency of Eastwood. I would like to thank the organisers of all the local remembrance events and, on a personal note, Legion Scotland's Newton Mearns branch for all they do. Every year that I have been elected, I have had the privilege of marching with the local Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen to the cenotaph in Newton Mearns. It means a great deal to me to do so, and I thank this year's flag bearer, Philip Mendelson, as well as Brigade Commander Monty Cowen.

As for Karen Adam, Lloyd Melville, Jackie Dunbar and countless other members and people all over the country, remembrance Sunday is a time when I reflect on my family—people such as my granddad, Edwin Oswald, who served in the Royal Navy during world war two—as well as on all those people who were lost. As time passes and fewer veterans of world war two remain, it is important that we remember the individuals—indeed, the individual lives that were lost and not only the extraordinary and terrible numbers. Russell Findlay set that out very well when he read Rifleman Valentine Joe Strudwick's name onto the record.

The Scottish Government and indeed the Parliament hold our armed forces community in the highest regard. I think that Morvern-May MacCallum's speech exemplified that. Yesterday marked the 107th anniversary of the first armistice day. In 1919, remembrance was overwhelmingly shaped by the devastating losses of the first world war and the grief of families mourning those who would never return home, as Iris Duane powerfully set out. More than a century later, remembrance continues to evolve, and I was struck by what David Smith said, including his reflections on submarines and submariners. Although we remain steadfast in our commitment to honour those who fell in that conflict, our understanding has broadened, as Stephen Kerr said, to recognise the many individuals and communities that were shaped, changed or cut short by war. I was struck by Laura Mitchell's mention of Cabrach and, of course, by what Paul Sweeney said—I am sure that we all come together to say how sorry we are for the loss of his friend.

Those things reflect Scotland's history. Ours is a nation with a deep and enduring tie to the armed forces community; those bonds were forged through generations of service, often rooted in local regiments and communities, as we have powerfully heard, but also through the lives of service personnel and families who came to Scotland from elsewhere and made their homes here. As we remember, it is right that we recognise not only those people from Scotland and across the UK but also the countless men and women from across the Commonwealth and beyond, who served.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): I did not get the option to speak today but I put on record that there was an officer barracks in the Wyndford estate in my constituency from 1872 to 1960; I draw the minister's attention to the new granite memorial stone that was recently erected to commemorate the four Victoria cross holders from there and all the men and women who served and made the ultimate sacrifice. In particular, I ask the minister to join me in thanking the local community council, who dedicated itself to securing that memorial stone so that the memory of those people would live on forever.

Kirsten Oswald: I am really grateful to Bob Doris for making that point and ensuring that we are all aware of the community council's sterling work to put that memorial in place so that people could remember.

It is worth reflecting on another Victoria cross, which was awarded, as Zen Ghani said, to Khudadad Khan, another exceptional service member. As Mr Ghani set out, the contribution of the more than two and a half million volunteers who served in the Indian army during the second world war, including some whose final resting place is here, is a powerful example for us to consider. Their service and that of millions of others from across the Commonwealth forms an integral part of the story that we remember.

I have spoken about Jewish veterans, and I think that we should ensure that the full diversity of the armed forces community is reflected in remembrance. The experiences of women veterans—and, as Laura Mitchell described, the women who made extraordinary efforts at home—LGBTQI veterans, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and others whose stories are less often recognised deserve to be acknowledged in the same way as those that are more familiar. The same is true of organisations such as the merchant navy, whose courage and resilience in sustaining vital supply lines during conflict remain an essential, if sometimes overlooked, part of our collective history.

I welcomed the comments from many members across the chamber, including Morven-May MacCallum, on the excellent and valuable work that is done by voluntary and third sector organisations. I know that that is close to the hearts of many who are here today.

More than a century after the first armistice day, remembrance clearly continues to hold an important place in our national life. Today is a valuable opportunity for us to honour all those who gave their lives and to reflect on the cost of conflict and the value of peace, as Lorna Slater outlined, as well as the debt that we owe to all those who have served and sacrificed. People from every background and from every nation of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and beyond helped to defend the freedoms and democratic values that we

cherish today. We remember them all with gratitude. As Karen Adam said, all those who were lost were somebody's boys. We honour them all with respect—we will never forget them.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on remembering the service of the armed forces community.

Motion without Notice

17:25

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I call the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.26 pm.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:26

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S7M-01988, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Right of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:26

Meeting suspended.

17:29

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We will proceed with the division on motion S7M-01988, in the name of Jamie Hepburn.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)

Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Against

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Ind)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)

Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Abstentions

Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-01988, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, is: For 73, Against 38, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-01993, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on remembering the service of the armed forces community, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament pays tribute to all individuals across Scotland, the UK, the Commonwealth and Allied Nations who were harmed or killed in war; is grateful to those who served and sacrificed to build the relative peace and freedoms that people enjoy today; acknowledges the enduring importance of the Remembrance period to families and communities and the importance of maintaining awareness amongst younger generations as events become more distant; remembers all victims of wars, those that happened in the past as well as those happening now, and recognises Scotland's Veterans and Armed Forces community and the significant contribution that they continue to make to the nation.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

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