



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 22 April 2025

Session 6



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Tuesday 22 April 2025

CONTENTS

| | Col. |
|--|-------------|
| TIME FOR REFLECTION | 1 |
| BUSINESS MOTION | 3 |
| <i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i> | |
| MOTION OF CONDOLENCE | 4 |
| <i>Motion moved—[First Minister].</i> | |
| The First Minister (John Swinney) | 4 |
| Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con) | 6 |
| Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab) | 6 |
| Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green) | 8 |
| Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD) | 8 |
| TOPICAL QUESTION TIME | 10 |
| Ardrossan Harbour | 10 |
| Sex Offenders (Name Changes) | 13 |
| SUPREME COURT JUDGMENT | 17 |
| <i>Statement—[Shirley—Anne Somerville].</i> | |
| The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville) | 17 |
| INTERNATIONAL SITUATION | 35 |
| The First Minister (John Swinney) | 35 |
| Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con) | 41 |
| Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab) | 44 |
| Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green) | 48 |
| Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD) | 50 |
| George Adam (Paisley) (SNP) | 53 |
| Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con) | 55 |
| Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP) | 57 |
| Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab) | 59 |
| Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP) | 62 |
| Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP) | 63 |
| Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP) | 64 |
| Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP) | 66 |
| Patrick Harvie | 67 |
| Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab) | 69 |
| Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con) | 72 |
| The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson) | 75 |
| PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS | 80 |
| <i>Motions moved—[Jamie Hepburn].</i> | |
| DECISION TIME | 81 |
| NHS GRAMPIAN WAITING TIMES | 87 |
| <i>Motion debated—[Douglas Lumsden].</i> | |
| Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con) | 87 |
| Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP) | 90 |
| Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con) | 92 |
| Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab) | 94 |
| Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con) | 96 |
| Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab) | 98 |
| Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con) | 99 |
| The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray) | 100 |

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 22 April 2025

[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 is the Rev Norman Afrin, minister, Sandyhills parish church.

The Rev Norman Afrin (Sandyhills Parish Church):

It is an honour for me to lead time for reflection. I have served as a parish minister in the east end of Glasgow for six and a half years, and I love it. A couple of weeks ago, as part of my chaplaincy role at Eastbank primary school, I went along to take its Easter assembly. As I walked in, one of the teachers said to me, "I'm glad you are here. I will give a hallelujah to that." She went on to say, in a throwaway comment as she set out the benches for the assembly, "Is it just me, or are things really beginning to impact on people? I think we all need a hallelujah."

From my knowledge, that teacher is not an overly religious person, but I think that she was referring to the impact that people are feeling just now, how things are hard for them and how they need hope. As an Isle of Lewis boy living in Glasgow, whenever I order black pudding in a restaurant, I have to hope that they will serve me Stornoway black pudding. Often, however, it is not that, and my hope has been in vain. It is much better to hope in something sure and steadfast.

That is what Christians have just celebrated, this past weekend: the glorious hope of the Easter story, in which churches across Scotland have joined to celebrate the life-impacting reality that Jesus is alive. However, that message is not bound to Easter Sunday alone. For Christians, that hope permeates every area of life. As Peter, who at one time denied knowing Jesus, would one day say, in 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 3:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead".

At Easter, we see the message of forgiveness, reconciliation, friendship and living hope. Those are themes that we would do well to live out and display in our daily lives.

May your lives be filled with that living hope, as you seek to lead and serve the people of Scotland. As you discuss complex issues, may you do so with—as the hymn writer said—

"strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow".

May the Lord bless you and keep you, and cause his face to shine upon you. Amen.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-17265, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme. Any member who wishes to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Tuesday 22 April 2025—

delete

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

and insert

followed by Motion of Condolence

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: The Supreme Court's Judgment in Relation to Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.45 pm Decision Time—[*Jamie Hepburn.*]

Motion agreed to.

Motion of Condolence

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Our next item of business is a motion of condolence in the name of the First Minister. On behalf of all members and staff of the Scottish Parliament, I extend my deepest sympathy to the Roman Catholic community in Scotland and worldwide on the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. We will remember his compassion and humanity, which have been at the very heart of the many tributes to him. As a mark of our respect, our flags fly at half mast today.

