



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 20 March 2025

Session 6



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CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
REVIEW OF THE EU-UK TRADE AND CO-OPERATION AGREEMENT	2

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Dr Frank Möschler (Scottish Government)

Angus Robertson (Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture)

Rachel Sunderland (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 20 March 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:34]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2025 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have apologies from George Adam and Keith Brown. We welcome back Jackie Dunbar. Alexander Stewart, our deputy convener, is attending stage 2 proceedings of the Housing (Scotland) Bill at another committee; he will join us if parliamentary business allows.

Our first agenda item is a decision on taking business in private. Do we agree to take item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Review of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement

09:34

The Convener: Our second item is our final evidence-taking session on the second phase of our inquiry into the review of the European Union-United Kingdom trade and co-operation agreement. Our witnesses are Angus Robertson, Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture; and, from the Scottish Government, Elliot Robertson, head of EU secretariat, external affairs; Rachel Sutherland, deputy director of population and migration; and Dr Frank Möschler, head of research, Scottish Government EU office, who joins us from Brussels. I give a warm welcome to you all.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make an opening statement.

Angus Robertson (Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture): Thank you very much, convener, and good morning, colleagues. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to the committee on the trade and co-operation agreement and to focus on trade in services and mobility. I welcome the committee's inquiry. Your previous report on trade and goods made a strong contribution to the debate on the impact of Brexit.

The Scottish Government's view is well known. The provisions that were made under the TCA represent a huge step backwards when compared with the benefits of European Union membership.

The changed international and UK economic situation demands an urgent change of course from the UK Government. It is becoming clearer by the day that being outside the European Union in the more volatile world leaves the UK and Scotland in an exposed and vulnerable position. This week, we have seen further evidence of the precarious position of the UK economy. In those circumstances, continuing the disastrous UK self-imposed exclusion from the European single market and customs union makes zero sense. There are clear moves towards greater European Union economic autonomy. That means, amid a possible global trade war, that the UK runs the risk of being marooned with no safe harbour. That cannot be in the interests of Scotland.

Within the parameters of the TCA, some limited improvements are still possible. In relation to trade in services, greater worker mobility and mutual recognition of professional qualifications in key sectors would help. The loss of mobility has had a particular impact on touring artists. Rejoining the Erasmus+ programme would make it easier for

our young people and students to study in the European Union and enhance their skills and qualifications.

The Scottish Government will continue to press for improvements to arrangements for co-operation with the European Union. To be clear, that means provisions that are much deeper and wider reaching.

From the evidence that you have taken so far, it is clear that the Scottish Government's priorities coincide in many cases with the priorities of stakeholders in business, education and civil society. In particular, it is critical that we come to a comprehensive and generous mobility agreement as swiftly as possible, and seek to rejoin key European programmes in order to redress harms and restore to our businesses and individuals at least some of what they have lost through Brexit.

To that effect, my ministerial colleagues and I will continue to work with key partners in Scotland on the proposed efforts to improve UK-EU relations. I expect to have a further meeting of the four nations interministerial group on UK-EU relations to press for Scotland's interests and I have offered to host that in-person meeting in Scotland. I have also recently travelled to Brussels to speak with key European Union partners as the EU continues to embed its new five-year cycle.

I remain committed to working closely with our fellow Europeans for the good of Scotland and for the rest of the UK and the European Union. To that end, I look forward to discussing these issues with you and other matters members might wish to raise.

Thank you very much.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I will start the questions. In the annexe of your letter to the committee, you say:

"The lack of progress on a number of key policy priorities is clearly disappointing".

You go on to describe the limits of the specialised committee process. What are your expectations for the forthcoming UK-EU summit, the TCA Partnership Council meeting and the next round of the specialist committees, and what would you like to see done differently?

Angus Robertson: I think that it is fair to observe two things. First, there has not been significant progress between the UK and the European Union so far. Secondly, preparations are under way in Brussels, London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast for forthcoming meetings in which more substantive progress can be made. That is the stage that we are at.

I observe that the UK Government has been taking the issue more seriously within

Government, which is welcome. There have been changes to the machinery in the UK Government to deal with that, including a new Cabinet committee on Europe, which the Prime Minister chairs.

Clearly, the UK Government is thinking about what is coming up. It would be remiss not to draw attention to the changing geostrategic peril that we all feel in Europe at present, and that dimension will perhaps loom larger in everybody's considerations, here and in the other capitals, of how we work together.

What can I imagine will be coming up? I can imagine that both the United Kingdom and the European Union will be focused on advancing shared interests in defence and security. We would very much welcome for there to be a joint statement on co-operation in that area.

I note that, overnight, the European Union has announced a very significant defence package, which is not open to the United Kingdom defence sector. That might change, were there to be a co-operation agreement between the UK and the EU. That is strong encouragement for that to happen. I think that there is goodwill on all sides to make progress in that area.

For the Scottish Government's part—I think that you have heard me make this point before—we have, for the longest time, advanced the need for what I call a food, drink and agriculture agreement. The terminology is important, because people might understand what that is as opposed to a "sanitary and phytosanitary agreement".

For those of us who have been speaking with our food and drink sector and our rural stakeholders, it seems that the general view is that it is very important that we should have such an agreement. We have been impressing that view on the UK Government and sharing it with European Union interlocutors.

There are other areas of common interest to the UK and the European Union: greater co-operation on energy and on law enforcement; addressing irregular migration; and perhaps having something like the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention for example. All those things might feature. Both sides have particular issues that might well be raised as part of the process. There is an expectation that the European Union is very keen to make progress on youth mobility, and we would share its interests in that. We will no doubt come back to that. There is also an expectation that fishing issues will be discussed, although there are no details about what that might involve. We very much hope that the UK Government will push for business mobility and mobility for touring artists.

We expect negotiations after the forthcoming summit to continue over the summer. We are not

aware of discussions between the parties as yet on the timing of the next TCA Partnership Council or on the spring round of specialised committees. I think that we are at the cusp of making progress. We have been making our priorities clear, and no doubt we can go into that in detail.

In fairness to my opposite number in the UK Government, Nick Thomas-Symonds has been impressing on me and colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland that the UK Government wants to take the priorities of devolved Administrations seriously. We are taking that at face value, and we very much hope that progress can be made on those matters as well as on the other areas that will be discussed.

The Convener: Thank you. I would also like to ask about mobility, which you mentioned, and, in particular, youth mobility. We recently heard from young people who face the challenges of studying in the EU outside the Erasmus+ scheme. We also heard from representatives of our culture sector about the impact on touring artists.

What would you like to say to the young Scots who feel that their life experiences are being damaged at the moment? How would they benefit if the UK were to rejoin the creative Europe programme?

