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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 5 March 2024

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Avril McNeill, headteacher of Glenrothes high school.

Avril McNeill (Glenrothes High School): I thank Jenny Gilruth for nominating me to speak to Parliament today.

While considering what to share with Parliament, serendipity aligned when I was given the date to deliver time for reflection, as it coincides with the week of international women's day, which will be celebrated on 8 March. International women's day not only celebrates women of various political, social and economic standings, but is rooted in striving for equality and honours those who campaigned for women's rights. The aim of equality requires a collaborative effort, so I ask that Parliament takes time this week, as I have done, to reflect on the women who have impacted significantly on our lives and how they helped to shape our values and our thinking over time.

As someone who grew up in working-class Renfrewshire during the 1980s and 1990s, I will always be grateful to Pat Cunningham, my history teacher. She inspired me to be the first woman in my family to go to university. Her knowledge and passion for history and politics, twinned with her quirky humour and dress sense, encouraged me to be aspirational and to develop a strong social conscience. Not only did I learn from Pat Cunningham to love the suffrage movement, which secured the franchise for women, but she influenced my path towards becoming a teacher of modern studies and history and ultimately a headteacher. If Emmeline Pankhurst was addressing Parliament today, as she did in 1912, she would

"incite this meeting to rebellion."

Presiding Officer, please rest assured that that is not my intention today.

As a student teacher in 1995, at the same time as genocide was occurring in Srebrenica, I would teach pupils about the Balkan crisis, in modern studies, and about Sarajevo sparking the great war, in history. In 2018, I was privileged to form part of an all-women delegation that visited Bosnia

on behalf of Remembering Srebrenica Scotland. While there, we met Dr Branka Antić-Štauber, the founder of a non-governmental organisation called Power of Women, which supports victims of the rape camps that existed during the Balkan crisis. Dr Branka had the most profound effect on me, having given her free time for almost 30 years to support the holistic health and repatriation of Bosniak women. She empowered survivors to move away from objectification and dehumanisation towards a sense of independence, pride and purpose in running their own co-operative.

All those women helped to shape my moral purpose, but who have shaped yours? Please take time this week to reflect on that. Thank you.

Topical Question Time

RAAC in Local Authority Housing (Torry)

14:04

1. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the announcement by Aberdeen City Council that residents of approximately 500 homes in Torry face relocation as a result of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. (S6T-01837)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I recognise that this will be a very worrying time for those who are directly affected by the latest situation in Aberdeen.

The rehoming programme, which was confirmed last week, is part of the council's long-term plan to remediate the RAAC that has been discovered in its housing. It is vital that the council puts in place that proactive plan to provide one-to-one assessments and make sure that tenants find suitable onward accommodation.

The Minister for Housing has met council leaders and the housing convener to discuss the action that has been taken and to gain assurance that the needs of tenants will be foremost over the coming months. We continue to engage with all local authorities through the RAAC cross-sector working group.

Audrey Nicoll: The Balnagask area of Torry is one of the most deprived areas on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Around 150 home owners in the area have purchased former council properties. Many have mortgages that are still outstanding and will see a drop into not just negative equity but, potentially, zero equity. Insurance companies are already withdrawing cover, leaving residents in a very difficult financial predicament. Will the cabinet secretary outline what resources, advice and support home owners can access to inform how they can proceed?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The affected buildings in Aberdeen have not been assessed as posing a critical risk, which would require immediate evacuation. There are therefore no plans at this stage to compel owners to leave their home. The long-term options available to those households will be considered as part of the council's on-going investigations and options appraisal for the site.

We understand that individual decisions on each property are for the lender or insurer, but we will continue to engage with the Association of British Insurers and UK Finance to urge them to take a

very responsible stance on the matter. I hope that they will appreciate that, as I said, it is a worrying time for everyone involved.

Audrey Nicoll: I thank the cabinet secretary for outlining those options.

I am pleased that Aberdeen City Council has set aside an initial £3 million to underpin its response to the issues that arise from RAAC. However, for many of my constituents, the need to relocate their homes could incur unforeseen costs such as new school uniforms for children or additional travel costs to work or services such as general practitioners. Everyone, but especially families and children in that close-knit community, faces huge upheaval.

Given that many of those affected are on low incomes, will the cabinet secretary outline what additional support might be available to constituents on already-tight family budgets who face additional pressures?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is a matter for Aberdeen City Council, but I understand that the process of one-to-one assessments that it has planned will ensure that the circumstances of each individual family are considered and that wraparound support is provided, including consideration of the health and, importantly, the schooling needs of affected families. That will be underpinned by disturbance payments to cover rehoming costs, such as removals, new carpets and other expenses such as those that the member mentioned.

I appreciate the member's on-going concern as the constituency MSP, and I will endeavour to keep her updated from a Scottish Government perspective. I am aware that she is in communication with the council as well, given that the affected buildings are council buildings.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): After years of underfunding, the council will need financial help from the Scottish Government, on what is a wholly devolved matter, to assist the council tenants, the owners and the private renters that we have heard about. What financial support will be made available from the Scottish Government to ensure that the council is able to provide the support that is needed?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Liam Kerr will be aware, the Parliament has very recently passed the budget. I am happy to be corrected if I am incorrect but, as far as I am aware, on this and on all other issues, the Scottish Conservatives did not come forward with costed proposals for how we might change either our revenue or our capital. It is therefore very important to put the context—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Clearly, those members are not interested in hearing how we have taken decisions over our budget.

I point out to Liam Kerr that the United Kingdom Government did not inflation proof its capital budget, and we forecast that that will result in a real-terms cut of nearly 10 per cent in our capital funding. That means that difficult decisions will have to be made by the Scottish Government and councils.

To be clear, the chancellor said in the past that funding would be made available not just for RAAC in housing but for RAAC overall. We have had not a single penny for that to date, and that is a very sad state of affairs.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): In common with other members, I have been contacted by a number of constituents in recent days, and they are consumed with worry about what the situation means for the homes that they have worked so hard to buy and about the safety of their families. What can the minister tell us about on-going support for Aberdeen City Council regarding the dialogue on the matter in the longer term?

The situation is akin to the cladding issue, which has left many families across the United Kingdom without any value in their homes. Is the minister determined to take a strategic approach to how we might address these issues, as they might arise in other parts of the country?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Michael Marra is quite right to point out that the issue that we are discussing might not be the only such situation that arises. It affects tenants, including private rented sector tenants, and owner-occupiers. That is why we have put in place the discussions that we need to have, at both ministerial and official levels, with councils and across the public sector, so that we can determine the scale of the challenge and liaise on good practice and any changes in guidance, ensuring that we work together as closely as possible. I take very seriously the member's point about the need to ensure that we do not just focus on tenants when working on this issue.

From the conversations that the Government has been having with the city council, it is clear that the council is considering the situation of everybody who lives in the area, not just its own tenants. That is a very important piece of work. The situation is very concerning for everybody involved, including the owner-occupiers, and we will continue discussions with the council on what is happening in its area and, indeed, with other local authorities as situations arise.

Budget (Children's Homelessness)

2. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported claims by the director of Shelter Scotland that it is "gaslighting" the country on housing when its budget "condemns 10,000 children to lives trapped in the homelessness system". (S6T-01835)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government is doing everything in its powers to tackle homelessness, and the Minister for Housing regularly engages with local authorities on the housing pressures that they are facing. We are making more than £14 billion available to councils in 2024-25, which includes £30.5 million to support work to prevent homelessness and £90.5 million for discretionary housing payments to mitigate cruel policies such as the bedroom tax. We are also investing £100 million in the multiyear ending homelessness together fund.

Scotland has a strong record of delivering rights for anyone becoming homeless—it is the strongest rights record in the United Kingdom. It has led the UK in delivering more than 126,000 affordable homes since 2007.

Graham Simpson: Alison Watson is not the only one to have lambasted Shona Robison's disastrous budget, which contained a 26 per cent cut of nearly £200 million to affordable social housing. She said:

"It's getting ever more desperate. We deliberately describe what's happening as a housing emergency. That's not empty words. What we're seeing is exceptional ... The government says it's doing great things, but these are the facts and figures. That's why I call it gaslighting."

Those are her words. She is right, is she not?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The brass neck of a Conservative member of the Scottish Parliament coming here and trying—

Members: It is Shelter Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Conservative members are here crying crocodile tears and trying to say that they are concerned about levels of homelessness or about the housing budget, but their party has ensured a massive cut to our capital budget.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is Shelter Scotland saying it.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): She is not answering the question.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: They are not interested in hearing the facts on this point either, but it inevitably—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: If you could just give me a moment, please, cabinet secretary. I know that members are passionate about the issues that they bring to the chamber, but I am absolutely determined that we treat one another with courtesy and respect. We cannot listen when members are shouting or commenting.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

When the UK Government sees fit to cut our budget, with a 10 per cent real-terms fall over the next few years, while also taking an absolute axe to financial transactions, which are important in our affordable housing supply, there will be an impact on what we can do up here.

In saying that, we know that we have to do everything that we can within our existing budgets. That is exactly why we have a record of developing affordable housing: Scotland has delivered more than 40 per cent more affordable homes per head of population than the UK Government has done in England, and more than 70 per cent more than the Welsh Government has done in Wales. We have protected the homelessness budget for the next financial year, despite facing one of the most challenging budgets since devolution.

I appreciate that Shelter would wish to see us go further, but let us be very clear that not one party in the chamber came forward with costed proposals for exactly how that could be done.

Graham Simpson: The cabinet secretary's attack on me should be aimed at Shelter Scotland, whose words I quoted. That was an absolutely disgraceful answer.

Homelessness is at an all-time high. There are 15,625 households in temporary accommodation, which is the highest number on record. Alison Watson has said that the Scottish National Party Government's promises to build more social housing

"look like a pipe dream".

John Blackwood, of the Scottish Association of Landlords, has said that landlords have been warning for the past few years that

"the combination of anti-landlord rhetoric along with short-term, ineffective policies are harming investment in private rented housing in Scotland."

Three councils have declared a housing emergency, and the entire housing sector says that there is a housing emergency. Can the cabinet secretary not admit that there is such an emergency?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am not one of the members who come to the chamber to make personal attacks. If Mr Simpson thinks that delivering the financial context that the Government is in constitutes a personal attack, perhaps it is because he feels quite sensitive about the record of his party in the United Kingdom Government.

We will continue, within the budget that we have, to ensure that, as far as we possibly can, we will prioritise—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: If I might interrupt you, cabinet secretary. I confirm to all members that I will chair the meeting in the way that I see fit. I have already asked members to ensure that they treat one another with courtesy and respect, and I will continue to do so where required.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Presiding Officer, I have been shouted down by men on the Conservative benches for many a year. It did not put me off before, and it will not put me off today; I will provide the context that is required on this subject.

We have made funding of more than £14 billion available to councils for 2024-25. Within that, we have committed £35 million for specific action to end homelessness and rough sleeping. We have also taken action on temporary accommodation. That is why work is being done on the acquisitions plan, in which we are investing at least £60 million in this financial year.

We will continue to do all that we can in the current difficult circumstances. If Mr Simpson has any ability to influence the chancellor—which I doubt—I urge him to use it, even at this late stage, in order to help with our action on housing and homelessness. Indeed, other members can help, too, by joining our call for the chancellor to reinstate the Scottish Government capital budget, which will help with housing and homelessness.

The Presiding Officer: I am keen to ensure that members who wish to put a question have the opportunity to do so. I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has confirmed that, over the past 17 years, the Scottish Government has built more affordable homes per capita than the other UK nations. Given that the Tories have cut Scotland's capital allocation by £1,600 million over three years, their council group leader in Edinburgh is keen on homelessness provision, but not in his ward, and, under Michael Gove, London has seen a 76 per cent fall in affordable housing starts this financial year, does she agree that it is the Tories who are gaslighting?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government has led the UK on housing by delivering more than 126,000 affordable homes since 2007, more than 89,000 of which were for social rent. That figure includes almost 24,000 council homes.

We recognise that there is more to do, but it is important to set out to Parliament the facts, the context and what has been delivered. We have taken action in the past and will continue to do so. I appreciate that Shelter Scotland has concerns and would like us to go further; we will continue that dialogue with the organisation, and with Crisis and others.

However, I point to some of the other factors that impact on homelessness, such as, for example, the local housing allowance, which has been frozen for three years by the UK Government. A recent report from Crisis said that that was one of the main drivers in homelessness last year.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I am glad that the cabinet secretary has faith in the third sector, which has pointed out the issue. She is right to say that this country is built on a strong human rights record. What would she say, therefore, to the 9,860 children who are in temporary accommodation? If we consider the foundation stones of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we see that that situation will cause them problems later in life. What will she say to those children about when they are going to escape temporary accommodation and have certainty in their housing?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The increase in homelessness applications and in the number of households, especially with children, in temporary accommodation is concerning; the member is absolutely right about that. That is exactly why we have been taking action on the recommendations from the temporary accommodation task and finish group.

I mentioned previously the work that we have been doing in investing at least £60 million in the current financial year in an acquisitions programme. Through that, we have provided targeted funding for the local authorities with the largest percentage increases in households in temporary accommodation.

Nonetheless, the member is quite right to point out that there is more work to do on that. The Government will continue to do exactly that next year.

Further Education (Industrial Action)

3. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to resolve

industrial action in the further education sector. (S6T-01838)

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans meets the campus unions biannually and meets regularly with representatives of the sector in a number of forums. As he committed to doing, in the chamber just last week, he will continue to engage with both management and unions, as and when appropriate, as they continue to work together to reach a settlement that is both fair and affordable.

The minister continues to make clear his expectation that college management and unions should work together to do everything that they can do to reach a settlement that is both fair and affordable.

Katy Clark: Does the minister believe that it is acceptable that further education workers in Scotland are being asked to take, as their first pay rise for three years, a below-inflation pay rise, or face compulsory redundancy?

Natalie Don: The fair work first criteria set out a range of fair work practices, including

"payment of ... the real Living Wage ... no inappropriate use of zero hours contracts";

the offering of

"flexible and family friendly working practices";

and

"investment in workforce development".

We expect the fair work first criteria to be upheld.

With regard to the specific issue that Katy Clark has raised, the matter is for colleges, and ministers have no direct role in it. In circumstances in which deductions are to be made, colleges must ensure that employees are reminded in advance of their contractual obligations, and that they are advised as to where taking action short of a strike is considered to be a breach of contract.

Katy Clark: I would be grateful if the minister could answer the question as to whether the threat of compulsory redundancy is acceptable. Many colleges still do not recognise trade unions and, as she indicated, some are deducting 100 per cent pay for action short of a strike being taken. Will she use this opportunity to remind colleges of their responsibility under the fair work convention that she has spoken about?

Natalie Don: As I already mentioned, operational decisions on resourcing and staffing matters are for individual institutions, and ministers have no direct role in those decisions.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education wrote to college principals last year to reiterate the

importance that the Scottish Government places on use of fair work practices in the college sector. He made it clear that he expects that to include full consultation of staff and trade unions, and that colleges should create the time and space to exhaust all options for redeployment.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): There are clearly financial challenges in further education, and across the entire Scottish budget. However, has the minister heard any calls from Tory and Labour MSPs alike for an increase in public services and an end to austerity? I know that I have not.

Natalie Don: I absolutely agree that more than a decade of Westminster austerity has had a simply devastating impact on the public finances. *[Interruption.]* I hear the groans from Conservative members, but that is absolutely correct. The fact that austerity is now supported by Labour and the Tories only confirms that the Westminster parties are not working for Scotland.

Despite the United Kingdom Government's autumn statement delivering a worst-case scenario for Scotland's finances, we will continue to invest in key services and priorities. The 2024-25 budget allocates nearly £2 billion to colleges and universities, thereby supporting delivery of high-quality education, training and research.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Ferguson Marine

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Màiri McAllan on Ferguson Marine. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy (Màiri McAllan): Today's statement provides me, as Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy, with an early opportunity to restate and to reaffirm the Scottish Government's commitment to ensure that Ferguson Marine delivers two lifeline ferries—the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa—so that we bring next-generation technology to the CalMac Ferries fleet and provide reliable, high-quality services to our island communities.

It also provides an opportunity, following meetings that I have held with the chair and chief executive, and with the unions that represent the skilled and dedicated workforce at Ferguson Marine, to report the latest information on costs and delivery dates that the business has provided, and to provide an update on the work that is taking place to ensure a long-term future for the yard.

On Monday 26 February, the chief executive officer, David Tydeman, provided his regular progress update to the conveners of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and the Public Audit Committee. That process reflects the statutory relationship between the chief executive and Parliament. The relationship is one in which the chief executive is responsible for the delivery of the programme to plan and to budget, and is personally responsible for spending, as part of the statutory accountable officer role that is set out in the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000.

The next day, Tuesday 27 February, the chief executive, along with the chair, Andrew Miller, and non-executive director Simon Cunningham, appeared at the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, where they were questioned for 90 minutes on the updates that the chief executive had provided. That was helpful and instructive, because the chair and the board of directors are appointed by ministers to provide strategic direction and hold the executive team, including the chief executive, to account for their performance. The yard has been grappling with complex and varied legacy issues, some of which go back many years, and the board is well placed to understand those pressures and consider

actions that it believes to be in the best interests of the yard.

I am grateful to members of the committee for the degree of scrutiny that they were able to provide on a range of issues, including the latest cost projections, the approvals that were received from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the board's work to develop a business case for future investment in the shipyard.

In his letter, the chief executive stated that the cost to complete Glen Sannox will not exceed £149.1 million since the point of public ownership. He also reported that the cost to complete vessel 802—or Glen Rosa, as it will be known—will not exceed £150 million since the point of public ownership, and he signalled that he remains hopeful that it can be completed below that maximum figure because the yard is learning from the way that it has resolved the many legacy issues around the first vessel that were inherited.

At committee, the chair reported that the board had scrutinised the cost forecasts, and Simon Cunningham described how it now had much greater visibility of the critical path to handover and the risks to the programme. They said that the board had much greater confidence in the accuracy of the forecasts, in part because Glen Sannox was nearing handover, but also, in respect of vessel 802, because of the diligence that they had carried out, and because management had negotiated fixed-price contracts from subcontractors to replace the more costly time-and-materials contracts that it had inherited on the build of Glen Sannox.

