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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 25 January 2024

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

Businesses in Aberdeen (Support)

1. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it offers to businesses in Aberdeen. (S6O-03014)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): Scottish Enterprise, our national economic development agency, works with businesses in Aberdeen to create high-value jobs, enable innovation, boost productivity and attract investment. It also helps businesses to internationalise and expand their export opportunities. Last week, with the First Minister, I was delighted to visit Verlume, a renewable energy company based in Aberdeen, to learn how it has benefited from such support from Scottish Enterprise and to hear about its future plans.

Further to that, the Scottish Government is investing more than £125 million in the Aberdeen city region deal, and it further supports businesses in the region through initiatives such as the energy transition fund and the just transition fund.

Liam Kerr: Last week, Aberdeen received the devastating news that Marks and Spencer is to close, just days after we lost Haigs due to difficult trading conditions. Recently, Aberdeen business leaders met the Government to highlight the impact of its decision not to introduce 75 per cent rates relief, as is in place in England. Will the Scottish Government reverse its decision to ignore the demands of businesses, including those in Aberdeen, and the witnesses at the Economy and Fair Work Committee this week, who desperately want the 75 per cent rates relief passed on to ensure that their businesses are competitive with markets south of the border?

Neil Gray: Marks and Spencer's decision to close its Union Street store but invest £15 million in doubling its space at Union Square is a signal of intent and of confidence in the market in Aberdeen. My understanding is that the decision will have no bearing on redundancies. I do not

believe that the issue of non-domestic rates had any impact on M&S's decision to provide substantial investment.

This morning, the Deputy First Minister, Tom Arthur and I had a very productive meeting with the hospitality industry on what is possible in relation to not just non-domestic rates but further work with the sector. That followed on from a very productive session with the Scottish Retail Consortium last week. We will continue to look at what we can do to provide support.

If we had passed on that resource to the hospitality, leisure and retail industry, we would have had no further space to invest in public services. That would have had devastating consequences, as can be seen in England, where the national health service has had a real-terms cut.

Families Outside Report

2. **Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its response to the recent Families Outside report, "Staying Connected: Care-experienced children and young people with a sibling in prison or secure care". (S6O-03015)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Keeping siblings connected is fundamental to the Scottish Government's commitment to keeping the Promise. I welcome the contribution that the Families Outside report has made to helping our understanding of the issue.

In 2021, we enacted legislation placing a duty on councils to nurture children's relationships with their siblings when they cannot live at home, including when one sibling is in prison. Through the work that is led by the children and families national leadership group, we are taking action to improve our understanding of how children and young people are affected by a family member being in prison or secure care. The group's final report and summary of follow-on work will be published shortly.

Maggie Chapman: One issue that the Families Outside report highlights is lack of data. We do not know how many young people have a sibling in prison, we do not understand why multiple siblings might be involved in offending behaviour, and we do not routinely keep records of where imprisoned siblings are. The report also states that many families struggle to afford travel for prison visits. Will the cabinet secretary meet me and Families Outside to discuss those issues and others that were highlighted in the report so that we can suggest potential resolutions?

Angela Constance: Data collection is, of course, important in establishing the national picture and monitoring the implementation of the 2021 legislation. I would be delighted to meet Ms Chapman and Families Outside, which is an organisation with which I am well acquainted.

With respect to travel costs, I am aware that many families are finding it difficult to make visits to their loved ones in custody. Although there are existing supports, we are assessing current issues with partners and will consider practical ways to make travelling to visit family members easier.

MV Isle of Islay

3. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that the MV Isle of Islay will be launched on 16 March 2024. (S6O-03016)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is pleased that work at Cemre Shipyard on all four vessels continues to progress well and that the MV Isle of Islay will be launched in March. I look forward to attending the official naming ceremony, which is due to take place in Scotland later this year and which marks another major milestone in the vessel's construction. When the vessel is delivered in October, the communities of Islay and Jura can look forward to a more resilient and modern ferry service.

Sandesh Gulhane: The Turkish-built MV Isle of Islay is on time and on budget, only two years after being ordered. I assume that the First Minister will not attend the launch with fanfare and fake windows, as his predecessor did for another vessel, but perhaps the minister will.

The handling of the boat being built at the Clyde shipyard under this inept Scottish National Party Government is utterly shambolic. It is three times over budget and six years late, and there is no launch date. That is a complete humiliation for the SNP Government.

Given the latest saga at Ardrossan, which is further letting down islanders, will the minister take the opportunity to apologise to them for the ferries fiasco? Islanders have been let down, ignored and taken for granted. Will she provide a guarantee that the incompetence of the SNP Government's handling of the ferries fiasco will never be repeated?

Fiona Hyslop: The Conservatives cannot acknowledge that six vessels will be delivered to support our islanders by 2026. There has been £2 billion of investment in our ferry service in order to support our island communities. Yes, there have been challenges, but, unlike Mr Gulhane, I will not insult the work of the Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd shipyard and its workers. The fact

that the shipyard exists enables them to work on completing the vessels. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Fiona Hyslop: I have spoken directly to islanders about the issues that they face. They know of the Government's concern, and I have apologised directly to them for the difficulties that they face.

However, let us face forward and welcome the six new vessels. Let us not use a positive story about the MV Isle of Islay coming to Scotland this year as another hook for the Conservatives to bash Ferguson's shipyard and not listen to the islanders who want the six ferries to be delivered by 2026.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The MV Isle of Islay is an exciting prospect for islanders, as is the MV Loch Indaal. The vessel represents an investment of more than £90 million and is proof of the Government's commitment to providing communities with a resilient and reliable ferry service. *[Interruption.]* The new vessel will bring—

The Presiding Officer: Can I have a question, please, Ms Dunbar? *[Interruption.]*

Would you put your question, please, Ms Dunbar?

Jackie Dunbar: I am sorry, Presiding Officer—I never quite heard you because of the chuntering.

Does the minister share my view that, although it is all very well to play politics, we should all welcome the news of progress on all vessels to improve services for our island communities?

Fiona Hyslop: I agree. Islanders do not want politics played; they want the vessels delivered. The MV Isle of Islay and the MV Loch Indaal will deliver increased capacity and added resilience, which will benefit islanders and businesses. We are investing in replacement vessels across the network, and I look forward to welcoming the six new vessels to the fleet by 2026.

Defence Solicitors

4. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported comments by the Faculty of Advocates and the Law Society of Scotland that an exodus of defence solicitors has left the legal system close to collapse. (S6O-03017)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I am aware of the issues of concern that have been raised by the Faculty of Advocates and the Law Society. I established, and I co-chair—along with the chief executive of the Law Society of Scotland and the

dean of the Faculty of Advocates—the future of the legal profession working group, which is examining evidence and identifying measures that we can collectively take to address recruitment and retention in criminal defence.

We recognise the important role of legal aid providers in the justice system, which is why, in recent years, we have provided significant additional funding and increases in remuneration. We have invested £31 million in legal aid since 2021, despite the clear and significant constraints on our finances as a result of the United Kingdom Government settlement. In this financial year, we will provide an £11 million package of legal aid reforms, including an uplift worth 10.2 per cent overall.

Jamie Greene: This is not a problem that has suddenly appeared this year—it is a decade-long issue, so it has been a long time coming. An estimated 70 defence advocates have left the profession and moved to higher-paid jobs in the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. Unsurprisingly, that exodus and the shortage of solicitors, which the Faculty of Advocates has described as “unprecedented”, have led to trials being delayed or, in some cases, cancelled. The Law Society has said:

“Scotland’s legal aid sector has been left in the dark without long-lasting reform”.

I agree.

What is the Government doing now to ensure that our legal sector does not collapse? As the Government often says, justice delayed is justice denied.

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government cannot compel private solicitors to undertake work. However, it is expected that the increase in legal aid fees will have a positive impact on availability for people who seek advice and representation, and on recruitment and retention.

Since 2021, £31 million has been invested in legal aid. If there is a continuing problem with recruitment and retention, that suggests that remuneration is not the only issue and points to a need for innovation in the provision of access to legal services.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Although there has been an increase in fees, the profession still pays defence lawyers less than is paid to lawyers who work for the Government or the Crown Office. The issue is simple to understand: if we do not pay defence lawyers the same as is paid to Government or Crown Office lawyers, we will not attract talent into the profession.

Although Scottish Labour welcomes the Scottish Government’s commitment to independent legal representation for victims who are subject to

section 275 in rape trials, the Law Society has already expressed concern about how it will fulfil that pledge if it does not resolve the unfairness of how defence lawyers are paid.

Siobhian Brown: Despite reductions in the level of crime, revenue funding for legal aid and other aspects of the justice system has been maintained in cash terms. There has been no cash reduction in the budget for the legal aid fund. In addition, the budget is demand led. Everyone who meets the eligibility criteria has access to legal aid, regardless of the allocated budget. The fact that the number of civil legal aid cases that were paid increased by 9 per cent, the number of summary criminal legal aid cases increased by 15 per cent and the number of solemn criminal legal aid cases increased by 13 per cent is a clear indicator of the work that is being done to reduce the Covid backlogs across the justice system.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The lack of defence solicitors is a particular problem in rural and island areas, with the falling numbers giving rise to the risk of legal aid deserts in some areas. What steps will the minister take to address that specific aspect of the problems that the Law Society of Scotland rightly highlighted?

Siobhian Brown: Solicitors in all parts of Scotland are able to access funding for the work that is carried out under the legal assistance schemes. The schemes are flexible enough to allow solicitors to travel to rural and remote parts of the country to carry out work, should it be possible to instruct a local agent, although I reiterate that the Scottish Government cannot compel private solicitors to undertake work. However, it is expected that the increase in legal aid fees will have a positive impact on availability and representation.

Criminal Justice Social Work Statistics 2022-23

5. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the statistics that it has published on criminal justice social work for 2022-23. (S6O-03018)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Justice social work does commendable work to ensure that community sentences and other interventions effectively address offending and its causes, and provide benefits to local communities.

Although the pandemic continued to have an impact in 2022-23, the latest justice social work statistics show encouraging signs that community justice services continue to recover. There were 14,700 community payback orders commenced in 2022-23, which is an increase of 20 per cent on the previous year. The numbers of bail supervision cases and structured deferred sentences

commenced also increased, with both at the highest level in the past five years.

Russell Findlay: What the cabinet secretary did not mention was that almost 5,000 criminals were diverted from prosecution instead of being put in the dock, which is a record high. She also did not say that one in three criminals who were given community service were not required to do any unpaid work. To put it simply, thousands of criminals are not prosecuted and those who are convicted receive no punishment.

This morning, I spoke with the Scottish Retail Consortium, whose colleagues suffer unacceptable threats and violence every day. Will the cabinet secretary tell them, and victims across Scotland, why they must pay the price for the Scottish National Party's relentless weakening of Scotland's criminal justice system?

Angela Constance: I know that Mr Findlay does not like the facts to get in the way of his narrative or of a good old yarn, but he should recognise that, since the inception of community payback orders, 10.6 million hours of reparation has been made to our communities through unpaid work. That is a good way of reducing reoffending and of ensuring that our communities are safer.

Mr Findlay raises the issue of diversion. I am quite sure that he knows that that is a matter for independent prosecutors and not for ministers. He should also be aware of the facts. For the first time, there has been more use of unpaid work in community payback orders than of other supervision requirements, which is positive. He should also know that unpaid work is one of 10 possible requirements in a community payback order, but—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

Angela Constance: As usual, the Conservatives are soft on substance and soft on solutions and this Government will focus—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. We will move to the next question.

Police Stations (Edinburgh)

6. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the justice secretary has had with Police Scotland regarding potential station closures in Edinburgh. (S6O-03019)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I have regular meetings with the chief constable, where a range of issues, including the police estate, are discussed.

Police Scotland's 2019 estate strategy outlined plans to replace outdated, underinvested and underused properties with modern ones so that it could develop modern premises that are capable of delivering effective and efficient public services to meet the needs of the people and staff who use them.

We are supportive of that and I agree with Deputy Chief Constable Malcolm Graham, who said that the presence of policing in communities

"is not defined by buildings but by the officers and staff who work there".

Co-locations often make the best use of the public sector estate and offer the opportunity for increased visibility, closer working and increased collaboration between partners. Police Scotland has more than 60 examples of successful co-location.

Sarah Boyack: The cabinet secretary should be aware that those closures might mean that communities such as Leith and Portobello in my region would be left without a local police station. Police stations are vital to our communities and ensure good relationships between the police and residents. It is not a surprise that Unison has said that the closures

"might deliver balanced books, but ... won't deliver better policing".

What assurances can the cabinet secretary give members that as many police stations as possible will be saved from closure? How is Police Scotland ensuring that it develops strong relationships with communities and residents to tackle crime and keep people safe? The cabinet secretary has spoken about hubs. Will she say where those will be in Leith and Portobello, so that people do not miss out on our police?

Angela Constance: I recognise that the matter is of extreme interest to local communities and that people often have strong views about the location of public sector buildings. That is why Police Scotland is currently consulting on its estate plans, which will help to inform the detail of future discussions and decisions.

That is, quite rightly, an operational matter for the chief constable. However, from my perspective, it is imperative that the estate meets the needs of modern policing, and that it is fit for purpose for 21st-century policing. That also includes visibility and engagement at the heart of our communities.

The Presiding Officer: With apologies to the members whom I was unable to call, that concludes general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Covid-19 Inquiry (WhatsApp Messages)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): During the pandemic, Nicola Sturgeon made Government decisions over WhatsApp. She was ordered by the United Kingdom Covid inquiry to retain those messages. The former First Minister promised to provide them. She said:

"I have nothing to hide."

However, we now know that she deleted them all. She broke promises to grieving families. She may have broken the law. Does the First Minister accept that it was completely wrong and utterly scandalous for Nicola Sturgeon to delete those messages? (S6F-02733)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Before I answer Douglas Ross's question of substance, I say at the outset, given that this is the First Minister's question time before Holocaust memorial day, that it has never been more important to remember the victims of the Holocaust and, indeed, the genocides that followed. Together, we remember the millions of lives that have been cut short with the utmost cruelty and brutality. The freedom and dignity of every citizen relies on our willingness to defend each other's human rights and to stand up against cruelty and violence everywhere in the world. It is a responsibility that we share equally. It is the responsibility of all of us to remember the Holocaust and, of course, to pay tribute to the survivors of those atrocities. Ahead of Holocaust memorial day on Saturday, my thoughts today—and, I hope, my thoughts every day—are with those who were affected then and those who are affected still. [*Applause.*]

I come to the issue of substance. I will start this exchange, as I have started exchanges on the issue in recent weeks and months, by giving first and foremost an unreserved apology to those families who were bereaved by Covid for our handling of informal communications, such as WhatsApps. As an organisation, we did not handle the request for the WhatsApp messages in a way that gave families who have been bereaved by Covid confidence—in fact, it was quite the opposite. They have asked for nothing unreasonable. They have asked for answers and for the truth. I will certainly give that when I appear in front of the inquiry later today.

Douglas Ross is asking me about Nicola Sturgeon. I believe that it has now been confirmed that Nicola Sturgeon will appear in front of the

Covid inquiry next week. She will answer for herself.

As per our records management policy, when it comes to any decisions that are made, whether they are made using WhatsApp or discussed over email or telephone call or any other method of communication, it is so important that salient points are uploaded to the corporate record.

I will end on this point by saying to Douglas Ross that we have handed over 28,000 WhatsApp messages, including mine. That is in stark contrast to the Prime Minister, of course.

Douglas Ross: I fully associate myself with the First Minister's remarks ahead of Holocaust memorial day on Saturday.

I asked a very simple question about what the First Minister feels about Nicola Sturgeon deleting those messages, and we heard nothing.

Although Nicola Sturgeon led the cover-up and the secrecy, she was not alone. The then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, also deleted his messages. Is it not telling that neither of them can be in the chamber today?

Although they deleted messages, let us look at some of the messages that we have seen. The chief medical officer, Professor Gregor Smith, reminded colleagues in a WhatsApp chat to

"Delete at the end of every day."

Ken Thomson, the former Scottish Government director general, wrote:

"I feel moved at this point to tell you that this chat is FOI-recoverable."

He went on to say:

"Plausible deniability is my middle name."

A message from the national clinical director, Jason Leitch, said:

"WhatsApp deletion is a pre-bed ritual."

He also said:

"Just my usual reminder to delete your chat ... particularly after we reach a conclusion."

From politicians to civil servants, they sought to destroy evidence. Does that not show a culture of secrecy running through this entire Scottish National Party Government?

The First Minister: Douglas Ross talks about a culture of secrecy, but we handed over 28,000 messages and 19,000 documents. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The former First Minister did 250 media briefings, taking questions from journalists day after day. The accusations from

Douglas Ross, of a Government that was hiding from scrutiny, hardly ring true. Far from that, the former First Minister stood up every day and took questions. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, First Minister. Many members wish to put questions in this session. It will make it far more likely that those will be taken if we can hear one another.

The First Minister: I assume that all the accusations that Douglas Ross is throwing at the former First Minister and the former Deputy First Minister—of course, they will give evidence to the inquiry, and I do not intend to prejudge that or put words in their mouths—ring true for his colleague the Prime Minister, who has not handed over a single WhatsApp message. If the accusations that Douglas Ross is making against Nicola Sturgeon and throwing at the former Deputy First Minister do not hold true for the Prime Minister, who has not handed over a single message, that is not just political opportunism but breathtaking hypocrisy.

Douglas Ross: That is risible and embarrassing from the First Minister. Let us look at the facts. Nicola Sturgeon destroyed all her messages, and she did that deliberately. However, some messages have been recovered from other people. This morning's Covid inquiry session with Liz Lloyd, Nicola Sturgeon's former chief of staff, has revealed that, unquestionably, Covid decisions were made on WhatsApp. There are many examples in her evidence, but let us take just one. With just two hours to go before a statement in the Parliament, Nicola Sturgeon said on WhatsApp that she was "not sure" what to do about the number of people at weddings and funerals. Her chief of staff said:

"I think as we only just put them up just leave it ... I think we stay at 20."

Therefore, a Government decision to stay at 20 was taken over WhatsApp.

Humza Yousaf has previously said:

"The Scottish Government did not routinely make decisions through WhatsApp."—*[Official Report, 26 October 2023; c 11.]*

Did the First Minister mislead the Parliament when he said that, or did he not realise that Government policy—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, we must hear one another.

Douglas Ross: I am happy to repeat this to SNP members, who seem to want to drown it out. Did the First Minister mislead Parliament when he said that, or did he not realise that Scottish Government policy was being made on the hoof over WhatsApp?

The First Minister: Presiding Officer,

"Whatsapp is a communications application rather than a decision-making tool. Instead, each Minister is supported by a Private Office and this team comprises private secretaries and administrative staff. A Private Office records the specific decisions of Ministers for the official record."

Members are laughing, but that is from the Scotland Office. When we asked it for Douglas Ross's WhatsApp messages, it refused to release them.

The point is that WhatsApp is not routinely used—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: Douglas Ross literally read out my quote. It is not routinely used to make decisions. If it was—*[Interruption.]* Opposition members are getting up in arms over what Douglas Ross has said.

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, I am sorry, but I cannot hear a word that you are saying, and that will be the case for those who are visiting the Parliament today. I ask all members to remember the requirement to conduct our business in an orderly manner.

The First Minister: The truth is inconvenient for the Conservatives, because it is very simple. If decisions were made over WhatsApp, they would have to be recorded. Otherwise, how on earth would they be actioned? All salient points and key decisions are recorded on the corporate record and taken forward.

To go back to the point that I made in response to the first question that Douglas Ross asked, I believe that there are challenges in relation to our use of WhatsApp. Frankly, in relation to the handling of those requests, it has not been the Government's finest hour. I put my hands up to that—unlike other Governments.

That is why I have commissioned officials to deliver an externally led review—not a Government review—into the use of mobile messaging apps and the use of non-corporate technology in the Scottish Government. That should take particular account of our interaction with statutory public inquires.

When it comes to being transparent, I go back to the point that I have made, which is that the Government handed over 28,000 messages and 19,000 documents. I, as First Minister of the Government, have handed over my WhatsApp messages. That is in stark contrast to the UK Government and the Prime Minister, who has refused to hand over a single message and who, of course, took the inquiry to court, only to lose.

Douglas Ross: There was so much in that.

First, I am not sure what the First Minister was speaking about in relation to my own WhatsApp messages, but, to be absolutely clear, I provided my WhatsApps from my time as a Government minister to the Covid inquiry. They are there on the record. Unlike senior nationalists, I did not delete mine.

The evidence that we have heard today is, quite frankly, shocking. It confirms that pandemic decisions by the SNP were made for political purposes. *[Interruption.]*

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): What?

Douglas Ross: They are saying, “What?” *[Interruption.]* The education secretary is saying, “What on earth?” Let me say that Nicola Sturgeon’s chief of staff talked of making “purely political” moves on public health to start a

“good old-fashioned rammy”

with the UK Government.

In another handwritten note, she says that she is going to look at

“political tactics—calling for things we can’t do.”

Hiding revelations such as those must have been the reason that the SNP Government destroyed so much evidence. The First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, the national clinical director and the chief medical officer all deleted their messages. Discussions and crucial decisions have vanished. A top-down culture of secrecy was rife throughout this entire Government. It looks as though the most senior figures have engaged in a deliberate cover-up.

The Presiding Officer: Can I have your question, Mr Ross?

Douglas Ross: Now that it has been confirmed that the SNP made some crucial Covid decisions for “purely political” reasons, is Humza Yousaf ashamed that the SNP Government made purely political decisions during the pandemic, and is that not the ultimate betrayal of the public, who sacrificed so much?

The First Minister: I reject the charge in its entirety. We published regularly regarding the four harms approach that we took to decisions that were made in relation to the pandemic.

I can say with confidence that, every single day, our overarching priority was always to keep the people of this country safe.

Douglas Ross: Political tactics. Calling for things you could not do!

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

The First Minister: That was the overarching priority.

Did we get every decision right? Absolutely not, and we will be rightly questioned about that in both the UK and Scottish inquiries. However, I know that our motivation, every step of the way, was to ensure that we kept the people of this country safe.

Was that not in stark contrast, of course, to a UK Government holding parties in number 10 and holding parties in the Treasury, and the obscene spectacle of the then Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: —flagrantly breaching the rules while loved ones, individuals and families could not go to their loved ones’ funerals? Throughout all that, Douglas Ross has not had the decency to apologise once.

Covid-19 Inquiry (WhatsApp Messages)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Saturday marks Holocaust memorial day on the theme of “Fragility of Freedom”. It is a day on which we pause, reflect and remember all those who have been victims of genocide, but it is also a moment to pause and reflect on those who still strive to live with peace and dignity, away from conflict, and without prejudice.

What has been revealed at the Covid inquiry this week has rightly shocked people across Scotland. The attempts to subvert the inquiry and to breach freedom of information laws are, frankly, a betrayal of the trust that people put in the Government.

WhatsApp messages were deleted on an industrial scale. The former First Minister used a private Scottish National Party email address for Government business. Officials openly joked about breaking the law while the Covid pandemic tore through our country.