09:45

Angus Robertson: The fact that the UK left Erasmus+ has been massively detrimental to young people. We remember, of course, that the UK Prime Minister at the time, Boris Johnson, gave an assurance to the House of Commons that that would not be the case. He said that the UK would remain in the Erasmus+ scheme and lauded what it had delivered for young people. I agree with him on that. I will say more about that once I have spoken about culture. The UK's withdrawal from Erasmus+ did not need to happen. It was unnecessary and was a form of self-harm from the point of view of younger people's life chances.

Similarly, the UK did not need to leave the creative Europe programme. Members of Scotland's creative community are absolutely clear about their desire for Scotland and the UK to be part of that programme. They look at other third countries that are members of it and see how those countries benefit from being part of it, and they do not understand why the UK is not.

I would strongly encourage the UK Government to look at both those areas, in the same way that the previous UK Government did in relation to the horizon programme, which is a similar programme for university and wider research. It was acknowledged that it was a big mistake to leave that programme. The university sector was keen to

rejoin it, and the most recent UK Conservative Government realised that the UK could again play a part in it.

I see Erasmus+ and creative Europe in exactly the same way. There is a willingness among European Union countries and institutions for the UK to rejoin those schemes. I very much hope that that will be the case because, for young people and people in our creative sector, that would go a long way to ending the self-harm that we have had to endure since Brexit. On a more positive note, it would enable us to mend and rebuild educational opportunities for young people to study and learn, and it would facilitate international co-operation for our creative sector.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to questions from members, starting with Patrick Harvie.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Good morning. I will start by asking about the process issues between the Governments that you mentioned, and I will then come back to youth mobility specifically.

The word "reset" is thrown around very easily, in relation to the UK Government's relations with the European Union and with the other Governments of the UK. I am not sure whether anyone has yet pinned down what the UK Government means by a "reset" in either of those spheres, but I would like to ask you to what extent you think that that is already happening. Is the UK Government's approach to the TCA and how it develops being generated as a result of a facilitated discussion between the Governments of the UK and other voices in the UK, or is the intergovernmental discussion, in effect, telling you what the UK Government's position is going to be?

Angus Robertson: Welcome back to the committee, Mr Harvie. It is nice to see you in your place. I will allow my civil service colleagues to collect any thoughts or reflections that they may have, because, as committee members will appreciate, most of the work that is done in preparation for and as part of such processes is driven at a working level by officials speaking to one another regularly. However, I will be happy to talk about my experience in dealing with UK Government colleagues and European interlocutors as part of the process.

The term "reset" is not liked in Brussels, but I think that we all understand what is meant by it, which is that intergovernmental relations between the UK and the EU, which were previously more fraught, should be less fraught and more positively aligned. Incidentally, the same approach should be taken between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations in the UK, because

those relations had been very bad under the previous UK Government.

When I have met colleagues in Brussels, they have reported that the still relatively new UK Government is definitely taking a different approach in its discussions with the EU. I would attest to the fact that, in the meetings that I have had, it is constantly stressed that we are in different territory and that the UK Government wants to listen. In that respect, it is a case of “So far, so good”.

I do not think that Mr Harvie was on the committee when I shared the insight of people in Brussels, who described the UK Government's position by referring to the Spice Girls. I am judging from Mr Harvie's face that he has not heard this before. EU colleagues said that they were not sure what the UK Government really wanted. They were saying, “Tell us what you want, what you really, really want.” That was the chat among everyone at events. They said that it was great that UK Government ministers were having conversations in which they said that the UK Government wanted to get on positively and that it was exploring various areas in which discussions could be held and agreement could be reached, but that there was a lack of clarity about what the UK Government actually wanted.

In fairness, when a new Government comes in, it has to understand where the previous Government got to and where the interlocutors in Brussels, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast are in relation to all that and to work out what the relative priorities are. With regard to the European Union, we have had European Parliament elections, a new Commission and new commissioners taking up their responsibilities, and I think that everyone has chosen to understand that backdrop as the reason why no substantive progress has yet been made on all those things. We have wished that process a fair wind.

I would characterise the conversations that I have had as follows. Colleagues have clearly and repeatedly expressed their views in similar terms. I met my opposite number, Lisa Nandy, who is the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, yesterday, and she started the conversation by saying, “The UK Government is very keen to work with the Scottish Government. Let's make sure that we can identify ...”, and so on. That is great, but we are getting to the stage where we need to move beyond terms such as “reset” and atmospherics. What is the UK Government actually going to seek to agree and when? At the same time, we must also bear in mind that a massive black swan has crossed in front of everybody's considerations in relation to defence and security.

Perhaps that will help everyone to understand—if they did not already realise it—why such areas of potential agreement really matter. It matters that one has good will. There will be different interests in those discussions, and I must hope—it has been reported back to us that this is the case—that the UK Government has taken our positions back. I have said this to the committee before, but I will do so again so that it is on the record. Improving professional mobility; securing EU-UK co-operation and the mutual recognition of professional qualifications; rejoining Erasmus+ and improving youth mobility; removing obstacles for touring artists; and improving migration arrangements to meet Scottish needs. Those things, which I listed in no particular order, are all things that we have asked the UK Government to take seriously.

Patrick Harvie: I am asking not whether you know what the UK Government really wants yet, but whether, as the UK Government determines what it wants, something akin to a co-decision-making process between the Governments of the UK is emerging. Are you in the position of lobbying someone else who will make the decision, or is there a process of deciding together what our shared priorities are?

Angus Robertson: No, there is not a co-decision mechanism in the United Kingdom. Sadly, that is not how the devolution settlement works. That, of course, was the advantage of the European Union. As a member state of the EU, we were formally part of a co-decision process, which also involved directly elected parliamentarians. We do not have that. We have an assurance that the UK Government will listen to the priorities of the Scottish and Welsh Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive, and that that will inform the UK's negotiating position, but there is no formal mechanism whatsoever for decisions to be made jointly.

Patrick Harvie: Is there an informal approach that seeks to achieve that, or is the process fundamentally unchanged?

Angus Robertson: I remember the Scottish electorate being promised the closest possible thing to federalism. That is how these things work. The federal system that countries such as Germany and Austria have involves the Länder as part of the decision-making process, but that is not the case in the UK.

Patrick Harvie: If I can move on to a practical example—

The Convener: I am sorry, Patrick, but Neil Bibby has a supplementary on that area.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): You quoted the Spice Girls. The Rolling Stones had the song “You Can't Always Get What You Want”.

Obviously, in negotiations, there will be a need for concessions and compromises on both sides. You mentioned all the issues that the Scottish Government wanted to be included in the trade and co-operation agreement. You said that you listed them “in no particular order”. Does the Scottish Government have a priority list? In the same way that the UK Government would look at priorities, has the Scottish Government considered what its priorities on that list are?

Angus Robertson: I do not have numbers next to the points that were raised, but it is clear that an agriculture, food and drink agreement and an SPS agreement would have a significant impact across our economy and would be important for our rural sector and our exports. I happen to think that the UK Government views that as one of the major priorities, although it has never said it like that.