Although I am encouraged by the greater degree of confidence that the board is showing, and although I recognise and agree with the point of my predecessor Neil Gray in his update to Parliament—namely, that inflationary and other significant pressures, such as around supply chains and design gaps, impact on the cost of completion—the level of those increases remains deeply disappointing. I share the frustration that will be felt by everyone across the Parliament and, indeed, in our country.

I met the chair and the chief executive last week, and I impressed upon them the need to understand that frustration and to take whatever action is appropriate to avoid further increases in costs. I will ensure that my officials continue to meet every week the senior management at Ferguson's and its delivery partners, including Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and CalMac, to ensure that they are living up to that requirement.

Separately, we have commenced due diligence on the latest projections, using external advisers to ensure that they are accurate and justifiable. I will update the Net Zero, Energy and Transport

Committee and the Public Audit Committee once that work is complete. That will be a short exercise, but one that is necessary to ensure that we continue to spend in the best interests of our island communities, taking into account the wider economic benefits that delivery of the vessels will ultimately provide to the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services routes.

On build progress, the chief executive indicated in his update that the Glen Sannox has proved to be very reliable during its sea trials. When running at full power, she has been smooth and quiet and has performed very well. The chief executive reported that the recent delay in installing the liquefied natural gas system was due to a delay in securing a contractor in a globally expanding market. He also outlined that, although handover with a single fuel was possible, the end user—CalMac—had been very clear that it expected a dual-fuel vessel on commissioning and that that was therefore what the shipyard was instructed to deliver. He further set out to the committee that he considered that the redesign of stairwells to certain areas of the ship to meet Maritime and Coastguard Agency requirements—which, I should add, it is absolutely right to require—had increased the cost by over £1 million. Taking those and other factors into account, the chief executive reported that the Glen Sannox would be handed over to CMAL at the end of May this year and that the handover date for 802 would move to September 2025.

The next milestone in the delivery of the Glen Sannox will be when she moves under her own power again to the dry dock at Inchgreen in early April. There, a number of hull-cleaning and maintenance tasks will be carried out, which will conclude in her return to sea for a second set of sea trials later in the month.

Weather and tide permitting, plans are under way to launch 802 on 9 April. The delay from the original planned date of 12 March was in part due to the need to have more work carried out on the Glen Sannox at the Port Glasgow site. However, the launch of 802 is an important milestone for the delivery of the vessel, and we look forward to engaging with the yard on the details of that.

The vessel will be named formally at a later date. That is consistent with the plans for the vessels that are being built in Turkey, the first of which is due to be launched in a similar manner this month. That will mean that we are on track to deliver six new vessels by 2026 for our island communities, to continue to support their economic resilience.

I will continue to impress upon Ferguson Marine the impact that delays are having on island communities and the need to do everything possible to bring two high-quality ferries into

service. Our due diligence on the latest cost projections will also test the delivery dates provided by the yard, but it is clear to me that completing those vessels at Ferguson Marine still presents the fastest possible route to getting vital new lifeline services, as well as providing wider economic benefits to the Inverclyde area.

I will move on to the future of the yard. From the very start, we have sought to ensure that the yard has a sustainable future, whether that be in the public sector or, as we have always said, by returning the yard to the private sector if and when the time is right to do so.

Members will recall that, last November, the former cabinet secretary confirmed that we were unable to support an initial business plan and associated request for capital investment that Ferguson Marine submitted, and that we had asked the board to revisit the proposal and develop a revised plan. I hope that that is successful and that the board will be able to provide a robust case for investment that is deliverable, makes economic sense and, of course, meets our legal requirements on subsidy control. The Scottish Government has provided funding to enable the yard to draw on external advisers to support that process, and I understand that extra resource is being provided at Ferguson Marine board level to steer that work. I welcome that commitment from the board and look forward to considering the new business plan, which we expect to receive by the end of this month.

I recognise that, as the existing contracts near completion, these are unsettling times for the workforce. I have been impressed by the passion and commitment that the trade unions have shown in making the case for future investment, and I was pleased to have the chance to hear directly from union representatives during a meeting in Parliament last week. Their views are vitally important to me, and I took the opportunity to listen and to assure them that ministers will leave no stone unturned when it comes to securing a future for the yard and for shipbuilding on the Clyde.

As a former transport secretary, I am acutely aware of how important the delivery of the Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa is to our Clyde and Hebrides ferry services network and to the island communities that that network supports. I am encouraged by the results of the initial sea trials of the Glen Sannox and am committed to supporting Ferguson Marine, its board and the people who work for it to ensure that both ferries are delivered as soon as possible.

I am also determined to do all that I can to support the shipyard in securing a route to a sustainable future. I have already met trade unions and understand both their frustrations about the

mistakes of the past and their determination to find a brighter future for their current members and for future generations of workers in Inverclyde.

I do not underestimate the challenges involved, but the yard is incredibly significant to the local, regional and national economies and we are committed to doing all that we can to ensure that it remains so.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to put a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. It came a bit later than is usual, so I ask her to look into that.

It was a disappointing statement, which said very little—in fact nothing—that is new. Any islanders who are watching will, and not for the first time, have been disappointed. They might have been expecting some news or announcement that would give them some hope or tell them something that they did not already know, but that was not in the statement.

I am pleased that the sea trials of the Glen Sannox have gone well; that is encouraging. I think that we are getting close to the end of what has been a scandal. That is good. The islanders will—eventually—get their new ferries, which is to be applauded.

The cabinet secretary says that the Government will carry out due diligence on the costs and the timescale, which seems to suggest that she does not entirely trust what she is being told. Who will carry out that due diligence and how much is it going to cost? The cabinet secretary rightly said that the Government turned down a previous request for an extra £25 million that would have given the yard a new plating line. As we look to the future of the yard, will she commit to any extra investment? What will the yard look like? How can it secure a route to the sustainable future that she says she wants?

Màiri McAllan: I note Graham Simpson's point about the time at which the statement reached him.

Regarding the statement's content, I respectfully note that Opposition parties from across the chamber asked for it, which is why I have given that update today, very soon after taking over my new portfolio. I am happy to do so, because it is important to the Government. The update acknowledged the chief executive's updates on costs and timing, registered my disappointment

with the scale of the change in the position and assured Parliament that due diligence will take place.

Regarding that due diligence, I do not think that Graham Simpson would wish to cast any doubt on the importance of the Government doing that, because it is what prudent public spending and consideration of what is put in front of us is about. That due diligence is under way, and we are doing it supported by independent advisers. Mr Simpson has asked for a timescale. I do not have one while the work is on-going, but I can say that it will be shorter than the former period of due diligence, due to improvements in internal board scrutiny, since then.

In relation to the future, I am committed to supporting the board and Ferguson Marine in their production of an updated business plan, and to considering it on receipt of it.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for an early copy of her statement.

There can be no doubt that there is a lot of blame to go round when it comes to delivery of the new ferries, but it is absolutely clear that the workforce at Ferguson Marine is blameless.

The cabinet secretary's statement fails to give assurances on the yard and its workforce. We need to know that there will be capital investment in the yard. When I visited the yard almost a year ago, the workforce and the management were clear that such investment was needed in order to secure its future.

Does the cabinet secretary therefore accept that making a decision on the matter is urgent? To what strategy is the Government working? What are the timescales for decisions being made? Will the decision on investment be made before the decisions are made on the small vessels replacement programme?

Finally, will the Government work with all parties in the chamber to ensure that we secure a future for shipbuilding in Port Glasgow?

Màiri McAllan: I agree entirely with the sentiment that Alex Rowley expressed about the importance of the workers at Ferguson Marine. The Government is focused on completing the vessels and on the future of the yard, and the workers are central to that.

It is worth stating that the Ferguson Marine workforce has been at the heart of the Government's actions in respect of the yard to date, and will continue to be at the heart of what we take forward in the future. That is partly why I was so keen to meet and to hear directly from GMB members' representatives last week. Their views have been very instructive to me, and I have

made the commitment to them that I would like to visit the yard as soon as I can.

I share Alex Rowley's view about the urgency of understanding future plans as the 801 and 802 contracts come to a close. That is why the Government is supporting the development of the updated business case. I will give very close consideration to it when it is with me, which I expect will be at the end of March.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the delivery of the Glen Sannox in late spring, but it is deeply disappointing that the £41 million small vessels replacement programme is being reprofiled—that is, delayed. Ferguson's has previously delivered high-quality hybrid small vessels on time and on budget—including the MV Catriona, which sails out of Lochranza—and the yard is crying out for orders. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it makes sense to prioritise ordering small ferries to show the market that Ferguson Marine has successfully turned a corner while delivering much-needed new vessels for our island communities?

Màiri McAllan: I understand Kenny Gibson's close interest in the matter. The small vessels replacement programme has not been "delayed", and my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Transport is actively overseeing it.

As for the position as it relates to my economy portfolio, direct award is, under procurement rules, possible only in strictly limited circumstances. Breaching those rules is not an option in and of itself, and could lead to legal challenges, costs and further delay. We will consider, case by case, future contracts for vessels from public agencies, and whether any might be open to direct award in those strictly limited circumstances.

However, it is worth restating that the very best way for Ferguson Marine to be supported into future public or private contracts is to increase its competitiveness. That is exactly what is on-going with regard to the business case that I mentioned.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I am extremely concerned about the vagueness in relation to the LNG system and whether that might cause further delays to the launch of the Glen Sannox. Islanders on Arran would rather have a vessel that runs solely on diesel than have no vessel running at all.

Is the Government digging in on the original wording of the contract, or is there any flexibility in respect of launching the ship sooner rather than later? Why is the Scottish Government, which owns the yard, not committing today to the small vessels replacement programme project being in Inverclyde, or is it more likely that Turkey will once again be the main benefactor of Scottish ferry-building contracts?

Màiri McAllan: I will first address the final point, on the small vessels replacement programme. As I stated in response to Kenny Gibson's question, a direct award is legal only in strictly limited circumstances under public procurement rules.

On LNG, that is an operational matter for the chief executive. However, the issue was discussed in some depth at last week's meeting of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. It is estimated that the LNG commissioning programme for the dual-fuel engines will be completed by the end of May.

When he was in front of the committee, the chief executive explained that the main cause of delay was the lack of available specialist contractors. I understand that there has been a global expansion in the use of LNG, so there has been competition for specialist contractors to carry out the work. However, David Tydeman was able to confirm to the committee that the issue has now been resolved with the appointment of a contractor that is based in the United Kingdom, and that there should be no further impact on building of the Glen Sannox.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has already met shop stewards Alex Logan and John McMunagle. I cannot stress enough how pivotal those shop stewards are to the future of Ferguson Marine.

I come back to the matter of a direct award, if that were to happen. Progress has certainly been slow. As things stand, the future of the yard relies on a direct award of the small vessels replacement programme being made to Ferguson Marine. That might not be welcomed by some people but, for the future of the yard and of shipbuilding in Port Glasgow, I ask the cabinet secretary to please make a direct award to Ferguson Marine.

Màiri McAllan: I note Stuart McMillan's direct plea on behalf of his constituents, and I admire his advocacy on their behalf.

In the generality, Ferguson Marine is absolutely right to be turning its mind to winning its next contracts. Ultimately, decisions on what contracts to pursue are operational matters for Ferguson Marine. However, for the Government's part, I am very happy to say that we will do all that we can, as the shareholder, to ensure that the business has a sustainable order book and a future.

We are currently considering the outline business case for the small vessels replacement programme. An update on the procurement strategy will be provided in due course, once a decision on investment has been made. I understand the potential opportunity that the small vessels replacement programme offers to Ferguson Marine, but I must restate once again

that a direct award is legal only in strictly limited circumstances.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I understand that the cabinet secretary has said that she needs to look at the detail of a new business case for investment in the yard that will support jobs in the Inverclyde area, which has lost 1,000 jobs in the past 12 months. I will follow on from what Graham Simpson asked. Does the cabinet secretary accept the glaringly obvious point that has been made by the GMB—this has cross-party support—that Government investment in the yard is now essential to its winning future work, to improving efficiencies and to securing a positive future for the yard? If that is not the Government's plan, is there an alternative plan? If so, what is it?

Màiri McAllan: The Government could not be accused of not having invested in Ferguson Marine.

Neil Bibby's question is about the link between our investment and investment case, and Ferguson Marine's ability to win future contracts. In June, Ferguson Marine provided the Scottish Government with a request for capital investment of about £25 million. It presented that as part of its making the shipyard more competitive. However, our due diligence concluded that the initial business case did not meet the vital commercial market operator test, which is a key legal requirement if we are to demonstrate compliance with subsidy control rules. That is why we are actively supporting the board in recasting its business case and investment plan, and will give close consideration to them when we receive them at the end of the month.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): In relation to the future of the yard, the cabinet secretary will recognise that it operates in a hugely competitive global commercial environment. Will the cabinet secretary tell us what work the Scottish Government has done to move things forward by seeking out potential industrial partners that could bring investment, technology and expertise in order to secure a long-term future for the yard?

Màiri McAllan: I am very happy to do so, because what the member describes is part of the considerations about the future of Ferguson Marine. The board has recently been strengthened with additional commercial and shipbuilding expertise, and the yard is supported by a supply chain that brings new technology and expertise into the yard. As I have said a number of times, the case for further Government investment will be covered in the business plan that the board is currently preparing, which I hope to receive at the end of the month.

In the meantime, it is worth stating again that decisions on what contracts to pursue are for

Ferguson Marine, but the Scottish Government stands behind it in supporting it to have the most prosperous future possible.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Listening to the cabinet secretary, you would think that the debacle had nothing to do with the Scottish National Party Government, but we should remember that the project is three times over budget and six years late, that hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been spent, that the workforce has been utterly humiliated, and that islanders have been left stranded because of ministerial meddling from the beginning. Can the cabinet secretary tell me why no minister has lost their job as a result of this debacle?

Màiri McAllan: I am far more interested in the practical matters around the delivery of vessels 801 and 802 and the future of the yard than I am in politicking, or whatever it was that Willie Rennie was pursuing there.

It is completely inaccurate for him to describe the saving of 300-plus jobs in the last commercial shipyard on the Clyde as humiliating for the workers involved. Our objectives have always been delivering the lifeline vessels, supporting the highly skilled and dedicated workforce, and securing a sustainable future for the yard. That is what I am focused on, not politics.

The Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Dunbar—*[Laughter.]* Members, I regard that as neither courteous nor respectful when I am trying to speak in the chamber.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): It is right that we scrutinise the progress of work at the yard. I was delighted to visit it a few weeks ago to see at first hand the progress that is being made. What should unite us all is a determination to secure a future for Scotland's commercial shipbuilding industry. Can the cabinet secretary provide any further information about the steps that are being taken to ensure that the yard is competitive and in shape to compete for future contracts?

Màiri McAllan: I know that Jackie Dunbar found her visit to the Ferguson Marine yard very helpful and instructive. Some of the workers she was able to meet left an impression on her. I share her determination to secure the future of the yard and agree on the importance of commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde.

The work that I have been describing and that we are supporting Ferguson Marine with, in producing the updated business case and investment plan, is among the key ways that we can ensure a competitive future and help the yard to be in a position to competitively bid for future contracts.

I give my assurance that, with my team, I will give very close consideration to the content of that business case when I receive it.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her statement. As a Highlands and Islands MSP who represents many of Scotland's island communities, I know that the performance and future of our ferries and ports are a source of deep frustration to those communities. Equally, I recognise what the cabinet secretary said about the anxieties that are felt by the workforce and trade unions at Ferguson Marine. I am interested in understanding what further reassurance the cabinet secretary can offer to the workforce that its views are heard and that its future is a priority.

Màiri McAllan: I mentioned in my statement that I was able to meet Ferguson Marine GMB union shop stewards John McMunagle and Alex Logan. My predecessor, Neil Gray, met them several times to hear their views at first hand. I have also undertaken to visit them at the yard as soon as I am able to. When we met very early on in my tenure in this position, last week, I gave them the assurance that their views and the views of those they represent will be very important to me and to the Government as we move into a critical period for the future of the yard. As I said in answer to a previous question, the workforce has been central to all actions that the Government has taken in respect of Ferguson Marine and will very much continue to be so.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As colleagues have said, the statement says nothing. It reveals nothing that is not already publicly known and certainly does not give any clarity to islanders, who should be at the heart of the Scottish Government's considerations on the matter but seem to have been forgotten by most of the Scottish National Party contributions. It also gives no clarity on when Scotland's ageing ferries fleet—whether operated by CalMac, NorthLink or the councils—will be replaced, what it will cost and what role Ferguson's will play in that. When will my island constituents get the new boats that they desperately need?

Màiri McAllan: I point out to Jamie Halcro Johnston that the statement was called for. I am happy to come to the chamber and update members on the progress on the issue as often as they call for it. The fact that there has been so much activity by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, which I credit with the scrutiny that it has undertaken, indicates that a great deal of work is going on across the Parliament on the matter.

I point Jamie Halcro Johnston to the update in my statement that we are on track to deliver six new major vessels to serve Scotland's ferry

network by 2026. I also point out to him how challenged we are in that regard by the actions of his party's Government, which is cutting our capital budget by up to 10 per cent over the coming years. He should be prepared to explain to his constituents why that is the case and why he has not been prepared to stand up to the Tories on it.

For our part, we will continue to focus on the delivery of those six vessels. That will be supported by the work that my colleague Fiona Hyslop is taking forward in the islands connectivity plan.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

The cabinet secretary quoted the chief executive of Ferguson's as saying that the sea trials of the Glen Sannox had been successful. Can she go into any more detail about those trials?

Màiri McAllan: The chief executive gave a full account of that matter when he was in front of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee last week. He described how the vessel was tried at different speeds, how it was a smooth journey and how various vibrations, to which he could speak—I am not as technically able to do so—meant that it was very successful. I also described in my statement what the next stages are for the trials of the Glen Sannox before she enters into service, in the coming year.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The shipbuilding financing guarantee programme of the Turkish national investment bank, Türk Eximbank, can provide direct loans and letters of guarantee to Turkish shipbuilding firms so that they may obtain competitive pre-financing of up to 85 per cent of the contract price. Will the cabinet secretary introduce a similarly competitive shipbuilding financing guarantee programme in Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: That was an utterly breathless contribution from Paul Sweeney. I did not catch most of the detail of it. If he wants to write to me with it, I will be glad to look into the matter and get back to him.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): From recent written questions that I have lodged, we know that each of the two new vessels will require two tankers of LNG fuel each week. Each tanker will have a 962-mile round trip from Kent to Troon. Has an audit been carried out to assess whether operating the vessels on dual fuel is better or worse for the environment?