The culture of cover-up started with the First Minister and extended down to the senior civil service. In June, when I asked Humza Yousaf whether

“all requested emails, texts and WhatsApp messages will be handed over in full”—*[Official Report, 29 June 2023; c 15.]*

he responded in this Parliament, without equivocation, “Yes”.

Now that we know that that was not true, was the First Minister knowingly misleading Parliament, or was he so out of his depth that he did not know what was going on?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We did hand over what we had—28,000 messages have been handed over. Officials and former ministers of the Government who do not have WhatsApp

messages will have to account for that before the Covid inquiry. Anas Sarwar cannot say that there was deletion “on an industrial scale” when 28,000 messages have been handed over to the inquiry. He cannot say that I have been leading that approach from the top when I have handed over all the WhatsApp messages that I have. No doubt, in a couple of hours’ time, I will be questioned about them.

Anas Sarwar is absolutely right, as is Douglas Ross, to ask questions about our informal communications. There is nothing wrong in that. Frankly, though, I do not believe that the public agree with Anas Sarwar or Douglas Ross when they suggest that there was somehow a cover-up. Why? It is because the public looked at this Government, questioned it and saw that it had a First Minister—Nicola Sturgeon—who stood in front of the cameras every single day—*[Interruption.]*

Douglas Ross: Where is she now?

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —and took questions from journalists and members of the Scottish Parliament more than 250 times. That is hardly the measure or the mark of a Government that was trying to avoid scrutiny.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister must live in a parallel universe. The then First Minister deleted every WhatsApp message; the then Deputy First Minister deleted every WhatsApp message; the then chief medical officer deleted every WhatsApp message; and the then national clinical director deleted every WhatsApp message. If that is not deletion on an industrial scale, I do not know what planet Humza Yousaf lives on.

The First Minister gave an unequivocal commitment to Parliament but, on his watch, ministers and officials failed to comply with “Do not destroy” notices. Key evidence has been deleted, and deliberately misleading statements have been given to the press and the public, on his watch.

One issue that I raised with Humza Yousaf was the use of private SNP email accounts to conduct Scottish Government business, which the Government has repeatedly denied. However, evidence to the inquiry this week has blown that claim out of the water. In November, when I asked Humza Yousaf whether all emails, whether they were from the Government or his party, would be handed to the inquiry, he said this:

“As for any other form of communication, including any other email address ... it is my full expectation that that is handed over.”—*[Official Report, 9 November 2023; c 17.]*

Humza Yousaf is First Minister and leader of the SNP. Have any emails from SNP accounts been handed to the Covid inquiry? If so, how many?

The First Minister: The fundamental point is that the use of a non-Government email address, such as an SNP email address, does not exempt official correspondence from freedom of information requests. *[Interruption.]* For example, a freedom of information request about a particular issue or for a particular document is not subverted because it is sent to an SNP email address. *[Interruption.]*

Anas Sarwar: Exactly.

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: Therefore, the information should be handed over. I give an absolute guarantee that no Government business was conducted through my SNP email address. Messages from my private communication applications have been handed over. I have handed over not only WhatsApp messages but private direct messages from my private Twitter account.

As for Government messages, I have made it very clear to every minister, cabinet secretary, permanent secretary and civil servant that, regardless of the method of communication that was used, we must comply with the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011, the freedom of information legislation and our mobile messaging policy.

I go back to the point that I made to Douglas Ross. Regardless of the communication method that is used—whether it be an SNP email address or otherwise—any decisions that are made must be recorded in the corporate record, as must the salient points. We will continue to comply fully with the UK Covid inquiry, as I intend to do in a couple of hours.

Anas Sarwar: Humza Yousaf is meant to be in charge of the Government and his party, but he cannot answer for anybody else in either of those, and he goes back only to his own messages and emails. The issue is not just about the Covid inquiry; it is about how the Government operates. Over the past 17 years in government, the SNP has created a culture of secrecy and cover-up—a culture that goes from the First Minister down.

People in the SNP believe that there is one standard for them and another standard for everyone else—because somehow the rules do not apply to the SNP. They have abused the trust that the people of Scotland put in them. If they will not take my word for it, they should perhaps listen to Caroleanne Stewart of Scottish Covid Bereaved. She said:

"I trusted them, I felt him and Nicola Sturgeon were honest and trying to be open with us, and to find out that was all just a facade, I don't understand how they can hold their head up high."

First Minister, how can you expect the people of Scotland to trust you or your party ever again?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

The First Minister: I will always leave the verdict of trust to the Scottish people. We will comply with the UK inquiry and the Scottish Covid inquiry—which, of course, we instructed. When it comes to transparency, we have handed over 28,000 WhatsApp messages. That is transparency. We have handed over 19,000 documents. That is transparency. When it comes to what the Government has done across a range of portfolios, whether it is about the duty of candour or the patient safety commissioner, that is transparency. When it is about public inquiries and instructing them, that is transparency. When the former First Minister was standing up at more than 250 media conferences, that was transparency. Taking questions in this chamber on multiple occasions—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Doing that on dozens of occasions—that is transparency.

I will end where I started—with my response to Douglas Ross. When it comes to families who have been bereaved by Covid, our responsibility, first and foremost, is to them. I can promise them this. I know that, when I appear in front of the inquiry, it will not just want warm words; it will want to see and hear truthful answers to straight questions. That is what I intend to give when I appear in front of the inquiry in a couple of hours' time.

The Presiding Officer: Many members wish to put questions today, as you would expect. I would be grateful if we could therefore keep our questions and responses concise.

Private Rented Sector (Rent Cap)

3. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I associate the Scottish Greens with the remarks of the First Minister and Anas Sarwar ahead of Holocaust memorial day.

To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on how the Scottish Government will continue to protect tenants in the private rented sector after the expiry of the rent cap under the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022. (S6F-02735)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government has led the way—we are far

ahead of any other part of the United Kingdom—in protecting private tenants against rent rises and eviction during the cost of living crisis. We are absolutely committed to supporting tenants when the protections end on 31 March 2024. Yesterday, we laid regulations that will, subject, of course, to the approval of the Parliament, temporarily amend the existing rent adjudication process for a period of 12 months. That will help to protect tenants from excessively large rent increases that could be experienced if there is a move back to open-market rent in a single step, while enabling landlords to continue to reinvest in the private rented sector. The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights has written to the lead committee on the matter with further details.

Ross Greer: I thank the First Minister for that answer and for highlighting that the emergency rent protections in Scotland have been far ahead of any other measure in the UK. Scotland will continue to play that leading role when long-term rent controls are introduced very soon under the forthcoming housing bill.

Some tenants who are watching today may, however, be receiving rent increase notices right now that are well above the 3 per cent cap. Can the First Minister reassure tenants that the rent cap remains fully in place until 31 March and that any tenant receiving a cap-busting rent increase notice before then should challenge that rise? Further to that, what is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that tenants know about, and are able to use, their rights?

The First Minister: Yes, I can confirm that the emergency rent cap remains in place until the end of March, so any rent increase notice that is issued before 1 April is very much subject to that cap, even if the increase will not apply until after that date. If a tenant receives a rent increase notice above that, they should refer it to rent service Scotland and rent will be set in line with the cap.

I fully agree that tenants need to know what their rights are and how to act on them. A national renters rights marketing campaign will launch very soon, highlighting existing rights and the changes when the emergency measures end. That will include online guidance and tools to help people to understand how the changes affect them specifically.

The Government has taken clear, bold action to support people through the cost crisis. We are determined to build on that, and our forthcoming housing bill will set out proposals for longer-term reform of the rental sector. We are committed to working not just with tenants—which is crucial—but with responsible landlords and other key

stakeholders to ensure that the legislation delivers reform that works in reality.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party-Green rent cap has not only failed to tackle the housing emergency; it has exacerbated it. Rents in Scotland have increased by more than 14 per cent despite the SNP-Green rent cap and, as a result of the cap, Scotland is the only part of the UK in which the number of properties sold by landlords has gone up. That ill-thought-out policy has hindered mobility, caused enormous price hikes when people move and reduced the availability of housing by driving landlords out of the market. Does the First Minister agree that his Government's interferences in the market have been nothing short of a disaster? Will he scrap the cap?

The First Minister: My goodness—I think that that is the most Conservative contribution that I have ever heard in the chamber. How dare the Scottish Government interfere in the middle of a UK Government cost of living crisis to help tenants because of the economic damage that the UK Government has caused? How dare we have the temerity to protect renters because of the economic vandalism of Pam Gosal's party?

Of course Pam Gosal's contribution does not bear out the reality or the facts. If we look at—

The Presiding Officer: I will stop you there, First Minister. I am aware of members clearly having conversations with other members across the aisles. That is totally unacceptable during First Minister's question time.

Please continue, First Minister.

The First Minister: If we look at the facts, we see that the latest Scottish landlord register data shows that the number of registered properties for rent in Scotland between August 2022 and November 2023 increased.

We will, of course, work with responsible landlords, tenants and other stakeholder groups. However, I say to Pam Gosal that I will never make an apology for making sure that we are on the right side of this argument.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): The new rent adjudication rules, which empower private tenants to challenge unreasonable rent hikes, are welcome. However, for the proposed transition to work as intended, tenants need to be fully informed of those rights. Will the First Minister expand on how the Scottish Government intends to ensure that renters and private landlords throughout Scotland understand the system that will be in place from April?

The First Minister: I absolutely agree with that. It is vital that tenants and landlords are made aware of the changes that will come into place

from 1 April. Tenants' understanding their rights and how to act on them is a crucial part of the changes that we are making to the rent adjudication process working effectively in practice. As I mentioned in response to Ross Greer's question, we are working on a range of awareness-raising activities and the provision of clear guidance to support people through the transitional period.

A national renters' rights marketing campaign will be launched very soon, and we are working on an online rent increase calculator to assist landlords and tenants in establishing what rent could be charged from 1 April, should it be subject to adjudication.

Grangemouth Refinery (Engagement with UK Government)

4. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the United Kingdom Government regarding the status of the Grangemouth refinery. (S6F-02760)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy chaired the first meeting of the Grangemouth future industry board, which includes representatives of the refinery, its workforce and the UK Government. I am encouraged that the UK Minister of State for Energy Security and Net Zero responded positively to Neil Gray's request to consider any proposal that supports a long-term and sustainable future for the Grangemouth industrial cluster, recognising its strategic national importance to the economy of the whole of the UK. My Government is committed to exploring all options to extend the life of the refinery and to bring forward new transition projects at pace.

I also welcome the UK Government's support of the Tata Steel plant in Wales, and I look forward to a constructive dialogue on a similar package being made available for Grangemouth. The cabinet secretary has written to the UK Government to seek a further discussion.

Michelle Thomson: It is indeed heartening to hear that the UK Government is now open to giving support to the vitally important chemical cluster at Grangemouth, which is in my constituency. There is the potential for the refinery to transition quickly to a biorefinery to be utilised for sustainable aviation fuel—in other words, there could be a just transition for workers right now. That would require support from the UK Government in respect of its policy barriers surrounding the hydroprocessed esters and fatty acids—HEFA—cap. What indications, if any, are there that the UK Government realises that

potential, and that it is willing to take the necessary steps and act in the best interests of Scotland for that vitally important national asset?

The First Minister: Michelle Thomson is absolutely right—there is a huge opportunity for Grangemouth in the transition to net zero. However, it is clear that there are serious regulatory barriers—to which Michelle Thomson spoke—for the owners of Grangemouth in developing opportunities such as sustainable aviation fuel, or SAF.

The company has made it clear that a major barrier to immediate investment—I stress the word “immediate”—in a biorefinery at the site concerns the United Kingdom Government’s proposed SAF mandate and the HEFA cap that Michelle Thomson mentioned. That requires action from the UK Government, and I believe that action should be immediate and urgent. Grangemouth’s hard workers and the wider community cannot be left at the mercy of UK Government inaction.

The Scottish Government wants to secure the best possible future for Grangemouth. The key powers in that area lie, regrettably, at Westminster, so we will continue to push the UK Government to make the necessary changes to ensure that Grangemouth plays a key role in powering Scotland’s drive to net zero—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister.

The First Minister: —and I hope that all members in the chamber can get behind the request that we have made—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please.

The First Minister: —to the UK Government to help that transition for Grangemouth and its workers.

Drugs Policy

5. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister, in light of the Scottish Government’s plans to open the first safe drug consumption room in Glasgow later this year, what assurances he can provide that other areas of drugs policy, including spaces for residential rehabilitation, will not be deprioritised. (S6F-02748)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Those areas absolutely will not be deprioritised. Drug deaths are a public health emergency, and we remain absolutely committed to investing an additional £250 million in our national mission to reduce harm and deaths caused by drugs. We will continue to take a person-centred approach to address the wider needs of some of our most vulnerable people.

We have been clear in our commitment to support the establishment of a safer drug consumption facility in Scotland. To give Annie Wells a sense of reassurance—I hope—I note that funding was earmarked in the national mission budget in the knowledge that Glasgow might need to proceed quickly, following the Lord Advocate’s position, so no existing drug and alcohol services will be affected in order to fund the pilot.

We remain committed to expanding residential rehabilitation capacity by 50 per cent by the end of the current session of Parliament. That includes the expansion of Beechwood house in Inverness, which, I am pleased to say, broke ground this week. That will add much-needed capacity in the Highlands when it opens in October.

Annie Wells: Residential rehabilitation is a vital way to help drug users not just to beat addiction but to get their lives back, yet the most recent figures show that the numbers of people starting at places in those facilities fell to their lowest in more than two years. We know that there are not fewer people addicted to drugs, so why have the numbers of those receiving that type of help reduced? Can the First Minister assure those vulnerable people that his Government will not oversee a further reduction in places?

The First Minister: First, we have maintained the drugs budget for 2024-25, in the face of significant cuts to our resource budget over the past couple of years.

With regard to the expansion of residential rehab, investment in 77 capacity projects combined will provide an increase of 172 beds by 2025-26, boosting the current rehab capacity in Scotland from 425 to 597. Far from being a cut, therefore, there is an increase of more than 40 per cent.

As I said, we have progressed work on safer drug consumption facilities. We are continuing to widen access to life-saving naloxone, and we continue to drive the implementation of the medication assisted treatment standards.

With regard to the safer drug consumption facility that Annie Wells mentioned in her first question, I am pleased that we have got to the current position. However, it would have been far easier, and far quicker, if the United Kingdom Government had approved the facility in the first place.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The safe consumption pilot in Glasgow is a critical part of our effort to tackle the drug deaths crisis in our country, but we need many complementary tools in the toolkit in order to address the crisis effectively. The Turning Point Scotland 218 centre in Glasgow, which supports women in the justice system with a number of critical issues such as

problematic drug use, is set to close next month as a result of funding cuts. How can the First Minister say that other drug policy interventions are not being compromised when his Government is allowing a well-established and effective lifeline service in Glasgow to close?

The First Minister: As I said in response to a question from Pauline McNeill, either last week or a couple of weeks ago, I know that Turning Point 218 is an excellent service. Decisions about funding it are, of course, made locally. In our discussions with Glasgow City Council, the council has made it clear that, if the service has to close, it is already ensuring that there is appropriate service provision available for the women who would be impacted

Prisons (Weapons and Attacks on Guards)

6. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government plans to take in response to the reported rise in attacks on prison guards and weapons found in prisons. (S6F-02753)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Government and the Scottish Prison Service recognise the importance of providing a safe and secure environment to live and work in our prisons by adopting a zero-tolerance approach to all violence. Although the SPS reports an increase in the recovery of weapons in prisons, that is likely to be a result of the positive impact of the mitigations that have been put in place to detect, deter and reduce the availability of contraband across the prison estate. The rise also highlights the professionalism of our prison officers in their ability to identify and manage both risks and threats. Although every act of violence towards staff is absolutely to be condemned—I am sure that we will be united on that—those acts of violence towards staff have reduced by 28 per cent over the past four years.

Pauline McNeill: Prison guard attacks have more than doubled in seven years, with nearly 4,000 weapons being discovered in the past 10 years. Those include homemade weapons such as knives that have been made from razor blades melted into toothbrushes. This week, Phil Fairlie from the Prison Officers Association Scotland said:

“The trend is growing at an alarming rate and coincides with an increase in assaults on staff and prisoners. We are heading towards record high population numbers and have more members of organised crime gangs inside our prisons than ever.”

I agree with the First Minister that we have a high regard for our prison guards and the work that they do, but does he agree that they should not have to fear going to work? Indeed, prisoners should not fear being in prison. What discussions is the Scottish Government having to ascertain

why those homemade weapons are circulating? Is the First Minister concerned that the increase might be symptomatic of severe overcrowding in Scottish prisons?

The First Minister: Those are all excellent questions from Pauline McNeill, which I will try to address. If there is further information that the justice secretary can send to her I will ensure that that happens. On overcrowding in our prisons, I do not disagree a jot with what Pauline McNeill said. Our prison population is far too high, so a number of efforts are being made try to reduce it. Our numbers in remand are far too high, as are our numbers in the female prison population. The justice secretary and I have spoken about a range of actions over a number of months to try to reduce the pressures. Those are not a silver bullet, as Pauline McNeill would understand, but we can take a range of actions. I agree with her that reducing the prison population is necessary. On the actions that we are taking in relation to weapons and contraband in prisons, the justice secretary will furnish the member with further details, but we are investing in technology such as rapid scan machines, body scanners and so on to try to detect the contraband that is coming into our prisons.

The last point that I make to Pauline McNeill is that she is absolutely right to say that we must place value on those who work in our prisons. That is why I was pleased that the latest pay proposal was overwhelmingly accepted by the SPS partner trade unions. It is a two-year deal that delivers a salary increase of 10 per cent for the majority of staff, with those on the lowest salaries benefiting from a rise of more than 12 per cent over the period of the pay award. I believe that we should all continue to praise the efforts of our prison staff up and down the country for the fantastic work that they do.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

XL Bully Dogs

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): From a written answer to me this week and following Westminster scrutiny of the XL bully dog regulations, it appears that there are an estimated 50,000 to 150,000 XL bully-type dogs in England and Wales. Extrapolating those numbers to Scotland would mean that there are between 5,000 and 15,000 dogs. Given those numbers, what help is available for existing owners, who are mainly responsible owners, to identify whether their dog fits that breed type? What concerns does the First Minister have of there being an influx of dogs to welfare charities, and that vets in Scotland

might find themselves euthanising perfectly healthy dogs?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Christine Grahame has raised very legitimate concerns. I know that she has put on record her concern and opposition to the actions that we are having to take. I understand and am willing to continue to have conversations with her about the approach, because I still believe that the Scottish Government's "deed, not breed" approach is the right one.

We have, unfortunately, had to respond to an unannounced decision that was made by the United Kingdom Government without any consultation whatsoever with the Scottish Government.

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety, Siobhian Brown, will happily write to Christine Grahame in relation to all the issues that she raises. We have to think about the impact on owners, of course, and about the potential impact on animal rehoming centres and the veterinary profession. All those issues are being considered as we progress these matters at pace.

Belford Hospital (Replacement)

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Following the announcement of the Scottish National Party-Green Government's latest budget, NHS Highland has been forced to put on hold development of the much needed and already delayed replacement for the Belford hospital in Fort William. The current building will be 60 years old next year, and patients, staff and pretty much everyone—except, clearly, the Scottish Government—recognises the urgent need for a new hospital.

Can the First Minister tell me when the people of Lochaber, who have been campaigning for decades for a new Belford, will get the new hospital that they have been promised?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We will provide the chamber with an update on our capital projects, including health capital projects.

I say to Jamie Halcro Johnston that, in the face of not just a real-terms cut to our resource budget but a real-terms cut to our capital budget of 10 per cent over the coming five years, we are continuing to ensure that our national health service gets a pay uplift. That is in stark contrast to a Conservative United Kingdom Government that has prioritised tax cuts for the wealthy over prioritising spend in its NHS.

Maternity Services (Caithness)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that the northern

part of the A9 has been closed several times recently, cutting off Caithness from the remainder of the mainland and from specialist maternity services. The First Minister also knows that Raigmore hospital's maternity unit cannot cope, which has led to women being asked to leave the unit, with nowhere to go and 100 miles from home as their labour progresses. Despite that, the Scottish Government has paused the Caithness healthcare redesign and the Raigmore maternity unit redevelopment. Will the First Minister revisit the downgrade and continue the redesign so that women who require specialist maternity care are never again abandoned?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The member raises very important points. I was involved in the issue when I was Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, and I know it well. The member is absolutely correct that refurbishments to and construction at Raigmore are much needed.

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care has outlined the very challenging position that we face in relation to capital projects, due to the cut in the capital budget that we will receive from the United Kingdom Government over the next five years.

I confirm to the Parliament that no final decisions have been taken on individual projects in NHS Highland. We absolutely remain committed to the reinstatement of consultant-led maternity services at Dr Gray's hospital. Any decisions made in relation to Raigmore's redevelopment will have no impact on the overall plan to return consultant-led services to Dr Gray's by 2026.

Notwithstanding all that, the member's points are crucial, which is why we are keen to update Parliament as soon as we can on our capital infrastructure projects.

Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group (Recommendations)

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the First Minister provide an assurance that, although budgetary pressures mean that the Scottish Government is not currently able to commit to the empire, slavery and Scotland's museums steering group's suggestion that it receive £5 million for its work—which includes bringing forward plans for a dedicated space to address Scotland's role in empire, colonialism and historical slavery—that work has not been ruled out for the future, and that consideration will be given to locating such a facility in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency, given its links with the transatlantic slave trade?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government has allocated £200,000 in

this year's budget to support the on-going work related to the empire, slavery and Scotland's museums group's recommendations. We will all work towards the recommendations that are published by the steering group. We will support the building of an effective and resilient organisation that contains the necessary skills to identify and acquire additional funding streams to allow that crucial work to progress and develop in the coming years.

The location of any facility remains to be determined, but I hope that Stuart McMillan will take some comfort from our reassurances about the importance that we place on the empire museum.

Edinburgh Eye Pavilion (Replacement)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): It is more than three years since Scottish National Party ministers cancelled the new replacement hospital for the eye pavilion in Edinburgh, a decision that the former First Minister agreed to U-turn on during the 2020-21 Holyrood election, pledging to build a new hospital during this parliamentary session. Will the First Minister keep that pledge to patients in Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There is no doubt that the replacement for the eye pavilion needs to be built. We need to replace the existing infrastructure, and there is no doubt across any political party about that.

However, I go back to the points that I made to the member's colleagues. We are having to take forward capital spending projects in the face of high inflation in construction costs but also a 10 per cent cut to our capital budget over the next five years, which is being imposed on Scotland by the Conservatives. Therefore, although Miles Briggs has every right to ask us about the progress that we are making, I hope that he will also use any influence that he has with the UK Government to tell it to reverse that capital cut, which is having such significant impacts on our budget and on health infrastructure up and down the country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions to the First Minister. The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Paul O'Kane. There will be a short suspension to allow members and people in the public gallery to leave before the debate begins, if they wish to do so.