Therefore, we are in a similar position. We are not at the stage of not getting everything that we want. We are not even at the stage of knowing what everybody’s relative priorities are, because we are at the stage of seeking to ascertain what those priorities are. However, I have made it clear that an agriculture, food and drink agreement is very important. Everything else is significant.

I do not see any technical or political reason why all those things are not deliverable. I cannot speak to what the European Union’s position on such matters will be. I know that the EU is very keen on mobility and on young people from the EU and the UK being able to enjoy the benefits of living, working and studying in one another’s countries, and I happen to agree with that. However, it is too early for me to be able to read the runes for Mr Bibby on the relative positions of the UK Government. We have talked about how important all these things are.

It is clear that all issues will bring advantages and disadvantages for different sides in a negotiation, but there are some aspects of this process in relation to which I see no downside whatsoever. Let us take the creative Europe programme, for example. I cannot see any downside to the UK being part of that. Thirteen other states and territories outside the EU are part of creative Europe. In our creative sector, co-operation with other parts of Europe is extremely important. In the screen sector, which is an area that Mr Bibby and I share a commitment to, co-production—working with other commissioning broadcasters and film and TV companies—is important. Anyone you speak to in that world will say, “We absolutely need to be part of creative Europe.” I have not heard a single person, in any context—whether in Scotland or the UK—question that, so, with a bit of luck, some of these things need not be complicated at all.

Other areas are also important. I have not yet mentioned energy. Energy matters greatly because of the geostrategic situation that we find ourselves in. Parts of the European continent are dependent on gas, and countries such as Germany are moving as quickly as they can away from being dependent on gas to hydrogen. They cannot produce enough hydrogen. Who can produce hydrogen? Northern European countries, including Scotland, can. It is really important for the UK Government to understand that issues around energy matter to us as well. However, that is a more complicated issue.

I concede that some things are much easier to deliver than others. On matters on which there are technical questions, the process might take a bit longer. In principle, however, I think that everything that we have said should be a priority from our point of view should be eminently deliverable. I am not in a position to answer on the relative order that the UK Government or, indeed, EU colleagues would give to those matters, but I will be happy to come back later in the process to talk about that.

10:00

Patrick Harvie: Thank you, convener. I will take as an example youth mobility, which you have touched on briefly, to understand how the process is working. We have seen conflicting news reports in recent weeks about whether the UK Government is changing or preparing to change its position on a youth mobility scheme. It is no great secret that I would like a maximal answer to that. I think the loss of freedom of movement is tragic. It is bad for our economy and society and there is a basic injustice in the fact that a generation of people who enjoyed freedom of movement have deprived the younger generation of that freedom.

However, in reality we are likely to see, if anything, a more modest change than the full restoration of the freedom of movement. Is the UK Government actively engaging the Scottish Government and other Governments within the UK in discussions on youth mobility? I hear support for it from the Scottish Government. We know that the Welsh Government has tried to make progress on it and wants to do more. We hear employers, trade unions and economists calling for it. The range of voices seeking a serious youth mobility scheme is broad and diverse and it seems as though the only voice in the room that is unwilling to say where it is going to go with this is the UK Government’s. Is the decision about where the UK should go being reached collectively, with the voice of the Scottish Government and other Scottish voices being heard, or not?

Angus Robertson: Our position has definitely been heard. I know that because the minister in

question has acknowledged that the priorities that we and other devolved Governments in the UK share are things on which we have been listened to.

We are all political practitioners so we have to acknowledge that the UK Government is wrestling with how to deal with immigration as an issue and is feeling the political heat from the populist right. I think that that is a significant part of the reason why there is nervousness in the UK Government about anything that might create an impression that the doors are being opened to more people to arrive, if I can put it like that. That is not where the debate about mobility or migration is in Scotland—it is just a different reality. From a Scottish point of view, I see the danger that mobility and migration are simply relegated in importance because of the UK Government's political position on the issue.

This goes back a little bit to Mr Bibby's question about different people's positions in the discussions. I foresee circumstances where a UK Government might say, "We want an agriculture, food and drink agreement, an SPS agreement" and the European Union might say, "That is very interesting. We are not disinterested in doing such a thing but we are very interested in a mobility agreement for young people". That is an example of where one might see different relative priorities of the European Union and of the UK Government. It just happens to be that on this question, the Scottish Government's position is more aligned with that of the European Union.

Are we formally part of that trade-off, if I can call it that? No, we are not. Should we be? Absolutely yes, we should. That is what happens in other European countries. Indeed, the electorate here was promised—was it not?—that we would be in the closest position to a federal position, and that is what federal government involves.

Having said that, I am a pragmatist. If I can, I want to encourage UK Government colleagues to understand that youth mobility is a good thing and to realise the damage that has been done by limiting young people's opportunities and what that is doing in our universities and our schools—the fact that they are now almost totally bereft of language assistants is just one example of the end of the freedom of movement, and it is a thoroughly bad thing. Those things could be remedied through a mobility agreement. I think that the UK Government is trying; if it is going to have to agree to something like that, it wants it to sound more limited, rather than giving the impression of its being too wide.

Patrick Harvie: One of the ideas that the UK Government appears to have floated in briefing certain parts of the press to report where it might be going with this is directly relevant to devolved responsibilities. It is around access to the national

health service: if there was a youth mobility scheme, it would involve big up-front fees for the participants to access healthcare. If that was the way the UK Government went—if that was what it wanted to achieve—it would require a degree of negotiation with the Scottish Government around its devolved responsibilities.

I seek your assurance that the Scottish Government's position will not be to commoditise access to healthcare in that way and that the Scottish Government would always argue against up-front fees for young people who are being welcomed to this country to be able to access healthcare?

Angus Robertson: I am in favour of a public healthcare system that is free at the point of access for anybody who requires it, and I would expect that for young Scottish people anywhere else in Europe. I hope that that answers your question.

Patrick Harvie: And for young European people coming to Scotland?

Angus Robertson: That is what I would wish. I would want to maintain the principle that we believe in access to public healthcare that does not involve paying for it.

Rachel Sunderland (Scottish Government): The immigration health surcharge applies to almost all visa routes, including all the existing youth mobility routes. There is a requirement for individuals who come through those routes to pay the immigration health surcharge; it has been a fairly long-standing part of those. The Scottish Government's position is that Scottish ministers do not consider that the immigration health surcharge is a helpful part of the immigration system because, in large part, it requires individuals to pay for healthcare twice; they are paying through their taxation while also paying through the immigration health surcharge.

A consequential element of the immigration health surcharge comes to the NHS in Scotland.

Patrick Harvie: The only point to add is that the argument has a stronger bite, if you like, in relation to a youth mobility scheme because if somebody is accessing a visa to come for their career, they are expecting to earn money while they are here, whereas somebody accessing a youth mobility scheme is likely to be somebody who does not have the resources. To achieve its objectives, a youth mobility scheme should be open and accessible to the maximum number of young people, not only to those who can come up with the cash.