Màiri McAllan: The use of dual fuel in ferries is widely regarded as being positive for the environment, not least as part of the reduction of emissions of various pollutants that are associated with single-fuel vessels. Douglas Lumsden needs only to look at the expansion of that market

throughout the world and the research on the environmental outputs of dual fuel to see for himself that it is the better of the two to pursue.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. I will allow a moment or two for front benches to organise themselves.

Scotland's Place in the World

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-12372, in the name of Angus Robertson, on Scotland's place in the world. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:59

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): This debate follows yesterday's publication of the latest paper in the Scottish Government's "Building a New Scotland" series, "An independent Scotland's place in the world", which sets out the values, principles and practical action that the Government believes should guide our international relations as an independent country.

Tomorrow, members in the House of Commons debating chamber will hear why independence for Scotland is essential and urgent. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out tax and spending plans within the context of a failing United Kingdom economy that is characterised by low growth, low productivity, low investment, poor living standards and high inequality.

Crucially, the chancellor is likely to ignore the economic calamity of a Brexit that has already wiped billions of pounds from the Scottish economy, compared with what we would have had with European Union membership. Brexit has worsened the cost of living crisis and left the United Kingdom looking increasingly isolated on the world stage.

Tragically and disastrously, the Labour Party is now fully signed up to Brexit, which means that it is fully signed up to the economic damage of leaving the EU, no matter the cost to Scotland. Although the Labour Party likes to talk about economic growth as its top priority, that is simply incompatible with its embracing of a hard Brexit that will see Scotland excluded not just from the EU, but from the huge European single market. That is the context for the paper that was published yesterday and for today's motion.

When the Conservatives and Labour turned their backs on our fellow Europeans, they instead proposed a vision of what they call "global Britain", which is apparently a buccaneering free-trading nation that has been released from what they saw as the shackles of the European Union. That vision has been a total economic and a diplomatic failure. One foreign affairs commentator described the so-called global Britain strategy as

"So sad. This politically illiterate, unilateralist international posturing is unreal. It's un-realist. It's humiliating for Britain, and it's bound to fail."

The Scottish Government, by contrast, is internationalist to its core. It is committed to multilateral organisations and to the principle of co-operation as we seek to tackle the great global challenges that affect us all.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): If this is such an important series of reports and if this is such a serious debate, why have only 10 of the cabinet secretary's parliamentary colleagues turned up for it?

Angus Robertson: I look forward to hearing the member's speech; I hope that he has something positive to contribute. I will make progress, Presiding Officer.

People in the rest of the UK will, of course, always be Scotland's closest friends. As an independent country, there will be many issues on which we will agree with the rest of the UK. There is no difference, for example, between the position of the UK Government and the Scottish Government on Russia's barbaric and illegal invasion of Ukraine. However, we take different positions on the need for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and on perhaps the most fundamental of foreign policy issues—our relationship with our fellow Europeans. People in Scotland want to go in a very different direction from that which is proposed by all the Westminster parties.

Within the constraints of the powers of the Scottish Parliament, Scotland has a strong record of international engagement, from our bilateral review with Ireland to our work on Arctic connections, as well as our international development programme. There are those across the Westminster parties who would want to see those powers constrained even further and for that work to be stopped. However, Scotland is not defined as a devolved Administration; we are an ancient nation, and my party, the Scottish National Party, and our partners in the Scottish Greens have an internationalist outward-looking vision for our country.

Independence offers Scotland the chance to play a full role internationally and to determine the kind of state that we want to be—one that promotes and protects human rights, acts on our values and principles and builds partnerships with others to address global challenges. Independence would allow Scotland to pursue Scottish interests internationally by focusing on the issues that matter most to people, communities and businesses here, while demonstrating our commitment to shared rules and international standards. As a new state with new powers, an independent Scotland would have the opportunity to make a fresh start and structure its diplomacy,

working relationships and priorities accordingly, while not overlooking the legacy of its past.

Our ambition is to be represented at every level of European Union decision making and able to influence decisions and promote Scotland's interests. With membership of the EU, people here would once again benefit from EU citizenship and the right to study, work and live right across Europe. As part of the world's largest single market, an independent Scotland's businesses would gain access to almost 450 million consumers without the barriers to trade that they face because of Brexit. They would also benefit from the opportunities that come from the EU's ability to secure advantageous trade arrangements.

Today, though, we also look beyond Europe to the wider world. "An independent Scotland's place in the world" sets out how an independent Scotland would take its place in the international community alongside 193 other United Nations member states, building relationships in pursuit of our international priorities.

The protection of the nation and its people is a first duty of every Government, and that would be no different in an independent Scotland. The Scottish Government proposes that an independent Scotland would apply to join NATO and would seek discussions with NATO leaders at the earliest opportunity following a vote for independence. As with the EU and the UN, there is much that we can offer as a NATO member. Scotland occupies a position of strategic importance, close to the high north and Arctic and facing out to the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea. An independent Scotland would therefore be a key strategic partner in the collective defence of northern Europe.

We would commit to defence spending of 2 per cent of gross domestic product and would make democratic accountability a cornerstone of defence policy, so that an independent Scotland would participate in overseas military operations only if they were lawful, approved by Scottish ministers and authorised by the Parliament.

The Scottish Government is also clear that nuclear weapons would be removed from Scotland in the quickest and safest way possible after independence. That is entirely consistent with NATO membership, as 23 of the 31 current members neither possess nor host nuclear weapons.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): My party and the cabinet secretary's party have different positions on NATO—as I will outline in my speech—but we absolutely agree on the moral obscenity of nuclear weapons. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the Scottish Government

still supports the objectives of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons?

Angus Robertson: Yes, absolutely. The Scottish Government supports the objectives of the international Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. As the paper makes clear, the removal of nuclear weapons from Scotland is a key priority, with a commitment to constitutional prohibition, which would mean that Scotland would be a non-nuclear-hosting NATO member state, just like our neighbours Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

As well as defence co-operation through NATO, the Scottish Government would participate fully in the EU's common security and defence policy. In doing so, an independent Scotland would join the family of nations that are committed to the international rules-based system, playing an important role in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention and the strengthening of international security.

The third pillar of an independent Scotland's defence and security policy would be our relationships with our nearest neighbours in the UK and Ireland. An independent Scotland would build on our strong relationships with the other nations and Governments across these isles to assure mutual safety.

All of that would be considered in a comprehensive expert-led defence and security review that the Government would commission following a vote for independence. That would ensure that, by independence day, Scotland had the appropriate capabilities to protect and defend its borders, citizens, democracy and economic interests.

We would work with like-minded partners to advance an ambitious and progressive agenda, guided by our interests and values, including those that we share with the European Union, of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. In line with those values, the Government would commit to meeting the UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of gross national income on official development assistance, thereby helping to contribute to a more stable world. Multilateral connections would be an important way for an independent Scotland to achieve impact, through the United Nations, the World Bank and, of course, the European Union.

Even with the limited powers that we currently have, Scotland has managed to develop a reputation for our commitment to addressing the climate emergency. Tackling climate change and biodiversity loss would continue to be a top priority, as would focusing on fair and just climate action towards net zero greenhouse gas

emissions and a more sustainable future. That would include building on our already deep and long-standing connection with Commonwealth countries from Canada to Malawi, and our growing connections with many others, including Rwanda and Pakistan.

Following independence, Scotland would actively participate in the Commonwealth as a consensus-based multilateral forum that gives equal weight to countries' voices, no matter their size. To achieve that level and breadth of international engagement, an independent Scotland would have a dedicated international network, deploying the full range of diplomatic functions to promote and protect Scottish interests.

A further benefit of EU membership is that citizens of an independent Scotland who are in need of emergency assistance would be able to access the consular services of more than 2,100 EU member state missions around the world, which is significantly more than the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office currently has.

Independence would mean a new and better relationship with our friends in the rest of the United Kingdom—one in which we work together as equals to co-operate on shared challenges, with a renewed Scottish democracy being a force for good across these islands.

Today's debate is about issues that are central to Scotland's future. Indeed, it speaks to two very different futures—being inside the EU or outside it; being a part of the huge European single market or living with a hard Brexit; having a voice for Scotland as a member of the international community of nations or being subject to attempts to silence that voice; having a nuclear-free Scotland or spending billions of pounds on Trident; and being in a partnership of equals with our friends in the rest of the United Kingdom or in a Westminster system that is uninterested in Scotland's concerns.

It was some decades ago that the former Presiding Officer and president of the Scottish National Party said:

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on”.

That is more relevant now than it has ever been. Scotland has the opportunity to take its place in the international fora and communities of nations—in the United Nations, in the European Union, in NATO—while working with our neighbours and allies on these islands.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that Scotland should be able to take its place in the world as a sovereign nation that acts based on its values and principles, working towards

peace, sustainability and security as a good global citizen, and in the interests of its people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alexander Stewart to speak to and move amendment S6M-12372.1. You have around nine minutes, Mr Stewart.

15:11

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, although it is disappointing that the Government has chosen to waste parliamentary time by debating today's farcical motion.

This is not the first time that that has happened this year. Only two weeks ago, the Parliament was debating hypothetical social security powers in a hypothetical independent Scotland. Anyone viewing today's proceedings could be forgiven for thinking that Scottish Parliament TV has started showing repeats.

In the light of the motion that has been lodged today—

Ross Greer: Will the member give way?

Alexander Stewart: I will take some time before I take an intervention; I might take one later.

My amendment calls for the Government to put a stop to the continuous grandstanding based on constitutional grievances, which is where we have been and where we are again today. My amendment calls for the Government to stop engineering a farcical politics based on non-existent powers in a non-existent future. It calls on the Scottish Government instead to focus on the powers that it already has—the powers to fix Scotland's national health service and to restore our once world-leading education system. Many people in Scotland wish to see those things prioritised and do not wish to see continuing debates of this nature.

However, all too often, it appears that those are not the interests of the individuals with the power. We need only to take a look at the motion for evidence of that. In it, the Government attempts to speak about the “interests of” the Scottish people. It is a shame that the Government appears to have no idea what those interests really are. I would hazard a guess that few people are concerned about Scottish independence at this time, and that many people are concerned about our schools and how they are performing. When it comes to Scotland's schools, it is hardly surprising that the SNP would rather talk about its constitutional issues and wish lists than deal with the issues that directly affect people.

For example, it is opportunistic for the SNP to talk about constitutional issues; it is doing so

because it does not want to talk about the record low programme for international student assessment—PISA—scores, the continued violence against teachers in our classrooms or the continued failure to close the attainment gap between Scotland's richest and poorest pupils. Those are all situations and circumstances that we should be discussing in Parliament. We should be focusing on those things, rather than on ideas about the possibilities of things that could happen in the future, when the reality is that people across this country do not wish to see that.

Even on today's subject, "Scotland's place in the world", the SNP is not interested in having an honest debate. International relations is very much a matter reserved to the United Kingdom Government, and the Scottish Government knows that. Scotland's place in the world is best served by working constructively within that framework, rather than continually wishing that that framework did not exist.

The UK is the fifth largest contributor of foreign aid in the world and it was a founding member of the United Nations. It can truly be proud of its reputation on the world stage, because many countries have received and still receive UK support for international development projects. Around the globe, the United Kingdom has done massive work to support projects and is involved in many organisations, which recognise the strength of the United Kingdom. It is just a problem and a shame that the Scottish Government does not.

As part of the UK, Scotland is a key player in one of the most influential countries in the world, both economically and culturally. Seemingly, however, the SNP would rather leave all of that behind. We have just heard the cabinet secretary try to convince us that an independent Scotland would have more influence on the world stage, and not less. That is fantasy politics indeed. The truth is that maximising Scotland's place in the world depends on the SNP working constructively with its counterparts in the United Kingdom.

Angus Robertson: A majority of MSPs wish to see an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, as do a majority of members of Parliament from Scotland at Westminster. What has the UK Government done to deliver on the views of this Parliament or the majority of our parliamentarians?

Alexander Stewart: There are many views and the situation is dire. We have to admit that. I want to see progress on a resolution to things and to see a two-state situation in that part of the world. There are attempts to achieve that. Even today, discussions are taking place in other parts of the middle east to try to create a ceasefire, and I look forward to that happening in the future.

Given the Scottish Government's approach to today's debate, it seems that it is trying to cloud the picture by arguing that Scotland would be better off on its own. However, we know that the financial broad shoulders of the United Kingdom ensure that we have a stable, responsible and properly managed situation. The Scottish Government's idea of taking a constructive approach has involved it releasing yet another taxpayer-funded independence brochure. The publication of "An independent Scotland's place in the world" represents the 11th time in the past two years that the SNP has chosen—scandalously—to waste the time of civil servants and the money of Scottish taxpayers, who are paying for this. It is unbelievable that we are putting all that time, effort and money into something that is hypothetical and that the people of Scotland do not wish to see. *[Interruption.]*

The paper talks about the importance of "security, wellbeing and prosperity" despite the fact that none of these things has even the slightest thing to do with Scottish independence. *[Interruption.]* The SNP Government is clearly willing to continue its same old narrative week after week—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Stewart, will you resume your seat for a moment? Mr Hoy and Mr Kerr, I have tried to make it clear to you that I do not want to hear separate conversations going on across the chamber, however much they might be incited. Please afford dignity and show respect to the person who has the floor, who is your colleague Alexander Stewart. You can have the time back for my comments, Mr Stewart.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The SNP Government is clearly willing to continue the same old narrative week after week. Taking such an approach is within its gift—we know that it can do that, and it chooses to do it. However, members on the Conservative benches will continue to call out this Government's abandonment of its duties and the communities that we represent. It is time for the SNP Government to end the grandstanding and the manufactured grievance, and to start using its powers to work towards delivering the Scotland that the public really want, and start delivering on their priorities. That is what our communities and our constituents want.

I move amendment S6M-12372.1, to leave out from "Scotland" to end and insert:

"the Scottish Government should accept the will of the people of Scotland as expressed in the clear and decisive result of the 2014 independence referendum, and calls on the Scottish Government to focus on Scotland's real priorities, such as growing the economy, reducing NHS

waiting times and violent crime, and improving education standards and public services.”

15:19

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): This is a crucial time for global democracy, as 2024 will see nearly 2 billion people around the world go to the polls and give their verdicts on their political leaders in places from India to South Africa and from the European Union to the United States. I also look forward to the people of Scotland and the UK being asked for their verdict in a general election this year, in whatever month it may happen.

This year will undoubtedly present huge opportunities, but it will also present significant challenges for democracy in the world. Last week, Mr Stewart and I joined with the cabinet secretary when he led tributes to the late Alexei Navalny and demanded consequences for Putin and his regime. History tells us that our parties do not always agree on matters that relate to foreign affairs, but it is important in this moment, when we do agree, to stand not only with the people of Ukraine but with those who fight in Russia against oppression and for democracy.

Many places, not just Russia, do not enjoy the free and fair democratic process that we enjoy. That puts into important perspective the occasional claims of democracy denial that are made by some in this place.

This time is also crucial for global security. While we debate, there is a land war on mainland Europe, conflict in the middle east and uncertainty in south-east Asia. In short, this issue and this situation are serious. However, regrettably, I cannot say that the paper or the debate are serious.

The first role of any Government is to protect its people. We agree on that, as we do on the need for greater co-operation on security and defence with the European Union and for better support for our armed forces personnel and our veterans. In order to make that a reality, a country needs to have a comprehensive strategy for defence. Right now, we should be strengthening our defence within the United Kingdom, not walking away from it or putting it at risk. I say with no hesitation that the defence of our people is significantly better served by being part of the UK than it would be by what is proposed.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): How can that be the case, given the recruitment and retention crisis, the possible selling off of one of the aircraft carriers, and the Ajax tanks fiasco? Surely we could do better in an independent Scotland.

Neil Bibby: I am just coming on to why that would be the case. The paper does not propose having any aircraft carriers.

I pay tribute to our excellent armed forces. They are among the best trained anywhere in the world. They are dedicated, brave and a credit to our country. The paper talks about investing in and prioritising “core capabilities”. That is basic stuff but, in the context of the debate, it is particularly important to highlight the UK’s special forces, which are exemplary. The Royal Marines and others have niche capabilities that cannot be replicated from scratch.

So it is with our intelligence services. The paper gives an agency name and a list of core functions—that is fantastic but, frankly, the lack of detail insults the intelligence of the people of Scotland.

The paper points to the example of Estonia as a country smaller than Scotland that has nonetheless developed considerable cybersecurity capacity. However, it fails to mention that Estonia did so over the space of 30 years, under pressure from a growing Russian threat.

I turn to the issue of nuclear capabilities, which seems to confuse the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has stated in its paper that it intends for Scotland to become a nuclear weapons-free zone. That does not sound compatible with NATO being an explicitly nuclear alliance. It appears to confuse not holding nuclear weapons with explicitly forbidding them from its territory.

Angus Robertson: Will Neil Bibby give way?

Neil Bibby: I will in a moment.

It has been reported that the cabinet secretary has said that Scotland would join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, but that is not what he said in answer to Ross Greer, and the paper talks of a “nuclear-free Scotland”. If the Scottish Government wants the paper to be remotely taken seriously, that needs clarification. Is the Scottish Government saying that it would allow NATO nuclear assets into Scottish waters and on to Scottish land? Yes or no? Will the cabinet secretary make clear to the United States, France and the rest of the UK whether their nuclear fleets would be banned from Faslane?

Angus Robertson: What Neil Bibby has outlined is the position of the Governments of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Kingdom of Norway, Sweden and the Republic of Finland. If it is all right for them, why is it impossible for Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Neil Bibby, I will give you the time back.

Neil Bibby: Talk about not answering the question! I asked not about Denmark, Finland or Norway—[*Interruption.*]—but about the Scottish Government’s position on whether it would allow NATO nuclear assets into Scottish waters or on to its lands. I am happy to take another intervention, if the cabinet secretary will answer that point directly. Is he saying that he would forbid NATO nuclear assets from entering Scottish waters or land?

Angus Robertson: As Neil Bibby should know, the right of passage for any vessel—conventional or nuclear, armed or powered—is guaranteed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. That is a statement of fact.

Neil Bibby: The cabinet secretary’s position is extremely confusing. Do we seriously think that NATO would allow a situation whereby a member would prevent it from using nuclear assets on its soil?