12:45

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Holocaust Memorial Day 2024

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11789, in the name of Paul O'Kane, on Holocaust memorial day 2024. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises Holocaust Memorial Day 2024; remembers the six million Jewish people murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of others killed under the Nazis' persecution of other minority groups; reflects on the millions of people who have been murdered in more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur; recognises that Holocaust Memorial Day takes place on 27 January, marking the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp; acknowledges that the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day is developed annually by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust; reflects on this year's theme, Fragility of Freedom; understands that, in every genocide that has taken place, those who are targeted have had their freedom restricted and removed, before many of them are murdered and that, despite this, in every genocide, there are those who risk their own freedom to help others, to preserve others' freedom or to stand up to the regime; congratulates the efforts of the Holocaust Memorial Day activity organisers around Scotland who bring people together to learn lessons from history, and understands the importance of challenging all forms of prejudice to ensure that lessons of such events are fully learnt.

12:47

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege to open today's debate to mark Holocaust memorial day 2024 and to follow the debates in previous years that were led by Jackson Carlaw and Fergus Ewing, which show the strong cross-party commitment to this motion in the Parliament.

Now, as ever, it remains incredibly important to come together to pause, reflect and remember the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis, alongside millions of others, including Roma and Sinti people, disabled people and LGBT people. We also call to mind the millions of others who lived through and survived the Holocaust but lost everything—family, dignity, health and home.

Now, as in years gone by, we recommit ourselves and our efforts to the statement, "Never again", but we know that, tragically, since the Holocaust, humanity has not lived up to that statement in many places across the globe, including Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. We remember those people today, too.

"Never again" is a phrase that should apply not only to genocide but to the hate and persecution

that surround the horrific acts of mass murder that we have seen.

The theme developed by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for this year's commemorations is "Fragility of Freedom". The horrors of the Holocaust—indeed, the horrors of most genocides in humanity's collective history—do not come from nowhere. Acts of targeted mass murder are preceded by an erosion of freedoms in order to control populations and make the terrors that follow easier to perpetrate.

In the lead-up to the Holocaust, Jews and other groups that were targeted by the Nazis had many of their freedoms and rights restricted and removed. The freedom to study, work and live wherever they wanted was restricted. Jews were removed from educational establishments, had their businesses attacked and destroyed and were forced into ghettos. The freedoms of self-identity, religion and marriage were limited, as Jews became a defined class for discrimination under the Nuremberg laws, which restricted whom they could marry. The freedom to engage in leisure and other activities was also restricted, as Jews were banned from cinemas, theatres and sports facilities.

Those are all freedoms that we often take for granted in the modern era. Although many of us cannot conceive of losing a single one of those freedoms, they are fragile, and, in recent times, our world has become a more uncertain place in that regard.

It is not only the freedoms of groups targeted by those carrying out genocidal acts that are restricted—frequently, the freedoms of all people are limited to prevent people from speaking out. During the Holocaust, the targeting of opposition politicians, journalists and dissenting voices of the Nazi regime ensured that information control and propaganda in the population stopped people speaking out and opposing atrocities. We have seen that pattern repeated in other genocides, such as that in Rwanda, where the infamous Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines spewed hatred against the Tutsis to lay the ground, through propaganda, for what would follow.

Ultimately, the Holocaust and other crimes of genocide result in the loss of that fundamental freedom—the freedom to live. Now more than ever, it is important for survivors and people born after the Holocaust and other genocides to recognise that, just because the atrocities have stopped and society begins to normalise, freedom does not always fully return, and survivors have to live with the reality of what they have experienced.

Growing up in East Renfrewshire, I have had the privilege of meeting and hearing at first hand from a number of survivors. Their children now

carry on the work of telling their story, because so few survivors now remain. On Monday evening, at the East Renfrewshire commemoration event, I had the privilege to, once again, hear the story of Marianne Grant, who survived a number of camps, including Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Marianne was a painter who literally painted for her life—she was forced to record images of the horrendous experiments of the angel of death, Dr Josef Mengele. Marianne's story is the very embodiment of the fragility of freedom.

For those who have lived through such times, freedom as it once was does not fully return. People lose livelihoods and homes. They often have no choice but to move to new countries, as so many Jewish people have done. People are restricted by the mental and physical trauma of what they have experienced. It can be hard to trust. Understandably, after all that has been experienced, it is hard for people to trust those in their new country, to trust that their freedoms will be guaranteed and to trust that they have complete freedom.

For many groups, the entrenched stigma and hate that are drilled into people through those periods remain, and their freedom remains less than that of their fellow citizens. For example, it was not until many decades later that gay men who had been imprisoned by the Nazis and around the world gained full rights and stopped being viewed as criminals.

The legacy of hate hurts not just those who survived but members of persecuted groups who are born long after. In the context of the Holocaust, Jews in our communities, including in East Renfrewshire, still have to face the vile words and actions of antisemitism and Holocaust denialism. For many, the lessons of the Holocaust—the ways in which Jews and others were victimised, othered and expelled—have still not been learned.

It is incumbent on us all, as representatives of the people of Scotland in this Parliament, to stand up and to recommit to combating antisemitism, racism, hatred and attacks on people's freedoms without equivocation. This year, let us once again redouble our focus on protecting those fragile freedoms, watch our own words and deeds, and watch the words and deeds of others, whether in our community, in this Parliament or elsewhere, so that we do not allow the fragile freedoms to shatter any further.

We must ensure that we, with one voice, say, "Never again", and that we have a Scotland where all people can walk free of hatred and fear. *[Applause.]*

12:54

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I thank Paul O’Kane for bringing this important debate to the chamber. We often say those words at the start of members’ business debates on all manner of subjects, but, in this case, it is especially true—critically so, given that the importance of this subject should not be underestimated.

About 20 years ago, my wife and I visited Oświęcim in the south of Poland—the site that we know in English as Auschwitz. We took my teenage daughter there to witness the inhumanity that occurred on that site. No one could fail to be moved by the memorials and the industrial scale of the slaughter that took place there and elsewhere, not just in concentration camps but in towns and villages across Europe—events that resulted in the murder of 6 million Jews and millions from other groups in horrific circumstances.

The horrific events of the Holocaust are the most significant example of genocide in modern times, but the act of genocide is, unfortunately, nothing new in human history, and it continues to the present day. It has been estimated that 43 genocides could have occurred between 1956 and 2016, resulting in perhaps 50 million deaths. On this Holocaust memorial day, it is important that we recognise genocides that have taken place in Rwanda, Darfur, Cambodia and, here in Europe, Bosnia in the 1990s. In 1995, I visited Bosnia as part of an aid convoy with Edinburgh Direct Aid—an organisation that has delivered humanitarian aid to many war zones and nations that are affected by crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, its work is still badly needed.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust memorial day is “Fragility of Freedom”. Commemoration means nothing if we do not truly learn lessons and take steps to stand against genocide, wherever it occurs. That is the primary lesson. It can happen anywhere, to any group. There is always that risk. In the words of Dutch Jew and Holocaust survivor Hajo Meyer, “Never again, for anyone.”

In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which defined genocide for the first time as any of five acts

“committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

The five acts are killing members of a group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm, imposing living conditions that are intended to destroy the group, preventing births and forcibly transferring children out of the group. A key point is that victims are targeted not randomly but because of their real or perceived membership of

a group. The International Court of Justice has a key role to play in assessing cases that might constitute the crime of genocide, and it continues that important work to this day.

In combating genocide, we must always be aware of how it starts. Dehumanising language, comparing whole groups of people to animals and calling for extermination, mass slaughter or collective punishment are signs that we need to be alert to, and we need to expose and combat such behaviour whenever it arises. In Rwanda, the Tutsi people were described as cockroaches. More recently, ethnic groups have been described as human animals. Incitement to genocide is recognised as a separate crime under international law—a crime that does not require genocide to have taken place to be prosecutable. Those who call for the wholesale destruction of a people, their forcible transfer or collective punishment are guilty of that crime.

The 10 stages of genocide have been identified as classification, symbolisation, discrimination, dehumanisation, organisation, polarisation, preparation, persecution, extermination and denial. Awareness of how that process works allows us to recognise it and call it out. We must be alert to and challenge all forms of hatred and prejudice, including antisemitism, Islamophobia and racism.

Nothing is more important than the need to expose and root out the signs that lead to genocide. Preventing the recurrence of the Holocaust begins with an understanding that it can happen to any group, anywhere. At this time of year, we also take time to celebrate our national poet. Although the two are not often linked, it is perhaps worth reflecting on Burns’s words:

That Man to Man the world o’er
Shall brithers be for a’ that.

A recognition that people of any ethnic group are not animals is a good place to start.

12:59

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Having participated in or observed these debates for 17 years, it is difficult at times to think how to bring a fresh perspective to the debate, so I congratulate Paul O’Kane on his speech. It has been a privilege to work with him since he was elected in 2021 and with others to ensure that there is a genuine cross-party approach to the way in which we remember—and ensure that the country remembers—the events of the Holocaust.

In the same way, I congratulate Ben Macpherson on the successful event that he held this week on yet another example of the fear that the Nazis engendered that led to so much loss of life.

I wonder, colleagues, when you put up your Christmas decorations. I am quite late in the day in doing so. I still have a real tree, which, this year, went up on Saturday 16 December—it very often goes up on the weekend before the week of Christmas. Bear in mind that date—16 December 2023.

Last year, I saw the latest movie adaptation of “All Quiet on the Western Front”. I think that many of us might, at some stage or another, have seen a version of “All Quiet on the Western Front”. Indeed, the title is a phrase that has worked its way into the common language.

“All Quiet on the Western Front” was originally a book that was written by Erich Maria Remarque, who was a veteran of the first world war. It sold 2.2 million copies in its first 18 months. It is a book about the futility of the loss of life in the first world war, but it was detested by the Nazis. The author of the book found that it was banned. It was burned on Kristallnacht, and he had to flee the country. He moved to the United States and, actually, had a very glamorous life. He had affairs with Hedy Lamarr and Marlene Dietrich, and he married Paulette Goddard. They left \$20 million to the commemoration of events of the Holocaust.

Back home, the Nazis arrested Remarque’s sister, Elfriede Scholz. In the judgment of the court, it was said:

“Your brother is unfortunately beyond our reach—you, however, will not escape us.”

On 16 December 1943, she was beheaded by the Nazis for the crime of being the sister of a brother who wrote a book about the first world war that the Nazis detested. The fragility of freedom.

In “A Village in the Third Reich”—a book that I commend to everybody—you can read about the village of Oberstdorf, one of the world’s first skiing tourist resorts, which benefited from massive international tourism, including Jewish tourism, and about how an insidious little clique in the village imposed the will of the Nazis to ban the Jewish community. There was subtle resistance throughout, but people there found themselves to be persecuted, arrested or shot for any collaboration or effort to save Jewish people. The fragility of freedom.

In last year’s debate, I referred to Danny Finkelstein’s magnificent book, “Hitler, Stalin, Mum and Dad”. It is about his grandfather, Alfred Wiener—the inspiration for the Wiener Holocaust Library, which supplied the exhibition that Ben Macpherson hosted in the Parliament this week—and his grandmother Grete, who were in Germany, and his grandparents Dolu and Lusja Finkelstein, who were in Poland. It is about the remarkable journey that the Wieners had through Nazi Germany and the heroic efforts of his

grandmother to save his mother and her two sisters, as they moved through the concentration camps to Bergen-Belsen.

In Bergen-Belsen, Grete Wiener did everything to save her three daughters and, in the end, they got out; they got out near midnight on 24 January 1945. The Wieners crossed the border to Switzerland and to freedom. Grete had triumphed: she had protected her girls through the long years of Nazi occupation and terror, kept them alive through the valley of death, given them every last crumb of food and seen them to safety.

Alfred Wiener had managed to go to New York, and Camille Aronowska, who was based in Switzerland but learned of the prospective exchange, informed him of it. He also received a telegram from the Red Cross, which said that his wife, Margarete Wiener, and the children had escaped from Germany to Switzerland. However, there was a final bit, which said:

“MARGARET WIENER PAST AWAY AFTER ARRIVAL ON WEAKNESS”.

She had done and given everything that she could to save her daughters in Bergen-Belsen and was so weakened by the experience that she literally died on the train as they escaped from that climate. The fragility of freedom.

Whether we are talking about Elfriede Scholz, the community of Oberstdorf, the Wieners, the Finkelsteins or Marianne Grant, whose daughter mentioned this, too, Primo Levi said:

“It happened, therefore it can happen again.”

The fragility of freedom.

We must remember, and we must ensure that, although Primo Levi worried, it can never happen again, even though we know that that is such a difficult task and statement to honour.

13:04

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank colleagues for their very fine speeches, and I thank Paul O’Kane for giving us the opportunity to renew, in this annual debate, our Holocaust remembrance through reflection and witness. The need for that becomes ever more pressing year by year, as members of the generation who lived through the Holocaust pass. Their witness must not be lost with them.

The Holocaust is history’s greatest horror. It was both the confluence of ancient hatred and industrial modernity and the fullest expression of nationalism, which was given form by an efficient and ruthless state that tore down the doors of family, faith and fraternity and replaced the human dignity of the soul with collated lists of category, of statistics and of method and calculated means.

That project begat the most notorious statistic of all—6 million dead.

In 1949, Theodor Adorno said:

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”

Where could beauty be found in a world that is capable of such horror? Was it not trite to find form? Was it not whimsy to seek prose?

How do you write about the Holocaust? That was a question that the late novelist Martin Amis, who died in May last year, walked around for most of his literary career. He was a late stepfather to Jewish daughters, and the Holocaust gained ever greater salience in his writing, although it had been a feature of it from his early career. His 2014 novel, “The Zone of Interest”, features the idyllic life of a concentration camp commander and his wife, who live just over the wire. Of course, we all live just over the wire. For days and even months, we can avert our eyes, yet we cannot avoid—as they could not—the stench of decay.

The Holocaust draws writers and readers in ever greater numbers. Colleagues have cited some of those works already—they include popular books such as “The Tattooist of Auschwitz”. We also have films such as “One Life”, which is an account of the heroic service of Nicholas Winton and his role in the Kindertransport programme. Such works open the hearts and the minds of audiences, and they prompt the biggest and most essential of questions: “How?”, “Why?” and, most urgently and repeatedly, “Could it happen again?”

It was in Amis’s “The Zone of Interest” that I first encountered this quote from W G Sebald on the Holocaust:

“No serious person ever thinks of anything else.”

Amis wrote of the exceptionalism of the Third Reich: it is our duty as elected politicians to see glimpses of it everywhere. Does our state stray too far? Will artificial intelligence make racism ever more efficient? Is our justice blind? Are we truly free?

On Tuesday night in this Parliament, the German consul general recalled the first expulsion of the Jewish Poles in 1938, in what is known as the Polenaktion. She was discharging the most solemn duty of the German state. She also told us of the hundreds of thousands of Germans who, in recent days, had gone on to the streets of their cities and towns to stand in the face of rising fascism, the far right, nationalism, ethnic hatred and economic alienation, and of time looping and history repeating itself. Never again. Never again.

We speak today in the livid aftermath of the largest and most deadly assault on Jews since the Holocaust. On 7 October, Hamas slaughtered the

innocent and raped and tortured 1,269 Jews because they were Jews. It did so in the hopeful knowledge of the horror that would be visited upon innocent Palestinian people.

History tells us that we cannot give up on peace, no matter how forlorn or how remote a prospect that may feel. That is our remembrance.

13:09

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I thank Paul O’Kane for leading this year’s debate.

Since I was first elected, I have spoken in a number of Holocaust memorial debates. Today, I had a look through my notes from those earlier speeches. One of the core purposes of the day is to remind us of the need to work proactively to ensure that something like the Holocaust could never happen again. Those seven years of notes made for pretty depressing reading.

In 2017, I spoke about how fascists create their own alternative reality, then set about making the rest of society believe in it. That alternative reality is a hateful false reality, in which some people are less than human.

We are all familiar with how the Nazis went about systematically dehumanising Jews, Slavic people, Roma, LGBT people, disabled people and others, and with the importance of media support to their success in doing that, which Paul O’Kane referred to in his opening speech.

We are a century on from the start of the Nazis’ rise to power, but have we really learned the lessons of the darkest period in human history? A century ago, the owner of *The Daily Mail* aligned himself with Hitler and ran the headline, “Hurrah for the blackshirts”.

The first time I spoke in a debate such as this, seven years ago, *The Sun*—this country’s biggest-selling newspaper—had recently published a column that described refugees crossing the Mediterranean as “cockroaches” who should be stopped by gunships—language that caused the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Human Rights to intervene to point out that that was exactly how the Nazis had described Jews and other groups. Today, we see dehumanising language being used against the desperate and vulnerable people who are crossing the English Channel, against trans people, against Palestinians and against other marginalised groups.

The Holocaust did not start with gas chambers, the Rwandan genocide did not start with machete-wielding gangs, and the Bosnian genocide did not start with the massacre at Srebrenica. They started with dehumanising language and misinformation, with extremists pushing the limits

of debate, and with efforts made to suppress the voices of the groups that were being targeted. Can we really say that the 21st century United Kingdom is doing all that it can do to live up to the commitment that the Holocaust must never happen again?

Seven years ago, Donald Trump had just taken office and major publications in the United States were running puff pieces on neo-Nazis with headlines such as,

“Meet the dapper white supremacist riding the Trump wave”—

the “dapper white supremacist”. This year, the prospect of Trump returning to the White House is a distressingly realistic one. How must the Jewish community in America feel when his first election was quickly followed by events such as those at Charlottesville, where uniformed white men held a torch-lit march chanting,

“Jews will not replace us”?

Across Europe, the far-right surge that appeared to have subsided a few years ago has begun again. A left-to-right broad democratic front may have taken back the Government in Poland, but fascists have just won a shock victory in the Netherlands on a platform that demonises Muslims in exactly the same way as the Nazis’ early platform demonised Jews. Sweden’s centre-right Government is entirely dependent on fascist members to stay in office, and Italy’s Prime Minister leads a party that traces its lineage straight back to Mussolini.

Germany has just been rocked by revelations that senior figures from the AfD party attended a meeting with neo-Nazis that included a presentation on how they could go about deporting people who are not ethnically German if they ever took power, which is not a distant prospect when the AfD is currently polling in second place nationally and in first place across swathes of eastern Germany. The cordon sanitaire is fraying and, in a clear and distressing parallel with Germany’s ruling parties a century ago, mainstream politicians who are desperate to hold on to or get into government are co-operating with the far right and with those who trace their roots back to the fascists who brought about that dark period in our history.

When you treat fascism as simply another political view, you have conceded legitimacy that it does not deserve and should never have. Its ideas become an acceptable part of mainstream discussion when inciting genocide is not an acceptable or legitimate point of view, and believing that you can win the argument by giving those people a platform for debate and then challenging them misunderstands the problem.

Fascism is not rational. Fascists and others who advance dangerous and lethal agendas are not interested in winning the debate. They just want to implement their wicked world view, and they are not going to play by the rules that the rest of us follow in a liberal and democratic society because they do not want a liberal and democratic society in which their argument might win a battle of ideas. We cannot ever allow them to win again.

Today, we remember the victims of humanity’s worst crime, when 9 million people, including 6 million Jews, were slaughtered in the Holocaust. We must think seriously about how we turn our determination never to allow that to happen again into a practical reality. It is not enough not to be a racist or a fascist; we must all be active anti-racists and anti-fascists. That is the only way in which our statements of “Never again” can truly mean something.

13:14

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It is a privilege to rise to speak for my party on the important occasion of our annual commemoration of the Holocaust. I am grateful to Paul O’Kane for leading the debate, which has been characterised and punctuated by thoughtful and moving contributions, not least from Jackson Carlaw and Michael Marra.

As we have heard and will hear again this afternoon, the Nazis engaged in the most horrific and barbaric acts. There was the mechanised slaughter of 9 million people, 6 million of them Jews—a genocide that killed two thirds of Europe’s Jewish population. Entire communities, huge segments of entire races and, indeed, anyone who the Nazis declared to be either deviant or defective were rounded up and shipped to camps such as Auschwitz and Belsen to be murdered.

As we have heard in speeches such as that of Ivan McKee, today is also an important opportunity to remember the victims of other genocides around the world—in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur—all of whom were tyrannised, oppressed and tormented simply because of who they are.

Monsters are real. They might wear business suits or military uniforms, but we see the evidence of their works in the bleaker chapters of human history, and today we mark the darkest chapter of all. The horrors of the Holocaust are a grim and tragic reminder of what can happen when we fail to recognise and challenge those monsters, and when we turn a blind eye to them. Horrific acts of this kind are enabled by the passivity of those with the power and the agency to act and to stop them, but who choose not to.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, warns us against that when he tells us:

“We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

The haunting memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, standing as it does at the heart of Berlin, symbolises the particular horror that can occur when those in power become corrupted and when domination trumps any sense of service to one’s fellow human being. There is no limit to how bleak things can become.

We should acknowledge that the Nazi regime was made possible only by the blind capitulation of thousands of otherwise normal people. The Nazis were successful at mass murder because they desensitised it, normalised it and buried it under the drudgery of bureaucracy. They inured every level of government and the military to atrocity using endless layers of bureaucracy that reduced millions of precious lives to the lines of a ledger book.

As we have heard many times today, the theme of this Holocaust memorial day is “Fragility of Freedom”. The word “fragility” rings scarily true just now. We have seen democratic institutions tested the world over. Some of them are facing tests still now. Authoritarianism is on the rise, and war has returned to continental Europe.

If we look even at modern-day Germany, we will be alarmed and heartened in equal measure. The rise of Alternative für Deutschland, the far-right nationalist party in Germany since the Nazi era, is deeply concerning. However, just last weekend, and in recent days, tens of thousands of Germans have taken to the streets to protest right-wing extremism, following reports that senior AfD members were present at a meeting at which the mass deportation of millions of not just immigrants but anyone who they did not deem to be properly German was discussed. That was a chilling echo of the past.

We in the Liberal Democrats and members across the chamber stand with those who took to the streets in defiance of that extremism. We must never be complacent. We must always remember the consequences of that complacency.

I have previously told the story of when I spent some time in hospital, and a man in the bed opposite volunteered his belief that the Holocaust was a hoax. In the argument that followed, he revealed that the basis of his position was rooted in the videos that he had seen on YouTube. Challenging antisemitism and Holocaust denial falls to each of us, wherever we find it, as does educating our children and young people about the horrific reality of the genocides that have taken place across our world.

The fact that today we are living among many of the communities that the Holocaust sought to extinguish, and that we stand united across the chamber in our remembrance of those awful events and in our opposition to the twisted ideologies of which they were born, is evidence that the Nazis failed. That sort of darkness will always fail, but only if we stand unflinchingly together, united, and resolute against it.

13:18

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thank Paul O’Kane for securing the debate on this important issue, and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for all the work that it does. I also thank Paul O’Kane in advance for hosting the Scottish national Holocaust event next week, when the Parliament will welcome pupils from Northfield academy in my constituency, who I believe will be speaking at the event. I am always pleased to see young folk from Aberdeen coming into our Parliament.

As the motion notes, the theme of this year’s Holocaust memorial day is “Fragility of Freedom”. Over the past few years and across the world, people’s freedoms feel much more fragile.