Angus Robertson: I am very sympathetic to the point that Mr Harvie makes. It is a matter of basic principle. We pay for the health system

through our taxes and I believe that we have an intergenerational responsibility. I would wish that young Scots who are able to live and work and are using a youth mobility scheme in the rest of Europe would not be disadvantaged and that what is true for them would, by necessity, also be true for Europeans.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Where to begin? Can we, first of all, ascertain the view of not just the cabinet secretary, but perhaps especially of Dr Frank Möschler, who I think is in Brussels? Has the Windsor framework agreement made a difference to the tone of the way that things are happening between the UK Government and the European Union in Brussels, in particular the institutions in Brussels?

I had the opportunity to visit one of our world-class research centres in Scotland this week, and I was heartened to hear from it that, since the Windsor framework agreement, there has been an almost complete change of atmosphere around research funding, project lead status and so forth. I ask you to respond first, cabinet secretary, but I would like to hear from Dr Möschler as well.

Angus Robertson: I have already said that I think there has been a difference in tone, and not just because of a new Government that is saying that it is keen on a reset. I have said before, and not just at this evidence session, that the previous UK Conservative Government, which Mr Kerr supported, was absolutely right to go back into Horizon. Like many other European programmes, Horizon is one in which our institutions were really big participants—disproportionately so, relative to the rest of the United Kingdom, in many respects.

For me, there is a very good reason and rationale for that. Incidentally, we have other programmes that have proven themselves in many different ways—take, for example, Erasmus+, where, in terms of headcount, we in Scotland had disproportionate take-up and participants from more deprived backgrounds relative to the rest of the UK.

I am making the point that I think that, on this issue, Mr Kerr is right. It is a rare thing for me to agree with him. Please can that be minuted to make sure that the record shows it to be so?

Stephen Kerr: Oh my goodness! I hope that the official reporters are catching this.

Angus Robertson: The logic of Mr Kerr's position is irresistible in as much as what was right for Horizon is right for Erasmus+ and is right for creative Europe. Those are three programmes that proved successful while we were in the European Union, and they have proven successful for countries that are participants but that are no

longer in the EU—such as in our case—or were not ever part of the EU.

Mr Kerr did not name which institution he was visiting that was singing the praises of increased research funding and co-operation and all that, but I am sure that its experience is one that we would, in years to come, hear about from participants in Erasmus+ if the UK were to rejoin it and it is what we would be hearing about from the creative sector if the UK were to rejoin creative Europe.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary. He is saying that I am right about things that he is putting forward, but—interestingly—I do not necessarily wholeheartedly agree with everything he says that I am right about. I am interested in the—

Angus Robertson: Did you want to hear from Dr Möschler?

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I wanted to come to Dr Möschler, because I am interested in—

The Convener: Mr Kerr, I would just point out that the cabinet secretary is giving evidence, and the officials are there to support him in that.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, that is why I asked the cabinet secretary—

Angus Robertson: It is fine; I would be delighted to hear from Dr Möschler. I should say, incidentally, that in this whole discussion, it is important to understand that our efforts in trying to have co-operative discussions with the UK Government and with European Union interlocutors are made significantly easier by having top-class representation both in London, in Scotland House, and Brussels—in an office that, incidentally, was set up by the Conservatives a number of decades ago—and by having a talented team on the ground who are best able to understand all information that we have to have about these important processes.

With that, I hand over to Dr Möschler and put on record my appreciation of him and his colleagues in Scotland House and Brussels.

Stephen Kerr: And the Conservative Government that set up the office—brilliant.

Angus Robertson: That, too.

Dr Frank Möschler (Scottish Government): Many thanks for the question. Very briefly, it is fair to say that the implementation of the Windsor framework is a key factor for the EU, and the steps that were taken to implement it have been warmly welcomed on this side. It unblocked the horizon association and a number of other aspects, and that is a signal from the EU of how strongly it feels about this.

It is fair to say that throughout, and even now, implementation of the Windsor framework remains a very high political imperative on the European Union side. The EU is constantly evaluating progress and considering the framework in all aspects of the work that it does, and in its relationship with the UK Government. It is fair to say that implementation of the Windsor framework has been mentioned in pretty much every exchange of correspondence with the European Commission.

The issue is important for the EU, and I would argue that the continued implementation is the other factor that we must keep in mind as we move forward. I hope that that answers the question.

Stephen Kerr: That is helpful.

Angus Robertson: There is an important point of context in that regard, following on from the Windsor agreement, which relates to border controls between the UK and the European Union. As we know, the UK has not fully implemented a border control regime and it will have to do so.

This is one of the areas where it seems to me that, again, enlightened self-interest on everybody's part has a role to play. Having an agriculture, food and drink agreement, if one were able to reach such a thing before the UK might have to introduce its full border regime, would obviate a lot of additional complications for our exporters and, indeed, those who import. It is important to recognise that that would be to the advantage of the food, drink and agriculture sectors in Scotland, the rest of the UK and the European Union. There is a virtuous circle there. We must acknowledge that that is part of a wider process but would also reduce the risks of greater friction.

I know that you have already heard evidence that there has already been a significant negative impact on the import and export of goods, and, if there were not an agriculture, food and drink agreement—an SPS agreement—which would obviate a very high percentage of requirements for border controls, there would be an even more negative impact were one to see border controls implemented, as the UK Government would need to do. That is why it is in all of our interests, as part of this process that we have been talking about here today, for an agreement to be reached in this area.

Stephen Kerr: The cabinet secretary knows that I believe that we should implement border controls in order to create an appropriate level playing field and a quid pro quo. At the moment, we are not in a particularly strong position when it comes to negotiating things, given that we have

not implemented the original agreement—we probably agree on that.

I am concerned about the implications of any reopening of negotiations—well, let us be clear that the TCA is not going to be reopened; and I agree that the word “reset” is completely overused and is probably best not repeated. However, I want to ask you, as a Government minister, about a bit of the document that came to us following last week's EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. It concerns the element of sanitary and phytosanitary agreements, which you rename for the understanding of everyone who listens to you. It describes the discussions that are about to happen and talks about the value of

“providing a signal at or before the Summit”—

that is, the initial summit that reviews all of this—

“that a fair deal on fisheries will be reached,”

I read that with some alarm, to be frank. As you know, over the past couple of years, the Scottish fishing industry has been having a bit of a bumper time, with record catches in places such as Peterhead. I am concerned that we are going to repeat the mistakes of the past when it comes to access to UK territorial waters and fishing rights.

Do you agree with my concerns? Do you agree that the UK Government ought not to be giving away rights that we have only just recovered and that the benefit of our current position is not only that the fishing industry is having a bumper time but that we have an opportunity to invest in the onshore infrastructure around fishing, particularly with regard to processing?