Many other key questions remain unanswered. The Scottish Government has said that it will have a review of defence and security and that its outcome will be in place “By independence day”. That is the very definition of saying that it will be all right on the night, and that is simply not good enough. It is not good enough that there are no details in the Scottish Government’s paper on the number of warships, the number of submarines, the number of fighter jets or the number of bombers. It gives us a rough estimate of needing 15,000 armed forces personnel, which it asserts as reasonable because it said that 10 years ago. The paper does not even use the terms “navy”, “army” or “air force”; it talks of “a maritime component”, “a land component” and “an air component”. What is wrong with calling them a navy, an army and air force? For that matter, what is wrong with the British armed forces that we already have?

It was quite apt that, before this debate, we heard a statement on Ferguson Marine. The Government’s paper acknowledges the importance of the defence sector and its 33,000 jobs. Leaving the UK would put those jobs at risk. The Scottish Government has struggled to procure two ferries on time and on budget—are we seriously meant to believe that the Scottish Government is going to procure us a naval fleet to match the Royal Navy?

The Government’s papers are a waste of time and money. They fail everyone in Scotland, no matter their constitutional viewpoint. The vast majority of people in Scotland want the Scottish Government to focus on the cost of living, the NHS and schools. Most people want the Government to give up the spin, to be honest, as Alexander Stewart said, and to do its job, rather than

“attempt to gaslight the Scottish public”,

as Shelter Scotland said this week.

“An independent Scotland’s place in the world” lets down even true believers in independence. It is not a serious piece of work, and it does not even attempt to answer the serious questions. The paper talks of

“cooperation on issues of defence and security”

with the rest of the United Kingdom as

“common sense”.

I agree. The SNP’s plans are the complete opposite of that, and they are not serious.

I move amendment S6M-12372.2, to leave out from “should” to end and insert:

“benefits from the defence, diplomatic and economic connections that it shares with the rest of the UK; highlights the massive amount of capacity building that would be required of an independent Scotland in areas such as defence and procurement, intelligence and cyber security, and diplomatic presence and expertise just to replicate the benefits that Scotland currently enjoys as part of the UK; encourages the Scottish and UK governments to work more closely together to ensure that Brand Scotland’s unique contributions and innovations are better sold across the world, and understands that, in an increasingly turbulent geopolitical situation, the interests and security of Scotland are significantly better served under the umbrella of its existing membership of NATO, as part of the UK, than by severing those connections and seeking to build them from scratch.”

15:27

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Deputy Presiding Officer, you already know that I think very highly of our Minister for Independence. I think that he is destined for many greater things in the world. I did not think that he was so cunning, however. Jamie Hepburn clearly has a new strategy for achieving independence: relentlessly producing paper after paper, week after week, in boring, soporific detail, he is trying to bore us into submission. Just when is it all going to end?

I have not read “An independent Scotland’s place in the world”, just like the other papers, but I can imagine what is in it. It will be full of grand assertion of just how brilliant the SNP and the Greens have been on the international stage. However, let us look at the record. Nicola Sturgeon personally signed a deal with the China Railway No 3 Engineering Group—CR3—during a meeting at Bute house. No due diligence was done. It was discovered that CR3 had been blacklisted by the Norwegian state pension fund for gross corruption, and it was found by Amnesty International to have connections to human rights abuses. The Chinese company SinoFortone was also a signatory to the same £10 billion deal, which was later described as “all bollocks” by the

chief fixer, after it was revealed that it only owned—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rennie, even if you are quoting, as I have made clear before—

Angus Robertson: He should sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Certainly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would expect members to use language that is fitting for the parliamentary chamber; that was not fitting for the parliamentary chamber.

Willie Rennie: I am sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer—and I am sure that my mother would not be impressed with that either—but I was simply quoting what was—

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Will the member give way on that point?

Willie Rennie: Sorry—could I finish this point?

I will withdraw those remarks, and I apologise.

Those comments were made by the chief fixer after it was revealed that the company only owned a pub in the middle of the Cotswolds. In 2022, it was uncovered that at least 49 public bodies in Scotland were still unaware of the Scottish Government's human rights tests that were introduced following those deals. To this day, the Scottish Government continues to use Chinese surveillance cameras, a year after pledging to remove them over security concerns.

Former First Minister Alex Salmond kowtowed to China by refusing to meet the Dalai Lama during his visit to Scotland, having personally assured the Chinese ambassador that it had nothing to do with him. Both he and Nicola Sturgeon thought that making a few speeches in China about Adam Smith would wash away all the human rights concerns.

Alex Salmond thinks that we have also forgotten about the tartan trews. On a trip to China, he got a poor, downtrodden official to buy him a pair because he had left his own at home, and then he tried to claim those tartan trousers on expenses and cover it up from the taxpayer.

But then, Alex Salmond does like strong leaders. Back in 2014, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Crimea, he said that he had a certain admiration for Vladimir Putin, saying that his restoring Russian pride must surely be “a good thing”. Did Humza Yousaf, Nicola Sturgeon or any of the ministers—or any of the members of this Parliament—at that time criticise that outrageous statement? There was not a chance that that

would happen. I suspect that it was a case of “Wheesht for independence”.

Alex Salmond later hosted a long-running TV show on the Kremlin propaganda channel Russia Today. More recently, he agreed to front a new television show on the Turkish channel TRT, which critics described as “a propaganda arm” of the Turkish regime.

Humza Yousaf, the current First Minister—for now—has been flirting with the Turkish regime as well. He courted President Erdogan, inviting him to Scotland despite concerns, including from members of his own party, about civil liberties and human rights abuses.

Let us not forget that, in 2013, as international development minister, Humza Yousaf visited Qatar but failed to raise the case of an imprisoned poet, Mohammed al-Ajami, despite visiting a poetry festival in the region on the very same trip.

The hypocrisy continues. An SNP minister held an unrecorded dinner with disgraced Australian financier Lex Greensill, amid financial deals that have exposed taxpayers to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. The party has dodged questions about whether Government-owned Prestwick airport was once used for US rendition flights, which have been the subject of a 10-year investigation. The SNP wants an independent Scotland to have the protection of the nuclear alliance NATO although it rejects nuclear weapons.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: Not just now.

It is still breaching international minimum standards on the age of criminal responsibility.

Let us not forget the Greens. At their conference in 2015 they passed a motion calling for Hamas to be taken off the international terrorist list. How outrageous that was.

Despite that record, with all the pomposity that it could muster, the Scottish Government pledged to create a peace institute, which would utilise all its incredible talent and credibility to bring peace across the world. That was before it cancelled the whole project because it had run out of money.

Whether it is through the SNP being duped by China, ignoring the jailed poet in Qatar, standing by while Alex Salmond praised Putin and flirting with Erdogan, or the Greens stating that they had backing to remove Hamas from the terrorist list, what a shower they are—parading as saints on the world stage but clueless, bumbling and a little bit more than grubby. They are an embarrassment to Scotland, but none of that will be included in this paper—that is for sure.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:34

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): First, I note that Alexander Stewart, in closing his speech, spoke about the “abandonment of ... communities”, and Neil Bibby touched on the cost of living. I wish that their respective colleagues in Inverclyde Council had, last week, decided to accept the £2.9 million from the Scottish Government, as opposed to Labour councillors voting against it and Conservative councillors sitting on their hands and abstaining. Neil Bibby also mentioned Estonia and talked about how it developed its cybersecurity capacity over 30 years. However, Estonia was, and is, an independent country—it had that decision to make and it chose to do so, in comparison with the situation that it faced beforehand.

I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I welcome the latest paper in the “Building a New Scotland” series, “An independent Scotland’s place in the world”, which shows how Scotland can take its place “on the international stage” as the 194th member of the United Nations. The paper makes clear that the Scottish Government’s vision for our country is to join the global community of nations, and that an independent Scotland in the UN, the EU and NATO will hold the powers that are needed

“to protect its citizens and prosper in the global”

community.

That is especially important at a time when every nation faces immense global challenges, from climate change and energy to the security crisis, as we see day in, day out. Scotland must face those challenges through more, not less, co-operation with our fellow Europeans and with the wider international community. However, Scotland is being prohibited from pursuing such approaches as a result of a Brexit that we did not vote for, and which has seen the UK retreat from positive values-based foreign policy. While Brexit Britain obsesses over “stopping the boats”, an outward-looking, independent Scotland would commit to multilateralism and to the eradication of global poverty.

In fact, despite the limitations of devolution, Scotland already plays its part on the world stage. We have an enviable reputation, with our strong international profile and a large global diaspora. With independence, those global linkages could be maximised for the benefit of Scotland’s people, businesses and institutions. That is particularly important. I have previously spoken with the cabinet secretary regarding potential work to

connect Scotland to our diaspora in Australia and New Zealand.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has helped to cultivate those conversations, and I know that my CPA colleagues on all sides of the chamber will agree that the Scottish Parliament’s engagement with the organisation has been important in helping to boost Scotland’s reputation, and Scotland’s name, in the Commonwealth. I know that the Deputy Presiding Officer was formerly a member of the Scotland branch of the CPA, so he will know exactly how important our branch is and the importance of the role that it plays in the CPA more widely.

With independence, however, we could build on our strengths and take our place alongside our fairer, happier neighbours. It would provide us with the opportunity to develop a genuinely different and progressive approach to overseas aid and development. For example, over the past decade, the UK has squandered the international leadership that it once showed on aid. In contrast, the Scottish Government would use the full powers of independence to meet the UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of gross national income on official development assistance. That would safeguard a sizeable aid budget with which Scotland could make a real positive impact in the world’s poorest countries.

An independent Scotland would also be more ambitious in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, thereby making a positive contribution to the planet and to its people. Scotland could join others, including those in the global south, and use its voice to champion their perspectives on climate justice and advocate for global vaccine equity and debt relief.

Some detractors always like to say that Scotland is too small to have an impact in the world, but small countries already lead effectively on the international stage. Finland, for example, has passed one of the world’s most ambitious climate targets into law, thereby acting as a global exemplar. Independence could therefore unlock even greater influence for Scotland, through working with partners in the EU and beyond to demonstrate how a fair transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions is possible.

Crucially, an independent Scotland would be nuclear free. Immediately on securing a vote for independence, the Scottish Government would pursue negotiations with a view to securing the expeditious removal from Scotland of nuclear weapons, which have, for more than half a century, been based just across the Clyde from my constituency. There is no reason why their removal should be an obstacle to NATO membership—after all, only a minority of NATO

members actually host nuclear weapons. Finland's accession to NATO—

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry—I am in my final minute.

Finland's accession to NATO proves that hosting nuclear weapons is not a precondition for membership. I therefore fully support nuclear weapons being removed from an independent Scotland in the safest and swiftest manner possible. We need to consider how Scotland would protect itself, so I welcome the pillars of defence that are outlined in the latest "Building a New Scotland" paper.

When the UN was established in 1945, it had 51 members. Today, it has 193, and I want us to be number 194. Independence is normal, so why not Scotland?

15:40

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I do not think that I commend Keith Brown often enough or warmly enough, but I commend him today, because although his Westminster colleagues flatly rejected his proposed boycott of the Westminster Parliament, judging by the number of SNP MSPs in the chamber today, they have taken his proposed boycott to heart and are sitting out this entirely irrelevant and fantastical debate.

Keith Brown: I thank Craig Hoy for giving way and for allowing me to live rent free in his head. I joined the SNP 40 years ago because I believed in the withdrawal of Scottish MPs from the Westminster Parliament. Did he believe in Brexit when he joined the Tories?

Craig Hoy: I will tell you what I believed: Alex Salmond said that Scotland would be free by whenever it was, and that was 25 years ago. The SNP has still not achieved that, and it will not achieve it, because it is not Scotland's number 1 priority.

I spent nearly a decade in the Asia-Pacific region. In Hong Kong, one is never far from a Scottish connection. For example, the MacLehose trail is a reminder of the Glaswegian governor who made Chinese an official language of Hong Kong and commissioned the construction of the Hong Kong underground. If one looks to the central skyline, one cannot miss the HSBC logo, which is a modified St Andrew's cross and a reminder of the bank's Scottish roots and its Aberdonian founder, Sir Thomas Sutherland. One can take a walk through the bars off Lockhart Road, which is named after James Stewart Lockhart, the former registrar general and a Scot. An Edinburgh man, John James Cowperthwaite, masterminded Hong

Kong's financial success when he assumed the role of finance secretary in the early 1960s.

Some people may, rightly, take issue with recent events in Hong Kong, and I, for one, am fearful for the territory's future, but it is still not hard to find a Hong Konger who does not speak affectionately about Scotland and the United Kingdom.

What we have recently achieved overseas as a nation has been achieved in large part because we are both Scottish and British, and that is the case not just in Hong Kong. I vividly recall a Singaporean taxi driver hurtling me from Changi airport to the city centre. When I told him that I was from Scotland, he pointed out that I was a Scot and a Brit, before swerving erratically while pretending to play imaginary bagpipes and waving like Her Majesty the Queen. For him, those two images embodied everything that we can achieve by being Scottish and British.

The point of this trip down memory lane is that Scotland punches above its weight in the world precisely because we are part of a globally recognised United Kingdom. I know from first-hand experience from a decade overseas that being Scottish and British opens doors, cements relationships and gets deals done. The SNP remains obsessed with symbols and flags, not with global reputation or global reach.

Stuart McMillan: As the member speaks about memory lane, does he think that Scotland being dragged out of the European Union is a positive or a negative? I say that as someone who studied in Europe. That opportunity is now lost to many people in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back.

Craig Hoy: For a start, there is a replacement scheme, and we would not have had access to the UK vaccine programme in an independent Scotland. That meant that we could open up quicker than our international competitors. Furthermore, we are now involved in entering the trans-Pacific partnership, so that we can open up the whole of the region that I am talking about to Scottish companies that want to export to those markets.

In effect, the SNP is saying that Scotland is closed for business. The dangerous truth of the matter is that, in an independent Scotland, we would not be wrapping ourselves in the blue and white of the saltire with which the party is obsessed. Instead, as the paper yesterday showed, we would be hoisting a white flag above Scotland and yielding our defence and energy security to despots such as Vladimir Putin.

Rather than be an intrinsic part and parcel of a NATO nuclear nation, the cabinet secretary would

hope for a free pass to shelter under the nuclear umbrella of our nearest neighbour—the United Kingdom.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time.

At the same time, the Scottish Government would destroy our oil and gas sectors and dismantle our nuclear energy industry, which would make us yet more dependent on despots such as Putin.

A person does not need to be a foreign affairs or defence analyst, or a cold war warrior, to realise that the paper is not a serious one. That is because this is not a serious Government. I say genuinely to Angus Robertson that I came into Parliament with a grudging respect for him. However, he is no Henry Kissinger, and the paper suggests that he fails to grasp the intricacies of global diplomacy and international relations.

Whether we are talking about the fake foreign embassies or the collapse of our global education rank, the SNP Government is diminishing our place in the world. This debate and this time could have been used to good effect to calculate how we can grow our economy, reduce waiting times, end violent crime, and improve education standards and public services.

But, no. Yesterday's paper reveals everything about the SNP Government. It is desperate to try to reactivate an increasingly disenchanted core SNP voter base. It is, frankly, ludicrous. There would be a new set of Scottish spies—the "Aye spies"—and a Scottish security and intelligence agency to replace MI5, MI6, GCHQ and Defence Intelligence. The paper says that that

"would support Scotland's role as a good global citizen".

It adds:

"As in all other aspects of an independent Scotland, national security would be delivered in line with Scotland's values".

I would like the cabinet secretary to explain to me whether anyone actually knows what that means in terms of international security.

A person does not have to be John le Carré to determine that the SNP Government is making it up as it goes along. The fantasy paper and this fantasy debate are just the latest attempt to divert attention from the SNP's appalling record in office, and to distract from the collapse in its support around Scotland.

Winnie Ewing once affectionately said:

"Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on."

I think that most people would agree that the cry now, sadly, is: "Stop the SNP because Scotland

now, actually, wants to get on." However, Scotland will not make progress or "get on" either at home or abroad as long as this independence-obsessed Government remains in office.

15:47

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Craig Hoy is getting a bit confused about whether he wants to get on or get off, or about what he wants.

I welcome the paper, which is part of the "Building a New Scotland" series and lays out how an independent Scotland would thrive as one of the independent nations of the world. The paper is particularly important because it covers Scotland's international relationships. Scotland looks forward to taking its place as a full member of the international community, projecting our human rights values on to the world stage, working in partnership with others and addressing global challenges in defence, security, human rights, international development and, of course, climate change—to Scotland being a good global citizen. That is very much in contrast with the approach of Westminster. The cabinet secretary has already outlined the stark contrast between the approach of the Scottish Parliament and the views of the Scottish people and the approach of Westminster when it comes to demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Eleven papers have been published so far, and the area of international relations offers the most opportunity for progress and change when Scotland becomes an independent country. Scotland has the opportunity to truly make its mark on the international stage.

I thank Craig Hoy for spending some minutes of his speech outlining the high regard in which Scotland is held in countries around the world. There is widespread international awareness of the nation of Scotland, and I think that he would struggle to find any other sub-national entity that has such recognition in Singapore, China and other countries around the world, whether that is in terms of our history, our culture, our trade relations or the iconic products that Scotland exports around the world. The education in our universities is world renowned, and there are so many international students here. This summer, we will celebrate the Scottish national men's football team taking part in the European championships in Germany.

Craig Hoy: Mr McKee is ignoring the point that I made. Scotland is not a sub-national entity. Scotland has a unique place in the world. We can leverage everything that is good about Scotland and everything that is good about the United Kingdom, and we can take both reputations to the

world trading environment. Why does he not see that?

Ivan McKee: I am glad that Craig Hoy already recognises Scotland as an independent country. The point is that, when we look at other countries—I was a trade minister for many years—we see that we can do nothing like as much as Norway, Denmark, Switzerland or even Singapore, which he mentioned. Singapore is a former colony and now an independent nation that is not much bigger than Scotland, and it is very successful in the world. That shows what independent countries can do when they have the ability to take forward their own policies to suit their own circumstances.

Scotland already operates internationally in the trade and investment environment through the network of Scottish Government and Scottish Development International offices that are already working with partners, including through Nordic partnerships. The success of team Scotland makes this the best-performing part of the UK outside London when it comes to attracting inward investment, and it means that we have the fastest-growing rebound of onshore exports post-Brexit.