When I was younger, I remember thinking of the Holocaust as a one-off tragedy—an act of unspeakable evil, carried out by evil folk, who just kind of disappeared at the end of the war. Over the years—especially the past few years—I have come to realise that the Holocaust and other genocides are at the end of what tends to be a long journey. I have come to realise that the folk who carried out those acts were not always evil—that they were once quite ordinary, and that many went back to living ordinary lives. I have come to realise that saying, “Never again,” is, sadly, just an aspiration rather than the promise that it should be.

I have also come to realise how many challenges the groups that were targeted in the Holocaust continue to face. Can any of us say, hand on heart, that, in the past few months, we have not seen, at home or abroad, any bigotry and discrimination that is aimed at Jews, Gypsy Travellers, those with disabilities, or the LGBT+ community? I cannot say so. I think that those things are becoming more common and, in some circles, are starting to be seen as acceptable.

That situation is very dangerous, and we need to challenge it whenever and wherever we see it, because, before the death camps, there was the discrimination, the dehumanisation and the turning of folk against their own fellow man. I fear that we are not doing enough to prevent that from happening again.

When the details of the Holocaust first emerged, folk reacted with horror, and the world said, “Never again.” However, in the years since, and with varying degrees of recognition, we have continued to see that sort of atrocity. We saw mass killings in Guatemala and said, “Never again.” We saw them in Bangladesh and said, “Never again.” We saw them in East Timor and said, “Never again.” We have seen them in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Zaire, Darfur, Iraq, Syria and Myanmar, and we keep saying, “Never again.” In the years to come, when that list is, inevitably, even longer, will we just keep on saying, “Never again”?

Looking ahead, instead of just saying, “Never again”, we need to say, loudly and clearly, what we are saying today—as individuals and as a nation, at home and abroad. When we see discrimination, dehumanisation, persecution, and mass killings, we need to call those for what they are and call for them to stop. That is the least that we can do to show that we have learned the lessons of history, and to make “Never again” a reality.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Paul O’Kane]

Motion agreed to.

13:23

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to contribute to this debate to mark Holocaust memorial day 2024. I warmly thank Paul O’Kane for securing parliamentary time for such a poignant and sobering topic. We come together each year in remembrance, so that the Holocaust may never again be repeated.

A tragedy is now unfolding in the middle east. Israel has suffered the worst terror attack in its history at the hands of Hamas, and Palestinian civilians in Gaza are experiencing a humanitarian disaster. What to say, after 1,200 Israeli men, women and children were slaughtered in 24 hours? Where to begin, after the rising tide of antisemitism that we have witnessed in recent months? Understandably, as we commemorate Holocaust memorial day, we look to the past. The devastating events in Israel and Gaza since October 2023 have shown us that we must also look to the horizon.

Experts argue that genocides do not simply happen; they are the culmination of a series of

circumstances or events. They begin with the persecution of a particular group of people simply for who they are and escalate to annihilation—of lives, religion and culture. In a diary entry dated Saturday 20 June 1942, Anne Frank wrote:

“That is when the trouble started for the Jews. Our freedom was severely restricted by a series of anti-Jewish decrees.”

She listed many restrictions in her everyday life, from having to turn in her bicycle to being forbidden from using swimming pools. She said:

“You couldn’t do this and you couldn’t do that, but life went on.”

As other members have touched on, the theme for this year’s Holocaust memorial day is “Fragility of Freedom”. Anne lost her freedoms before she, ultimately, lost her life. The lives of millions of Jews were curtailed before they were brutally cut short. We must understand what precedes genocide and how the seeds of hatred and prejudice are sown, so that we might prevent it from happening again and again.

The conflict in the middle east must not become part of the culture wars that are waged on streets and screens. The nuance and complexity of crisis cannot be effaced for social media likes and views. With the rise of antisemitism incidents across the UK, Europe and the US, I worry that we have reached a tipping point—we cannot allow the clock to turn back.

13:26

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I offer my apologies to my colleagues: I was not scheduled to speak today, because I have been off sick with a chest infection. However, I have made it to the chamber because how could I not speak in today’s debate? In a Parliament of 128 MSPs who are eligible to speak, this debate, given its importance, should have been oversubscribed. I will not take up too much of members’ time, but I will make two additional points over and above the eloquent and moving speeches that we have already heard today. One point will cast our eyes back in history, but the other point, I hope, will cast our eyes towards the world that we live in today.

The first point is that, in addition to the 6 million Jews who were exterminated—and that is the word that we should use—the events of world war two led to the victimisation, persecution, torture and death of some 9 million non-Jews as well. It is often described as the era of Holocaust because it extended far beyond the systematic targeting of Jews. Catholics, disabled people, Roma people, gay people, communists and freemasons. I am not Jewish, but I would not have stood a chance. Indeed, to this day, the forget-me-not badge is worn on the lapels of many a mason across the

world in remembrance of those who suffered. Those three simple words, “forget me not”, could not be more apt to today’s debate.

Of course, the Nazis saw many people as threats for religious, cultural, ethnic, social, racial, political or sexual reasons, or saw them simply as a burden on society because they failed to sign up to Hitler’s growing fascism and violent nationalism. Many of those people were sent to camps and wore inverted red triangles. I know that because, on a recent visit to Brussels just a few weeks ago, I went to the museum of military history and I stood face to face—through a glass cage—with a pair of those striped pyjamas that we often see in Hollywood films. Those red triangle badges were on the pyjamas—they were real, not a prop. Someone had lived in and worn that item of clothing.

The second and perhaps more pertinent point that I want to make today has already been made—the Holocaust did not happen overnight. “Forget me not” means as much today as it did then, because Tess White is absolutely right—it was a creeping hatred and a series of events that led to mass murder. Of course, Kristallnacht, which Jackson Carlaw referred to, kicked off overt mass violence against Jewish people and their businesses, but that was the culmination of many months, if not years, of systematically targeting them. The boycott of their businesses was almost discreet when it started—the gossip columns of newspapers, the caricatures of Jews in satirical cartoons, the verbal abuse in the street and blaming them for things that happened in bygone years or, indeed, faraway places. Then the political rhetoric crept in.

Let us not forget that the Nazis were voted in democratically by their people. Germany was an unsettled country that had a nostalgia and an appetite for its former strength and glory. Opportunistic politicians promised that restoration of glory, which, of course, gave way to Hitler, who promised leadership and restoration of economic success and glory once again.

Oh, friends, how history repeats itself. The stab-in-the-back myth that is often referred to blamed Germany’s losses in world war one on betrayal, not on the battlefield. The communists, socialists and Jews were supposedly to blame for that almighty fall from power. Radicalisation of thought crept in. It started with boycotts, protests and placard waving, perhaps driven by political ideology or perhaps even well-meaning expressions of disapproval. It starts with blaming everyday people for the actions of Governments and army chiefs in faraway lands.

Looking at the polls across the European Union, we see the balance swinging and shifting in a dangerous direction. The parallels are true.

Antisemitism is as creeping and dangerous today as it was in 1930s Germany, less than a century ago. Underneath it all, whether it be age-old, medieval, true antisemitism, antisemitism cloaked in modern outrage over other horrific events of war and conflict or simply a wider hatred and othering of those on the margins of society, the sentiment, causes and complacency are the same.

It is a dangerous assertion to believe for just a moment that the Holocaust was a thing of the past. A Holocaust, in some shape or form, could happen again. Forget it not.

13:31

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I echo the thoughts of the other members in the chamber and thank Paul O’Kane for lodging the motion, which gives us a valuable opportunity to speak about the importance of Holocaust memorial day.

The horrors of the Holocaust are a stark reminder of the inhumanity and violence that hatred and prejudice can wreak if left unchallenged. I thank all the members for their powerful, thought-provoking contributions. Despite the political differences that we might have, it is deeply touching to see the chamber united in commemorating everyone who perished during the Nazi atrocities, as well as the millions who were persecuted in the genocides that took place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

This year’s theme for Holocaust memorial day is “Fragility of Freedom”. It reinforces the importance of opposing those who threaten the essential freedoms that underpin our society. As history tells us, genocide begins with the erosion of basic liberties. In Nazi Germany, the Jewish, Roma and Sinti people were initially banned from participating in activities that we take for granted, such as attending places of entertainment and enrolling in academia. As we are painfully aware, those cruel and prejudicial acts sowed the seeds of the mass extermination of millions of people.

This Holocaust memorial day marks the 30th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. That tragedy began with restrictions on people’s freedom, as they were instructed to stay indoors and not leave their homes. That created an environment for soldiers and the civilian militia to murder indiscriminately, resulting in the deaths of 75 per cent of the Tutsi population.

We must, of course, also pay tribute to the acts of extraordinary bravery in which people put themselves at great risk to preserve freedom and protect the lives of others by providing food, medication or sanctuary to those targeted for persecution. We should forever be indebted to them for those acts of immense sacrifice.

When we reflect on those tragedies, it is tempting to view them as so abhorrent that we could never possibly allow them to be repeated. We cannot turn a blind eye to the challenges that we face today. We know that there are people whose freedoms are being curtailed and who experience hatred and prejudice because of who they are and the group to which they belong.

That is why the Scottish Government, in our commitment to combating hatred and prejudice, has embarked on an ambitious programme of work. Last November, I spoke at our tackling hate crime and building cohesive communities conference, at which we launched our hate crime strategy delivery plan. The delivery plan shapes how we work in collaboration with our partners to enhance protections for those who are most at risk, while taking meaningful action to prevent hate crime from happening in the first place.

Putting people and communities with lived experience at the centre of our policies is at the heart of our approach, and that is essential to the delivery of our actions. We want to foster communities where everybody feels empowered, included and safe, and we want to address the societal attitudes that lead to the perpetrating of hate crime.

It is unacceptable for anybody to live in fear or to be made to feel as if they do not belong. Preventative work that builds strong, respectful and cohesive communities can stop the narratives that foster prejudice from taking hold.

We are clear that there is no place for hatred or prejudice of any kind in Scotland's schools. I am sure that members on all sides of the chamber will fully recognise the vital role that schools play in helping our young people to value a diverse and respectful Scotland, supporting them to become responsible and truly global citizens, and helping to counteract prejudice and intolerance. It is essential, therefore, that our curriculum continues to support learners to develop their understanding of others' beliefs, cultures and traditions alongside their own. Our aspiration is that they feel equipped to go out into the world, to be citizens of the tolerant and inclusive Scotland of which we all want to be part.

This following Tuesday, I, along with the First Minister, will be participating in the Holocaust memorial day Scottish ceremony. I commend our partners at the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for their continued efforts in organising the event, which will also be attended by Peter Lantos, who is a Holocaust survivor. Chantal Mirmri and Sabina Kadić-Mackenzie, who escaped the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia respectively, will also be in attendance. I hope to see as many members there as possible, as we stand in solidarity to honour all those who have suffered.

In my final reflection, I remind members that, while the Nazis began consolidating their power, the German journalist Fritz Gerlich warned:

"The worst thing we can do, the absolute worst, is to do nothing".

This year's "Fragility of Freedom" theme provides possibly the most poignant illustration of the importance of heeding those words.

It is only through remaining unwavering in our opposition to all forms of hate, and in striving to protect freedom at any cost, that we can prevent genocides in the future, and instead build a better world for everybody.

13:37

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time. On this occasion the portfolio is social justice. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. There is quite a bit of interest in supplementaries. I therefore make the usual appeal for brief questions that do not come in four or five parts and for similarly brief responses from front-bench speakers.

Families in Poverty

1. **John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether a greater increase in the Scottish child payment or a council tax freeze will do more to help families in poverty. (S6O-03006)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish child payment provides well-targeted support to the lowest-income families. It is estimated that it will lift 50,000 children out of poverty this year. We have committed to increasing the payment, in line with inflation, to £26.70 per week from April, and it is expected that 329,000 children will benefit from it in 2024-25. The Government is working with local authorities to help them to deliver the council tax freeze and to provide much-needed financial relief to more than 2 million council tax payers. Both measures are provided for in the budget, are unparalleled in the United Kingdom and will provide much-needed help for families.

John Mason: Some people, especially those in the third sector, have argued that a council tax freeze will not help the poorest people, because they already do not pay council tax, but that it will help those who are better off, who pay more council tax. How would the cabinet secretary respond to that argument?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: People who have the lowest incomes will benefit most from a council tax freeze. That is because, for them, council tax represents a larger proportion of their income than it does for people who are better off. The freeze is on top of the council tax reduction scheme, which supports people who cannot be expected to afford to pay council tax. However, the cost crisis has seen bills rise for households across the spectrum, and the freeze will give them some certainty for next year.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Councils across Scotland are having to slash their budgets due to the council tax freeze. That means that local services to help people in the most deprived areas will come to an end. How will that help them?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The position has been made clear on numerous occasions by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I am happy to say, once again, that the council tax freeze will be fully funded by the Scottish Government. Work is on-going with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the details of that proposal. That is a very important reassurance, which I am pleased to be able to give to the chamber again today.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): It is recognised that council tax is regressive, which is contrary to the Government's stated progressive outlook. What work has been undertaken to evaluate other models of less regressive and more proportionate property or land value taxes? When does the Government expect to complete that work?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Council tax represents a larger proportion of overall income for lower-income households than it does for richer households. The council tax freeze recognises the regressive impact of council tax, which underlines the importance of reform. We are committed to a fairer, more inclusive and fiscally sustainable form of local taxation. I have convened the joint working group on sources of local government funding and council tax reform, which is co-chaired by the Scottish ministers and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Short-term Lets (Planning Guidance)

2. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will update its guidance to local authorities on planning rules for short-term lets, in light of the recent ruling from the Court of Session that deemed the City of Edinburgh Council's planning guidance for businesses on short-term lets to be unlawful. (S6O-03007)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): In bringing the judicial review of the City of Edinburgh Council's local guidance, the petitioners noted that it was not consistent with the Scottish Government's guidance. In issuing its decision, the court agreed with the Scottish Government's position on the interpretation of the relevant legislation. Therefore, the Scottish Government does not consider it necessary to update its current guidance, which was set out in planning circular 1/2023.

Murdo Fraser: I am sure that the minister would acknowledge that there is confusion about the law on planning for short-term lets, with different councils taking different approaches. Some councils now require such operators, even if they have been operating for some time, to apply for retrospective planning consent before they will grant a short-term let. Other councils take a different approach. Does the minister not think that updated guidance from the Scottish Government would be helpful, so that we could have uniformity of approach across the country instead of the current confusion?

Paul McLennan: One of the most important points when we set out the policy was about giving local authorities the ability to use their own flexibility—something that was supported in our discussions by the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland, SOLAR.

I am aware that representatives of the City of Edinburgh Council are speaking to petitioners to try and clarify some of the points that have been raised, and I know that discussions are on-going in that regard.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Will the minister make it clear that the court ruling applies only to the City of Edinburgh Council's short-term lets policy, and that the national legislation underpinning the licence scheme remains robust and applicable across Scotland, with a considerable degree of local discretion?

Paul McLennan: As I mentioned in my previous answer, I can confirm that the ruling applies only to the local planning policy of the City of Edinburgh Council, which relates to the council's interpretation and implementation of legislation for designated short-term let control areas. The ruling does not impact in any way on either planning or short-term let licensing legislation, nor was the court asked to consider any matters relating to legislation as part of the judicial review. Our view is that the licensing and planning of short-term let accommodation can be operated effectively by authorities so as to respect the rights of hosts and guests.

Social Security Support (Motherwell and Wishaw)

3. **Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what social security support is available to people in the Motherwell and Wishaw constituency who are experiencing poverty, including fuel poverty. (S6O-03008)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government's priority is to do everything that we

can to help those who are worst affected by the cost of living crisis, which is why, since 2022-23, we have continued to allocate around £3 billion a year to support policies that tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible. That includes our investment of more than £22 million this winter through our winter heating payment to support around 400,000 households on the lowest incomes to heat their homes. We have also invested more than £7 million this year, making more than 30,000 payments of the child winter heating payment to children, young people and their families in Scotland who may have higher fuel needs due to a disability or health condition. There is no equivalent support available elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

We continue to raise our investment, increasing all social security benefits in 2024-25 by 6.7 per cent, in recognition of the challenges that are being faced across Scotland.

Clare Adamson: Energy companies are resuming the installation of prepayment meters under warrant, following updated advice from the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. I have contacted Ofgem and major energy suppliers, which say that that is a last resort. However, my constituents in Motherwell and Wishaw, who are at the sharp end of that unfair practice by the energy suppliers, tell a very different story. Energy policy remains reserved to Westminster, so what engagement has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government regarding the unfair position that is faced by people who are forced to take prepayment meters?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I very much share the member's concerns regarding the reintroduction of forced prepayment meter installations. Ofgem's code of practice requiring suppliers to meet a number of conditions before taking such action is an important step. However, too many households remain at risk from that practice, especially with energy costs remaining so high. We believe that energy suppliers must exhaust all options, including meaningful support to struggling households to manage debt, before imposing prepayment meters. The Minister for Energy and the Environment has raised the matter previously with the UK Minister for Affordability and Skills and will continue to pursue the matter in meetings with the UK Government and Ofgem in the coming weeks.

Social Security Scotland (Support for Claimants)

4. **Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it holds Social Security Scotland to account to ensure that it is fulfilling its responsibility to help claimants, who

request support, to provide supporting information, including obtaining it on their behalf. (S6O-03009)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Social Security Scotland framework document provides accountability and governance to ensure that Social Security Scotland meets its statutory obligations. The framework requires delivery in keeping with our core values of dignity, fairness and respect. Encouraging people to access the benefits that they are entitled to and assisting them through our application process are rights that are enshrined in the social security charter. Assisting people to gather supporting information for disability assistance is a fundamental part of delivering those obligations. Reviewing performance on that is a frequent priority in my discussions with the chief executive of Social Security Scotland.

Foyso Choudhury: The cabinet secretary recently informed me that

“Social Security Scotland are committed to ensuring people applying for disability assistance are helped to provide supporting information, which can include obtaining it on their behalf.”—[*Written Answers*, 14 November 2023; S6W-22558.]

A constituent of mine advised that, as his claim was being considered, he was not contacted once and nor were the clinicians whom he provided to verify the claims. What data is kept on the number of applicants who may need additional assistance with applications? How often is that reviewed?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am afraid that, from the information that Foyso Choudhury has given and our previous correspondence, he has not directed me to a particular constituent and issue. If he has his constituent’s permission to pass it on, I would be happy to receive that information and to work with the agency to look into it.

It is clear that an integral part of the work on adult disability payments is assisting those who gather supporting information. That is a very important part of the work. I know that we have corresponded on the matter previously, but I am not aware that Foyso Choudhury has raised a particular case in which there has been an issue. I would, of course, be very pleased to look into that along with the agency and to get back to him in correspondence.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The support that Social Security Scotland provides to claimants has helped it to build remarkably high satisfaction ratings. Those stand in stark contrast to the reputation of the UK Government’s Department for Work and Pensions. Has the cabinet secretary had any recent discussion with Social Security Scotland about how it can maintain or even improve claimants’ experiences?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have been very pleased to have had regular discussions with the agency’s executive team about how we can build on the high satisfaction ratings. For example, around nine in 10 survey respondents said that they were treated with kindness, dignity, fairness and respect. That is, of course, in stark contrast to the reports from the DWP’s previous system, particularly on the personal independence payment. However, it is clear that there is still work to do to ensure that we deliver that service for everyone. I am always more than happy to work with members to see what more can be done to improve that.

Temporary Accommodation (Support for Local Authorities)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is offering to local authorities to help people stuck in temporary accommodation. (S6O-03010)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): We have committed to reducing the use of temporary accommodation and, in response to the recommendations of the temporary accommodation task and finish group, we are investing at least £60 million through the £752 million affordable housing supply programme in 2023-24 to support a national acquisition plan. We are working with partners to develop a new programme for social landlords to maximise the use of existing housing stock alongside targeted partnership plans with the local authorities that face the greatest pressures. Additional funding of £2 million in 2023-24 has been targeted at the local authorities with the largest percentage increases in temporary accommodation.

Meghan Gallacher: What the minister failed to mention is that more than 15,000 households are stuck in temporary accommodation. “The homelessness monitor: Scotland 2024” predicts that homelessness will increase by 33 per cent by 2026. I find it shocking that the Scottish National Party Government has chosen to cut the housing budget and to starve councils of the funding that is necessary to tackle those issues. Does the Scottish Government plan to declare a housing emergency to ensure that the predictions in the homelessness monitor do not come to fruition?

Paul McLennan: It is important to make a few points.

There is a 10 per cent capital cut from Meghan Gallacher’s Government. I hope that she will take that back.

I am glad that Meghan Gallacher mentioned the homelessness monitor, because one of the key things that it said was that the biggest increase is

due to the local housing allowance being frozen over a number of years. That is in the report; the member should read it. It also mentions benefit rates being the biggest factor. If Meghan Gallacher is serious about the issue, she should go back to her chancellor about the budget, which is coming in March, and discuss those issues. We spend near enough £100 million a year on discretionary housing payments to support that. If we had a decent level of local housing allowance, we would not need to do that.

There are three main points that Meghan Gallacher needs to take back in that regard. I am glad that you mentioned that because, as I said, the biggest impact is from poverty, which your Government is adding to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should speak through the chair, please, minister.

Affordable Homes

6. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to ensure that it meets its affordable homes target by 2032. (S6O-03011)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): To September 2023, 15,765 homes—of which 77 per cent are for social rent—were delivered towards the 110,000 target. The United Kingdom budget has meant that our UK capital funding will fall by 10 per cent in real terms between 2023-24 and 2027-28. Inflationary pressures, Brexit impacts and wider market conditions have triggered a rise in construction costs and workforce challenges.

We remain focused on our target of delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. To support that, we are bringing forward to 2024 a review that was scheduled for 2026-27, with a focus on deliverability. We are also accelerating work with the financial community to boost private sector investment.

Katy Clark: Nearly £200 million is to be cut from the affordable homes supply programme. The number of social homes on which construction began was down by 41 per cent in 2023. An average of 7,700 new social homes need to be built every year in order to meet the target. How does the minister believe that that can be achieved if funding is to be cut?

Paul McLennan: I refer the member to my answer to the previous question, regarding the 10 per cent real-terms cut to our funding. That is an issue to mention—we have to deal with those issues. The Institute for Fiscal Studies gave evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on the cuts to the Scottish Government's budget and the Welsh Government's budget, which have been made

basically to pay for tax cuts. That is the decision that has been made.

I meet and work with local authorities on how we can maximise the deliverability of their own programmes.

There is also a challenge for Katy Clark and her party. If Labour is successful in the election, it is key that it reverses the cut to our capital funding. It also needs to look at local housing allowance rates, which are important. I hope that, if a Labour Government is elected, we can discuss those issues and bring forward proposals, because those are the main things that are impacting on deliverability.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Can the minister confirm that the previous Labour Administration built only six council houses in Scotland between 2003 and 2007, and that this Scottish National Party Government, despite Tory austerity and Sir Keir Starmer's refusal to turn on the taps if he becomes Prime Minister, is still building 1,157 houses this year, which is nearly 200 times more than Labour built over four years?