Angus Robertson: First, I would to say to Mr Kerr that I am keen not to re-write history and misrepresent the facts around fishing. The situation is not as Mr Kerr has presented it. Brexit left the Scottish fishing industry with access to fewer of the important fish stocks than it had under the common fisheries policy; the industry group Salmon Scotland reported that Brexit cost Scotland around £75 million in 2023 in lost salmon exports to the European Union; and leaving the European Union has ended freedom of movement, contributing to an estimated 20 per cent to 25 per cent of vacancies being unfilled throughout the seafood industry.

Stephen Kerr: I am asking about the fish quote.

Angus Robertson: To quote the Scottish Fishermen's Federation:

“The fishing industry in Scotland paid a heavy price for the Brexit deal in the first place.”

I could go on to say that the deal was desperately poor—

Stephen Kerr: You are quoting very selectively.

Angus Robertson: I am quoting the head of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, who wrote to the Prime Minister saying that the deal was "desperately poor", generating

"huge disappointment and a great deal of anger about the failure to deliver on promises made repeatedly to the industry."

Stephen Kerr: That was five years ago. What I am talking about is the current health of the Scottish fishing industry. You are talking about salmon, but I am talking about fishing.

Angus Robertson: We do not want to omit key parts of the facts about the negative impact that Brexit has had on the fishing industry across the piece.

Stephen Kerr: I am contesting that, because we are having record catches.

Angus Robertson: To answer Mr Kerr's question about negotiations, there are no details about the wishes for any potential changes to the fishing regime on the part of either the UK Government or the European Union.

Stephen Kerr: Can I interrupt you?

Angus Robertson: No, you cannot, because I am speaking through the chair. In doing so, I am finishing my answer by saying that, as soon as any formal positions are outlined by the European Union or the UK Government, I will be happy to update the committee on them. I have seen none so far. I have no doubt that issues around fisheries will come up at some point. That is what Mr Kerr has reported to the committee today, and I do not disagree with that. However, the issue as such has not formed any formal part of conversations that I have had with the UK Government or, indeed, with European Union interlocutors. I do not doubt that it will come up as an issue formally at some stage, but it is not formally part of discussions at present.

Stephen Kerr: I am surprised to hear that, because I think that it is commonly understood that one of the key asks of the EU in this review will be about improved access to fishing grounds. I generally regard Angus Robertson as one of the most informed cabinet secretaries that we have in the Scottish Government, so I am surprised that he does not seem to be aware of that fact, given that the fact that fishing rights are on the line features in every report that has ever been published on the topic. I hope that he will—

The Convener: Mr Kerr, please, we have had the cabinet secretary's response, and it would be good if you did not reinterpret what he is saying.

Stephen Kerr: That is what I am here to do. It is my job to interpret what he is saying, convener. That is exactly why we have committees. We saw

a great example of that in the Education, Children and Young People Committee yesterday.

The Convener: Only if you are representing the witnesses' contribution.

I want to ask a supplementary question on the issue, just before I bring Mr Kerr back in. The most recent trade figures have shown that the food and drinks industry's exports to Europe have reduced by two thirds since the implementation of Brexit. The industry feels that that is partly because the Europeans are not subject to the same pressures as our producers, because of the lack of border controls. If the border controls were implemented, do you think that there would be an industry swell lobbying the EU side of these negotiations to have a better deal, given that those producers would feel the same pressures that have resulted in two thirds of our trade being lost?

Angus Robertson: We were talking about fishing and seafood a moment ago, so I will use that sector as an example. The export of Scottish seafood to markets such as France or Spain is extremely important, and time is of the essence in that regard, as seafood needs to be very fresh and exports should happen very quickly. If the UK Government were to introduce border controls that led to any delay in exporting, it would cause massive problems in that sector. That is why I have said that it is in the interests of Scotland, the rest of the UK and the European Union to have an agriculture, food and drink agreement—an SPS agreement—that will obviate the necessity for high-handed border controls, which is what will come in unless there is a deal.

It would be good for us not to get ahead of ourselves but to understand that this is perhaps a moment in time when there is an opportunity to reach a good agreement. It does not compare with being part of the common market, with being part of the single market, or being a member state of the European Union, but out of the bad situation that we have found ourselves in, which has had a negative impact on the fishing sector in Scotland, we could perhaps, as part of the negotiations, reach an agreement that will insure the industry against a worsening of its situation because of border controls that are yet to be introduced.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring Mr Kerr back in.

Stephen Kerr: I will leave fish behind and move on to the subject of inquiry, which is trade in services. We learned from evidence that was presented to the committee that there has been a healthy increase of 9 per cent in service exports from the United Kingdom to the European Union, compared with an increase of 13 per cent in service exports to the rest of the world. I ask the cabinet secretary outright whether he accepts that,

despite what he might want to believe—I respect his beliefs, of course—the evidence suggests that the service sector has continued to grow rather healthily in terms of the trade that we do between Scotland, the United Kingdom and the EU.

Angus Robertson: I have no doubt that parts of the service sector have been trading very well. We should encourage that, and that is exactly what the Scottish Government and its agencies do.

It is also fair to say that there are impediments and that we should take the opportunity of reducing them, if we can. I hope that Mr Kerr agrees that there is no artificial ceiling to our ambition in supporting the Scottish service sector. In relation to professional recognition of qualifications or the provision of legal services, there are undoubtedly constraints and downsides, which have been evidenced to the committee.

Yes, there is a difference between trade in services and trade in goods with the European Union—that is a statement of fact. It is also a statement of fact that there are impediments. I would not want to downplay those areas and say that they are insignificant and do not matter because some parts of the sector are doing okay. I encourage our UK Government colleagues to work out ways in which we can ensure that, where there are constraints and impediments in the service sector that have technical solutions, the UK and the EU can reach agreement on those solutions.

Stephen Kerr: We have looked at one of the issues that you mentioned, which is mutual recognition of qualifications. We have had interesting evidence from a number of people—I have no doubt that they are experts in their fields—including Professor Catherine Barnard of the University of Cambridge. From my professional experience, I can vouch that what she told us is true. She said that

“even when we were in the EU, the mutual recognition provisions did not work terribly well, because there is a lot of vested interest in each state to ensure that its people get the jobs and professions and that those are not very open to other people. The legal profession is a good example of that.”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 21 November 2024; c 16.]

We have that problem even in the UK, because of the different jurisdictions in Scotland and England.

I agree with the cabinet secretary that we want to smooth out any rough edges of free trade, and I am all for free trade, as he well knows. Does he accept that the issue was a problem before the UK left the EU and that, regardless of whether we are in the EU, a lot of work therefore needs to be done to push forward bilateral recognition of professional qualifications?

We were given the example of architects. Architects in the United Kingdom and those in the

European Union agreed that they would accept each other’s qualifications, which is fair and good, and then the European Union said no.