We must recognise the success that Scotland can deliver. One of the mistakes that Mr Hoy's party and others make when they try to pooh-pooh Scotland's international footprint is that they fail to recognise the jobs, investment and export success that that footprint delivers as a consequence of Scotland being able to project itself on the world stage.

I look forward to being a full member of the European Union, reversing the disaster of Brexit and having access to one of the biggest markets in the world. This party, unlike the Labour and Tory parties and now even the Lib Dems—I apologise to Willie Rennie, but I have to say that again—remains committed to Scotland being a full member of the European Union.

The paper also addresses the future defence and security arrangements of an independent Scotland, recognising Scotland's key geographical position and our commitment to working with neighbours and partners on broader defence issues.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member give way?

Ivan McKee: Yes, very briefly, if I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back.

Fergus Ewing: Mr McKee will recall that Mr Rennie, who did not take an intervention from me, opined that the Lochaber smelter should not have been the beneficiary of a deal in which I had a role back in 2016. Does Mr McKee recognise that, if that deal had not gone ahead, the smelter would have closed instead of remaining open since then

and for the past eight years? Does he think that the Liberal candidate in Fort William would have supported the closure of the smelter there?

Ivan McKee: I do not have time to go into the detail of that, but I absolutely agree with the member. It must be remembered that it was a cross-party finance committee that agreed to that deal, having seen the detail of it. Much of the information that is put out about that deal is very wide of the mark: the assets that exist more than cover any liabilities due to the Scottish Government as a consequence. As the member rightly identifies, the jobs are absolutely still in place.

Appropriately, I will move on to industry. The defence strategy recognises the need to focus on Scotland's defence needs and on the role of the Scottish defence industry within that. That sector would, to a significant extent, continue to support the maritime needs of Scotland's defence strategy. An independent Scotland would also have control of its arms export regime. That would allow us to align that with our human rights-based approach to international relations, which is quite different from the UK Government's approach. We could use the internationally well regarded vision for trade that we have already set out in a Scottish Government document as a model to inform how we align our arms export regime with our human rights principles and others.

The commitment to a non-nuclear Scotland is absolutely central to the document and to the SNP's approach, which is unlike that of the Labour party. There will be no new nuclear weapons on Scottish soil, a position that is similar to that of most other NATO member states. I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to maintain our position on international nuclear non-proliferation and prohibition treaties.

Scotland is well equipped to be an independent nation. In fact, when we achieve our independence, we will be the best prepared country ever to become a full member of the international community. The paper takes us one more step along the road towards independence as that becomes the settled will of the Scottish people.

15:54

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): At a time when many in the country are confused by the seemingly contradictory priorities of the Scottish Government, it is good to be able to rely on our monthly fantasy debates about an independent Scotland to give us a sense of stability in an often unsettled world. Today's debate is about that often unsettled world. Where

would an independent Scotland find its place in the world?

I have little objection to the Scotland that the cabinet secretary describes in his foreword to the 11th paper in the “Building a New Scotland” series:

“Scotland has a long history of being an outward-looking nation, and we are clear about the country we want to be – providing development assistance to the most vulnerable overseas, safeguarding human rights, upholding the international rules-based order and supporting and promoting Scots and Scotland around the world.”

I agree that Scotland not only has long been an outward-looking nation but has been well known to punch above its relative weight on the international stage over decades and centuries. My concern, however, is that the Government is so consumed by its singular focus on independence as the only answer to the difficulties that Scotland faces that our current place in the world is diminished purely because the SNP refuses to believe that we have the ability to build a better country with the powers that we have.

Right now, Scotland lacks any sense of direction. Where is the industrial strategy that will set Scotland on its way to being a high-skill, high-wage economy? Our education system is failing on so many fronts, and, after 18 years of failed interventions into further education, our colleges are struggling, lurching from crisis to crisis. In order to find our place in the world, we must have a strong economy, a highly skilled and motivated workforce and the very best education system in the world.

Ultimately, as an independent country, Scotland would need to rely on things that we used to take for granted but that we have been severely lacking in recent years.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Universities Scotland has recently highlighted that international students have added between £4 billion and £6 billion to the Scottish economy. However, the UK Government’s shameful rhetoric on immigration will cut across that success in the future. Does the member agree that an independent Scotland would address that issue, which is only set to worsen without independence?

Alex Rowley: I want Scotland to tackle the massive crisis in education right now and ensure that every child gets the opportunity to go to university and the chance to succeed. Right now, we are failing. Before we start lecturing countries in the rest of the world about what they need to do, we must put our own house in order.

Our manufacturing base, which was once the pride of Scotland, has been badly let down over years of poor investment. When opportunities

have arisen for the Scottish Government to stand up for Scottish industry, I have been left disappointed by the decisions taken. The failure of the Government to take advantage of the opportunities of ScotWind, for example, is enough to raise concerns about the impact that a future manufacturing strategy, or lack of it, would have on the future of Scotland’s economy.

The SNP could have followed through on its promise of delivering a state-owned energy company, as so many other countries around the world have, and that could have taken advantage of ScotWind, secured manufacturing guarantees for Scottish industry and allowed much higher bids from the private companies that it decided to work with for their development sites. Instead, as Common Weal has stated in its report “ScotWind: one year on”,

“The ScotWind auction of January 2022 has massively undervalued Scotland’s offshore energy resources and placed a low and arbitrary maximum ceiling on the amount that competitors could bid for their development.”

Indeed, Common Weal found that three offshore wind auctions that took place in the year following the ScotWind auction—two were in the USA and one was in England—raised 40 times as much money as the ScotWind auction. Imagine what Scotland could do with a single payment of £16.4 billion had it matched the success of the New York bight auction or a payment of £28 billion had it matched the success of the English auction.

When we failed to secure high bids, we could have at least secured the opportunity for manufacturing that a project of that scale would bring to Scottish industry. Will we, instead, continue to see the manufacturing for the renewables industry taking place in other countries across the world while Scotland remains simply the host of the turbines?

In Fife, Rosyth dockyard has an order book that will secure jobs well into the future, but it does not have a skilled Scottish workforce and is heavily reliant on skills from abroad, as are many of the construction and engineering sectors of our economy. The good news is that more and more people are getting apprenticeships that are being created in Scotland, but let us be clear that that is a result of Scotland working as part of the United Kingdom.

Scotland has always punched above its weight across the world, but we need to start putting our own house in order and addressing our education and skills crisis. That will, once again, put Scotland out there in the world.

16:01

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I welcome the paper on Scotland’s place in

the world, which sets out where we see Scotland's future in relation to defence, international co-operation and the global economy.

Before I focus on the global economy, I want to highlight an example from my Edinburgh Pentlands constituency that shows that there is little certainty in UK defence policy and no status quo position for people to build on. Redford barracks was once the largest Army base in Scotland. In 2011, it was earmarked for closure, but that decision was reversed in 2013. In 2016, it was then announced that Redford barracks would go in 2022, as part of a package of cuts involving 56 bases across the UK, eight of which were in Scotland. The closure date was then put back to 2025, but now it has been announced that closure will be in 2029.

Lack of long-term planning by the Ministry of Defence has created uncertainty, which has had an impact on the local community and its future. Just six days ago, the MOD sought parliamentary authority for the maximum number of personnel in the armed forces. During the next financial year, the number of Army regulars is to be cut by a further 4,500 and the number of Royal Air Force regulars is to be cut by 700 at a time when our armed forces are stretched. You could not make it up.

Independence will mean that we will become the 194th member of the United Nations. It will also provide us with the opportunity to rejoin the European family of nations, which will give us access to a marketplace of almost 450 million consumers, compared with the UK's 67 million. By rejoining the EU, we will reinstate our right to live and work in any of the 27 member states across Europe. It will also allow EU nationals to come to Scotland to help to grow our economy.

Scotland is the only UK nation that has had a consistent international trade surplus in goods since records began. In 2021, we exported £28 billion in manufactured goods and a further £51 billion in services and other items. Many of the people who purchase Scottish goods are part of a large global diaspora of about 40 million people, covering every continent, who claim to have Scottish ancestry.

Our international trade is supported by our GlobalScot network, which has 1,200 members across 64 countries. The network assists companies to understand local markets and customs to help to win trade, which, in turn, supports employment in Scotland.

In addition, the Scottish Government's network of offices from Beijing, across Europe, to Washington supports businesses to trade internationally, improve Scotland's international profile and attract inward investment. The result is

that Scotland continues its record of attracting foreign direct investment, outpacing both the UK and Europe in terms of the number of projects and maintaining its position as the top-performing area of the UK outside London for the eighth year.

That record on inward investment is at risk. Since we officially left the EU in 2021, many companies no longer consider the UK to be the gateway to Europe. To combat that risk, we need independence, which would, for the first time, enable Scotland to have a dedicated diplomatic network that was devoted to promoting and protecting Scottish interests. Soft power is important in diplomatic circles, and our international brand is strong, but we need to protect our reputation, as it is one of our most important assets.

Former Obama White House aide Jennifer Erickson said of the Scottish brand:

"There is huge currency Scotland has around the world, and a tremendous amount of goodwill can be claimed in a good way."

The nation brands index confirmed that. It asked 60,000 people from 20 countries what they thought about the 60 countries that make up the index, and Scotland ranked 16th out of 60 countries—ahead of Austria, Belgium and Ireland—which shows that Scotland continues to have a strong reputation abroad. We were seen as "hard working", "honest" and "skilful". When questioned about investing in Scotland, participants said that we were "forward thinking", "modern", "developing" and "ambitious".

Given the views of people from across the world and the good will that exists towards Scotland, we need to break away from the UK, which is now considered to be an unreliable partner. Given that a UK minister indicated during Brexit negotiations that he was prepared to break international law, how can the UK Government reassure future international partners that the UK can be trusted to abide by the legal obligations of any agreement?

The nation brands index also indicated that people rank Scotland 10th out of 60 countries for fostering international peace and security. Recent events have justified that ranking, as the First Minister has consistently called for a ceasefire in Gaza. Last autumn, the Parliament voted for an immediate ceasefire, but once again our voice was ignored by Westminster.

With independence, we can promote human rights, build partnerships with other countries and be good global citizens who work towards peace and security in the interests of the people of Scotland. It is time that Scotland took its place as an independent country and as an equal among the global community of progressive countries.

16:07

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): During recent weeks and months, there has been a narrative, which has come primarily from the London commentariat, that international affairs is not really of interest to voters or, worse, that the public should not be interested in it and should not vote on the basis of it. That is profoundly undemocratic; we do not do that with any other area of Government policy. It is also patronising, because it presumes that the public care about other people only if they also live on these islands. I do not think that that is true of communities anywhere across the UK, and I certainly do not believe that it is true of communities in Scotland.

Our country has always had an internationalist outlook. That is in part because of centuries of emigration. Scotland has had a disproportionate impact—both good and bad—on the world relative to our size. However, today, our voice on the global stage is severely limited by our being part of the UK, and there is no clearer example of that than in relation to the on-going genocide in Gaza. More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, including at least 13,000 children, and we know that those numbers are a massive undercount.

The public in Scotland and across the UK have been in favour of a ceasefire for months, and I am confident that a majority would support an arms embargo on Israel. However, Westminster has treated public opinion with contempt, to the extent that the UK Government is now considering a ban on MPs and councillors engaging with pro-Palestine—and, for some reason, climate change—protesters. That proposal, by the way, was made by John Woodcock, who is an adviser to the current Conservative Government, but who was previously a Labour MP, and who spent a lot of his time in office palling around with some very unsavoury regimes across the world; he is certainly no defender of human rights.

If Scotland were independent, we could apply such an arms embargo and end the scandal—which Ivan McKee mentioned—of equipment that has been made in factories in Scotland being used to supply an Israeli occupation force that is committing a genocide in Gaza. Rather, we have a UK arms export control regime that is so lax that, when the relevant minister was answering a question in the House of Commons last week, they cited the robust oversight of the arms export controls committee—a body that has not existed for years.

In December, Foreign Office officials expressed concern to the Foreign Secretary that Israel was not acting in line with international law, which is something that we can all see on our TV screens. They presented the Foreign Secretary with options on arms export control licences to Israel, and

David Cameron chose to continue those arms licences, which I find very hard to square with Alexander Stewart's claim that the UK Government is making a significant effort to secure a ceasefire. One of the most effective things that the UK Government could do to secure a ceasefire would be to stop providing bombs to the people who are bombing civilians in Gaza.

Craig Hoy: Recently, the Parliament held a reception for young Scottish apprentices who are working at the cutting edge of Scottish science and innovation. Mr Greer was implicated in trying to block their access to the building, which caused concern to some of those who attended. He went on to describe those young people, who came to the Parliament to promote engagement, as being “a who's who of Israel's arms dealers”.

Will he now apologise for doing so and for the offence that he caused?

Ross Greer: I am grateful for the intervention, because Mr Hoy gives me the opportunity to point out that the Conservative Party hosted a reception in the Parliament for the companies that are currently supplying an occupation force that is committing a genocide. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Members!

Ross Greer: The shameful event that happened in the Parliament a couple of weeks ago was the presence of companies such as Raytheon, which is Israel's missile supplier. It is the supplier of missiles to an occupation force that is destroying schools, destroying hospitals and executing children on sight. That was the shameful event that happened in the Parliament a couple of weeks ago.

NATO is recognised as an area of policy difference between the Scottish Greens and the Scottish National Party. For the Greens, there are two primary reasons why we would not have an independent Scotland join NATO. The first is its nuclear first-strike policy, and the second is the presence of the United States and Turkey in the alliance.

The US and Turkey are not reliable partners. They are not partners for peace or leaders in an alliance for democracy. Turkey is certainly not a democracy, and the United States has done all that it can to undermine democracy across large parts of the world, most notably in—but not limited to—South America. Anything that Israel is committing against the people of Palestine right now has been committed by the Turkish regime against the Kurdish community inside Turkey and outside its borders for decades.

As Greens and those who are committed to unilateral nuclear disarmament, we cannot be part

of an alliance that maintains a first-strike nuclear policy, which we believe to be immoral. We would want an independent Scotland to sign the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

I am confused by Scottish Labour's position on that point. The last that I remember, its party conference voted for nuclear disarmament. Has that conference vote been overridden or has Keir Starmer simply informed the Scottish Labour Party that it now has a different policy because he has decided so?

Greens believe in co-operation based on common values. We would model an independent Scotland's role in the world somewhat on Ireland's role, although we would not quite take the same position of absolute neutrality. However, Ireland's role on the UN Security Council, for example, is a clear area in which a small nation is acting as a force for good in the world and punching above its weight. We want to be a force for peace but not alone. A country does not need to be a superpower to do good in the world; it just needs to be a team player.

We believe in security in the traditional sense, but we also acknowledge that the biggest threat that we face is the climate crisis, which is why Scotland's defence forces would need to be equipped for a world where major natural disasters are the norm. We would also want our international development spend to match our defence spend to head off the greatest security threats in the decades to come.

We do not propose that an independent Scotland will be a land of milk and honey, but independence is the opportunity for us to have a positive impact on the world in a way that reflects our values: to be a force for peace, to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and to fight to protect the planet. The UK, whether it is under a red or a blue Government, will not reflect those values. It will not reflect the public's values. There is plenty of historical precedent to show that, never mind what is going on right now.

Scotland is not better than any other nation, but I certainly believe that we are equal to any other nation and that we want to play an equal part in building a better world. Another world is possible and another Scotland is possible, but for us to play our greatest part in building that better, fairer and greener world, we must take the opportunity to become an independent nation.

16:14

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The cabinet secretary stated yesterday:

"Ultimately, independence would enable Scotland to determine the kind of state it wants to be on the world stage."

I agree and, therefore, welcome the debate and the paper that the Government published yesterday. I will further develop some considerations that I will proffer as a constructive contribution.

I will start by consideration of an independent Scotland as a good global citizen that has a welcome commitment to overseas development and to meeting the UN target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income being spent on official development assistance. However, that, in and of itself, will not mean that we are playing our full part in tackling global poverty. Official development assistance is a necessary, but not sufficient, contribution.

As was pointed out in an ActionAid report from some years ago—I think that it was in 2016—international taxation arrangements via what are called double taxation treaties are depriving many developing countries of vital taxation revenues—not least from global corporations. I know from our time together at Westminster that the cabinet secretary is aware of the issue, because it was the subject of a private member's bill by one of our parliamentary colleagues.

One estimate has suggested that creating more equitable tax treaties would do more for the funding of African states than the entirety of foreign aid funding. Nevertheless, even with the minimum that is set out in the document, which would initially honour existing double taxation treaties that would be inherited from the UK on day 1 of independence, that would subsequently involve scrutiny of a large number of treaties, which could bring opportunities to enhance our global citizenship. Such treaties need to be updated regularly in order to ensure that they reflect current economic conditions and fairness between parties.

For example, the latest versions of treaties with Ireland and France were agreed in 2019, with the USA in 2021 and with Germany in 2022. However, the UK has not updated the treaty with well-known tax haven, the Cayman Islands, since 2011. Questions need to be asked about why. Tax treaties have played a part in the most well-known cases of aggressive tax planning by international corporations, and they often ensure that money flows untaxed from poor countries to rich countries.

Treaties with many developing countries have also not been updated for too long. The treaty with Ghana, for example, is a 2006 version that was drawn from the Bangladesh treaty of 1961. I suggest that, ultimately, Scotland as an independent country could do much better. We should bear in mind the view of the International Monetary Fund—that use of tax-treaty networks to

reduce tax payments is a major issue for many developing countries.

I will move on. I am pleased to see such a strong focus on having a feminist foreign policy that includes specific reference to protecting the rights of women and girls internationally. As we know from the current conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, often innocent women and children pay the highest of prices in terms of death and physical injury. However, there is evidence to suggest that post-conflict traumatised countries rely especially heavily on women to rebuild homes and communities, but are often left to do so with insufficient resources. That is an area in which Scotland could play a particularly important role by channelling support through funding, expertise and capacity building. As one recent report on Ukraine pointed out, there is a huge need to develop trauma-informed education practice, and Scotland has notable world-class expertise to contribute to that.

I also welcome the commitment to rejoining the EU and to enhancing human rights and democracy. However, even under the restrictions of devolution, we can be more ambitious. In the coming days, I will be speaking in Malta, which was the home of the remarkable journalist and campaigner against corruption, Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was assassinated by a car bomb on 16 October 2017. When she died, she was the subject of 48 lawsuits that were designed to silence her by people who are rich, powerful and corrupt.