Paul McLennan: Indeed—a total of six council houses were built in the last four years of the Labour-led Government in Scotland. That is in stark contrast to the last few years of this Government, when 7,564 new council houses have been built. That is 1,260 times the number that were built under the last four years of the Labour-led Government. I am proud that, from April 2007 to the end of September 2023, we worked with the sector to deliver 126,396 affordable homes, more than 89,000 of which are for social rent, including 23,625 council homes.

I come back to Mr Gibson's point about Keir Starmer's refusal to turn on the taps. There is a real challenge for Labour on housing if it is elected—I will come back to that point later in the year.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Scotland's

"affordable homes target risks becoming an impossible dream."

Those are not my words but the words of the chief executive of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations. The Scottish Government set a target of 10 per cent of all affordable homes to be in rural and island communities. Last year, however, there was a record low in approvals and completions. Does the minister now accept that that target is unlikely to be met?

Paul McLennan: In my first answer to Katy Clark, I mentioned that we are bringing forward to 2024 a review that was scheduled for 2026-27, with a focus on deliverability. I also mentioned some of the issues that have had an impact on house building, such as inflationary pressures and

the impacts of Brexit, as well as wider market conditions, which have not helped. As I mentioned, there is also the 10 per cent cut to our capital funding.

Miles Briggs mentioned rural homes. I have discussed with rural developers the cost of construction, which has had an impact in that regard. That comes back to the point about interest rates and construction inflation over that period. I continue to meet local authorities in rural areas to deliver houses there.

New Homes (Rural Areas)

7. Liz Smith: To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the number of new homes started in rural areas. (S6O-03012)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): I have been engaging closely with a range of partners such as local authorities, housing providers and businesses, including at a recent round-table event, to support the delivery of more affordable homes across rural Scotland. That work is underpinned by our recently published "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan".

We will invest more than £556 million in affordable homes across Scotland in the next financial year, including through the demand-led rural and islands housing funds and the rural affordable homes for key workers fund. We also provided funding for the Communities Housing Trust and South of Scotland Community Housing to support communities to deliver more affordable homes in rural and island communities.

Liz Smith: That is helpful, but I want to double-check that, out of the 110,000 affordable homes that are planned by 2032, 10 per cent is the proportion that is supposed to be built in rural and island communities. Can I check that figure, please? There seems to be a bit of confusion about it.

The latest housing statistics from the last quarter in 2023 showed that the number of new homes that were started had decreased by 24 per cent. Can you tell us how that will impact on your ambitions to ensure that rural areas are well served, given that such homes are critical to the sustainability of rural communities?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to speak through the chair.

Paul McLennan: As I have said previously, 10 per cent is the minimum target that we are aiming for, and we will work with local authorities in that regard. If we can deliver more than that, we will. As I mentioned, we had a round-table discussion with major employers about opportunities through, for example, the key workers fund, and we are

working with the Communities Housing Trust on deliverability.

We are looking at other opportunities. Liz Smith will be aware of some of the developments in the renewables sector in Inverness. I spoke to developers there, along with the local community and the local authority, about the opportunities for Inverness and the surrounding areas. We are looking to see how we can deliver six or seven renewables hubs, mostly in rural areas. By working with the sector and developers, there is an opportunity to develop more housing in rural areas. I am happy to discuss that later.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Many young people want the chance to live in the rural and island areas where they have grown up and where they have family ties. Even a small number of new properties can have a significant benefit, such as the development by Hjalmland Housing Association of four new homes in Walls, in my constituency. The outcome of the methodology to determine where new houses are built can sometimes differ from the needs that are expressed by communities. What action can the Scottish Government take on that point?

Paul McLennan: Beatrice Wishart will know that I visited Shetland a number of months ago and spoke to Hjalmland about that development. Infrastructure funding was provided for the site. The topography of an area can be a particular challenge, and she knows that we are working closely with Hjalmland and Shetland Islands Council on that. I know that Shetland has had specific challenges with the renewables sector and others that have put real pressure on the area. We continue to work closely with people on Shetland and will have follow-up meetings with them. It is key that we meet local authorities to discuss their individual challenges, such as those that Shetland has. I will continue to discuss Shetland's particular issues with the people there.

Disabled People

8. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve the lives of disabled people. (S6O-03013)

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): The Scottish Government is working hard to improve the lives of disabled people. The independent living fund, which supports disabled people, will reopen to new applicants after it received £9 million in investment as part of the 2024-25 Scottish budget. That investment will support about 1,000 new applicants. Later this year, we will implement an immediate priorities plan, co-produced with disabled people's organisations, which will include a range of actions to support disabled people. In

addition, £5 million from our equality and human rights fund supports disabled people's organisations to tackle inequality and discrimination, further equality and advance the realisation of human rights in Scotland.

Sharon Dowey: The Scottish National Party Government claims that Social Security Scotland is founded on the principles of dignity, fairness and respect. However, Scots with disabilities are being let down by the system. Specifically, the latest Social Security Scotland statistics show that more than a third of adult disability payment applications have been denied, while the average processing time for the child disability payment is about five months. What action is being taken to ensure that everyone who is in need of disability benefits receives them in a timely manner?

Emma Roddick: The Scottish Government recognises that some people have waited too long for Social Security Scotland to make a decision on their application, but work is on-going to address that, and the situation has been improving at pace.

I absolutely stand by the principles of dignity, fairness and respect being embedded in Social Security Scotland. That is borne out by the customer and client reviews that we have received from Social Security Scotland, which tell us that the process is far better than the one that the Department for Work and Pensions down south uses for similar benefits. I urge the member to ensure that the communications to constituents provide the message that people should feel able to ask Social Security Scotland for support and that they will be welcomed when doing so.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Will the minister outline how the reopening of the independent living fund will align with Social Security Scotland's work to support the wellbeing of disabled people?

Emma Roddick: The Scottish Government recognises the pressures on household budgets, including those of disabled people, who are disproportionately impacted by, and being stretched due to, the on-going cost of living crisis. That is why, since 2022-23, we have continued to allocate about £3 billion a year to social security policies that tackle poverty and protect people as far as possible.

The independent living fund provides additional funding to disabled people, alongside social security and social care funding, which supports them to live more independently. The reopening of the fund realises our commitment to further supporting the disabled people who need it most. The £9 million of extra investment will allow up to 1,000 new recipients to exercise greater choice and control over the care and support that they

receive, so that they can be better supported in their homes and their communities.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): This week, Homes for Scotland's "Existing Housing Needs in Scotland" report showed that 85,000 households are living in properties that do not have the required adaptations or support for the disabled people who live in them. The 27 per cent cut to the housing budget will not help to drive forward the progress that we need on aids and adaptations. Will the minister who has responsibility for equality tell the chamber what assessment was made of the impact that the cut will have on disabled people across Scotland?

Emma Roddick: We are all too aware that older and disabled people might struggle to find housing that meets their needs. We are taking steps to mitigate that by increasing the supply of accessible and adapted housing.

Technology

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11958, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on Scotland as a technology nation. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:57

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): Today, as we celebrate the contribution of Rabbie Burns to the world, in this debate we can celebrate and discuss Scotland's contribution to the world as a technology nation.

The world's economy faces two extraordinary and arguably unprecedented and unavoidable forces. First, there is the critical need to transition from an economic model that is based on fossil fuels to one that is based on sustainable resources. Secondly, there is the need to rethink the way in which we live and work in order to harness the potential of artificial intelligence and other forms of new technology. Those forces are transforming our world and demanding collective leadership to steer a course through uncharted waters, and it will be an exciting voyage of discovery.

Scotland can face that journey with optimism. We are equipped with an abundance of natural resources, and universities and industry can provide opportunities to lead and break new ground, improve productivity, create new businesses and open new markets at home and around the world.

Scotland absolutely has the potential to be a leading nation in technology, science and world-class innovation. We start from a position of strength, with our tech sector employing more than 80,000 people and contributing around £6 billion to our economy—that figure has increased by an astounding 107.5 per cent since 2012.

With more than 700 life science organisations employing more than 42,500 people, Scotland is one of the largest life sciences clusters in Europe. Life sciences are worth £3 billion to the Scottish economy. The sector has achieved 8 per cent growth each year since 2010, and life sciences exports stood at £3 billion in 2019. Scotland is also home to 227 financial technology companies. The fintech cluster has seen a 24 per cent increase in jobs over the past two years and is breaking new ground in areas such as green finance and financial regulation.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It is interesting to note that the minister highlights

both pure technology and its applications. Do we need greater clarity on the fact that tech is not just pure tech but a dynamic and a driver? Consider, for example, advanced manufacturing, life sciences and robotics in the North Sea. That clarity also needs to be translated into policy.

Richard Lochhead: There is an element of truth in the member's point, and it is an important point in the debate, but I hope that, as my remarks progress, I can give the member some confidence that we are doing that at the moment.

We have a thriving space industry, with more than 130 companies in a sector that employs 18 per cent of the United Kingdom workforce and has seen recent revenue growth of 30 per cent. Orbex, based in Forres in my constituency, has just been identified in the top 10 space start-ups to watch globally.

This year, we hope to see the UK's first vertical launch take-off from Scotland, and that will command headlines throughout and beyond Europe. With regard to Daniel Johnson's point, we also have one of the largest critical technologies clusters in the UK, with a turnover that is estimated at more than £2.8 billion. Those underpinning and often invisible technologies are vital to our future. In particular, they have huge export potential. Photonics—the science and technology of light, including lasers, optical systems and fibre optics—generates £1.3 billion in revenues, with more than 96 per cent coming from exports.

The growth that has been achieved warrants celebration. That is tremendous growth in tech against a backdrop of the challenges of Brexit, Covid, inflation and energy costs, which are faced by all industries, including technology, and the wider business community. The growth is testament to the strength and resilience of Scotland's high-tech industries.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Scotland has always been very good at innovation and early-stage advanced technology. However, we have not been so good at taking that to the next level. What are we doing to make sure that overseas agencies do not come in, buy up our technology and take it away?

Richard Lochhead: The member raises an issue that is very topical and pertinent to the debate. Of course, at the moment, there is a huge amount of activity in Scotland, with lots of signs of progress in relation to that challenge. I will refer again to some of the progress that is now evident, because we want sticky jobs that stay in Scotland, which is particularly the case with tech jobs. In this country, we want not only to invent things but get the jobs and economic benefits from those

inventions. I honestly think that there are signs of that now changing in this country.

Our national strategy for economic transformation and the recent innovation strategy set out a very clear model to build on that, by forging partnerships between Government, academia and industry to build an entrepreneurial, innovative and successful technology nation. Together, we have invested in an infrastructure that nurtures talent and provides opportunities to apply the technologies of tomorrow to the challenges of today. The National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, the medicines manufacturing innovation centre, the national robotarium and the Aberdeen BioHub are just a small sample of the new infrastructure that has opened, and those four examples have opened just in the past two years. The Scottish public contribution totalled more than £100 million for those projects. Since 2013, we have invested more than £155 million in innovation centres, and a further investment of up to £8 million per year was announced last week.

Ivan McKee: Will the minister take an intervention?

Richard Lochhead: I will take a final intervention.

Ivan McKee: I think that the minister knows what I am going to say. It is great to highlight that infrastructure that is in place, but how does that align with the Government's decision to shut three of the seven innovation centres last week?

Richard Lochhead: As the member knows, the Scottish Funding Council carried out a review—at arm's length from Government—of long-term funding for innovation centres. A lot of work is going on with the innovation centres that did not secure long-term funding from the SFC on how the new model can work for them. The SFC is leading that exercise and I am confident that, in some shape or form, the great work that is carried out by some of those innovation centres will continue.

We have committed £60 million so far to the implementation of the "Scottish Technology Ecosystem Review" recommendations, including £42 million in our national and unique Techscaler network to support the next generation of Scottish start-ups over the next five years. We are also developing entrepreneurial campuses, with academics, researchers and students bringing new business ideas to life. This is the technology nation in action—our science excellence fuels our innovation and technology, with our world-class universities underpinning our tech revolution.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Richard Lochhead: I am happy to do so if I can get the time back.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Given the point that the minister just made about universities, is he concerned by the £28 million cut that they are facing this year?

Richard Lochhead: The universities have received more than £1 billion from the Government per year for the past number of years. I am concerned about the very difficult budget that the Scottish Government has to implement following the settlement from the UK Government. Members of all parties across the chamber should also be concerned about the cut in the budget that the Scottish Government has received from the UK Government.

Our universities are playing a tremendous role at the moment, and they will continue to do so. Spin-outs from Scottish universities continue to attract significant investment, with £235 million making it a record year for spin-out value—up 53 per cent on 2021.

The University of Dundee was named the world's most influential pharmaceuticals research institution, above the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Berkeley, Oxford and Cambridge. TauRx, an Aberdeen spin-out that is seeking to develop a treatment for Alzheimer's, has raised hundreds of millions of dollars since its founding in 2002. It promises great things.

The Research Excellence Framework 2021 shows that there is world-leading research in every Scottish university. Edinburgh Napier University is one of three in Scotland and one of seven in the UK to achieve the highest rating for research in computer science.

Our global leadership can be seen reflected back at us from space. Scottish scientists designed crucial technology within the world's most powerful space telescope—the James Webb telescope, which allows us to look back in time over tens of millions of years—and developed key components for the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory project, the first in the world to detect gravitational waves. Those are all part of Scotland's tech for good approach, as those advancements can be seen to benefit our health and other needs of society.

Two university spin-outs, MR CoilTech and Wideblue, are behind new technology that is being used in the next generation of ultra-high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging scanners and other medical devices.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the minister take a quick intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is time, minister.

Richard Lochhead: I will take the intervention.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I declare an interest in relation to farming.

The minister has not mentioned some of the technology around agriculture. Gene editing is a real opportunity for Scotland. Given that he is a former rural affairs minister, what concerns does the minister have about Scotland's block on the opportunities of that new technology?

Richard Lochhead: Agritech has a big role to play, and I am keen to learn more about it as part of our innovation strategy as we take it forward. At the same as we keep an open mind to new technologies, it is absolutely vital that we protect Scotland's incredible image in relation to provenance and good, clean food and drink in terms of the raw ingredients that are used in our fantastic food and drink industry. We must balance those approaches going forward, and I think that we have the right balance at the moment.

A new international standard has been created for wi-fi light communications. Edinburgh-based pureLiFi is at the forefront of this emerging technology. The University of Edinburgh also recently opened the Quantum Software Lab and will host the UK's first next-generation supercomputer, which is 50 times faster than any of the country's existing machines. Last year, the famous XPRIZE Foundation chose the University of Glasgow as its new European hub.

We should not forget the brilliant games technology, with its own track record of success, which is largely born in the city of Dundee. That track record looks set to continue, with Edinburgh-based Build A Rocket Boy successfully securing £87 million in capital just last week. That is another sign of the fantastic momentum in Scotland's technology sectors.

We need to keep moving up the international league tables of technology nations, and we must continue to create the conditions for success, such as by rolling out fibre infrastructure, which truly is the backbone of a technology nation. That backbone enables every business in Scotland, no matter where they are located, to play their part in a digital economy.

Our record investment in the reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme is extending gigabit-capable fibre networks the length and breadth of Scotland. Over the past 10 years, we have invested more than £1 billion in delivering almost 1 million broadband connections.

Another engine of growth is 5G, and its adoption has the potential to increase Scotland's gross domestic product by up to £17 billion, add up to 160,000 jobs and help to create more than 3,000 new businesses by 2035. That is why we have invested £14 million in establishing the Scotland 5G Centre and the network of regional hubs.

Our enterprise agencies are playing their part. I will shortly address one of the points about scaling up.

Scotland continues to be the most attractive location outside of London for inward investment, with more than 8,500 jobs being created last year. Our projects were up by 3.3 per cent in 2022, compared with a 6.4 per cent fall in the UK. In inward investment, we are outperforming the UK and are the best-performing area outside of London.

Our agencies work together to help businesses to access the capital that they need to grow. That issue was raised earlier. M Squared Lasers, a quantum and photonics company in Glasgow, received £12.5 million of investment from the Scottish National Investment Bank in November 2020, which was the bank's first investment. The bank has now committed more than £0.5 billion of investment to 31 businesses and projects, bringing in more than £800 million of investment from third parties. In fact, research last year showed that equity investment in Scottish businesses reached a record £953 million—an increase of 26 per cent from 2021. A strong and vibrant technology sector can do much to help us to manage the challenges that we face now and into the future. We want the companies that are based here to scale up, and it is great to see those new statistics.

Those sectors are export driven and generate high-value employment, high wages and more tax revenues. Many tech sectors pay well above the national average. The photonics sector, for example, has an average employee gross value added of £89,000. It is important for us all in the chamber to remember the ultimate point of all of this. Technology can improve our quality of life, save our planet and support humankind. It can keep us secure by protecting vital systems and services from attack. We are producing health tech, agritech, climate tech, clean tech, education tech and so much else. Many of the emerging new technologies to help the public sector and the public good are emerging through our successful CivTech programme.

To ensure that Scotland's high-tech industries are equipped to meet future challenges, the Scottish Government will continue to invest in digital and enabling infrastructure. We will work with businesses to develop a green industrial strategy, and we will convene industries to come together to understand how we can better support and drive collaboration between the high-tech sectors. We want to explore the appointments of ambassadors, for example, for each of the high-tech sectors, and we want to promote Scotland's position as a leading science and technology nation.

It is 25 years since the opening of this Parliament. We have witnessed enormous changes in that time and, 25 years from now, the world will not be the same as it is today. However, Scotland is in a position of strength. Scotland can be and, if we play to our advantages, will be a hub of world-class science and technology. I urge Parliament to support the motion.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the fundamental role of technology, science and innovation in shaping the modern world; notes the global trends that will impact upon Scotland's future economy and society; celebrates the successes of Scotland's high-tech industries and the benefits that they bring in generating economic prosperity, enabling the transition to a green economy, offering solutions to the challenges of the 21st century, providing thousands of high-skilled jobs and generating inward investment and export opportunities, and recognises the role of the Scottish Government in supporting Scotland to become a hub of world-class technology, building on the strengths of these industries to play a central role in the delivery of an economy that is fair, green and growing, and benefits all of Scotland's communities and people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As I indicated to the minister, there is some time in hand this afternoon. At this stage, we have plenty of time for interventions.

15:13

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to begin the Scottish Conservatives' contribution to this important debate. Any day when I get to quote the science fiction author Arthur C Clarke is a good day. Clarke wrote three laws about the future, the most famous of which was:

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

He wrote that in 1968, at a time when many people believed that, by now, we would have colonised space, cured hunger and ended disease. Well, we could not accuse them of being unambitious. However, if the author were here today, would he see the technology that we possess now as magical? Would he recognise that same technological ambition in us today?

Since Arthur C Clarke's time, we have transformed the way in which we live and work. The warehouse-sized computers that helped to put man on the moon can now be vastly outperformed by the smartphones in our pockets or even the smartwatches on our wrists. In every sphere of life, from education and health to engineering and business, new technologies have transformed how we live and work.

As the Government's motion alludes to, Scotland has achieved a great deal as a technological nation—our technologies have been

groundbreaking and transformative. However, as the Scottish Conservative amendment seeks to point out, our past achievements are no guarantee of future success. At a time when the pace of change in technology continues to accelerate and whole new fields of research are in development, we should be laying the foundations of future success. Instead, we have a Scottish Government that does not just lack focus on long-term gains; in some cases, it takes decisions that actively harm such gains.

The coming years will see dramatic changes to our economy and society as a whole. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, synthetic biology and zero carbon energy all have the potential to radically alter our lives, and the Scottish Government and this Parliament should constantly be considering how that could and should impact policy making.

The Scottish Government has not completely failed to recognise the need for change. The Scottish technology ecosystem review, which was led by Mark Logan—and commissioned by Kate Forbes back when Scottish National Party plans for the future extended beyond the Scottish Green Party manifesto—offered more than 30 recommendations to support more start-ups and scale-ups in the technology sector, which the Scottish Government duly accepted. However, the report examined only part of the picture, at best, and, despite being published in August 2020, it was written at a time when the arrival of AI felt more distant than it does today.

Daniel Johnson: Does Brian Whittle agree that the critical point with technology is that we always need to push ourselves further, that doing so is a constant challenge and that there is a risk that we rest on our laurels? Indeed, if we look at the Logan review, we can see that we have yet to fulfil a number of challenging recommendations. To be successful, we must be realistic about the challenges in front of us.

Brian Whittle: Daniel Johnson is absolutely correct. One of the things that we must do is stop looking at the short term. We must look beyond that, look at the possibilities—I will probably come on to that issue later—and ensure that there is a framework to support those possibilities.

Technology moves quickly, but Governments all too often have a reputation for moving painfully slowly. The belief that it is enough for this or any Government to act in response to changing technology is the surest way to allow other countries to leave Scotland behind. If we are to capitalise on technological revolutions, we must plan for the long term and the big picture, as I was discussing with Daniel Johnson. To use a construction analogy, the first role of Government

should be site clearance and preparation, not architecture.

Education lies at the heart of the issue for me, which is why it features prominently in our amendment. I was glad to see education feature in the Labour amendment, which we will support later. Education is what shapes tomorrow's workforce. It is through education that we can offer everyone an opportunity, and education sets the path of an individual's life.

Education is also one of the many areas in which the Scottish Government consistently fails to deliver. That has been discussed often in the chamber recently. When Nicola Sturgeon was First Minister, she said that she should be "judged" on her record on education. Although the immediate focus might be on WhatsApp retention policies, the record of her Government and her successor on education is no less disingenuous.

Although Scotland's return to the programme for international student assessment and other educational rankings is a welcome development, it only serves to demonstrate just how much of a hill we now have to climb. Before any SNP MSPs leap to their feet to insist that our declining performance is not unique and remind us once again that Covid is responsible for every bad outcome, except the situations in which it is the UK Government's fault, it is important to point out that Scotland's score in maths has declined by more than 20 points since 2015. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development director of education and skills is on record as saying that

"long-term issues in education systems are also to blame for the drop in performance. It is not just about Covid."

He cited declining parental engagement, worsening teacher-student relationships, difficulties in recruiting teachers and the negative impact of the use of smartphones for leisure purposes as other key factors to consider. It is also worth noting that some countries improved their PISA scores, so a pandemic decline was not inevitable.

The reality, whether the SNP likes it or not, is that the Scottish Government's approach to education simply is not working. We should be encouraging Scottish pupils to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects in further and higher education, but we are seeing cuts to the Scottish Funding Council and a cap on Scottish student numbers, leaving the next generation of home-grown talent at the back of the queue for places. That assumes that we have pupils leaving school not only with the basic skills that are required to study STEM subjects but with the inspiration to do so. If pupils are not coming out of school having had the chance to learn to code, to visit engineering businesses or to hear

from scientific leaders about what the future holds, why would we expect them to want to make a career for themselves in technology?

I feel as though I have barely scratched the surface of my thoughts on the subject. There is a whole separate debate to be had on the potential of new technologies in the national health service and the desperate need to modernise the technology and information technology systems of the health service.