I am honoured to welcome to the gallery Monsignor Jeremy Milne, Vicar General for the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh; the Right Rev Dr Shaw James Paterson, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; Rabbi Moshe Rubin, Senior Rabbi in Scotland; and Imam Fakhar Aftab of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Scotland.

14:05

The First Minister (John Swinney): On behalf of the people of Scotland, I express my sadness at the death of Pope Francis on Easter Monday. His loss will be felt most acutely in the Roman Catholic community here in Scotland and abroad, but his loss will be mourned by countless others who admired, respected and were inspired by the humble, kind and empathetic spiritual leadership that he gave to the world.

Pope Francis brought simplicity and humility to the papacy—he was a gentle spirit who preferred to receive people informally, and always with grace. In deeds and in words, he took forward his leadership of the Catholic church in a manner that was thoughtful, measured and conciliatory. His Holiness's belief in the goodness of people was as unshakeable as his devotion to the church, and his papacy was defined by the message of Jesus Christ to love your neighbour as yourself.

As the first Pope from Latin America, he sought to build new bridges between nations and faiths. He spoke warmly to advocate for greater inclusivity, both within the church and throughout society. Pope Francis spoke loudly in calling for peace and human dignity around the world. In his final public address, held this Easter Sunday at the Vatican, he used these words:

"What a great thirst for death, for killing, we witness each day in the many conflicts raging in different parts of our world ... I would like all of us to hope anew and to revive our trust in others, including those who are different than ourselves".

Pope Francis was a man who was always on the side of the poor and the migrant. He was always on the side of those who faced injustice.

He had a thirst to use the power of Christian teaching to advocate for those who required a message of justice and the protection of the message of justice. He regularly called for an end to bigotry and conflict.

Above all, Pope Francis worked to bring people together across what often seemed like insurmountable divides. His Holiness was particularly outspoken about the trauma experienced recently by the people of Ukraine and Gaza, while equally condemning the growing climate of antisemitism throughout the world. In 2014, at a prayer meeting held at the Vatican, Pope Francis urged the then President of Israel, Shimon Peres, and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas to be courageous in the pursuit of peace in the middle east.

Despite the weight of his office, and often when he was in poor health, the Pope built friendships and connections to try to bring people together. In recent years, his faithfulness in keeping in contact with Christians in Gaza has illustrated the devotion of his leadership to all congregations, especially those who were suffering.

I express my own gratitude for Pope Francis's lifetime of faithful devotion and dedicated public service. He was always on the side of the poor and those who faced injustice, and he used his position of leadership to work for a better world. That leadership has been a powerful example to me and to millions around the globe. We are profoundly grateful for his life and his example of principled spiritual leadership in our world today.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I wish to conclude with some words from Pope Francis's final address on Sunday:

"There can be no peace without freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of expression and respect for the views of others ... The light of Easter impels us to break down the barriers that create division and are fraught with grave political and economic consequences. It impels us to care for one another, to increase our mutual solidarity, and to work for the integral development of each human person."

There could be no finer words to have left the world with, given the challenges and the difficulties that we face as a society today, than the words that Pope Francis left us with on Easter Sunday. They are a mark of the power of his spiritual leadership, and his is an example that we would be well advised to follow.

I move,

That the Parliament expresses its deep sadness at the death of Pope Francis; conveys its condolences to all those in the Roman Catholic community in Scotland and beyond; affirms the affection in which His Holiness was held by people across the world, and expresses gratitude for his lifetime of devotion and dedicated public service.

14:10

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): As the world mourns His Holiness Pope Francis, I am honoured to have the opportunity to pay tribute to him here today. Pope Francis was a champion of compassion within the church. He was elected to the papacy at a time of huge challenges and controversy for the Catholic faith. Ultimately, however, his time was marked not by those difficulties but by the true love of humanity, with all its flaws and strengths, that he brought to his office.