The campaign for Daphne's law to protect people who are engaged in exposing corruption and human rights violations has come to fruition partly through the publication of an EU directive on 20 February, just a few weeks ago. It is an area in which Scotland could act in concert with the EU to bring in our own legislation and to protect people who would expose corruption and human rights violations. In that matter, we do not need to wait for independence, and it would be a small step on our path to being an active and good global citizen right now.

I congratulate the Government on the paper and would be grateful if the minister could confirm that the Government will consider the issues of double taxation treaties and adoption in Scotland of an equivalent to Daphne's law.

16:19

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It might be super Tuesday in the United States, but it is far from a super Tuesday in this Parliament. We have yet another fantasy debate and another grotesque waste of taxpayers' money. I say again, as I said in a previous debate of this ilk, that if

SNP members want to indulge their fantasies and speak to each other in their little echo chambers about something that is never going to happen, and if they want to publish documents to their heart's content, they should do that at their own expense and not the public's. The SNP is spending £2 million on all this nonsense—and it really is nonsense.

What else could we be debating?

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Of course.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the member for giving way—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could we have Dr Allan's microphone on, please? His card is in the console.

Dr Allan—perhaps you could just move to a different position, because we are using up Mr Kerr's time, although I will give him the time back.

Alasdair Allan: I will just shout, if that is okay.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, that does not work, I am afraid.

Alasdair Allan: I will give up then.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is obviously some problem—[*Interruption.*] Excuse me.

There might be a problem with Dr Allan's card, which might be something to investigate. I apologise for the intervention's having not been possible.

Mr Kerr, please resume.

Stephen Kerr: I am disappointed because I was not able to take that intervention. I am open for business on interventions, if anyone else—

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP) rose—

Stephen Kerr: I am delighted to give way.

Ruth Maguire: I thank Stephen Kerr for the invitation to intervene. The SNP Government was elected by the people of Scotland to put forward the case for independence. If we are not to talk about it in this place, where does he suggest we do it? How do the people of Scotland make the case?

Stephen Kerr: I have no objection to the SNP making the case for anything—that is entirely the nature of politics. What I object to is the fact that public funds are being used to further a party-political objective in a reserved area. The constitution is reserved: therefore, we are wasting our time talking about this fantasy.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Do you agree with me, Stephen, that the debate is, at the same time, a waste of taxpayers' money? It is not the SNP's conference in here, is it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members must speak through the chair.

Stephen Kerr: I could not agree more. I thank Foyso Choudhury for that intervention.

What subjects could we have been speaking about? Our amendment suggests some things, and I will mention some very quickly, just from today's newspapers. A headline in *The Telegraph* says, "Public at risk in Scotland as police"—*[Interruption.]*

Members can laugh, but they should listen to this headline. The member who is leading the laughing was previously the justice secretary, so he should listen to this point about the mess that he left after his time in office. The Telegraph's headline says "Public at risk in Scotland as police funding cuts means fewer crimes are being investigated". It is a shocking disgrace.

What else could we be talking about? Another headline from *The Telegraph* states "SNP 'risking patient safety' by accepting NHS union's reduced working demands". The Scottish Government is accused of causing more turmoil by cutting the working week. It is incredible that we have not heard a thing about that in the chamber. Neil Gray has negotiated away the full-time equivalent of 10,000 jobs, which astonishes me.

The Herald says that the number of rehabilitation beds is up by just 32, despite a pledge having been made on that. The story goes on to remind us that the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced that there would be a great expansion of rehab beds of 50 per cent over five years. What is the number? It is 32. We should be talking about that issue and not this nonsense, because it is about life and death for people in Scotland.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I must hear from Ross Greer: it would be such a shame not to hear from him.

Ross Greer: If I recall correctly, Mr Kerr—champion of correct parliamentary process that he is—had significant objections when the Scottish Government published papers in the "Building and New Scotland" series but did not bring them to Parliament. Now he is objecting because papers are being brought to Parliament. Is it not simply the case that the Conservatives object to the fact that the people of Scotland have voted over and over again for a pro-independence majority in Parliament?

Stephen Kerr: I am objecting to the papers and the complete waste of time and money. The papers have nothing to do with the issues that I am highlighting, which are just from this morning's newspapers. The Government should be ashamed for thinking that the debate is relevant enough to take up two hours—or whatever it is—of the Parliament's time. The Parliament sits in this chamber for only nine hours a week, and we are taking more than two hours of that time to discuss this subject.

There is more about the police in *The Scotsman*. The *Daily Mail* has the headline, "NHS waiting times crisis is damaging Scots economy". A report by the Confederation of British Industry Scotland and the Fraser of Allander Institute talks about the damage that is being done to our economy because of the ineffective way in which the SNP is managing the national health service in Scotland.

It is

"déjà vu all over again."

Someone said that earlier, and they were absolutely right. We hear about this subject all the time. We are getting fed up: the people of Scotland are bored stiff by such debates and the never-ending obsession of the SNP. I do not know when its conference is to be held, but it should be held soon, so that the SNP members can get the subject out of their system. They can have morning-to-evening debates among themselves about this stuff, but they should not waste the time of Scotland's Parliament on this fantasy.

Had I known, when I accepted the chief whip's request to speak in the debate—I am doing so as a favour to the chief whip, by the way—*[Interruption.]*—that this was going to be another fantasy "independence white paper" debate, I would have opposed the business motion last week. We should have opposed the business motion, and I think that the Parliamentary Bureau should look at itself very closely. It should look itself in the mirror, because this afternoon it has allowed Parliament to withdraw from reality. That is what it has done.

I know that Keith Brown wants the SNP MPs—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you will be bringing your remarks to a close. I have been generous.

Stephen Kerr: I will. I have gone on for far too long already—*[Interruption.]*—because I should not be giving airtime and grace to this nonsense debate.

Keith Brown wants the SNP members—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I said that you should conclude your speech.

Stephen Kerr: I am concluding by mentioning Keith Brown, whose bright idea is to withdraw SNP MPs from Westminster. This whole Parliament, because of the SNP, has withdrawn from reality this afternoon, and it is a shame and a disgrace. This is a—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr.

16:27

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I thought that I would take up the independence minister's kind request for me to take part in one of these debates, although he may not be so keen once he hears what I have to say.

We are more than midway through the second pro-independence term of government since the referendum. In response to the Supreme Court judgment, the Scottish Government appointed an independence minister to build the case and rally the cause for independence, and the First Minister pledged to be "the first activist". However, there does not appear to be any concern in the Westminster system that that will cause any disruption to the continuing union. In a week in which the Prime Minister made a statement in response to a by-election half-surprise, it seems that there is no fear for the union because of the independence ministry.

I am nothing if not practical, and I have already made several suggestions on how we can deliver independence. I have even presented a plan and a potential bill. In a show of bipartisan spirit, I am happy for it to be taken over and put in the Government's name.

On these independence papers, however, I must say that they are the equivalent of cold dry toast in a buffet of ideas. The hope, the dream and the ambition of 2014 are missing and have been replaced with grievance seeking and a bewildering commitment to doing things in exactly the same way.

It is unlikely that anyone has read the nearly 1,000 pages—I note that Willie Rennie admitted that he has not read the report, and I suspect that Mr Stephen Kerr has not read it either—of what seems to be regurgitation of the prior white paper but which has been carefully distilled to make sure not to offend or to excite anyone.

I will recap some of the highlights from previous papers. There is a migration policy that tweaks the UK plan. It ignores the largest net migrators, which are the Indian and Polish communities. There is a commitment to ending the oil and gas sector, which of course requires a diverse international community.

In its 84 pages, the EU paper manages to spare a single half-page to cover the relationship with the UK, which is our only land-based trading partner and will be our largest trading partner for some time. It complains about the common fisheries policy, the common agricultural policy and the monetary union, while ignoring the much better plan that the Government advanced in 2016 involving the European Free Trade Association. EFTA and the European Economic Area agreement would solve some of those problems and have none of the drawbacks on fisheries, agriculture or monetary policy. That approach is also deliverable quickly, easily and more inexpensively than EU accession, and it has the uniting effect of pleasing both Brexiters and remainers.

The marine paper is entirely lacking in direction, strategy or plan. I suspect that selling out oil and gas and fishing in one paper made it quite difficult to write, which is probably why it is relatively short.

The social security paper is the best of a bad bunch, but it does not clearly navigate the ageing population. It does not seek to increase the pension or allow many pension-age carers to have additional financial support, and the financial incentive to secure our population's future is barely acknowledged.

Fergus Ewing: I have much sympathy with many of the points that the member makes. Does she agree that, if Scotland is to obtain independence, it is desirable and perhaps essential for the many different voices that advocate independence to be respected and to work together, be they in the SNP or Alba or elsewhere?

Ash Regan: I completely agree with Mr Ewing's sentiment on that.

The culture paper, which runs to 55 pages, aims to keep both the BBC and Channel 4 and to support exactly the same industries that we have now. It does not bother to look beyond that to smaller creators or other visionaries.

In short, the entire series of papers is a work of art in being completely unambitious. How many people will read them? Not even the people who are taking part in this debate have read them, so I suspect that the answer is very few. The Government hopes that they will be well covered in the media, but I have to break it to the Government that, unfortunately, it seems that the launch of "Celebrity Big Brother" got more coverage today than the latest independence paper. Winnie Ewing has had a couple of mentions this afternoon and I will mention her again. Winnie Ewing got us this Parliament. Alex Salmond got us a referendum. Jamie Hepburn has got us ignored.

Craig Hoy: I think that this is an apposite moment for my intervention. Does the member think that the dream has died for this Government, or is it simply that it is not up to the job?

Ash Regan: The dream will never die for the wider independence movement.

I move on to the latest paper, which I have read, although I perhaps wish that I had not. The only surprise was that the Scottish Government wants a feminist approach to foreign policy. I had to laugh at that, because it is feminism that is foreign to this Government—a Government that, let us not forget, is unable to define what a woman is. I suspect that that will make designing international development policy rather tricky for it.

I come back to my initial point: who in the UK Government is scared of the Scottish Government's papers? Far be it from me to burst the minister's bubble. After all, in response to my urging him over the past few months to take action on independence, he said that the Scottish Government was hard at work producing the papers. However, they present nothing new and no one is reading them. I say to the minister that this is not the action that the independence movement is looking for. Papers that address the big questions from 2014—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Regan, you need to conclude.

Ash Regan: —and move the argument forward would be useful, but the papers that we have are not useful. We need action towards independence. I have outlined a strategy that Westminster would be afraid of, and the minister should look carefully at it.

16:34

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): As has been mentioned—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, will you please refrain from what you are doing and look this way? Thank you.

Jamie Hepburn: Sorry.

Keith Brown: As has been mentioned, just before the first world war, there were around 60 independent sovereign states in the world, and today there are almost 200.

Last night, I went to see a production of "Hamilton". It is amazing how many single transferable unionist speeches from different parties mirror exactly the arguments that were used by the UK back at that time: "You can't go. You can't manage on your own. You're not good enough. You're too small. You don't have the experience." Nothing in the unionist arguments

has moved on. That is why there has been the same approach today to the publication of the Scottish Government's paper—to dismiss, denigrate and talk down Scotland's potential.

In a little more than 100 years, our world has transformed from being one of very large empires to being one of sovereignty and independence, backed by the UN and the international rules-based system, which the UK Government said that it was happy to break—it was happy to break international law and its word on treaties. Despite that, much of our world is a better, more peaceful and more democratic place, because of the diversity that we now see within it. Unashamedly, my ultimate political aspiration is for our country to join the UN in our own right, as an independent country. I firmly believe that that is the direction of travel that we as a country are taking.

One hundred and fifty years ago, there was no Secretary of State for Scotland or any other meaningful political distinction for Scotland within the UK. One hundred years ago, there was no Scottish National Party to advocate for independence. Thirty years ago, there was no Scottish Parliament. However, just 10 years ago, 45 per cent of Scots voted for full independence. In other words, the direction that the world and Scotland are travelling in is clear—it is the direction of independence and a seat at the UN. We cannot do justice to Scotland's place in the world without highlighting that fact.

Not only is independence normal; it is essential to having any meaningful say in our increasingly international world. International questions such as climate change and defence require international answers, and the bodies that produce those answers—the EU, NATO and the UN—are clubs of independent states, which the UK is and Scotland, currently, is not. The alternative is to continue to allow Scotland to be represented by the UK Government which, more often than not, has been rejected by Scottish voters and for which Scotland is rarely, if ever, a priority. That does a huge disservice to Scotland's offering to the world.

Nowhere is that more evident than in defence. We heard Neil Bibby talk about the Royal Marines. Is he aware of the consternation in the Corps of Royal Marines about the latest threat to its existence, following on from threats in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher and under various Governments since then? There is no confidence that the UK Government will defend the existence of the Royal Marines, so the idea that it can be held up as a paragon of fantastic management of our defence by the UK Government is completely wrong.

Neil Bibby: I am aware of concerns that we need to invest in our armed forces at a UK level and there has been a lack of investment from the

current UK Government. My point in relation to that was that the paper—which, for clarity, I have read—talks about investing in “core capabilities” but does not mention niche capabilities or special forces. That is an omission that means that what is proposed would not replicate what we currently have in the United Kingdom, notwithstanding the point that Keith Brown has made.

Keith Brown: The point that is being made is about how much planning and foresight are going into the issue. The comparison that was made by Neil Bibby is based on saying that the UK is doing something that the paper is not, but the UK is not doing it. In 2012, we had a commitment from the UK Government that we would have no fewer than 12,000 service personnel in Scotland. It has ditched that without even telling anybody. We have the lowest UK armed forces numbers since Napoleonic times.

We have a recruitment and retention crisis—nobody wants to stay, because they do not have the equipment that they need. That goes back to Labour’s time, when it could not provide the helicopters or the boots in Afghanistan, and during which it issued P45s to service personnel on the front line.

The UK is no paragon of virtue—that is before we even mention the possibility of selling off the Prince of Wales aircraft carrier, which cost billions to build and would be sold at a discount, or the possible closing down of the Royal Marines because the niche capability that Neil Bibby talked about is not valued by the UK Government.

Let us go back to Labour. For the Nimrod programme, billions of pounds was spent on dismantling something before it was completed. The track record of the UK Government in defence is appalling. The idea that Scotland could not do better is for the birds. We currently have an arrangement whereby Scotland can be dragged into illegal wars.

Let us talk about nuclear weapons. What is the sound of a nuclear Trident submarine drill? It is a “plop” in the water. Hundreds of billions of pounds have been spent on something that has never been independent, does not even work and could not conceivably be used. The UK Government spends that money at the expense of proper training and proper equipment for service personnel. The paper that was produced by the Scottish Government says that we would not do that and that we would not have those nuclear weapons.

We will be dragged, as before, into illegal wars, despite the clear and express view of people in Scotland that they do not want that to happen.

Leaving Scotland’s defence capabilities in the hands of Westminster is failing Scotland’s service

personnel. Service personnel have moved from Germany to Scotland to Northern Ireland within the space of 18 months, with whole families made to learn different education systems. The UK defence system is a mess. Everybody knows that—everyone on the Defence Committee at Westminster knows it—but we do not hear anything about that here. We should, because Scottish taxpayers’ money goes into those fiascos.

There has been talk about the Ferguson ferries. Members should consider the aircraft carriers, which are massively over budget, or the Ajax tanks—what a disgrace! There is not a word in defence of Scottish taxpayers from the Tories in relation to any of that, because they see their role here as to defend the UK Government, not to stand up for their constituents.

Independence would allow us to get rid of nuclear weapons, and I totally refute the idea that an independent Scotland would somehow be uniquely incapable of joining NATO. Much of the unionists’ argument relies on convincing people in Scotland that we are uniquely different from every other country in the world and that we cannot manage those affairs. It is our job, and the job of the paper that has been produced by the Scottish Government, to give the contrary argument.

We have a chance to make a different impact in the world—on defence, peacekeeping, climate change and being a constructive partner. We have seen the diminution of the UK’s international reputation over many years. On the matter of taking our country to independence, governing ourselves at home and representing ourselves abroad, we hear from the Tories that they do not like us representing ourselves abroad—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Brown.

Keith Brown: I will conclude on this point.

They do not like us representing ourselves abroad—with the honourable exception of Donald Cameron. Labour members of the House of Lords do not want Scotland’s voice to be heard abroad. Taking our country to independence is the way in which we can govern ourselves at home and represent ourselves abroad. As the essence of what I stand for—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Brown.

Keith Brown: That is the essence of what I stand for, what my party stands for and what the Scottish Government stands for. For that reason, I support the motion in Angus Robertson’s name.

16:41

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): As Alexander Stewart noted, the latest independence paper shows that the SNP is still wasting time on imagining what it would do had it won the 2014 independence referendum almost 10 years ago. In 2014, the people of Scotland voted democratically to remain in the UK, yet the SNP continues to use precious time in the chamber to bore us, as Willie Rennie and Stephen Kerr rightly put it, with independence papers as it continues with its agenda. This is Scotland's people's Parliament, not the SNP party conference.

Alex Rowley rightly outlined concern that we have been called to the chamber time and again to discuss the SNP's constitutional obsession. Many colleagues across the chamber, including Neil Bibby and Craig Hoy, have outlined the valuable time spent on that in the Parliament that could have been spent on productive discussions to improve the lives of people in Scotland now. Those people are struggling with the cost of living crisis, the housing crisis and the NHS crisis, to name but a few issues.

It is important that an outward-looking Scotland plays its role in the world. As Ivan McKee and others outlined, Scotland is renowned internationally, and we must focus on what Scotland can do now to continue that legacy. The independence papers have failed adequately to address even the big unanswered questions, such as those of currency, the border and the economic case for independence. If they have failed even to address those big questions, how could they deliver on the massive amount of capacity building that would be required for an independent Scotland in areas such as defence, intelligence and security?

Ross Greer: Will Mr Choudhury take an intervention?

Foyso Choudhury: I am sorry: I will not be taking interventions, because you guys have had so many debates in the Parliament.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Foyso Choudhury: I have a lot to get through.

That would be wasting taxpayers' money—*[Interruption.]* Let me get my points in. You guys have had millions of debates—and there are probably many more to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Choudhury, I am not entirely sure that “you guys” is the way that—

Foyso Choudhury: Those are capabilities that Scotland—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Choudhury, I am speaking.

Foyso Choudhury: Sorry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not sure that using the phrase “you guys” to refer to your colleagues is keeping within the tenets of courtesy and respect.