Similarly, we must spend more time talking about the digital infrastructure that will be the backbone of our future economy, from 5G to fibre broadband to grid infrastructure for data centres. I hope that colleagues across the chamber will touch on at least some of those points and agree that, although we have the potential to be a leading technology nation, we can do that only if we start from the position of accepting our current weaknesses and start thinking for the long term.

I was interested to hear the minister talk about our space technology. As I have a little bit of time left, I want to pick up on that. The other day, I watched a programme in which the point was made that, when we human beings are long gone, the only things that will be left will be AI and the 1970s technology that has now left the solar system, which may live for billions of years beyond our short lives. I think that AI has huge potential. Yes, I am a nerd when it comes to that kind of stuff.

In closing, I return to another of Arthur C Clarke's three laws:

"The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible."

I move amendment S6M-11958.1, to leave out from ", and recognises" to end and insert:

"; notes that the recent Scottish Budget for 2024-25 will prevent Scotland's technology sector from reaching its full potential by cutting enterprise funding, stymying economic growth, and placing a higher tax burden on Scotland, compared to the rest of the UK; further notes that recent cuts to the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish National Investment Bank will restrict research and development opportunities in the software, medical and green technology sectors; acknowledges that the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results will impact the technology sector with Scotland continuing to perform poorly in maths and science; believes that the poverty-related attainment gap will prevent future generations from entering the technology sector; calls on the Scottish Government to promote STEM subjects in schools, and to encourage more people to pursue technology as a career through higher education or apprenticeships, and urges the Scottish Government to work more constructively with the technology sector to grow the economy so that Scotland can continue to become a centre of world-leading technology, and provide more well-paid and highly-skilled jobs."

15:21

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I will pick up where Brian Whittle left off, because the issue at hand is about challenge, what we need to achieve and the gap between what that means and where we are now.

There are many things in the Government's motion that we can agree with. There are many things that we should be celebrating. Technology is undoubtedly one of our strengths. We have fantastic innovation when it comes to tech start-ups, both here and in Glasgow. We have phenomenal strength in the games industry in Dundee. In addition, fascinating work is being done in Aberdeen on robotics and the use of technology in the supply chain. However, are we a leader in technology? Are we there yet?

If this subject were being debated in Seoul, California or Estonia, I do not think that we would have a motion quite like the one that we have from the Scottish Government. I think that the politicians in those places would be rigorously focused on what they needed to do to keep pace. On issues such as AI, they would be thinking about whether China was going to replace them, where the next challenges were going to come from and whether future global conflicts could potentially result in a global supply chain shortage of silicon chips. Those are the sort of issues that we need to be alive to. We must also recognise how much further we still have to go if we are truly to be a tech nation.

I will set out some of the challenges that we need to address. I am glad that the minister mentioned AI in his opening remarks, but, frankly, a motion on technology that does not—in this day and age—even name check AI is simply deficient. We will support the Government motion, but I urge the Government to back the amendments of Labour and the Conservatives, because it is important that we are clear-eyed about what those challenges are.

Let me start with the Logan review. It was excellent, but it was very clear about the challenges. Yes, the Government has moved forward on some of the recommendations, but not all of them. The Logan review was very clear about the importance of education. Any tech entrepreneur will highlight the importance of computer science teachers in our schools, but the number of such teachers has declined, not increased, since that report was published. What is more, only handfuls of trainee computer science teachers are going through teacher training college.

That is an issue of national importance. It is certainly one of critical importance to the tech sector, but it goes beyond just computer science

teachers. It is also about how we are teaching technology. I hear concerns not only from the tech sector but from parents, through my casework, about the fact that the availability of iPads in the classroom is seen as a proxy for technology. Frankly, our children do not need to be taught how to consume technology; they need to be taught how to use and manipulate it.

Brian Whittle: I cannot agree more with what Daniel Johnson said. Does he agree that the issue, rather than being about teaching our kids technology—after all, the jobs of the future are yet to be invented—is about creating an environment in which they can see the impossible?

Daniel Johnson: I completely agree, but it is also important for them to apply technology to their work when they seek to do new things. We do not have enough of that and it is certainly not rigorous or comprehensive enough.

One critical point made in the Logan review is that there is still work to do on the capitalisation of, and investment in, tech. There have been some steps in the right direction, but there is still a big funding gap. We still have to get access to critical venture capital funds in other parts of the world, because that is where the money is.

The issue is not just about the tech sector itself. When I intervened, I touched on the idea that what is important is not just the application of technology but its penetration throughout our economy. I come from a small business environment and am critically aware of how poorly most small and medium-sized enterprises currently use technology. According to the business software company Sage, SMEs could double their output from around £200 billion to more than £400 billion if they were to use technology as effectively as companies in the upper quartile use it. That would be a huge boost. Likewise, the Open University recently reported that 79 per cent of SMEs are held back from applying technology because they simply do not have the finance, time or knowledge to implement it properly. We must focus on the penetration of technology not only in the tech sector itself but across the economy.

It is also critical to recognise that the economy is not only the private sector but is made up of the public and private sectors. We are a million miles away from where we should be in applying technological innovation and processes in our public sector. I thank Richard Lochhead for bringing this debate, but it is somewhat dismaying not to see the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy here to present ideas and not to see any of the other cabinet secretaries who should be interested. We need technological innovation in health, agriculture, education and social security, and I would have

thought that at least one of those individuals could have played a really useful role in this debate. [Interruption.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Gentlemen, please do not speak across the chamber from a secondary position.

Daniel Johnson: I am trying to bring a constructive challenge. There may be a wider point to make, but I am my party's front-bench spokesperson for the economy and it is a core part of my work to take this forward. My colleague, the front-bench spokesperson for education is also here. That is how the Labour shadow cabinet— [Interruption.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please refrain. I remind members that the person who has the floor is the person who gets the shot at speaking. Please continue, Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: There is a challenge for us all; I do not think that is a partisan point. If we are to deliver on the challenges of demography, climate change and all the others that have been highlighted, we must apply technological innovation across our public sector.

My final point is that it is just not acceptable to talk about what needs to be done with technology without talking about digital exclusion. The economy and society depend on digital technology and that dependency will only grow. We can use technology to make improvements. The Blackwood housing association, in my constituency, uses technology to stay in touch with people living in its sheltered accommodation. It would be remiss to bring forward a broad motion about technology without addressing its vital social aspect.

There is much to celebrate and to focus on, but we must first acknowledge and be serious about the challenges or we simply will not meet them.

I move amendment S6M-11958.2, to insert at end:

“; notes the findings and recommendations of the Scottish technology ecosystem review, led by Mark Logan, including the findings that the number of computer studies teachers in Scotland is falling and that Scotland's education system is not currently set up to support a thriving technology sector, and calls on the Scottish Government to act urgently to reverse this trend, reduce digital exclusion and make computer studies a growing and exciting subject area in Scottish schools.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I advise members that we still have some time in hand.

15:28

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to take part in Parliament debates about technology.

A few years ago, I spoke in a debate about the Scottish Council for Development and Industry report “Automatic for the People”, which examined the opportunities and challenges that Scotland faced in the fourth industrial revolution that was then almost upon us. That was just a few short years ago, but that revolution has now almost passed us, because of the speed with which technology has moved on and the way in which innovation has changed our environment.

Technology brings challenges, but we should embrace it. Scotland is leading in some areas of technology. The minister mentioned the robotarium at Heriot-Watt University. The cross-party group on science and technology, which I co-convene, visited the robotarium a short time ago. We were able to see some advances in robotics for use in agriculture and health, AI and chatbots, and how robots could be used in the hospitality industry.

In health, robots and AI are being used to examine people's gait and to predict whether a person is likely to have a condition such as Parkinson's disease, long before any other tests that are available to us might indicate that there could be a problem. The robotarium also includes sensor technology. I note that Mr McKee mentioned CENSIS, which is one of the internet of things and sensor technology centres for excellence. Minute changes in a person's gait can, through use of the technology, be detected by machines in a way that a physiotherapist might not be able to, so gait could be corrected.

Through the gaming industry, games are being used to engage people in doing their exercises. All those technologies are coming together; we must be able to embrace them and move forward.

In my constituency, I am lucky to have the campus of New College Lanarkshire, in Motherwell. It has its smart hub, which is a funded hub that is directed specifically towards supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and enabling them to embrace technologies such as cobots—collaborative robots—and AI-enabled manufacturing and production opportunities. The consultancy is free to SMEs across Scotland. I was able to see the very simplest of robotics and pneumatics that could be used in a manufacturing process, but there were also cobots that were working alongside humans. The robots react if they are touched, so that there is no danger to people in their working environment. Some of the robotic arms from the cobots were being used in

very innovative ways. I was blown away by what is happening there.

Cobots are, for example, working at height on our renewable energy wind turbines, where they can sand, weld, paint and repair the blades, in situ.

Daniel Johnson: I am delighted that Clare Adamson is talking about cobots. One of the things that strikes me is that they have the potential to turn economies of scale upside down, and to make small businesses competitive with very big businesses. Does she agree that that is a challenge that we might need to get ready for?

Clare Adamson: Absolutely. That is why the debate this afternoon is so important. Cobots are being used in our renewable energy and in welding. That is important and is something that is close to my heart. Cobots working at height means that no one has to abseil up towers so people are less likely to sustain an industrial injury. It is not safe to abseil when weather conditions are inclement; the job cannot then be done by people. Cobots can work at height and they can work for 24 hours.

Cobots can also do precision welding. We know that industrial injury can be sustained from welding fumes, which is very close to the heart of the Scottish Trades Union Congress and its hazards group, which is investigating the matter, at the moment. Anything that makes such roles in our society safer and which takes danger out of work is amazing. We have seen that in the use of drones. The centre of excellence is well worth a visit and it is really excelling.

The centre also does outreach to the schools in my area. It runs robotics clubs in the college's feeder schools, which is a welcome innovation. It gives young people opportunities such as we have been talking about. Learning does not always have to be about the classroom and Scottish Qualifications Authority assessments. The opportunity to take part in games of skill—robot wars and so on—is important in engaging our young people in technology.

With the cabinet secretary, I was, as the CPG chair, invited to the centre of data science and AI at the University of Glasgow. It is a new centre of excellence that is dedicated to examining how we can use big data and AI, and is imagining how they can be used in health. Cancer imaging in cancer research was demonstrated there. The centre is the state of the art for Scotland. Again, our education is leading, in that we are among the first countries in the world to have such a dedicated centre.

Recently, the cross-party group on science and technology had an evening event with Scotland's critical technologies supercluster, which is at the

University of Glasgow. During it we looked at quantum computing and semiconductors, which will absolutely transform what we are able to do in monitoring health. There are systems working that look at the microwaves and below wi-fi frequencies in our environment to detect changes in a person's breathing. The opportunities for health and for looking after people with various conditions are simply breathtaking. They include protecting people in their homes from trips and falls. We also saw at the robotarium how we can support people in their homes with robotics.

Incidentally, one of the cobots costs around £25,000, after which the extension arm must be bought and fitted for whatever it will be used for. Such technologies are accessible to a lot of our SMEs. That is transformative.

The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, which I convene, recently visited Ireland. When we were in Dublin, we met producers. I asked about AI in every meeting until the last. The food producers are using the next level of robots in their manufacturing and said that, if they did not have AI technology they could not be competitive in the European market or do what they do. That is absolutely where we need to be. I am delighted that we are doing that at the moment.

I have a final point, if I still have time on my hands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You may have another 25 seconds.

Clare Adamson: In 25 seconds, I can say that I met the Scottish AI Alliance at an event the other day for the British Standards Institution. The alliance is working with The Data Lab and has a wonderful course called "Living with AI", which explains how AI impacts our lives from day to day. I recommend that course; I will try to take it. I hope that other members will consider it as a way into understanding AI in our developing world.

15:37

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): There is little to disagree with in the motion that the minister has put before the Scottish Parliament this afternoon. Of course technology, science and innovation play a fundamental role in Scotland and Scotland's economy and will continue to do so. Conservatives, too, celebrate and acknowledge that key role.

However, the motion raises two linked concerns. The first was briefly alluded to by Daniel Johnson. Surely, if debate in the Scottish Parliament is for anything, it is for interrogating a topic. It is absolutely for celebrating successes, but it is also for acknowledging the challenges, horizon

scanning for the challenges that are ahead and offering the Government the opportunity to put up those challenges and to listen about issues and possible solutions, just as Daniel Johnson suggested would be done elsewhere.

The motion falls at the first fence. That not only suggests that the Government has a different view from mine on the role of debate, but highlights its inherent stifling tendency to think very much in silos. That is the only plausible explanation for the extraordinary omission of the one sector that can drive not only societal change, but the very changes and outcomes that involve budgets, the economy and technology, as is craved by the motion. In order that viewers at home are aware, I say that the motion will mention education only if either or both the Conservative and Labour amendments are agreed to today—which is why they must be agreed to.

Yesterday's *Scotsman* editorial made that point better than I did. It said:

"If Scotland is to prosper, it needs leaders who have an over-riding obsession to improve the fundamental building block upon which everything else depends. Until then, the foundations of our economy and society will continue to crumble into sand, risking a spiral into a devastating, long-term decline."

Indeed—because it is fundamentally incoherent to talk about the positive impact of business on society and then, in the same breath, to launch a tax-and-axe budget that cuts the economy budget by £97 million, the Scottish National Investment Bank budget by £69 million and the enterprise budget by more than £62 million.

The businesses and enterprises that remain need a supply of talent and skills, in particular, for the purposes of the motion, and—as Brian Whittle said—in STEM subjects. However, last year, there were more than 350 fewer science teachers, 300 fewer maths teachers and 180 fewer computer science teachers than there were in 2008. As Daniel Johnson rightly said, not only do we have fewer teachers coming through, the minister did not even mention that in his remarks. It is also hugely concerning that, at higher grade level, entries by women in science, maths and chemistry are at their lowest levels for five years.

The supply of talent to our technology industry will also come from the further education sector, which is being so hammered by this Government that it prompted the principal of the outstanding North East Scotland College to write to MSPs earlier this week. Neil Cowie has told us that, in the context of the SFC having reported that 68 per cent of colleges are facing a budget deficit, with four facing significant cash-flow issues, and in which the Auditor General is warning about financial sustainability, colleges face a £32.7 million reduction in revenue funding. He told that

last year, years of damaging funding settlements had led to reduced student places across campuses, and that it is likely that there will be a further reduction this year. He also said that that will limit the flow of skilled and qualified entrants to the region's workforce, which is particularly concerning for businesses in key sectors, including energy transition, hospitality, travel and tourism, technology and life sciences.

Richard Lochhead: Liam Kerr raises a number of important issues that deserve consideration. However, in the past two minutes, he has argued for an increase in the budget in four, five or six different areas of Government. Can he explain how the Government is supposed to increase or protect budgets for all those areas when the UK has cut the Scottish budget? How are we supposed to do that, and what representation has he made to his Conservative colleagues to change that situation?

Liam Kerr: Of course, the minister completely failed to acknowledge—as he failed to acknowledge everything that I have brought up so far—that he is sitting on the biggest block grant in devolution history. Minister—cut the waste and grow the economy, then you will have the money to do what we need to do.

The minister did not even mention the challenges for universities, which is a sector that the SFC has forecast—we should remember—to be running a deficit of £3.3 million in two years, with net liquidity days forecast to fall to 124 in the coming financial year. In that context, we have a Scottish budget that proposes cuts of almost 6 per cent to resource budgets and a £28.5 million cut to teaching grants, which will lead to at least 1,200 fewer university places being available to first-year Scottish students to study in Scotland for the very industries that the minister cited.

Daniel Johnson: Will Liam Kerr give way?

Liam Kerr: If it is very brief.

Daniel Johnson: If it is £8,000 per place, does £28 million divided by £8,000 not mean that the potential implication is closer to 3,500 fewer students? Is that not the basic arithmetic?

Liam Kerr: I think that it is. That point was made by the member's colleague, Michael Marra, just last week, when he said that the figure—which the finance secretary is saying will happen—could be much more than 1,200 places. Daniel Johnson has made a very important point.

Sadly, I do not have the time to interrogate the apprenticeship and future workforce development issues, so I will simply leave members with this thought. The education landscape that will generate the businesses, talent and skills of the future lies battered and bruised after 17 years of

SNP Government. The utter and abject failure of the minister to even mention education in his motion tells a story of complacency on an industrial scale—coupled, I dare say, with a fundamental lack of ability.

Once again, it has been left to the Opposition to ensure that the debate not only—rightly—lauds our industries, but also recognises and starts to address the challenges. That is why Parliament must vote for the Conservative and Labour amendments at decision time.

15:44

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Scotland has a deep and illustrious history of innovation and making technological progress. Given Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone, John Logie Baird's pioneering of television, James Watt's transformative improvements to the steam engine and Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin, the modern world as we know it can be said to have been created on the back of Scottish innovation. However, the jobs of yesterday cannot guarantee jobs tomorrow. Although we can look to the past for inspiration, if Scotland is to compete globally and meet the challenges of an ever-changing and interdependent world, we must focus on the future.

This country is awash with high-tech industries. Life sciences, space, fintech, agritech, games, robotics, AI and quantum photonics are all sectors in which Scotland boasts companies that are at the cutting edge of development. As the member who led this Parliament's first-ever debate on AI nearly six years ago, I find it incredible to see the transformational effect that ChatGPT and other AI models are having, including on our economy. The Data Lab, Scotland's innovation centre for data and AI, recently published an impact report showing that it generated nearly £200 million in revenue in the past decade, with more than 1,350 jobs having been created and 80,000 people having registered for online courses that were being created or funded.

In North Ayrshire we have global leaders in life sciences manufacturing, which last year generated £251 million of gross value added. Scotland's largest life science enterprise area is in Irvine, in which investment is being targeted on the i3 enterprise area as part of the Ayrshire growth deal. Such funding, including £11 million from the Scottish Government, will also create a digital processing manufacturing centre at i3, providing a centre of excellence for digital automation and flexible advanced manufacturing space that will serve digital process industries.

In Dalry, DSM Nutritional Products, a company that is globally active in health, nutrition and

bioscience, is enacting plans for large-scale production of a methane-reducing feed additive for cattle and sheep, which should reduce emissions in beef cattle by as much as 45 per cent.

Mangata Networks chose Prestwick international aerospace park for its innovative space engineering, manufacturing and operations hub, which is set to create 575 highly skilled jobs, and where more than 24 medium-class satellites will be produced and tested every three months. That will help to position Scotland as a leading centre for space and manufacturing innovation, while supporting the aims of the Scottish Government's space strategy and bringing a huge boost to Ayrshire's economy.

Pharmaceutical and biotechnology giant GSK, formerly GlaxoSmithKline, has a major manufacturing facility in Irvine, which each year produces 2,500 tonnes of active ingredients for two of the company's leading antibiotics, which is enough to supply 700 million people for a week. GSK explains why it and similar companies choose Scotland as a manufacturing base. It is

"the availability of a skilled workforce, an established supply chain backed by good infrastructure, government support and a strong academic culture that generates the company's future talent pool that keeps them here."

GSK also points to Scotland's size, which allows it to

"work closely with the government, its agencies, the academic institutes and industry on partnership projects."

High levels of education and activity on the part of economic development agencies are recurring key factors in companies' reasons for coming to Scotland. It is vital that they come here. Companies in high-tech industries such as life sciences create the growth that we need to establish skilled jobs and drive productivity across the economy. However, as the Scottish Government's national strategy for economic transformation notes,

"Scotland ... lags most OECD countries in indicators of entrepreneurial dynamism".

Underlining that point, at May's meeting of the Parliament's cross-party group on life sciences, members were treated to a presentation by the regius professor of life sciences at the University of Dundee, Sir Michael Ferguson. At this point, I declare an interest as convener of the CPG on life sciences, which brings together industry, academics and MSPs to recognise achievement, encourage close collaboration and identify where policy makers can play an active role in making Scotland a place where people and businesses want to come to learn, feel encouraged to innovate and are supported to stay and grow.

I thank the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry for all its work in

supporting the CPG. Professor Ferguson's presentation focused on the practical challenges for growing life sciences start-ups. Despite Scotland's having only 8 per cent of the UK population, it won 14 per cent of the UK's life and medical sciences research grants. However, only about 6 per cent of commercialisation investment went to Scotland.

Dundee is one of Scotland's centres of biomedical research, and it hosts a wealth of expertise in life sciences. Several successful high-growth companies created in Dundee moved their centres of operation out of the city and out of Scotland. Professor Ferguson suggested the creation of a national innovation-to-investable-assets fund to help to keep Scottish-born companies in Scotland. I urge the minister to look seriously at creating such a fund. I hope that he will touch on that in his summing up.

Daniel Johnson: One of the points that was made to me directly by Mark Logan was that he would like the scaler principle, which has been used for technology, to be applied to other industries. Is that the sort of idea that Kenny Gibson thinks could be applied to other sectors such as life sciences?

Kenneth Gibson: Yes. As the member may recall, I have raised the issue of tech skills a number of times in response to various budget statements and in debates, because I feel that it is something that we need to expand. That is a great idea, and I congratulate the Government for working on it, but the money that has been allocated to that is not enough, frankly. Given the potential returns, if we are looking to generate greater taxation in order to invest in the public services for which we need more funding, I would urge the Scottish Government to invest more. I know that I am not the only one in the SNP group who believes that, and I am certainly not the only one on the Finance and Public Administration Committee who believes it, as people will see when we publish our report in the next few days.

On university spin-outs, Scotland has performed well when turning research into companies. Edinburgh, Glasgow and Strathclyde universities all appear in the UK top 10 for the total number of spin-outs created since 2011. As we heard earlier, Dundee is a global leader in entrepreneurial impact. Of the 211 equity deals involving spin-outs across the UK during 2021, 21 per cent came from Scottish institutions—the highest proportion of any region or nation in the UK. Scottish institutions have produced some of the UK's most significant spin-outs, such as the AI drug discovery company Exscientia and the industrial biotechnology spin-out ENOUGH.

However, Scotland produces 50 per cent fewer spin-outs than the rest of the UK relative to the

percentage of research funding, which has consequent impacts on the amount of investment raised by Scottish businesses. The national strategy for economic transformation recognises that, and the strategy document notes:

“Perhaps more than any other domain of the economy, it is in the creation of new companies, and the scaling up of successful companies, where data shows the greatest gap between current performance and Scotland's potential.”

The Scottish Government has taken steps to address that. In 2022, it appointed Mark Logan as Scotland's first-ever chief entrepreneur, tasked with ensuring that entrepreneurship is embedded in the economy and strengthening partnerships with industry and investors. Clearly, however, we need to do much more. That role includes building a network of support for start-ups and scale-ups in Scotland, although we have to consider the cost of the huge investment that we will need to digitalise the public sector.

The 10-year national innovation strategy that was published last year sets out a vision to make Scotland the most innovative nation of its size, using innovation as a tool to make Scotland a fairer, more equal, wealthier and greener country. The path to a more prosperous Scotland lies in fostering entrepreneurialism and innovation. We can then fuel economic growth, create new opportunities and build a more dynamic and innovative society. Our world-class universities, skilled workforce and infrastructure give us strong foundations to truly make Scotland a technology nation.