Pope Francis stood for the downtrodden, the vulnerable, the poor and all those who, for a long time, were not sure whether they were really welcome in church. His accepting, generous spirit reached out to Catholics like me around the world. His famous words "Who am I to judge?" marked the start of a shift in how the Catholic church approached homosexuality, but they also perfectly captured Pope Francis's humility and compassion for others. That message meant so much to me, as a gay woman, and many others.

However, Pope Francis was not just a champion for those of Catholic faith. His message was one of acceptance and solidarity between people of all faiths. Right up until the final days of his life, he was preaching that message of acceptance and peace and praying for an end to conflicts around the globe, including in his Easter blessing on Sunday, just the day before his death. Although he was not able to deliver his full blessing himself, he still appeared in Rome to wish us all a happy Easter just two days ago, showing astounding dedication to public service even when gravely ill. He demonstrated how all of us can continue to make a difference right until the end, and he left us with the words

"May the principle of humanity never fail to be the hallmark of our daily actions",

reminding us of the value of every human life and the importance of loving our neighbour.

Pope Francis was a pope who reached out to people across the world, who gave the church a human face and personal touch, and who focused on humanity as well as divinity. His passing will be mourned for a long time by those of many different faiths, but his legacy can be celebrated as one of compassion and peace.

14:13

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I put on the record our deep sorrow on the death of His Holiness Pope Francis. The death of the Holy Father will come as a source of mourning and reflection for Catholics in Scotland and around the world, but the fact that it came on Easter Monday—the day when

Christians reflect on Christ's conquering of death—will, I am sure, have been a source of solace in what is a trying time. While Pope Francis was loved by Catholics worldwide, he was also deeply respected and loved by people of all faiths and none. I saw that when I attended mass at St Andrew's metropolitan cathedral in Glasgow yesterday.

Pope Francis was not only a remarkable Pope and shepherd of his flock, but a remarkable man. From his humble origins in Buenos Aires to the seat of St Peter in Rome, His Holiness never lost sight of what drove him or lost touch with the feelings and realities facing the people he served. Throughout his ministry, Pope Francis dedicated himself to the corporal works of mercy—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead. In the midst of war and depression in his native Latin America, Pope Francis was a voice for peace and reconciliation.

He called again and again for peace in Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, phoning the parish priest in besieged Gaza every single day until the end. As Pope, he threw himself at the feet of warring leaders in South Sudan to beg for peace. He literally washed the feet of prisoners and those whom society had shunned. Only last week, he was washing the feet of inmates in one of Rome's largest prisons. He was a constant voice for social justice in our world, standing up for the rights of workers, demanding action on the climate crisis and giving voice to the plight of refugees and the dispossessed worldwide.

Pope Francis used his final public address to call once again for peace across our world. He called for a ceasefire in Palestine, the release of hostages and dialogue towards peace. He called out all forms of prejudice and hate and used his final hours to call for justice and peace—yes, in the middle east, but also beyond.

All of Francis's actions were driven by his deep Catholic faith, his personal devotion to Our Lady and his spiritual connection with the great peacemaker and ecologist, St Francis of Assisi. He was, in short, a humble labourer in the vineyard of the Lord; a man who spoke to all faiths and none, who broke down barriers and broke bread with all, who opened his heart to the world and who dedicated his life to making our world a better place. We can unite in our deep hope that he now hears the words "Well done, good and faithful servant."

In these dark and, at times, violent times, it is worth reflecting on how much better and safer our world would be if we all strived to live a little more like Pope Francis. On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I put on the record our prayers and

our condolences on the passing of the Holy Father. Eternal rest grant unto him. Requiescat in pace.

14:17

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I offer my condolences and those of the Scottish Green Party to the Catholic community in Scotland and around the world following the passing of Pope Francis. The first non-European Pope in more than a thousand years, he was known for his determination to be a voice for the poor. In particular, he recognised climate change as a global problem with significant consequences and he recognised the harms of the developed world's addiction to consumption. Pope Francis called on the world to join the fight against climate change, writing in a papal encyclical letter that the science of climate change is clear and that the Catholic Church views climate change as a moral issue that must be addressed in order to protect the earth and everyone on it.