10:30

Angus Robertson: Yet again—and for the record—I agree with Mr Kerr that the recognition of professional qualifications was a challenge while we were in the European Union and that it remains a challenge now that we are no longer in the European Union. Of course there is self-interest on the part of countries in and around the issue. I agree with Mr Kerr that that is not a reason not to try to make progress. If decisions were made in the past that did not progress recognition and were mistaken, that is no reason not to return to them.

However, we also need to be aware of the internal UK aspect. Because the UK has different legal jurisdictions, as Mr Kerr said, it is a case in point that we have different professional qualifications in the UK. That makes my point, which is that trade is a reserved matter. We are bound by the actions that the United Kingdom Government takes, including the passing of legislation on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, such as the Professional Qualifications Act 2022, which is a UK Parliament act.

Trade policy is reserved, but the 2022 act was passed without the legislative consent of the Scottish ministers. When Mr Kerr brings up examples of where progress has not been made with European Union institutions, I point out that there have been such difficulties in the United Kingdom. I underline that we should take the opportunity, given that we can do so at this moment, to make progress on all such things. If there is cross-party agreement, I very much welcome it.

I know that Scottish professional bodies are closely involved in all of this. The committee has heard from the Law Society of Scotland and the Faculty of Advocates, and others are also involved. To the same end, Scottish Government officials are engaging regularly with counterparts in the Department for Business and Trade.

Stephen Kerr: As I think the cabinet secretary knows, I am an advocate for improved and more clearly defined intergovernmental and interparliamentary relations in the United Kingdom to make the state work better for citizens. I am all for that.

My last question is about youth mobility. I have listened to what Angus Robertson said and I do not doubt his sincere belief in the advantages of improved youth mobility, but that begs an obvious question. I know that he sits here as the Cabinet

Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, but if everything that he has said is true—I do not doubt that it is; I, too, believe in the advantages of youth mobility—why on earth has the Scottish Government done next to nothing to tackle the issue, compared with the example that the Welsh Government has set with Taith? Taith is a huge success, and I pay tribute to the Welsh Government for its vision and ambition and for the pace at which it has implemented a really successful exchange programme to complement the Turing scheme.

Let us be frank that the Scottish Government has done nothing with the Scottish education exchange programme. Where is the ambition? Where is the vision? Where is the passion about youth mobility that Angus Robertson rightly expressed earlier? Addressing that is well within the Scottish Government's competence. Next to no money has been spent; the idea has just been tinkered with. In comparison with the Welsh ambition, the Welsh efforts and the Welsh budget for exchange, we are embarrassed, are we not? Are you not embarrassed?

Angus Robertson: No—I am not. I do not accept the characterisation that Mr Kerr gave. I stress again that there have been efforts to find workarounds for the foolhardy UK position of leaving Erasmus+, following the previous UK Conservative Government's pledge that we would remain part of it. Since then, the Scottish education exchange programme has been established to support Scottish education institutions to develop stronger international partnerships with other institutions following the loss of Erasmus+. We continue to seek out the best means to create opportunities for Scottish learners to enjoy international opportunities.

We have looked very closely at the Taith scheme, which Mr Kerr drew attention to. It is absolutely clear to us that there is no comparison to Erasmus+. If one looks at the amount of money spent and the impact when compared with Erasmus+ previously, there is no substitute for Erasmus+.

If colleagues wish me to, I can write in greater detail so that members can see the clear facts about the number of students who have been involved, the number of institutions that have been involved, the funding that has been delivered or not delivered by the Turing scheme and how the Taith scheme compares with all of that.

It is clear that the best solution for us in Scotland is not to replicate something that works; it is to be part of the thing that works, which is Erasmus+. The good news for Mr Kerr is that that is on the table. The European Union has said that it is open to the United Kingdom being a part of that and is keen for that. In the same way as Mr

Kerr rallied to support the United Kingdom's call to rejoin the horizon programme, I call on him and everybody else to realise that, although I have no doubt that people with the best of intentions have tried to ensure that the Turing scheme and the Taith scheme make up for the disadvantage of leaving Erasmus+, they do not.

That is why I will not be diverted from the Scottish Government's position, which is to impress on the UK Government why it is so important to take the opportunity—the offer—of rejoining Erasmus+. The plus is there for a reason. The scheme involves much more than just the ability of students to study in different countries; it has an impact on our wider education system and much more besides. I would wish young people in Scotland and our education institutions—our universities, colleges and schools—to be a part of all of that. I am happy to write to the committee if you think that that would be useful, convener.

Stephen Kerr: I would like Angus Robertson to write to explain why the Scottish Government has done nothing.

Angus Robertson: I have already answered that question and said that we have acted.

Stephen Kerr: You have not—you have just gone on to a politically inspired description. I would really like to know how the Welsh Government, with a much smaller budget and a smaller population, can commit £65 million to Taith, which has involved 15,000 young people from Wales participating in exchanges and 10,000 international participants coming to Wales, while the Scottish Government has spent a grand total of £2 million in two years, which is £1 million a year, and to focus on what? We do not even know how many young people have been involved with SEEP. Why has the Scottish Government not even bothered at all? Angus Robertson passionately believes in youth mobility.

The Convener: Mr Kerr, this is veering into the education aspect of these things. It is not relevant to—

Stephen Kerr: It is part of youth mobility. When we heard evidence from the Taith representative, we asked whether they had interacted with any representative of the Scottish Government.

The Convener: We have to acknowledge that our Scottish students have accessed the Turing scheme.

Stephen Kerr: They have.

The Convener: I am going to move on now, if that is okay.

Angus Robertson: Convener, with your permission, can I help with Mr Kerr's lack of knowledge in this area? I draw his attention to the

fact that the Welsh Labour Government has said publicly that it would welcome the United Kingdom Government entering into discussions with the European Union about rejoining Erasmus+.

Stephen Kerr: That is not the same thing.

Angus Robertson: I think that that answers the point about which scheme is best and which approach is best. The Scottish Government's position is that rejoining Erasmus+ is where we would wish to be. Thank you.

Stephen Kerr: Convener, I am asking questions of the cabinet secretary because he is here to account for the Scottish Government's performance. In comparison with the other devolved Government on the island of Great Britain—the Welsh Government—we have done nothing on youth mobility. The cabinet secretary is, rightly, enthused by the idea of youth mobility, but he has done nothing about it.

My last question in this area—

The Convener: I am going to move on. I will come back to you if we still have time, but other members wish to come in.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thought that that was your last last question, Mr Kerr.

I have been listening very intently to what the cabinet secretary has been saying today. As I am a substitute member, please forgive me if I do not get things completely correct. My view is that the UK's exit from the EU has negatively impacted the outward and inward mobility of Scottish and EU students. The data that I have looked at showed that, in the past, Scottish students were the most mobile across the four nations in the UK. EU exit has had a negative impact, in that they are no longer so mobile. When they were the most mobile, unemployment was lower among those who had participated in the mobility schemes compared with those who had not, and I understand that, in most cases, the salaries of those who had gone into the mobility programmes were higher.