15:52

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow Kenneth Gibson and his opening history of the technology, development and discovery that rested here in Scotland. That allows me to make immediate mention of Leuchie house, the national respite centre. We have already heard about the robotarium. Through its guests, Leuchie has been working with the robotarium to develop robots that can advance diagnosis and prognosis for urinary tract infections.

Looking at the meaning of technology, it is about that ability to take scientific knowledge and apply it to practical purposes, especially in industry. That lies at the heart of the reason for debating the motion today. Without technology based on scientific development by our world-leading universities, which we have already heard about, we will not see the development and broadening of industry, or SMEs developing into highly technical world leaders, which is what Scotland needs.

There is one example to which I wish to refer in this short speech: Sunamp, a company based in Tranent under chief executive Andrew Bissell and his truly superb staff. They have developed a thermal battery—in essence, a battery or device using phase-change materials that stores and discharges heat. It can be plugged in inside a house to get heat, or it can be used to warm up a swimming pool. The battery can be recharged from renewable energy. The company is so successful that it had the great privilege of winning the first King's award for enterprise last year. Only in November last year, Sunamp also won the VIBES Scottish environment business award.

I mention that company because it is a world-leading one that is based in Scotland, and it has been visited by ministers and cabinet secretaries. Its brilliant work has been hailed. The local high school in the area—Preston Lodge high school, which is just down the road in Prestonpans—took part in the fuel change project, for which students came here. In Preston Lodge high school's case, 30 secondary 5 and secondary 6 students had the opportunity to spend the year trying to come up with solutions to the climate change challenge. That was supported by staff in the school and the senior management team, along with universities. Those students rose to the challenge superbly well, as we would expect because, to go back to Brian Whittle's comment about Arthur C Clarke, our young people see the impossible, and they bravely walk into it and try to achieve a solution.

I mentioned Preston Lodge high school not because I am incredibly proud of it, but because the fuel change project carried with it a Scottish credit and qualifications framework value qualification at level 6. Those are the skills that our young people need so that they can go forward and help in the potential technology desert that could exist, given the real challenge in education, as we have heard from many contributors. In our primary schools, where are the Lego classes that we see elsewhere around the world, in which young people can just play at using technology? In doing so, they develop innate skills so that, when they are faced with maths algorithms, they mean something to them and it is not just a paper exercise. How can they do that when the specialists are unavailable to our schools in Scotland?

We have heard about the drop in the availability of STEM teachers, no more so than in computer science, which is the very foundation of what we need. As we heard earlier, it is not just about our young people using technology; it is about our young people understanding technology, and technology working for the benefit of our young people. They have those skills. The students who were involved in the fuel change project proved

that. However, that is just a tiny example of the many young people who are available.

I will pick up again on Brian Whittle's speech, because it is important. We have had two of the three rules that he mentioned, so let us have the third: when an elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right, but when he states that something is impossible, he is probably wrong. Before I come on to my next point, I venture to point out that that was written in 1962.

Women and girls play a massively important part not just in STEM for the future but in STEM and scientific discovery today. When we consider the motion and the work that is being done, we must remember that more than an equal contribution can be made by females in that field, and they need to do that. I go back to what technology is about. It is about scientific theory and understanding making a practical solution. In some ways, the contribution of women and girls can be far greater and certainly more far reaching than their male colleagues' contributions.

I welcome the motion and the opportunity to celebrate brilliant technology in and around the south of Scotland, but I highlight the fundamental foundation of where we are going with education. How are we dealing with our youngest people as they come into an education system and how they understand? The curriculum for excellence requires that children, when they are first at school, should look up at the sky in wonderment. In order to do that, they need adults around them who can support them, excite them, answer their questions and drive them forward to make the discoveries themselves. The Scottish Government must facilitate such adults being around our young people.

15:59

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate. I thank the Government for bringing forward a debate on a subject that is hugely important to the future of Scotland's economy.

As the minister said, there are a number of global trends that we need to be ahead of the curve on, where we can, such as technology and decarbonisation. I would add to that list the demographic shift, which will drive so much in terms of technology requirements.

The minister was right to identify—and many other members highlighted—Scotland's significant successes in many areas, including the fact that we lead the UK in inward investment. The opportunities that exist, and our leading position, in sectors such as energy, food and drink and tech—in particular fintech—as well as in financial

services, advanced manufacturing, space and life sciences have rightly been mentioned, and there are other such sectors.

However, I will focus my contribution on some of the challenges, and the things that we need to ensure that we have in place to enable us to take advantage of those opportunities and build on that success.

First, it is important that we understand the conditions for success. We should not take it for granted that those great companies are out there and great things are happening in our universities, and we should not simply bask in that success. We need to understand, at a deep level, what is driving it and what the pillars are, and, consequently, what the risks are and what we need to strengthen.

It is important to understand what our strengths are. Our universities play a pivotal role in taking forward research. The challenge, as always, is how we build on that and commercialise it at scale.

Brian Whittle: I agree with Ivan McKee that our universities are great incubators for some excellent innovation. Does he agree with me that the challenge is for us to hold on to that innovation, in a country where 95 per cent of our businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, rather than having the initial tech bought out by the Chinese or Americans and shipped abroad?

Ivan McKee: The member is absolutely right—I heard that part of his speech. It is, to be frank, a problem that most countries in the world suffer from. I will talk about some things that may help to address it to some extent.

We need to understand our other strengths. Our skills base, while having shortcomings, is always cited as a reason that inward investors come to Scotland. The same goes for our natural resources, in particular in the energy and food and drink sectors.

We need to be clear about what we are good at, and we should not fall into the trap or make the mistake of trying to be good at everything, despite the plethora of opportunities that we have in front of us. In what we are good at, however, we need to be among the best in the world, and not in the second division.

We also need to have a clear strategy to deliver. We have the innovation strategy, which I am delighted that the minister has taken forward. I ask him, in his summing up, to give us an indication, now that we are around six months in, of where we are on rolling out the actions from that strategy. I am thinking in particular of cluster building and cluster accreditation. We should be ensuring

that—as I said—we understand, at a deep level, what we are good at, and we should focus on and support those technologies and the vertical industry sectors that sit above them.

I take the opportunity to raise—as I did in an earlier intervention—a concern about the innovation centre decision. The money is one thing, although those innovation centres are generating, over time, tens of millions of pounds in private sector contributions as well, and several of them will find a route through.

More concerning, to my mind, is the lack of joined-up decision making, of which that particular decision is a symptom. To be frank, it is not good enough for Government to say that it gave the problem to the Scottish Funding Council and the SFC gave it to some other folks, who came back with some independent assessment.

Government needs to own that decision—it needs to be on top of it. There needs to be a joined-up approach: the innovation strategy identifies those innovation centres as a core part, but, on the other hand, we seek to cut their legs away through some process that has happened somewhere else. Government is shifting the buck, and—to be frank—that is not good enough.

Daniel Johnson: On that point, I note that the innovation report laid out quite a complicated landscape for innovation. One of the problems is that we have at least two places that own innovation. Does the member think that innovation should be owned by a single agency in Scotland?

Ivan McKee: That is an excellent point. Fundamentally, we have the universities and the education system, which drives the research, and the economic development agencies and the business sector, which take that research and makes it work.

The principle that I always worked to in business was that it is the customer who has to own it, because they need to pull it through. They need to be in the lead, because they suffer the consequences if it does not work. On that basis, I would be all in favour of the enterprise agencies owning that problem. Part of the issue is that we have given the problem to an agency that, to be frank, while it understands research, does not understand innovation, commercialisation or economic development. I think that we are suffering as a consequence of that.

The second area to highlight is investment, and capital investment in particular: whom we approach for money; how we sell that opportunity to them; what businesses and sectors we want the money to come into; and how we put a coherent case together.

The global capital investment plan gives us many of the answers to that. It is hugely important that we continue to drive that and bring in investment for businesses, because that will help to address some of the issues that Brian Whittle raised about businesses being bought out by larger international companies. If we have the capacity to have investment flowing into businesses in Scotland, they can grow and export on the back of that, rather than feeling the need to be bought by other companies.

My third point is about skills alignment. We understand that there are skills challenges, but having a tight connection between what businesses require for particular skills over the coming years and what the college and university sector is lined up to provide is important, which is an issue that I have addressed with education ministers. I sometimes worry that those two things are pulling in separate directions, and we have not joined them up as effectively as we could.

The minister makes great points about infrastructure and digital connectivity, which are absolutely central. I welcome the work that is happening there. The connection speeds could always be faster, but I know that a lot of good stuff is happening on broadband and mobile connectivity across the country.

The final point is about something that Daniel Johnson and Brian Whittle raised. We need to use the public sector to adopt and procure technology, which will accelerate its development. Brian Whittle mentioned the NHS, which is a great example of where we could do more to support our life sciences sector. We are not as joined up as we could be. We need to leverage the significant £14 billion or £15 billion to support Scottish indigenous growth businesses.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Could you conclude, Mr McKee.

Ivan McKee: Absolutely, Presiding Officer.

There is a huge opportunity and there are a lot of things that we can do to transform Scotland's position globally, but we need to understand those drivers and we need to be joined up on delivery.

16:06

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): As we navigate our way toward a fairer and greener Scotland, we know that technology will be an important tool for us to tackle the grand challenges that we face. We must not only embrace technological innovation and advancement, but also ensure that we are aligned—I believe closely—with Europe's forward-thinking approach to sustainable innovation, because technology in and of itself is not always a

good thing. We must make sure, as I discussed in a debate on the green economy yesterday, that our innovations, processes and techniques support our broader vision for a liveable future.

We know that many in Scotland have worked hard to earn our country's reputation as a hub of technological development. Excellent innovation infrastructure, spotting and exploiting opportunities and a highly skilled workforce have all contributed to that. Digital businesses in Edinburgh and Glasgow, for example, have a combined turnover of £1.2 billion, employing more than 70,000 people. Tech is in the DNA of Dundee, which is one of the cities that I am honoured to represent. Britain's "coolest little city" is, according to the Tech Nation Group, one of the most likely cities to become a leading UK tech hub, with its vibrant mobile application, software and games development scene.

However, Brexit uncertainty, lack of adequate or appropriately targeted UK Government capital investment, skills development and talent retention remain challenges for the sector across Scotland to overcome if it is to continue to thrive well into the future. We will need tech, including AI, to meet the challenges that we face. As we embrace the transformative opportunities that tech provides, we must ensure that our technological progress aligns with principles that protect the planet, promote social sustainability and foster a circular economy. The Scottish Greens' vision for Scotland as a technology nation extends beyond economic considerations: it encompasses the principles of green industrialism and the imperative to create a technology landscape that protects people and planet.

In emphasising a repair economy, we echo the sentiments of those who want to end the cycle of disregarding perfectly good devices. We envision a Scotland in which repair, reuse and recycling are not only encouraged but become integral to our tech culture. The goal is to move away from a throwaway culture and built-in obsolescence, which means that it is cheaper to buy new devices than to repair the ones that we already love. In doing so, we will not only protect our environment but create thousands of jobs in a burgeoning repair economy. The principles that are articulated by the European Commission resonate strongly with our vision for a sustainable tech future in Scotland. Our tech innovations must provide solutions for, rather than a barrier to, the sustainable green economy. Given some of the growth predictions in different tech sectors, our commitment to green industrialism demands that we take proactive measures to ensure that the growing environmental footprint will not have a negative impact.

To harness technology for good and protect the planet, we should work toward the following goals. Consumers should have the right to repair their own devices or to choose paid repair services. That will empower us to extend the lifespan of devices, which will promote sustainability and reduce e-waste.

People should be empowered to make informed and sustainable retail choices—that goal is crucial. Labels should indicate the environmental impacts of technology, as that will empower everyone to consider the ecological footprint of their gadgets. We should set strong minimum sustainability requirements—as far as devolved powers allow—that include considerations for product reparability and longevity, across all products on the market. That would ensure that manufacturers prioritise eco-friendly design and durability. Efficiency standards, which are currently industry led across the UK, set a good precedent for that.

We should promote a repair economy, supported by strategic investments in creating a secondary market for reusing raw materials. The repair economy not only contributes to environmental conservation and material optimisation but generates new job opportunities in the repair and recycling sectors.

Developing and sustaining a skills-based labour market and encouraging skills transferability in the context of the circular transition align with the goal of creating a workforce that is capable of supporting sustainable practices. Such an initiative promotes adaptability and expertise in environmentally friendly technologies.

Aiming for zero harmful substances in our technology is a pivotal commitment that is tied to the goals of the circular economy. Eliminating or minimising harmful materials in the production and disposal of technology is essential for creating a less polluting and more sustainable industry.

The UK Government obviously has a role to play in all this. We must enhance transparency and commercial reporting on the environmental impact of technology, including greenhouse gas emissions, energy consumption and life-cycle impacts, which should be published in an open database. Such information empowers consumers and policy makers to make informed choices.

Integrating environmental impacts within decision-making criteria in the development of public policies on the purchase and use of digital equipment is critical. By aligning policies with sustainability goals, all Governments in the UK can actively contribute to shaping a more eco-conscious tech landscape. Scotland should align itself with the 2030 European Union targets for significantly reducing the use of materials and

incorporating the climate impact of technology in upcoming laws and regulations on AI.

Those proposals collectively represent a comprehensive strategy to integrate sustainability into the technological landscape, ensuring that Scotland aligns with progressive European approaches for a more environmentally conscious future.

As we celebrate the strides made in Scotland's tech sector, let us weave these principles into the fabric of our technological advancement. Scotland can be a beacon, not just for its technological prowess but for its embrace of technology that protects the planet, fosters social sustainability and champions a circular economy.

16:12

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This has been a very interesting debate so far, on a subject that we can all agree is of major importance. Much has already been said by others about Scotland's proud history of science and innovation, from the television and the telephone to the tidal turbine and the modern toilet.

In a world where innovation and technology increasingly shape our everyday lives, Scotland has played a proud role. However, now we look to the future and how we can build on Scotland's reputation by taking advantage of the opportunities that innovation brings.

We can also build on new technologies, such as AI.

"Artificial Intelligence is increasingly pivotal in shaping Scotland's technological landscape, offering groundbreaking opportunities across various sectors.

AI's role in Scotland's tech sector is advancing technology and building a smarter, more efficient, and environmentally conscious future."

I did not write that—AI did, and I suppose that it would say that. However, I have previously spoken in the Parliament about AI and the opportunities that it brings, as well as the challenges that we face because of it.

In my Highlands and Islands region, traditional sectors are embracing and benefiting from new technology. In agriculture, a sector in which I am involved, I have seen how technology has transformed our farm. It has been vital in increasing the efficiency of our crop and cattle production, in reducing emissions and in making farming safer than it was. At the Royal Highland Show last year, I spent much time speaking with operators about the potential of drones in agriculture, which could allow better access—for weed suppression, planting and other reasons—to previously hard-to-reach areas.

Scottish companies are making breakthroughs in vertical farming technology. Intelligent Growth Solutions in Dundee is developing a 900,000 square foot “game-changing” giga farm in the United Arab Emirates. That not only promotes Scottish research but signals our capability to improve agriculture globally.

As was highlighted earlier, there are further opportunities from gene editing, both for Scottish agriculture and for the businesses that support it. We just need the SNP to catch up, put aside its prejudices and allow the opportunities to be taken advantage of. That could have real benefits for our food security and for Scottish science and innovation.

Technological advances have also been driving change in our whisky industry, not only to boost production but, again, to integrate green technology into the processes and reduce emissions and the environmental impact.

Technology is also driving new industries. As a child, I remember work being done on wind turbines at Burgar Hill in Orkney. Now, tidal turbines and other forms of marine renewables are being developed at the European Marine Energy Centre’s Billia Croo site just outside Stromness in Orkney. Stromness is now home to Heriot-Watt University’s international centre for island technology, and Orkney is home to a number of leading players in the field, as well as the wider renewables sector that supports it.

As other members have mentioned, an increasingly important example of new technologies—and new opportunities—is the SaxaVord UK spaceport in Shetland, which plans to have its first launch later this year. Although it might not, certainly in the foreseeable future, be a base for interplanetary exploration, Shetland is boldly going where no Scottish island has gone before. SaxaVord, along with the site in Sutherland, is helping to support a growing space sector in Scotland, and it will be a crucial hub for technological innovation and space exploration. Such projects have already attracted considerable UK Government funding, as well as funding from major international players such as Lockheed Martin, thereby cementing Scotland’s place as a key player in the UK space industry. As deputy convener of the Parliament’s CPG on space, I very much welcome that.

The Highlands and Islands has always been an entrepreneurial and innovative region. Our geography has forced our people to look for solutions to the challenges that our rurality and remoteness set. That is why some of the Scottish Government’s decisions have been so disappointing. As Liam Kerr mentioned, in the latest SNP-Green budget alone, the Scottish National Investment Bank’s budget faces a

staggering cut of £69 million, the budget for Highland and Islands Enterprise, which is crucial for development in my region, is being cut by £8 million, and, of course, budgets for further and higher education have also been slashed.

Those are real setbacks for innovation and growth. During my time on the Economy and Fair Work Committee, including in the inquiry that we undertook into business support, I saw some of the challenges that small innovative technology companies already faced when they were ready to scale up. If that support and the people and skills are not available, we risk innovators taking their ideas to more welcoming and supportive fiscal and regulatory climates. That is why the cuts and the Scottish Government’s decision to tax more heavily those whom we need to attract to this country—or, at least, encourage to stay—risk being so damaging. In the longer term, that will only discourage investment, stifle enterprise and dampen the entrepreneurship that is vital for technological advancement.

As members have highlighted, there are many good news stories on the subject, and there is much to be positive about, but that is because of Scotland’s innovative, entrepreneurial and creative people. We need a Government that recognises and supports the potential opportunities that investment in the technology sector brings. Unfortunately, given the Scottish Government’s record over 17 years, and the latest budget, we are still waiting for that.

16:18

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Questions of technology are too important to be left to a small class of specialists and managers. In my view, technology should be used to help to transform, not entrench, existing relations of power. Its application should have social objectives, democratic objectives and egalitarian objectives, but, all too often, innovation and technology are directed to the wrong end—to warfare instead of peace; to the desires of the rich in place of the needs of the poor; and to trivial and harmful purposes instead of social, humanitarian and ecological ones.

That is why we say that we welcome the humanitarian aid provided by the Scottish Government to Gaza, but we ask: what good is it if we are also providing public funding to the high-tech arms manufacturers, based in Scotland, who are supplying the Israeli Government with the latest technology to bomb the people of Gaza? What good is that?

This afternoon’s Government motion speaks of a technology nation. The motion highlights

“inward investment and export opportunities”.

It is true that one of the challenges that we face in the Scottish economy is weak export performance and the negative balance of trade, but the challenge is not just limited to the deficit in the export of goods and services; it extends to the huge deficit created by the export of profits, the extraction of value and the outflow of wealth. It is a deficit that is made markedly worse by the SNP-Green Government's obsession with the Ernst & Young index and foreign direct investment.

An important analysis on that has been published recently by the economist Dr Craig Dalzell, who warns that

"the level of profit extraction from Scotland is far too high for a country of our size and economic development."

He estimates that it totals £10 billion a year.

It was a policy that began when the Tories were in charge of the Scottish economy, back in the 1980s and 1990s. Their strategy was to close down the mines, the shipyards, the steel mills and the factories and replace them with silicon glen by attracting a large, globalised and mainly anti-trade union electronics industry to Scotland. Almost all of it is now gone.

I am more convinced now than ever that what we need is an alternative economic strategy, and it is not one to be found in either the politics of nationalism or the economics of market capitalism. In fact, as Mariana Mazzucato has regularly reminded us, the state—the public sector—rather than venture capital and the private sector is the key actor in the innovation system. Yet, shockingly, some of the corporations that are most notorious for avoiding paying their share of tax, and so evading their contribution to the common good, are some of those very same tech giants, such as Apple, Google and Amazon, that benefit the most from it.

I note that Amazon is inviting us to join it in the Parliament next week to consider its research and development record. Well, I hope that it will also be able to tell us about its corporation tax record, its trade union recognition record, the ethics of its record as an employer on workers' rights, human rights and equal rights, the use of zero-hours contracts, the computer tracking of so-called associates and its record on poverty pay. I hope that it will tell us its record on that.

It is time to think big and act radical, because there are far-reaching implications of technology for democracy. Unless we recognise that the market is not democratic, that we need to plan our economy and that we cannot go on simply producing according to private profit instead of according to social need, technology and AI will do nothing other than perpetuate biases and so deepen those inequalities of wealth and power. But I am not fatalistic—I think that transformative

economic, social and environmental change is possible; that our universities continue to carry out important and socially useful research and development; that, with vision in politics, instead of people working for the economy, we can have an economy that works for the people; that we can stand up for democracy so that we have science in the service of the people, not in the service of monopoly interests; and that, in Scotland, we can take the lead, not only in pioneering this technology but in pioneering the democratic economy, promoting co-operatives and employee ownership, and extending collective rights and the redistribution of power that needs to go with that.

That has to be our priority. That is how progress will be made. That way, we can build, rooted in past experience, both progress in the present and hope for a better future.

16:24

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):
Presiding Officer,

"Dare to be honest and fear no labour",

wrote Robert Burns. On this, the national day, when we celebrate the works of the bard, it is an apt quote, as we use this debate to look to our future. Securing a place as a serious player on the global economic stage requires us to take seriously technology and innovation. That is—and should be—considered one of the most important investments in our nation. It is not just a worthwhile project for us all to benefit from here and now but a legacy for the next generation of Scots to build on. I encourage the Scottish Government to build on that future.

I come to this debate with optimism, as we recognise the fundamental role of technology, science and innovation in shaping our modern world, particularly as I intend to use the debate to discuss some of the work that is taking place in my constituency, Glasgow Kelvin. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, it is institutions such as the University of Strathclyde that are not only carrying the torch of Scottish ingenuity but illuminating the path towards a brighter and more prosperous future for all of Scotland. Celebrating its diamond jubilee this year, Strathclyde has the unique distinction of having twice been named the UK university of the year. That is no small feat and speaks volumes about the institution's commitment to excellence and its role as a driving force behind the Glasgow city innovation district and the advanced manufacturing district.

The university's partnerships with global technological leaders such as Rolls-Royce, Boeing and AstraZeneca are testament to its calibre and its pivotal role in the global innovation landscape.

Liam Kerr: I am curious to know what impact £28.5 million-worth of cuts to the sector would have on the world-leading outputs that the member is describing.

Kaukab Stewart: Any kind of cut would have an impact that none of us would want. However, the 1.2 per cent fall in the block grant, in real terms, has an impact. Capital spending is due to contract by about 10 per cent. I encourage members to engage with their Westminster counterparts to increase the budget allocations for Scotland.