The Pope was a committed supporter of Palestine and publicly condemned Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. He called for a ceasefire in Gaza. He urged for humanitarian aid to be allowed into Gaza and for all captives to be freed. He emphasised that war is always a defeat—that every war is a defeat—and begged for the violence to stop.

He often took an inclusive stance in the face of intolerance and prejudice. Although he never actually changed institutional or doctrinal opposition to issues of LGBTQ+ equality, women's rights or reproductive choice, he did make bold steps to move the Church in a more inclusive direction, allowing informal blessings of same-sex unions and broadening the role of women.

I recognise the sadness that will be felt around the world at Pope Francis's passing and I hope that his dream of a more peaceful and just world may yet come to be.

14:19

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to express on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats our profound sympathy and our sorrow at the passing of the Holy Father.

In his words from the balcony of St Peter's basilica in 2013, on his election, Pope Francis told the packed square below:

"You all know that the duty of the conclave was to give a bishop to Rome. It seems that my brother cardinals have come almost to the ends of the earth to get him."

Born, as we have heard, in Buenos Aires, Pope Francis was the first non-European Pope in

modern times—there had not been one since the year 741—and he was a radical pontiff. He railed against what he termed the “pathology of power” and those in the church who, he said,

“feel themselves ‘lords of the manor’—superior to everyone and everything”.

He urged his church, instead, to

“come out of herself and go to the peripheries”.

His vision was a

“church of the poor for the poor”.

Over the next decade, he put front and centre traditional Franciscan themes, which above all valued humility, compassion and solidarity with the poor. He was determined to favour that humility over grandeur. After greeting the crowds on the day that he was elected, the new Pope shunned the papal limousine and decided instead to share the coach that was taking his brother cardinals home. Throughout his time as Pope, he stayed true to those values of simplicity and became known for it, becoming the first Pope who lived not in the Vatican’s apostolic palace but in the modern block next door, which had been built as a guest house.

Pope Francis always sought to foster peace where there had been conflict. He worked to heal the rift that had existed with the Eastern Orthodox Church for more than a thousand years. He worked with Lutherans, Methodists and Anglicans, and persuaded the Israeli and Palestinian presidents to join him to pray for peace. After attacks by Muslim militants, he said that it was not right to identify Islam with violence. At the time, he said:

“If I speak of Islamic violence, I have to speak of Catholic violence”.

too. He was clearly guided by the prayer of St Francis of Assisi:

“where there is hatred, let me sow love”.

A great internationalism and concern for the natural environment featured throughout his papacy. He appointed more than 140 cardinals from non-European countries, and he passes on a church that has a more global outlook than it did when he was first elected.

Today, we acknowledge the profound loss that a great many people across Scotland and around the world feel. On the mace before us that rests in our well are inscribed the words that are so familiar to all of us in the chamber: wisdom, integrity, justice and compassion. Each of those words defined the papacy of Pope Francis. As we reflect today, therefore, let us commit to standing up for what is right, caring for others and holding on to the values that Pope Francis sought to

embody. May the Lord bless him, may the Lord keep him.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-17250, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament expresses its deep sadness at the death of Pope Francis; conveys its condolences to all those in the Roman Catholic community in Scotland and beyond; affirms the affection in which His Holiness was held by people across the world, and expresses gratitude for his lifetime of devotion and dedicated public service.

The Presiding Officer: I will now allow a short period of suspension until 2.30 pm.

14:22

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Topical Question Time

Ardrossan Harbour

1. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it expects to conclude negotiations with Peel Ports regarding the purchase of Ardrossan harbour. (S6T-02475)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): As I confirmed last week on Arran to the Ardrossan harbour task force, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd is leading on commercial discussions with Peel Ports Group, and those discussions are currently on-going. Those are confidential commercial discussions and I cannot comment on the detail at this point. There is a requirement to agree heads of terms between Peel Ports Group and CMAL before any change of ownership can be confirmed. Following a fair and negotiated settlement and due diligence undertaken by CMAL on behalf of Scottish ministers, the potential transaction could be finalised by summer 2025, depending on the progress in those discussions.