Foyso Choudhury: I apologise to members.

Those are capabilities that Scotland already enjoys as part of the UK.

The Scottish Government's motion talks about Scotland acting

“in the interests of its people.”

In this increasingly turbulent geopolitical situation, Scotland needs to remain a member of NATO as part of the UK instead of severing those connections and trying to build them again from scratch. The Scottish Government should instead focus on the detail of improving our place on the world stage by working closely with the UK Government and engaging with international partners to build cultural and economic connections. It should work closely with the UK Government to sell brand Scotland around the world, marketing our unique contribution and innovations to facilitate trade and tourism for our country.

There is no doubt that it is important that Scotland plays a role on the world stage. As the cabinet secretary outlined, building relationships with global partners can increase opportunities for tourism and trade. It can also reaffirm that Scotland is committed to working with others towards important shared goals such as achieving sustainability and tackling climate change.

Last year, as convener of the Parliament's cross-party group on Bangladesh, I, together with Miles Briggs and Evelyn Tweed, travelled to Bangladesh, where we discussed the importance of sharing knowledge and skill globally among nations on issues of importance such as climate justice. On that matter, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. The trip showed that so much can be done now to develop such relationships and to increase benefits for Scotland in the current climate.

Our time in the chamber should support the will of the electorate and find ways to improve offerings for the Scottish people with Scotland as part of the UK. We should honour the democratic decision that reflected that will and find ways for Scotland to benefit from the defensive, diplomatic and economic connections that it shares with the rest of the UK.

While the SNP-Green Government continues to use the Scottish Parliament's time and Scottish taxpayers' money to talk about its fantasy scenario, Scottish Labour stands ready to deliver

for Scotland in line with the people's democratic will and to improve Scotland's standing both at home and on the world stage.

16:47

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Working with the UK Government and within the terms of the devolved settlement, the Scottish Conservatives—I started to say the Scottish Government, but we are not the Government yet—have always argued that it is vital for Scotland to have an international voice in developing trade, connecting with the diaspora and promoting Scotland as a destination for investment and tourism. When we have debated that point in the past, our exchanges have been constructive and have engaged the entire chamber. Most importantly, the debate was not predicated on a fallacy.

Angus Robertson: Given Mr Golden's welcome words about international engagement, will he take this opportunity to praise the work of Scottish Development International in promoting trade, or the Scottish Government's international network of offices that do so much to promote Scotland abroad? Will he put that on the record?

Maurice Golden: I am happy to praise the efforts of such individuals—including SDI, with which I have worked in the past—who seek to promote trade with, to link with and to work with the United Kingdom within the devolved settlement. That is absolutely important. I will come on to some additional points on that in due course.

Craig Hoy spoke about the fantasy paper and, in describing his own experience in Hong Kong and Singapore, highlighted the global value of being both Scottish and British.

Alexander Stewart expressed his disappointment that the Government is wasting parliamentary time.

Willie Rennie gave a highly entertaining and informative speech that outlined the lack of coherence in the Scottish Government's policy in the international sphere.

Ash Regan, from whom we heard just a few minutes ago, described the document as a "grievance" paper and a "regurgitation" of previous announcements. She came up with some new ideas, which are always welcome in this place.

The Government's motion reveals a thinly veiled approach to international relations, with the SNP putting the promotion of independence at its heart. Is it any wonder, therefore, that, at a time when—thanks to the SNP—local council funding is in disarray, the NHS is at breaking point, the climate emergency has been cancelled and Scotland's

once world-class education system is in the doldrums, the Scottish Government would rather waste money on its latest prospectus for independence and related projects?

Furthermore, today's debate serves to underline the millions of pounds that the Scottish Government spends on international relations with very little scrutiny of what that money is spent on. When the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee recently reviewed the Scottish Government's international work, the Government was consistently criticised on the transparency, scrutiny and accountability of its work. That aspect has not been addressed today. If the intention is to have a real debate on Scotland's place in the world, perhaps the minister could address that in closing.

On that subject, last year the Parliament agreed that the Scottish Government would provide more details regarding the metrics on which the delivery of the "Scottish Connections Framework" will be measured. I would appreciate an update on that from the minister in closing. There is concern, highlighted by the focus of today's debate, that the SNP does not want its international outreach work scrutinised, nor to be held to account or to be fully transparent in that work, because that would expose the flagrant waste of money when the SNP pursues its independence agenda at home and abroad instead of serving the interests of the people of Scotland.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Maurice Golden: No.

I will move on to the amendments. Labour, led today by Neil Bibby, has highlighted that Scotland's place on the international stage is best served by the mutual benefits that we share with the rest of the UK in areas including defence, diplomatic relations and economic connections. We will support Labour's amendment, and we agree with it whole-heartedly.

Regrettably, today's debate has been a waste of time. That has been a recurring theme for a number of months now, with this debate representing the most recent in a long line of pointless debates on independence. Only one month ago, we were debating an independent Scotland's place in Europe, and now we are debating an independent Scotland's place in the world. It continues to get more ridiculous and ludicrous. The SNP is treating this Parliament as a mockery. Next month, it will probably have us debating an independent Scotland's place in the United Federation of Planets, with Humza Yousaf demanding that Scotland take its rightful spot at the top table, next to the Vulcans and Betazoids.

All of this is fantasy anyway, so that subject would be as valid as this one.

As far as the SNP is concerned, it would give it another opportunity to duck scrutiny. The SNP wants to avoid the issues that really matter to the people of Scotland—priorities such as growing the economy, reducing NHS waiting times, reducing violent crime, and improving education standards and public services. We should be spending parliamentary time debating those issues, but the SNP clearly believes that those are not the sort of priorities that the Parliament should be concerned about.

I urge members to support the amendment in the name of Alexander Stewart.

16:54

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): I thank members who have taken the time to speak in the debate. The issues that we have debated are of importance in the context of where Scotland stands in the world. I am grateful to those who have given it proper consideration, but I am perhaps less grateful for that last contribution. I freely confess that I have no idea what a Betazoid is, but I assure Mr Golden that we will bring forward more debates on the future of Scotland and on an independent Scotland. However, I must apologise to him—they will not be in the context of his clear interest in “Star Trek”.

I turn to the amendments. I will start by focusing on Alexander Stewart’s speech. He suggested that if someone tuned in to Scottish Parliament TV today, they might have thought that it was a repeat. They may well have done so, but I respectfully suggest that that might have been because they had tuned in at the juncture at which he was speaking. I will return to that point in a moment.

However, his speech was much better than the nightmarish vision of project fear on overdrive that was laid out by Craig Hoy. I would take his suggestion, and those of other Conservative members—sometimes from a sedentary position—that the prospect of an independent Scotland would in some way be capitulation to Russia, rather more seriously if it did not come from members of a party that, in the run-up to the 2019 general election, accepted £3.5 million-worth of donations from members of the Russian oligarch class. *[Interruption.]*

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

Jamie Hepburn: The amendment in the name of Alexander Stewart says that we should “accept the will of the people”.

Let me quote from the manifesto that we presented at the 2021 election. We said that we would

“ensure that the people of Scotland have the information they need to make an informed choice about their future.”

I respect the right of people to comment on the content of our papers—Mr Rennie might want to start reading them in order to do so on an informed basis. That is precisely the information that our “Building a New Scotland” series provides.

I remind Mr Stewart and other members that we won the 2021 election standing on the manifesto that I directly quoted from and that his party lost that election. I say to Mr Stewart, just as Ruth Maguire said—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Minister, take your seat for a moment.

Mr Stephen Kerr, I think that you may have forgotten where you are. I ask you to remember that you are representing your constituents in our national Parliament; please conduct your behaviour accordingly.

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Kerr must forget where he is quite often, because that is his usual demeanour.

Ruth Maguire also made this point in her intervention on Mr Kerr: we won that election. Mr Stewart should accept the will of the people of Scotland and understand and respect the right of the Scottish Government to bring forward these debates—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry to have to take up more parliamentary time, but I cannot hear the minister and I am fairly close to him. I am sure that everyone would like to hear the minister. Please continue.

Jamie Hepburn: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I do not know whether Mr Kerr would like to hear this part, because I am going to return to his speech. He talked about economic damage. We would take his concerns about economic damage rather more seriously if it was not his party that had just led—

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I hear what you say, Presiding Officer, but if the minister is pointing at other members and deliberately provoking them, it is hardly a surprise that members feel it necessary to react.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Carlaw, I say gently that the person in the chair is best placed to chair the meeting and that I will intervene as and when I find that necessary.

Jamie Hepburn: What news to us that Mr Carlaw is such a shrinking violet that he is affected by such meagre provocation.

Let me return to the point that I was making. Mr Kerr talked about economic damage. We would take that point rather more seriously if it was not his party and Government that had just led the UK into recession. The Resolution Foundation made the point that if the UK economy had kept pace with comparable countries since 2008, the average household in the UK would be £8,300 better off, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has talked about increased levels of destitution in this country, so we will take no lessons on the economy from Mr Kerr and the Conservatives.

I turn to Neil Bibby's amendment, which talks about severing connections. The paper is about the exact opposite—the polar opposite—of severing connections. It lays out a prospectus for us to be able to reverse Brexit, which we did not vote for, and enable Scotland to return to the European fold, as Gordon MacDonald set out.

As we know from the previous debate that Mr Golden referred to, the Conservatives, in alliance with the Labour Party and, indeed, the Liberal Democrats, voted against the simple concept that Scotland is best served by being in the European Union. That was not even in the context of being an independent country, but included being part of the United Kingdom. It is very clear that the only way for us to rejoin the European family of nations is by becoming an independent country.

Fundamentally, the paper speaks to two different visions. The cabinet secretary spoke about two competing visions; I want to talk about those, too.

The first vision is of the status quo and doing what we can—we will always do what we can—to seek out like-minded partners, acting as a good global citizen, and using the limited resources and powers that we have to make an impact. We saw that just last month with £500,000 committed to help to address the food crisis in Malawi, where more than 5 million people are unable to meet their basic food needs, and we see it in our support for the people of Gaza. We will always do what we can. However, the status quo also means having decisions of fundamental importance, such as on Brexit, made for us by Westminster, resulting in isolation and decline. That isolation and decline would only be hastened by any proposals to decrease or diminish Scotland's international engagement, as we have seen threatened by the UK Government in recent times, despite its being the case that, since the advent of devolution, starting with Donald Dewar's Administration, all devolved Administrations have sought to represent Scotland on the international stage.

The second vision is of independence—of a sovereign nation, active and engaged on the world stage, with decisions that affect us made by us; taking our place as a state among equals in the global community and having the powers to truly transform our country; and harnessing all the potential and ability of our nation to make a difference internationally.

Listening to Opposition members, we would have to believe that what we have laid out is somewhat fantastic and beyond our capabilities. However, in lots of ways, nothing that is proposed in the latest paper should be considered to be particularly radical or groundbreaking. The proposals align with the way in which many other nations of a similar size to that of Scotland operate. However, for Scotland, which has been so long without the levers and powers of a state, the proposals are groundbreaking, and they could be transformative.

Ivan McKee talked about how other similar-sized nations can play their part on the global stage as independent countries. We could do things differently to the United Kingdom. As an independent country, we would seek to become a party to the UN International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, which is something that the UK has declined to sign. As an independent country, we would join the revised European social charter, which is something that the UK has never ratified. As an independent country, we would not seek to exempt migrant women from the protections of the Istanbul convention, as the UK does. As Stuart McMillan highlighted, and as set out in our paper, we would, as an independent country, join Sweden, Denmark and Norway in meeting the UN target of committing 0.7 per cent of gross national income to overseas development. That is something that the UK does not do—it has specifically legislated for a lower amount. That belies Mr Stewart's suggestion about leadership from the UK on international development. As an independent country, we would seek to implement a humane and sensible immigration system that is not founded on hostility, which is also something that the UK has not done.

As an independent country, we could be, and we would seek to be, a good global actor. It is only as an independent country that we can properly become a good global actor. That is why the Scottish Government has laid out the case for independence in "An independent Scotland's place in the world", and that is why we will continue to advocate for independence. We will continue to take that work forward.

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if amendment S6M-12372.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart, is agreed to, amendment S6M-12372.2, in the name of Neil Bibby, will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-12372.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12372, in the name of Angus Robertson, on Scotland's place in the world, 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.

17:04

Meeting suspended.

17:07

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Alexander Stewart is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Neil Bibby will fall.

We move to the vote on amendment S6M-12372.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12372, in the name of Angus Robertson, on Scotland's place in the world. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The system is rubbish and I could not even connect. I would have voted no.

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

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would have voted no.

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

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect and I would have voted no.

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

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My vote may or may not have registered; I would have voted yes.

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

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 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)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine 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)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
 (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-12372.1, in the name of Alexander Stewart, on Scotland's place in the world, is: For 32, Against 87, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-12372.2, in the name of Neil

Bibby, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12372, in the name of Angus Robertson, on Scotland's place in the world, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Kenneth Gibson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 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)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (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)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-12372.2, in the name of Neil Bibby, is: For 52, Against 67, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-12372, in the name of Angus Robertson, on Scotland's place in the world, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My system is obtuse, which I am not happy about. I would have voted yes.

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

For

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)
 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)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (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)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 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)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-12372, in the name of Angus Robertson, is: For 67, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that Scotland should be able to take its place in the world as a sovereign nation that acts based on its values and principles, working towards peace, sustainability and security as a good global citizen, and in the interests of its people.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2024

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12285, in the name of Emma Harper, on eating disorders awareness week 2024. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I invite those members who wish to take part in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that the week of 26 February to 3 March is Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2024, and that the theme for 2024 is avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID); understands that eating disorders affect one in 50 people across Scotland and the wider UK, and that more people lose their lives due to eating disorders than any other mental health condition; further understands that ARFID is a largely unknown and misunderstood eating disorder, which can have serious consequences for health if left untreated; considers that the number of people affected by ARFID is unknown, and that treatment is not currently available nationwide, with many people with ARFID, or those who suspect they may have the condition, reporting difficulty in accessing treatment and support both in Scotland and across the whole of the UK; welcomes the work of Beat Eating Disorders, a UK-wide charity working to support those living with eating disorders, and their families; understands that, in 2023 alone, Beat provided more support in Scotland than ever before thanks to what it sees as generous funding from the Scottish Government, but that demand has been so high that Beat reports that it has had to pause sign-ups to many of its programmes; welcomes the Scottish Government's funding of £120 million in 2022 for the Mental Health Recovery and Renewal Fund, with a focus on additional support for mental health in primary care settings and enhanced community support; notes the calls for the Scottish Government to provide an update on its current work to support all those impacted by an eating disorder, and to set out how it will ensure that crucial eating disorder services are protected within what it considers to be the challenging fiscal landscape, and further notes that anyone in Scotland with concerns about an eating disorder can seek support either from their GP surgery, which can point them to the most appropriate healthcare provider, or from Beat, which can be contacted seven days a week on 0808 801 0432 or through its helpful website, beateatingdisorders.org.uk.

17:15

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to lead this debate on eating disorders awareness week 2024, which took place from 26 February to 3 March. The theme of this year's week is avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, which is also known as ARFID. It is a largely unknown and misunderstood eating disorder, which can have serious consequences for health if it is left untreated.

The number of people who are affected by ARFID is unknown and treatment is not currently

available nationwide. Many people with ARFID report difficulty in accessing treatment and support in Scotland and across the United Kingdom—I will come back to that.

I thank colleagues on all sides of the chamber who have supported my motion, which has allowed the debate to go ahead. I also thank the eating disorders charity Beat for the excellent work that it continues to do to support those who are at risk of, or living with, an eating disorder. That work includes supporting family and friends.

Around 1.25 million people across the UK and about one in 50 people in Scotland currently live with an eating disorder, and the numbers increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Types of eating disorders include binge-eating disorder; bulimia; anorexia; other specified feeding or eating disorders, or OSFED; and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, which we are discussing today. Another, very dangerous, eating disorder is diabulimia, which occurs when people with type 1 diabetes deliberately omit their insulin in order to control their weight.

Eating disorders have high mortality rates, and anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. One in six people with a binge-eating disorder has reported trying to end their life. People with eating disorders typically develop severe physical health problems, and it has been estimated that their overall quality of life is as low as it is for those with symptomatic coronary heart disease or severe depression. Without early intervention, many people become unable to participate in education or employment. However, recovery is possible. Access to the right treatment and support is life changing, and early intervention provides the best chance of recovery.

The key symptoms of eating disorders include worrying excessively about weight and body shape, avoiding social situations where food may be involved, frequently visiting the toilet for prolonged periods after meals, and a person not being up front about the food that they may be consuming. It is important for family members, friends and colleagues to be aware of those signs. Research has shown that there is a link between eating disorders and depression, low confidence and low self-esteem.

Today, however, I will highlight specifically this year's theme: ARFID. ARFID is a condition that is characterised by the person avoiding certain foods or types of food, having restricted intake in terms of the overall amount eaten, or both. Beat has experienced an increase in requests for support for people who are living with ARFID. One of the people who have been impacted by ARFID, Harriet, summed up the impact of the condition by saying:

“A lot of people thought I was just being picky and friends would often get very offended when I went round to their houses for dinner and I wouldn’t eat anything. Less than five people outside my immediate family knew about my condition. When I explained it wasn’t to do with losing weight, it was because of anxiety, I was told to get over it.”

That example shows exactly why we need to put the spotlight on ARFID: so that people are aware of it, and so that we can break down the stigma and support people to access treatment.

People of any age can have ARFID. The condition is linked to anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism. People with ARFID may be sensitive to the taste, texture, smell, appearance or even the temperature of the food in front of them.

In March 2021, the Scottish Government completed a national eating disorder service review. The “Scottish Eating Disorder Services Review—Full Report” includes a total of 15 ambitious recommendations that focus on ensuring that all those who are affected by eating disorders receive timely and appropriate care and support. Those recommendations include better co-ordination of national activity and data collection; national availability of self-help resources, which should be available to everyone in Scotland, at any stage of life; and a focus on early diagnosis, with the aim of prevention. It is welcome that an implementation group has been set up to review the timescales for, and the cost of, implementing the recommendations, and that three sub-groups have been created: a training group, a standards group and a data group. One of Beat’s key policy asks is for the 15 recommendations to be implemented in full. I would be grateful, therefore, if the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport could, in responding to the debate, provide an update on the implementation of those recommendations and comment on when they will be implemented in full.