Cabinet secretary, you have said previously that you were pleased to hear about the Conservative UK Government reaching agreement on the horizon programme, and that you would be keen to see that happen with Erasmus+, creative Europe and mobility. Do you believe that that can be done?

Angus Robertson: Yes, I absolutely believe that it can be done, because when we deal with the facts—as opposed to the rhetoric that we have heard from some quarters this morning—it is obvious that there is no comparison between the UK's Turing and Taith schemes and Erasmus+. Between 2014 and 2020, Scottish universities

were awarded on average €12.1 million per year through Erasmus+. Scottish universities are currently awarded less than half that value—just over £5 million—through the Turing scheme, and they are also becoming less competitive at securing funding for mobility.

If we are to deal with the scale of the challenge, I think that it is important that we acknowledge the facts. Data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service shows that, between 2016 and 2024, there was an 81 per cent decrease in the number of acceptances by EU-domiciled students of places at Scottish universities. The largest decrease in EU acceptances came in 2021, which coincided with a change in student support for EU students. We expect the 2023-24 figures to be published during this committee session, and we expect a further decline in the number of EU students.

I make a final point for the record, so that everybody has the facts at their disposal. The loss of Erasmus+ funding is greater than just the impact on universities. For example, in the final year of Scotland's last Erasmus+ cycle, £26.4 million was awarded across Scotland's education sector. In the current year of the Turing scheme, Scottish institutions have been awarded £6.9 million. It should be obvious to us all that the Turing scheme and the Taith scheme are not a match for being part of the Erasmus+ programme.

The good news—in the context of this evidence session, at this time, given the early discussions that are about to take place on a more formal basis—is that being part of Erasmus+ is on the table and on offer from the European Union. If we were to listen to our institutions—our universities and those in the wider education sector—they would tell us, as they have told you, how much they would wish to be part of the Erasmus+ programme. That is why the Scottish Government is making that point to the UK Government.

10:45

Jackie Dunbar: Can you give an update? What has the engagement been?

Angus Robertson: This is my initial update for the committee. The engagement and the tone of the engagement have been good. What is more difficult to understand is the relative priorities of the UK Government. That was Mr Bibby's question, and it was a good question but we do not know the answer to it.

There has been some effort to work out what the European Union's emerging position is going to be, what the UK's emerging position is going to be and where there might be trade-offs. Going back to Mr Harvie's questions about process and where we fit in, the situation facing us is uncertain

and, effectively, ad hoc. At least we are invited to attend meetings and are told that we are being listened to. What is not yet apparent is the extent to which negotiations will occur on our behalf.

It is true to say that there was a much higher preponderance of Scottish institutions and Scottish students taking up places in Erasmus+. Therefore, being part of Erasmus+ might be viewed by others as being less of a priority for them than it is for us. We are trying to impress on the UK Government that it is not just a financial decision; it is also about goodwill. It is not just about Scottish students being able to study elsewhere in Europe, but about European Union students being able to study here. We have seen an 81 per cent drop—we have caught up with those numbers, but only in part, and the students concerned are from countries and parts of the world that bring challenges. For example, the biggest single international cohort of students in Edinburgh now comes from the People's Republic of China. We should be looking closely at how we can support our universities. The international student cohort is very important for them, and being part of Erasmus+ would help with that.

The Convener: Thank you. I think Dr Möschler wants to come in.

Dr Möschler: Yes, please. The cabinet secretary mentioned the statistics that were to be published today. They have just come out, and they show that, for Scotland, EU student enrolments have decreased by 21 per cent this year, and we have seen non-EU student enrolments decrease by 10 per cent. Therefore, this is the sixth year running that EU student numbers have decreased. I just thought that I would add that.

Angus Robertson: For the record, the decrease is therefore worse than 81 per cent, which should give us all cause for concern.

The Convener: I want to talk about Erasmus exchanges with educational institutions. I attended New College Lanarkshire's celebration of its international work. It is involved with more than 20 countries through outreach in delivering nursing and dental training, and lecturers are given the opportunity to get involved. We used to also have the Comenius teacher exchange, which was run through the British Council. How important are exchange programmes for Scotland's education sector, and for further and higher education?

Angus Robertson: You raise a very good point. We have been talking a lot about student numbers, the student experience, the opportunity to study in other countries and the advantages of doing so. In addition, the fact is that a more significant proportion of students from a deprived background in Scotland were able to take part in

such programmes than was the case elsewhere. However, there is also a direct and indirect impact on those who teach in our educational institutions. As we know, over the decades, we have benefited from a significant number of our university and college lecturing staff coming from European Union countries.

We have witnessed a significant decline in the numbers of European Union students coming here, and one of my fears is that we will see the same impact on our teaching staff from European Union countries. That should give us all cause for concern. We want the best teaching staff, from everywhere in the world, to come to work in Scotland. Anything that would lead to a decline in the number of academics from European Union countries working here would be a concern for us, and we have observed observe the beginnings of a trend in that respect.

The Convener: Most of the work that was done by the college was SEEP-funded. For an area such as my own constituency, with its high levels of deprivation, that onward journey through further education colleges is vital, and they do a wonderful job at trying to keep those links together.

Neil Bibby: I go back to the topic of Erasmus replacements and the SEEP programme. Cabinet secretary, you said that the Scottish Government wanted much deeper and wider-reaching co-operation agreements with the European Union. Following on from Mr Kerr's question, I think that there are questions about that, given the rhetoric. I appreciate that the Scottish Government has not done nothing, but there is a significant difference between 36 SEEP projects and 199 Taith projects. The Scottish Government's stated position is to have much closer relations and co-operation, but it has not done anything like as much as the Welsh Labour Government has with the Taith programme. Why is that?

You said that Taith and Turing are not a full replacement for Erasmus+, and I understand that. However, that is not a logical explanation of why you are not even replicating what the Welsh scheme has done. Why has the Scottish Government not replicated Erasmus as much as the Welsh Government has done?

Angus Robertson: This meeting is taking place at a moment in time when the opportunity for us to rejoin Erasmus+ is on the table. That is the context for the evidence session and for the interministerial discussions that I have been having with Nick Thomas-Symonds. We can go over the old ground of the interventions that the Scottish Government has made relative to schemes elsewhere, but I would have hoped that a reasonable and rational understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the schemes that

are available would make it patently obvious that there is no substitute for being part of Erasmus+. European Union interlocutors view that—this is an important point—in exactly the same way as horizon Europe and creative Europe are viewed by the European Union, which is that they are not seen as cherry-picking. These are schemes that are on the table if the United Kingdom wants to play a part. That is why I appeal to colleagues in other political parties. There are different views in the UK Government, and I think that it is true to say that those who have a particular educational and cultural perspective in the UK Government are very keen for the UK to rejoin Erasmus+. I am not sure that that is necessarily the case in the Treasury. That is why I appeal to colleagues who have a voice to use it to make the case for why Erasmus+ is something that we should go back into.