I have mentioned the University of Strathclyde's partnerships. The university's expertise spans a vast array of fields, from 5G and communications to health tech, quantum and energy. Those are the areas that will define our future, and Strathclyde is at the forefront, leading the charge. Its network of industry-facing centres, including the Power Networks Demonstration Centre and the Advanced Nuclear Research Centre, are committed to addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

The Glasgow city innovation district was founded by the University of Strathclyde in 2019. The district has an impact value, created by the university, of around £920 million. It is a vivid illustration of how innovation can drive economic growth and create opportunities. I would always encourage the Government to invest in such institutions because of the added value that they bring. Facilities such as the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and the Medicines Manufacturing Innovation Centre are more than just research centres; they are the groundwork for a manufacturing renaissance in Scotland, blending traditional expertise with cutting-edge technology. Strathclyde is at the forefront of sustainability and net zero research—a legacy that harks back to Professor James Blyth's pioneering work in 1887. That commitment to sustainable innovation is integral to our shared vision of a green and prosperous Scotland.

At this point, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I would like to highlight the profound impact of the Scottish schools education research centre—SSERC—of which I am proudly a board member. The centre is dedicated to enriching the professional learning of science, technology, engineering and mathematics educators and practitioners across Scotland. We have heard from colleagues that we continue to have a shortage of teachers in that area. We have heard, too, about underrepresented groups in the field, so the work of SSERC is worth highlighting. It not only educates but inspires, and it ignites a passion for STEM fields among Scotland's young learners, starting as early as age three.

According to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,

children as young as seven begin to limit their future career aspirations, which are influenced largely by their immediate environment and societal norms. That is why it is incredibly important that STEM careers are put in front of children at a very early age. Through partnerships with organisations such as Ocean Winds, the SSERC has funded programmes that bring practical, hands-on STEM learning into school, while upskilling educators and engaging students in real-world challenges.

I commend the Scottish Government's commitment to STEM subjects and the STEM education and training strategy. I would be grateful if, in summing up, the minister would outline the Government's future plans for STEM subjects and how it intends to expand STEM training and skills into the world of research and work.

Support for technology and innovation is about not just celebrating the triumphs of our past but investing in our future. I will finish, as I started, with a final quote from Burns, who wrote about education being valuable not just for education's sake. He wrote:

"What's a' jargon o' your Schools,
Your Latin names for horns an' stools;
If honest Nature made you fools,
What sairs your Grammers?
Ye'd better taen up spades and shoos,
Or knappin-hammers."

16:31

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):

Technology, science and innovation have a crucial and ever-growing role in the modern world, as colleagues from across the chamber have said this afternoon. Technology plays a key role in solving many of the 21st century challenges that we face: the transition to a green economy; space, as Kenny Gibson and Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned; harnessing AI, which Clare Adamson spoke passionately about; supporting the increasing demand in social care and the wider public sector, as my colleague Daniel Johnson pointed out; and life sciences, as Ivan McKee mentioned.

Technology does not just enhance our society; it provides thousands of high-skilled jobs and generates inward investment and export opportunities. If we are to truly harness its potential—harness our technology prowess, as Maggie Chapman said—we must not just support the industry and its people today but look to the future to ensure that the next generation is inspired and supported to enter it in order to, as Brian Whittle said, lay the foundations of the future. That is what our amendment focuses on today.

As I am a wheelchair user and the daughter of an engineer, technology and engineering have not only been huge supports to me—the chair that I sit in, the adapted van that I drive and the aids and adaptations that I use—but brought income and joy to our family and our community. I have seen at first hand the incredible importance of technology, the talent in the industry that exists and the benefits that it brings.

As the minister recognised in his opening speech, our best natural resource is the talent of our people, and many of those who live in the Glasgow region and are supported by our outstanding colleges and universities are a great example of that. It concerns me, and it should concern the Government, too, that many young people are not getting the exposure that they need to the subjects—science, maths, engineering and computing—that support these industries, particularly in schools, which no longer provide the same opportunities that they once would have done.

It also concerns me that the Government has—as Liam Kerr called it—a stifling tendency to think in silos. The vision that the Government has set out does not and cannot happen by accident. It will happen only by design. As my colleague Richard Leonard pointed out, for the economy to work for all of us, it is important that we plan it that way and use technology for the good of people. To do that, the Government must work across silos, including in education, if it is to get anywhere near delivering the vision that it has set out.

We must address that. We must inspire and teach young people about the value of these subjects and support their provision from the early years to the workplace. That is why our amendment focuses on teachers, and it is why we are concerned about the findings from Mark Logan's review that the number of computer studies teachers in Scotland is falling, as other members have said, and that Scotland's education system is not currently set up to support a thriving technology sector. The most up-to-date statistics that are available demonstrate a worrying decline in the number of computer studies teachers in Scotland. In 2008, there were 766 computing teachers. In 2022, that figure was 588. We need more, not fewer, computing teachers.

The picture is not great in related subjects, either. The Government has failed to meet its target for new teachers in key subjects such as biology, the target on which was missed by more than a third; chemistry, the target on which was missed by more than two thirds; and computing and maths, in which less than half the target number of new teachers were recruited.

Attracting people to teaching is getting harder. Classrooms are particularly tricky places to be.

The bursary scheme is massively underused, and fewer teachers are using the preference waiver scheme to address geographical difficulties. All that is having a real impact, not only on young people's opportunities but on the economy and the potential of Scotland to be a nation of high-tech industry, and it undoubtedly contributes to a situation in which, according to the Institution of Engineering and Technology, only 55 per cent of young people say that they know what engineers do.

We must treat STEM subjects seriously if we are genuine in our ambition to be a competitive technology economy, and we must ensure that STEM is for everyone. I commend, as my colleague Kaukab Stewart has done, the work of SSERC in that area.

Liam Kerr: In Scotland in 2022, just 7 per cent of STEM apprentices in training were women. Is the member as concerned as I am about that? Does she regret the Government's lack of attention to that fact?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I deeply regret that statistic. We see the effect of that in education and apprenticeships, but it also leads through into the workplace—whereas 60 per cent of the workers in the care sector are women, women represent only 30 per cent of workers in the STEM sector. Of those who stay in the STEM sector, only 12 per cent ever obtain managerial positions. It is a matter of huge concern to me that that pipeline is not increasing in the way we need it to so that women and their innovation, which my colleague Martin Whitfield spoke about, can build our STEM economy for the future.

To create a Scotland that offers opportunities for all, we must smash every class and glass ceiling that stands in the way of our pursuing the skills of the future. My colleague Martin Whitfield passionately set out the reasons for doing that, which I outlined in my response to the intervention that I have just taken.

We know that girls are far more likely to undertake higher education in art and design, French, fashion, food tech and childcare, and that boys are more likely to study computing science, physics, engineering and graphic communication. That speaks to some of the problems that members have highlighted today with regard to equality in STEM.

We must use every opportunity to expose all young people to the broadest of skills, including in STEM, to address the shortages that exist in key sectors. We must be innovative in how we do that. We need to teach children that maths is useful and introduce them to real-life examples, as Martin Whitfield pointed out.

I am conscious of time, so I will finish on this point. Scottish Labour believes that the wider adoption of technology across our economy, the use of technology in the public sector, and the tech sector are all key to economic growth. We believe that Scotland will be a technology nation only if we become world class in each of those areas. That is why our amendment focuses on making that happen for the current and the next generation. That is why it calls on the Government to act urgently. It is a rallying cry for a concerted effort to deliver high and rising standards of STEM education in Scotland, so that the current and the next generation can lead the way in not simply the economies of the future but the dreams of the future.

The Presiding Officer: We have time in hand for interventions.

16:38

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

Today's debate has given Parliament the opportunity to acknowledge Scotland's place as a hub of innovation, as the historical home of countless great minds and as a true technology nation. I will take a few moments to pay tribute to some of the great contributions that we have heard this afternoon. I was worried that, in such a short amount of time, I would not be able to say something about the speeches of everyone who has spoken, but, now that the Presiding Officer has said that we have some time in hand, I am sure that I will be able to cover the remarks of every speaker.

My colleague Brian Whittle rightly spoke about how education is what shapes tomorrow's workforce and how it provides opportunity and sets a path for an individual's life. However, as my colleague Liam Kerr pointed out, the motion utterly fails to appreciate that all the outcomes that it wants us to achieve are underpinned and driven by education, whether that is provided by schools, by colleges or by universities.

I absolutely agree with Daniel Johnson that we have much to do to become a tech leader compared to the rest of the world, and I, too, am amazed that the motion contains no mention of AI. Everyone out there is talking about AI, but the motion says nothing about it.

It was great to hear from Clare Adamson about the work that is being done at the campus of New College Lanarkshire and about the work on cobots.

Kenneth Gibson spoke about the CPG on life sciences, which promotes close co-operation and

points out areas where policy can contribute to making Scotland a destination for individuals and companies that want to innovate and grow.

Martin Whitfield spoke about Sunamp, a company that has created a thermal battery that stores heat. It is world leading and has won many awards. All of that great work on technology is taking place in Scotland.

Ivan McKee rightly raised concerns about the closure of innovation centres and said that the Government needs to take a more joined-up approach.

My colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston said that we must not forget new technologies and opportunities such as the SaxaVord spaceport in Shetland, which is funded by the UK Government. Shetland is leading the way as no Scottish island has before.

Maggie Chapman spoke about sustainable technology and the need to harness technology for the good, while Richard Leonard spoke about the need for a new innovation strategy that goes beyond politics, nationalist or not.

Kaukab Stewart spoke really well about her constituency and about the work that is being done by the University of Strathclyde, along with key businesses such as Rolls-Royce, to create innovation in technology.

What has shocked me is that most members have spoken about education and about how important that is to technology yet there is no one here from the Scottish Government education team—no cabinet secretary, no minister—while the Opposition parties have deployed their front benches.

There have been a number of excellent contributions today, but I will highlight the importance of finance and fintech. It was great to hear the minister mention that sector.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I apologise to the member, because I was not here for the debate but have come for the summing up. On the subject of education and technology, I attended the Cadder primary school Burns supper and art exhibition last night. Much of the art that had been produced by the pupils was digital art, which shows that curriculum for excellence has embedded digital art in primary schools in my constituency. I am sure that the member would want to welcome that.

Pam Gosal: I absolutely welcome that. It is so important that we treat teachers with respect and that we have more teachers. Outcomes are more important than inputs, which is something that I have been speaking to local authorities about. I absolutely welcome any school doing innovative work with technology.

To return to finance and fintech, it is great that the minister, Richard Lochhead, spoke warmly about the Scottish fintech sector, which has grown by 50 per cent since the start of 2020 and already supports more than 8,500 jobs in Scotland. The gross value added by the Scottish fintech sector is predicted to increase to £2.1 billion by 2031. Scotland is the second-largest centre for fintech in the UK after London, so Scotland is already punching well above its weight in the UK market. That is why, last year, as convener of the cross-party group on India, I led the first cross-party delegation to India to help Scotland to connect with India's fintech sector. It is great to see my colleague Sharon Dowey here today. She came to India with us, as did Kenneth Gibson, and Ivan McKee is a deputy convener of that cross-party group.

India is a world leader in fintech and has the world's third-highest adoption rate for fintech. It is pushing forward with new technologies such as a data-sharing interface that can reduce the barriers to digital access across the country. Growing Scotland's fintech sector even further will create more highly skilled jobs in Scotland, as well as new business opportunities. That will require working closely with leading fintech companies in countries such as India, sharing knowledge where possible. In the future, it will be vital that the Scottish Government plays its part in ensuring that the Scottish fintech sector continues to thrive. However, as it stands, the Scottish Government is not supporting our technology sector in the way that it should.

As our amendment highlights, Scotland has the highest tax burden in the United Kingdom, which risks driving away the top talent that our technology sector needs. Instead of cutting the budget of the Scottish National Investment Bank by £69 million, the SNP should be using SNIB to support innovation, such as the Scottish space sector, in our economy. We are also seeing a cut of more than £60 million to the enterprise trade and investment budget, which hardly sends the right message to innovators in the business community.

Given the SNP's approach to business and innovation, it is hardly surprising that the entrepreneurship rate in Scotland is now lower than the UK average. Scotland is already a leading technology nation, but it has the potential to go even further. We must ensure that Scotland continues to be a place where innovation and technology can thrive, as is called for in our amendment. Economic growth and the growing technology sector should go hand in hand. Too often, we have heard empty promises from the SNP Government on economic growth—we have yet to see them translated into real policies.

However, we should not fear. Once again, the Scottish Conservatives have come to the rescue with our paper "Grasping the Thistle", which sets out our vision of how to create a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in Scotland. We want to see a real vision for economic growth that encourages the creation of well-paid, highly skilled jobs, that truly keeps Scotland's history as a hub of innovation, and that—I hope—the Scottish Government will now deliver.

The Presiding Officer: I call Richard Lochhead to wind up and ask that he take us to decision time, at 5 o'clock.

16:47

Richard Lochhead: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I surely will do my utmost. There are quite a lot of points that I will do my best to respond to, but I want to start by thanking Kaukab Stewart for the Burns quotations. I also thank all members for their—in most cases—excellent and just about always thought-provoking contributions to this wide-ranging debate.

There are many different dimensions to the future of technology in Scotland, and many of the points that members raised would be worthy of a debate in their own right. There might be an opportunity for future debates on particular subjects and angles that have been raised by members. There is no way that we can cover all of them in motions or nine-minute opening speeches but, in my closing remarks, I will try to address a couple of the themes that members mentioned.

I also want to thank people outside the chamber. I posted on LinkedIn—which is a sign of technology, because it was not available a few years ago—about the fact that we are having this debate. There was substantial engagement from the technology sector in Scotland, which was excited about and welcoming of the fact that Parliament is debating Scotland being a technology nation. Many of the comments that were made by people in the sector echoed some of the themes that members raised. There is a lot of food for thought and a lot to think about as we go forward.

It is also worth reflecting on how things are changing at a phenomenal speed. The Parliament is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. A couple of years after the Parliament was set up and running in 1999, the iPod was released. The SNP Government was elected in 2007, the year in which the iPhone was released. Facebook happened in 2004. Since the SNP has been in government, we have seen Airbnb, Spotify, Uber and a host of other technological advancements in our society. AI, which I will turn to shortly, is now dominating the agenda to a great degree. That is

all down to the increase in computing processing power and the internet, and AI is now taking it all to a different level. The prospect of quantum computing will change things completely again, if that comes to fruition in the coming years.

It is evident that Scotland's high-tech sectors have captured the attention and imagination of not just members but the people of Scotland in a wider sense. That is absolutely right, given the importance of the subject of the debate, and its fundamental impact on our planet, our lives, our society and our economy.

When we were children growing up, some of the technologies that we used would also be used by us in old age. Nowadays, of course, the technology that children use changes radically—beyond recognition—even 10 or 20 years later, as they approach adulthood. That is how fast things change nowadays, due to computing processing power, compared with past generations. We cannot even begin to foresee what the situation will be in the next 25 years of the Parliament.

It is challenging to adapt to that situation in the right way. We have to be fleet of foot as a country, as a Government and as a Parliament.

Brian Whittle: I will go off on a tangent, as is my wont. The minister raised the prospect of how fast technology is developing. There is quite a lot of fear around the singularity of AI and where that might end up. What are the minister's thoughts on that?

Richard Lochhead: I have visited Edinburgh Napier University, which is working on how robots can use AI to learn. That boggles the mind. It is important that we take advantage of AI, because it can achieve great things for society. That is why the Scottish Government has commissioned the Scottish AI Alliance to give us up-to-date advice, which we expect in the next few months, on the risks and opportunities for Scotland of AI. I would be delighted to bring that back to Parliament for a debate once the report is available.

I will touch on a couple of the themes that people mentioned. The first is digital inclusion, which was mentioned by several members, including some on the Labour benches. A theme of the progress of technology is how we ensure that people are not left behind and that we bring everyone with us. That is a big challenge, given the pace at which technology is changing. However, as members said, it is important.

Connecting Scotland is a Scottish Government programme that is delivered in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. It provides internet-enabled devices, connectivity and digital skills to support people who are digitally excluded. It has issued 61,000 devices since May 2020.

A lot of other work is now under way as part of the new digital inclusion alliance that has been formed with partners. Officials are also looking at the concept of a minimum digital living standard and how that could work in Scotland. That is exciting and important. It is work in progress, but it is an indication of how the issue of digital exclusion is taken seriously.

Liam Kerr: I appreciate that it might be a little difficult for the minister to answer this question, because his education colleagues have not joined him but, according to a Scottish employers' skills survey in 2021, more than a third of applicants for skill-shortage vacancies lacked basic IT, numeracy and digital skills. What, specifically, is the Government doing in schools to address that?

Richard Lochhead: I thank Liam Kerr for raising that point, because I was just coming to that theme. Many members mentioned the issue of education and skills, which is absolutely fundamental to the future.

It is not just a Scottish issue. In UK-wide employer surveys that were published in September 2023, a majority of technology companies said that there was a shortage of IT skills. The issue is very real and applies not just to Scotland but across all our islands. We face similar challenges, and I am sure that they apply across western Europe and not just to the UK. We must work together to address the issue.

The Labour Party amendment does not characterise the current situation, because, as a result of Mark Logan's review, we have taken a number of steps. Existing steps in Scotland include our offer of bursaries of up to £20,000 for career changers to train to become STEM teachers. The review by Mark Logan has led to other steps. We have formed Scottish Teachers Advancing Computing Science, which is run by computing science teachers and is about spreading best practice in computing science across all our schools. A suite has been created of resources and programmes for teaching upskilling.

We have also made available £1.3 million for schools to bid for additional equipment to transform their teaching of computing science. Over the piece, 280,000 devices have already been provided to learners. Steps are under way and are being taken.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I do not—and nor does our amendment—suggest that nothing is being done, but the fact remains that the amendment is factually accurate. The Government has missed its target on computing science teachers by half, and we know that fewer people are getting involved in those subjects. It is therefore perfectly fair to characterise the situation as we have done in our

amendment, and I would like to think that the Government will accept that.

Richard Lochhead: Pam Duncan-Glancy made a number of valuable contributions to the debate. That is one. It is a very serious issue, and we take that challenge head on. I simply make the point that the amendment mischaracterises the situation, because a number of steps are in the pipeline as a result of the Mark Logan review. We are hopeful that they will deliver results, but that is not reflected in the Labour Party's amendment, which is perhaps a bit too negative, given that a lot of steps are being taken.

I want to make an important point to the chamber. In the context of today's debate and working with technology sectors, I am lucky enough to be trade minister as well as minister for small business, tourism, and innovation. In the past few weeks, I have lost count of the number of people who I have been in communication with or met who are involved in technology in Scotland, in our universities or in the private sector. Virtually all of them said to me that the reason why their businesses are expanding in Scotland—I gave plenty of evidence of that being the case in my opening speech—and the reason why Scotland is outperforming the UK and Europe in relation to the growth of inward investment projects, which I am also told by overseas companies, with my trade hat on, is that they want to come to Scotland because of the talent pool, skills and pipeline of skills that we have in this country.

I understand that the pipeline of skills for the future through our schools and colleges is a very serious issue. That is a difficult challenge that we have to take head on, as I said. However, we should not talk ourselves down, because the rest of the world is talking about how great the skills pipeline is in Scotland and how talented and skilled our people are for the industries that we are speaking about. Especially on Burns day, when we talk about how Scotland is viewed across the world, we should recognise that and remember that a lot of people view us as having a lot of talent in this country.

Ivan McKee and others mentioned the innovation strategy, which is under way. Another massive game-changing challenge is how we have more companies that are innovative and active, and how we declutter the landscape. I agree with Daniel Johnson that the innovation landscape is far too cluttered. I think that Ivan McKee would agree as well. That is outlined in the strategy document and, speaking as a minister trying to get my head round the innovation landscape in Scotland, it is complex and cluttered. I agree with the comments that have been made in the chamber that we have to declutter the landscape.

I am not quite sure where we will end up, but we are looking at that in 2024 as part of implementing the innovation strategy. I can also tell Ivan McKee that we are speaking to universities about the new innovation funds that they are working with—particularly Edinburgh, Glasgow and Strathclyde universities. I also mentioned previously the entrepreneurial campuses that are being developed across Scotland to promote that culture, with businesses, academia and students and so on working together to create new start-ups. That is also a very exciting concept.

As part of the innovation landscape, I mentioned in my opening speech the amount of investment that is happening across Scotland, which is pretty phenomenal. I cannot remember anything like it, and I have been in Parliament since 1999. A huge amount of investment has been taking place in Scotland across the past two or three years alone, getting Scotland ready for the future in relation to today's debate and the future of technology, innovation, high-quality jobs and boosting our economy.

For example, there is the £75 million national manufacturing institute for Scotland; the £22 million national robotarium; the £42 million for the delivery of the Techscaler network; the £60 million for the Michelin Scotland innovation park; the £1 billion of investment, which I mentioned, over a number of years for digital connectivity infrastructure; the £155 million for innovation centres in recent years and, most recently, the £88 million for the medicines manufacturing innovation centre, which other members mentioned. There is also the £20.5 million for the Fraunhofer centre for applied photonics in Glasgow, the £40 million for the Aberdeen biohub, the £180 million for the net zero technology centre in Aberdeen and the £1.9 billion investment in the city region and growth deals, which are full of innovation projects the length and breadth of Scotland.

That is not just Scottish Government investment. A lot of it is from the private sector and from local government, of course, and the UK Government contributes to a number of those projects. That is a phenomenal amount of investment in Scotland's future and making sure that Scotland is ahead of the game when it comes to being a technology nation.

I will close now, Presiding Officer. Although I have a lot more to say, it looks as though I have already used my extra minutes.

I thank members for their contributions. We are on the cusp of amazing things in Scotland as we become a technology nation, with all the potential that that holds. It includes the potential for the public sector to save money and to deliver better services for people, and for health innovation to transform people's ageing process and their

quality of later life, as well as tackling the challenges that our country faces on health profiles and a whole host of other areas. Saving the planet, achieving the energy transition and playing our role in saving humankind are also important. Scottish technology is at the forefront of that.

I believe that we have enormous potential to become one of the world's leading technology nations. We just have to play our cards right in the next few years and ensure that that is the case. I commend the motion to Parliament.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-11958.1, in the name of Brian Whittle, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11958, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on Scotland as a technology nation, 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.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:03

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-11958.1, in the name of Brian Whittle. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Sweeney. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)

Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)

(SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Abstentions

McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11958.1, in the name of Brian Whittle, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11958, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on Scotland as a technology nation, is: For 44, Against 67, Abstentions 2. [*Interruption.*]

For clarity, the result of the division is: For 44, Against 66, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11958.2, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11958, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on Scotland as a technology nation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Doney, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dorman, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)

McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11958.2, in the name of Daniel Johnson, is: For 50, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11958, in the name of Richard Lochhead, on Scotland as a technology nation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the fundamental role of technology, science and innovation in shaping the modern world; notes the global trends that will impact upon Scotland's future economy and society; celebrates the successes of Scotland's high-tech industries and the benefits that they bring in generating economic prosperity, enabling the transition to a green economy, offering solutions to the challenges of the 21st century, providing thousands of high-skilled jobs and generating inward investment and export opportunities, and recognises the role of the Scottish Government in supporting Scotland to become a hub of world-class technology, building on the strengths of these industries to play a central role in the delivery of an economy that is fair, green and growing, and benefits all of Scotland's communities and people.

Meeting closed at 17:08.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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