Ahead of the debate, my office contacted NHS Dumfries and Galloway and spoke specifically with the dietetics team. The team has a specific dietician who works with and focuses on those people who are living with, or at risk of, developing eating disorders. I heard that because of the rural nature of Dumfries and Galloway, some people who are at risk of developing an eating disorder may not be picked up as easily, or may be reluctant to access support because of the travel that is involved in attending appointments. In addition, because of the stigma around eating disorders, many people report that they feel ashamed even to access treatment and support.

Although the situation has improved through a move to virtual appointments, people who live in rural areas still have issues in accessing eating disorder support services. We need to continue to support them to access those services, so I ask

the minister to ensure that rural areas are included in the Government’s approach. In addition, I press the Scottish Government to ensure that eating disorders are included in the mental health stigma reduction strategy, and that all possible action is taken to combat eating disorder stigma.

Anyone who has an eating disorder, or who thinks that they may be at risk of one, can access judgment-free support from Beat. The helplines are free to call from all phones. Anyone who is affected by an eating disorder—including families, carers and anyone else who provides support to someone with an eating disorder—can call 0808 801 0432 or email Scotlandhelp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk, or contact Beat’s helpline advisers via a one-to-one webchat. The helplines are open from 3 to 8, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

I appreciate the opportunity, once again, to lead this important debate, and I reiterate my ask of the minister for further detail on when the review group’s recommendations will be implemented. Once again, I thank Beat and all the national health service staff across Scotland for the vitally important work that they do each day. I look forward to hearing the contributions from other members.

17:23

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank my colleague Emma Harper for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I also thank Beat, which is an amazing organisation that has for many years been amplifying the voices of those who are dealing with eating disorders, and which has provided us with information and has led on eating disorders awareness week 2024.

I want to make special mention of ARFID Awareness UK, which is the UK’s only charity that is dedicated to raising awareness of avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. Hearing comments such as:

“She’ll eat when she’s hungry”,

“If that was my kid, she’d clear that plate”,

“If she doesn’t eat it, heat it up again and give it to her for breakfast”,

“You’re spoiling her and you’re making a rod for your own back”,

“Just get her telt”,

“In my day, a skelp is what you would have used to fix this”

and

“She’s just being picky and you need to put a stop to this fussy nonsense”

made me dread interacting with anyone as a family unit when food was involved, as it became

ever more clear that my youngest was developing a serious aversion to the majority of foods that we all enjoy daily.

I can trace it back to the moment when, as a three-year-old, she choked a wee bit on a homemade chicken nugget. Almost overnight, she went from enjoying a variety of foods to tolerating only a handful. There was a distinct link to anxiety and sensory issues, and with what we later understood to be neurodiversity. At times, her food intake was limited to only a couple of items, mostly beige and carbohydrate in nature.

After a year, our general practitioner advised us that our child had selective eating disorder and that there was not a lot that we could do except to offer her a wide variety of things in the hope that one day, magically, she would start to eat again. In retrospect, that approach often caused more harm than good, as new foods were met with such suspicion and terror that anything relating to eating had any scintilla of enjoyment removed, leaving a highly distressed child and two highly distressed parents.

We stopped eating out. I dreaded parties and social events, as I knew that well-meaning folk would try to coax her into trying the lovely food that they had prepared, while casting aspersions on our parenting abilities with passive-aggressive comments. In a sea of judgment, my mum was the only person who kept saying to me, “Elena, if the wean is only going to eat your lentil soup and bread and nothing else, just feed her that with a smile and love and ignore what everybody else thinks. It’s just background noise.”

My child stopped eating at school when she was not allowed to bring in crackers and peanut butter—one of her staple safe foods—given the risk of allergies among other children. After protracted negotiations, she was allowed to have vegetable soup and bread from the canteen, and she would not be forced to eat a main course. Maybe 200 calories at most would see her through the school day. She avoided the canteen totally while she still attended secondary school, as the smells and the noise of people eating overwhelmed her.

At nearly 16, she now has a slightly longer list of safe foods, including her much-loved plain udon noodles and bubble tea, but we often lose some of those when recipes change or when something is no longer made, or when she has eaten a certain food every single day for a whole year and just cannot face it any more. She is slight and often exhausted, and the health service still does not really know how to help her, or the thousands of other young people who are living with ARFID.

I know that the Scottish Government has a special focus on eating disorders, and I hope that

the minister will say a wee bit about how it plans to help those like my Sophie. We must ensure that every layer of our health service, from health visitors to GPs and child and adolescent mental health services, understands the needs of those who are living with ARFID. We also need to educate the public and those working in our public services, including our schools, to stop needless pressure and guilt being laid at the feet of parents who are doing their level best just to get enough calories of any kind into their children. The condition really is far more serious than is suggested by the “fussy” label with which children are often saddled.

17:27

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks from Elena Whitham, and I thank her for sharing her lived experience in what was a very powerful contribution.

I thank Emma Harper for securing the debate to mark eating disorders awareness week. I know that I speak for every member in the chamber when I say that it is vital that we take such opportunities to raise awareness of this cruel and complex mental illness. As policy makers, the better informed we are, the better equipped we will be to make decisions to help sufferers and their families to get the help that they need.

I also thank Beat, as the charity that is behind so much of the effort that goes into supporting those who are suffering. We are honoured to have representatives of Beat here to support the debate today.

To go back to the point about awareness, this year, it is even more important than usual. That is because, as the motion sets out, the theme for this year is ARFID, which is short for avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. Despite being a serious condition that can have severe affects on sufferers, it is not widely understood. The need for early and sustained intervention is one thing that different eating disorders have in common. It is concerning, therefore, to hear from Beat that, despite an increase in calls about ARFID to its helpline, it is hearing that sufferers are struggling to get the help that they need.

That is no doubt partly down to the lack of awareness that I discussed, but Beat also points to the lack of standardised treatment pathways. It is calling for better access to intensive out-patient treatment, noting that that can achieve similar results to in-patient treatment, while avoiding people being admitted to hospital.

That is preferable not only for the patient but for the NHS, and I urge the Scottish Government to ensure that every health board has the resources

that are needed to offer that treatment model. In particular, I cannot help but think about NHS Tayside, in my region of North East Scotland. From speaking with constituents, I know the struggle that they have faced in trying to access support, and NHS Tayside itself has admitted that its CAMHS waiting list is likely to get longer.

I also highlight the issue of calorie labelling on menus, which was the theme of last year's eating disorders awareness week. Having formerly worked with the healthyliving award scheme, I know that the benefits of a balanced diet cannot be overstated. From our fruit and vegetable intake to high-fibre foods and protein, nutritional value is paramount. In my view, putting calories on menus is a blunt instrument that takes into account just one metric in terms of nutrition. As the minister knows, for individuals who are suffering or recovering from eating disorders, that policy could cause immense harm. I would appreciate an update from the minister, either now or in closing, on the Scottish Government's thinking on that topic.

Overall, when it comes to eating disorders, warm words will not cut it. We need investment in treatment services and staff recruitment, we need to fund more research and public awareness campaigns, and we need to get a national eating disorder network off the ground and ensure that calories are not on menus. I know that ministers take the issue seriously, so I urge them to now give action to their convictions.

17:32

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Emma Harper on securing a debate on this very important subject, and I commend Elena Whitham for her very moving personal contribution.

It is very welcome that, during eating disorders awareness week 2024, we have this dedicated time in the chamber to speak at length about it. This year, in particular, when the theme is avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, or ARFID, raising awareness is absolutely key. That includes awareness that ARFID is real and not just in your head, and awareness that if you have any sort of eating disorder, there is help out there for you.

When, ahead of the debate, I searched for "ARFID" and "eating disorders awareness week", I was particularly pleased to see that the first thing on Google was not a result—it was just the line:

"Help is available",

and underneath that, it said:

"Speak with someone today. Beat Eating Disorders."

Following that, there was a range of helplines, along with other contact information. That sends a

message to folk. I hope that it gets to those who need to see it, because those helplines and the Beat website are some of the best places that people can look to get help.

If members go to Beat's website, they will see—among so much helpful information, details of where to get support, training resources and much more—a section entitled "Your Stories".

One of those stories, "Frankie's Story", outlines exactly why this year's theme of ARFID is so important. I will share some of Frankie's story. Frankie says:

"I didn't realise I even had an eating disorder until I discovered the ARFID page on Beat's website. I'd felt so scared of food for a long time and yet, because I wasn't worried about my weight, neither me nor anyone else could pinpoint why I had felt like this. It had been suggested I had PTSD or OCD, but nothing quite explained the way I felt about food. When I finally found out about ARFID, you might think a diagnosis would've scared me more. But the truth is, I had a name for what I was feeling, and I found out that it's actually really common.

My eating disorder means that I'm scared of eating in case I'm ill and doesn't relate at all to my body image physically. It was really hard when I had this diagnosis (later by a professional too) but at least with my diagnosis I could now put it into words and share my experiences with people in my family."

Frankie goes on to say:

"Living with an eating disorder is really tough. It makes everyday harder and over-thinking comes into play at all times. I'm still in the process of recovering and whilst I'm so thankful for everyone who has helped me over the years, I also want to say well done to me".

I finish up on a similar note to Frankie's. Well done to Frankie for their progress and for openly talking about their ARFID to help to raise awareness. Well done also to Beat for all the excellent work that it is doing across Scotland to support folk and raise awareness.

To anyone who is worried about an eating disorder, whatever it is—whether it is ARFID, anorexia, bulimia, stress eating or something else, or you are just not quite sure—well done for recognising that. Please consider the offers of help that are available from Beat and elsewhere, which can support you on your journey to overcoming the condition.

17:36

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Emma Harper for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank everyone for their contributions, which have been interesting to listen to.

Like other parties, Scottish Labour supports the aims and objectives of eating disorder awareness week, which, as we have heard, was held from 26 February to 3 March. This year, there was a

particular focus on avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder, which, as we have heard, is more commonly known as ARFID. The condition is characterised by a person avoiding certain foods, restricting the overall amount eaten, or perhaps both. It can affect someone of any age, and occurs in children, teenagers and adults. As we heard in the previous contribution, people with ARFID may lose weight or have low weight, but that is not one of the criteria. It can occur when people have no necessity to think about their weight.

As we have heard, eating disorders are not uncommon. One in 50 people in Scotland and the wider UK is affected by them. We know that, tragically, their impact can be life changing for the individual and their family and friends, and, sadly, it can sometimes be fatal. It is good that, at times, the chamber focuses specifically on eating disorders. I know that many members who are here this evening and, according to my research, other members frequently put questions to the Government on the issue. It is right that we should do that.

Today, we are focusing on the experience of a condition that we know very little about. In my reflections before the debate, I remembered that, last year, we were able to produce statistics that told us that one in four people who experience eating disorders is a man. One in five of those men reported that they struggled to talk about the issue. It is different this year, in that we are talking about a little-known condition; it is unclear how many people are affected. That is important. We need to raise issues in the chamber that people are unaware of and are perhaps not being treated for.

My first indication about the disorder was when I caught the end of a television programme. A mother was talking about how she had been quite frantic, trying to get a diagnosis. Although her GP was kind and trying to be helpful, she felt dismissed. It was quite shocking to hear that, but it reminds us that, although eating disorders are prominent and serious, there can continue to be a taboo attached to them, particularly when people have a condition that is difficult to diagnose, difficult to discuss and difficult for health professionals to understand.

I thank Beat for its helpful website, which has already been mentioned. I refer members to it, because it tells us a bit about the condition. We have heard quotes about what it feels like for people suffering from the condition, and Elena Whitham very helpfully told us what it was like to be a family member.

It is essential that we, as MSPs, take seriously our role in raising awareness, fighting for funding for research and scrutinising the Government in delivering services. That is why it is important that

we bring a debate like this to the chamber and that we have the minister here to respond. I look forward to the minister's remarks on the direction of the eating disorders plan in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final speaker in the open debate is Kevin Stewart.

17:40

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I commend Emma Harper for securing the debate, which is now an annual debate to mark eating disorders awareness week. As always, I pay tribute to my friend Dennis Robertson MSP, who kicked off our having these debates, which allow us to raise awareness about eating disorders and about the terrible impact that they can have on people who are diagnosed as having them, and on all of us who have family, friends and loved ones who live with eating disorders.

As has been said, the focus of this year's eating disorders awareness week is avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. We have heard that ARFID is a condition that is

"characterised by the person avoiding certain foods or types of food, having restrictive intake in terms of overall amounts of eating, or both."

Ms Whitham's powerful speech went into real depth about the difficulties that people face, but I want to reiterate a point that has been made before and that cannot be repeated too often: ARFID is not "fussy eating". We have to get away from some of the old-fashioned ideas that are still out there.

I know that the Scottish Government has made a commitment to ensure that people with eating disorders get the support and treatment that they need. When I was a minister, I established the implementation group to drive forward the recommendations that came from the national review that took place in 2021. I would be grateful if the minister could provide us with an update on where the Government is in delivering the 15 recommendations that came from the review. I would also be obliged if the minister would indicate where we stand on data collection and on the status of the national eating disorders network, and if she would comment on whether the Government's resource allocation is meeting the demand for services, including the vital services that are provided by Beat.

In last year's debate, we heard that one in four people who develop an eating disorder is a man. I said then, regarding men, that we need to get awareness right, change attitudes and further reduce stigma, so that no one is afraid to come forward for help. I am not convinced that we are getting that right yet, for men. Unfortunately, I am hearing of more men and boys who are suffering

and who are not getting the help, support and treatment that they need and deserve. I urge the minister to look at what can be done to run an anti-stigma campaign that has a greater focus on men and boys, so that those folk are not afraid to come forward for the help and treatment that they deserve.

I again thank Emma Harper for lodging her motion, and I thank members—Elena Whitham, in particular—for the many powerful speeches that have been made today. I hope that the minister will, in her speech, which we are about to hear, address the points that I have made.

17:45

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I welcome this annual debate to mark eating disorders awareness week. It is really important to raise awareness of eating disorders and the substantial impact that they can have on people who are affected by them, and their families and friends.

I thank Emma Harper for lodging the motion this year and for focusing our minds on how significant the subject of eating disorders is. I assure Emma and all members across the chamber that this Government is committed to supporting people with eating disorders, including ARFID, to get the right support at the right time. We recognise that early diagnosis is absolutely vital in treating eating disorders, and that it is essential that people who are diagnosed receive a thorough assessment and get the right care and treatment for every aspect of their illness, as soon as possible.

I extend my thanks and appreciation to everyone across the country who works day in and day out to support recovery of people with eating disorders, and their families.

As we have heard today, the theme of this year's eating disorders awareness week is ARFID. If left untreated, ARFID can have very serious health consequences, including weight loss and poor nutrition, both of which can impact on growth and development in children, and cause poor health in adults.

As we have heard, ARFID is not an easily recognised condition, but Beat has reported a significant increase in the number of people who seek help. That is why I am pleased that we are providing Beat with more than £600,000 this year alone to provide a range of support services for people who are impacted by eating disorders. The support services include a range of self-help provision and peer-support groups. That partnership continues to be successful, and individuals who have used Beat's services say—as we have heard tonight—how important it is to

have access to a range of support throughout their recovery.

Before I go on to talk about the work that we have undertaken specifically to improve eating disorders services, it might be helpful for me to set out some of the wider policy context. As many members will be aware, last year the Scottish Government published our new “Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy” and the associated delivery plan. The vision that is set out in that strategy is of

“a Scotland, free from stigma and inequality, where everyone fulfils their right to achieve the best mental health and wellbeing possible.”

The actions in the delivery plan include the establishment of a national eating disorders network, as well as the publication of a national specification for eating disorders care and treatment. I will come on to talk about both those pieces of work in more detail.

Over the past three years, we have taken significant action to ensure that people who require support for an eating disorder can receive timely access to appropriate treatment, including by providing funding to NHS services and to the third sector, and by working with people with lived experience to deliver the recommendations from the national review of eating disorders services.

Since that review was published, we have made positive progress in delivering the short-term recommendations, and work is under way to deliver the remaining recommendations, including the development, for eating disorders services, of a national specification for care and treatment, which is due to be published later this year. Work is also under way to establish a national eating disorders network. I was delighted to appoint Professor Cathy Richards to chair the network, which will support delivery of the specification and the remaining recommendations from the national review.

I will bring us back to the theme of eating disorders awareness week. We have heard that ARFID is a complex condition that is not easily recognised and one that often presents alongside other mental health conditions and neurodivergence. I assure members that improving mental health services is an absolutely key priority for me and for the Scottish Government.

Clear standards are outlined within the recently published core mental health standards, which apply to all mental health services, including those that treat people who have eating disorders. I wish to use this opportunity to urge anyone who thinks that they might need support for an eating disorder to speak to their general practitioner so that they can access the right help as quickly as possible.

Let me pick up on some of the specific points that have been raised in the debate. To respond to Emma Harper and Kevin Stewart, we have made real progress on delivering the recommendations. We will be publishing national specifications later this year, and we have made progress in establishing the national eating disorder network. I am very happy to continue to work with the network to ensure that it is updated on progress.

On the rural areas question, Emma Harper will be aware that the subject is very close to my heart, because I, too, represent a rural area. We know that specialist treatment in remote and rural areas is difficult, so we were pleased to see the expanded use of digital appointments and other technology across Scotland during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the national specification standards are implemented, the national eating disorder network will welcome remote and rural health boards working together to provide specialist care and treatment to their populations. The network will definitely take that into consideration.

I absolutely agree with the points that have been made about stigma. As I have said before in the chamber, stigma is the bane of my life, because it prevents people from accessing the care and support that they require. We need a sustained effort to tackle stigma, including in relation to eating disorders—in particular, the less well-known eating disorders. Maurice Golden will be aware that we have paused before making a final decision on mandating calorie labelling. It has gone ahead in England, so we can potentially learn from what has happened there before we implement changes in Scotland.

I am sure that Maurice Golden would also welcome today's CAMHS data, which shows that there has been sustained improvement in access, with all but one of our health boards having eliminated long waits and with performance restored to—in fact, it is now better than—pre-pandemic levels. I certainly welcome that and am sure that members across the chamber will welcome it very much.

I again thank Emma Harper for lodging the motion for this afternoon's debate. I reiterate my support for and thanks to the staff who have been working tirelessly throughout to care for people with eating disorders and their families.

Meeting closed at 17:53.

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