Neil Bibby: My question is: why have we done less than Wales?

Angus Robertson: We have done something different from Wales, and I can go through those things. However, but as part of the process we have been looking at Turing and Taith and at Erasmus+ and saying there is no substitute. That is underlined by the fact that the Welsh Government is saying to the UK Government that it wishes the UK to look at going back into the Erasmus+ programme. That is my point—there is no substitute for Erasmus+. Why do not we all agree—I hope that we do—that Erasmus+ is the best show in town? Rather than going off and trying to replicate something that cannot deliver in the same way as Erasmus+ delivers, let us focus our attention on getting back into Erasmus+. Let us tell the UK Government that we care about it and think that it is important, and, as part of a wider mobility approach, let us tell European Union colleagues that we are in favour of Erasmus+ and of young people having that mobility between the United Kingdom and the European Union. That would seem to me to be a fair deal for everybody.

Neil Bibby: What is the plan, if there is one, for SEEP going forward?

Angus Robertson: I would have to write to Mr Bibby about what will happen post this round of negotiations. I am working on the basis that we can persuade our colleagues to make progress, which will impact very much on how things go forward afterwards. If we know that Erasmus+ is going ahead, that will have a significant impact on the work that we currently undertake.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, it would be helpful if you wrote to the committee about that, and we can share it with Mr Bibby.

Angus Robertson: Indeed.

Neil Bibby: In answer to a previous question, you mentioned Treasury concerns about costs. Is it because of the cost implications that Scotland has not replicated the Welsh model? Are there any concerns in the finance directorates of the Scottish Government about spending more money in this area?

Angus Robertson: I have not seen any correspondence that would support what Mr Bibby is saying. Obviously, such schemes come with a cost implication—of course they do. However, I think that we have to take a step back and look objectively at the strengths and weaknesses of all the schemes that are out there. It is true that we should consider the cost implications of those things.

There is, however, also an intangible benefit that you cannot assess on the basis of cost, which is of value to a generation of young people—both Scottish and wider UK students, as well as European Union students who wish to come here—who have been denied the opportunity of a year abroad or of furthering their studies in other countries. That is at a time when—we have talked about this in passing—we are looking at the situation in Ukraine with the gravest of concern. The Europe in which we all grew up, with certainties around peace and security, is unfortunately over. That is why schemes such as Erasmus+, which bring people together and help to grow understanding and trust between emerging generations of our younger society, are so important. It is another reason why we should be part of a scheme whose scale means that it does much more than Turing or Taith could ever do.

Neil Bibby: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I appreciate that he is not responsible for education, but we can have further information, which would be helpful.

Angus Robertson: Of course.

Patrick Harvie: I want to move on to another topic before we finish. Earlier in the second half of this inquiry, before we got deep into the youth mobility issues, we heard some evidence about energy issues. Could you reflect on that and, in particular, on the emissions trading scheme? It is an area where there is some co-decision-making, because the ETS is not wholly reserved—the Scottish Government is represented on an authority that makes some decisions.

We heard some evidence suggesting that, unless there is alignment between the UK ETS and the EU ETS, there will be an impact, from January next year, on businesses trading in and out of the EU. What is the Scottish Government's position on that, and what is the status of that work? Also, is there a concern that, if a trade

agreement was reached with a far-right US regime that promoted climate denial conspiracy theories, which would clearly not be likely to include a carbon price in products entering the UK market, there could be harmful impacts from that?

11:00

Angus Robertson: I fear that I will not be able to do Mr Harvie's question justice in the less than one minute that I have left in this evidence session, but I assure him that I and my colleagues are very seized of the matter. The UK Government obviously has an interest in reaching energy agreements about trading, carbon capture and storage, interconnectivity and regulatory alignment to ensure that the energy sector can operate as well as possible, and we are very supportive of that.

I think that Mr Harvie knows this, but one of the things that I spend a lot of my time doing when I meet continental European colleagues—primarily northern European colleagues—is drawing attention to the opportunities that we have as northern European renewable energy-rich countries. Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Denmark and others are all likely to be energy exporting countries, and we work as closely as possible to make the case to other European countries that we need to work together to deal with regulatory issues, trade-related issues and interconnectivity-related issues.

I am trying to impress on my UK Government colleagues that, when they talk with EU member states and European Union institutions about all of this, they must remember the priorities that Scotland has as a country that will be able to produce green hydrogen, without nuclear being part of our energy set-up, and then export that hydrogen through the European Union's hydrogen backbone system, which links Ireland and Scotland to the European Union via Scotland. We have to understand—this has not been widely reflected in the Scottish media or in debates in the chamber, as far as I have been able to ascertain—that we are in a really strong position if we can have regulatory alignment and interconnectivity and if we realise that Europe's moving from gas dependency to hydrogen use is a massive opportunity for us as well as for continental Europe.

Patrick Harvie: The point about hydrogen infrastructure is certainly relevant, although it is perhaps outwith the scope of this inquiry. If the cabinet secretary could give us in writing any further update on the status of the work on ETS alignment, that would be helpful.

Angus Robertson: Convener, we are in a position to share with you the energy paper that

has been developed, which covers a lot of the points that Mr Harvie has raised. We would be happy to forward that to the committee and to respond to any follow-up questions that there might be.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you.

The Convener: It is worth mentioning again that the outcome statement from the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly looked at emissions and that both sides see it as a priority that they come to some sort of arrangement around the carbon border adjustment mechanism or a different mechanism for that position.

Cabinet secretary, do you have time for me to bring in Mr Kerr for his final question?

Angus Robertson: Please do.

Stephen Kerr: That is very generous of you, convener. It is an unexpected opportunity. This question requires only a yes or no answer, which will please the cabinet secretary. Does he welcome the UK youth mobility visa, as it stands, being extended to all EU nations as a step towards improving the youth mobility that he spoke about?

Angus Robertson: Mr Kerr has invited me to give a yes or no answer, but I think that it would be more sensible for me to understand what the different relative positions would be. If that were the position of the UK Government, what would the position of the European Union institutions be in relation to that? As soon as I have greater clarification on that, I will be happy to come back to you.

Stephen Kerr: It already exists and operates on a bilateral basis with a number of countries.

Angus Robertson: Convener, I am trying to make the point that, as I have said to the committee, we are about to learn a lot more about the UK Government's position.

Stephen Kerr: What is your position?

Angus Robertson: If you are asking me to talk in concrete terms about a UK Government scheme that may change on the basis of the proposals that are about to be set out, I would prefer to reserve my position until I have looked at the proposals for an enhanced scheme relative to that which is currently in place.

The Convener: I think that that is your answer for this morning, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: It would appear to be.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and his officials. I thank Dr Möschler, in particular, for joining us from the Brussels office. The Brussels office was very helpful to the committee

on our recent visit to the PPA, and I thank them
once again for that.

11:04

Meeting continued in private until 11:06.

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