Kenneth Gibson: It has now been almost 10 years since the redevelopment of Ardrossan harbour was proposed, with no discernible progress since then. Eventually, the cabinet secretary announced nine weeks ago that the Scottish Government would explore options to buy the harbour from the private owner, Peel Ports. Since then, much to the frustration of my constituents, there has been little word from Scottish ministers on when such discussions will conclude. Again, we have heard no firm date, nor

have we even heard who is undertaking the discussions on the Government's behalf. In the interests of transparency, can the cabinet secretary say who is leading negotiations for the Scottish Government and how often it has met Peel Ports since 18 February?

Fiona Hyslop: As I indicated in my original answer, CMAL is leading on commercial discussions with Peel Ports Group. I had the opportunity to talk to the Isle of Arran ferry committee last week and gave it that update. I was also in Ardrossan, where I met campaigners who have been heavily involved in the issue, and part of my discussions with them was relaying the importance of securing the purchase. Upon the purchase of the harbour, we can provide the investments and, importantly, control the level of investment, which I am sure the member understands.

I was also able to reiterate to both groups that the Scottish Government is committed to Ardrossan harbour. In our interim support for the harbour, I have also made it clear, following representations from Kenny Gibson, the constituency MP and the Isle of Arran ferry committee, that the return of the MV Caledonian Isles will see it operating out of Ardrossan. There will be a two-port solution to make sure that the Ardrossan harbour is used for as long as possible.

Kenneth Gibson: Many Arran and Ardrossan constituents are understandably upset and angry at the Scottish Government's apparent lack of urgency in concluding the discussions with regard to the harbour's redevelopment and taking it forward. Central Ardrossan is one of Scotland's five poorest communities, where 44 per cent of households survive on benefits. Some 165 jobs directly depend on the harbour, and they are in limbo. Meanwhile, vulnerable, elderly Arran residents have been transferred to the mainland as care workers struggle to travel to and from Ardrossan.

The outline business plans for harbour redevelopment have been imminent, it seems, for years. When will they finally and definitively be published? When does the cabinet secretary envisage that a contract for the redevelopment of Ardrossan harbour will go out to tender?

Fiona Hyslop: A tender would clearly be far preferable should the harbour come under the ownership of the Scottish Government. The works that CMAL is preparing, both in the short, medium and long term, can then be developed and published. I recognise the desire from the local community to understand when works on Ardrossan harbour will begin, what those works will be and how they will be scheduled, but such a timeline can be reasonably established and

published only on the actual purchase and transfer of control of the port.

I do not want to take part in anything that would compromise our commercial and confidential negotiations. It is important that the Scottish Government and the funders from our taxpayer base understand that we should get the best value from that. There is a risk that making the commitments that, quite understandably, Kenny Gibson wants me to make in the here and now to speed up things would compromise negotiations and compromise best value for the public purse.

He makes a key point about the regeneration that will be required around Ardrossan, regardless of what happens with the harbour and when. The harbour is central to that—I understand that. However, part of my discussions with the save Ardrossan harbour campaign, the Isle of Arran ferry committee and the task force was about the importance—once we have set out the short, medium and long-term plans for the harbour—of the regeneration of that vitally important area, which I know that Kenny Gibson is passionate about.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Time is of the essence. Residents of Ardrossan have been messed about by the Scottish National Party ever since the ferry fiasco started, a decade ago, with one resident saying:

"Why anybody would commission a ferry which doesn't fit the harbour for the route it is meant for is crazy."

Given the limitations that were outlined in the cabinet secretary's answers, can she guarantee that the negotiations will deliver for the residents of Arran and Ardrossan? How much money has she allocated to upgrade Ardrossan harbour in the event of a successful purchase?

Fiona Hyslop: I point out that the Conservatives refused to support the budget, which contains funding for Ardrossan harbour. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

Fiona Hyslop: I also point out that, if the member does not understand what has happened at the harbour, perhaps she might want to look into its history—regrettably, it is a long history. The harbour is owned by a private company. *[Interruption.]* The original plans for it were to be developed by the private company Peel Ports and North Ayrshire Council.

What do I see as the best option? The best option is to get the level of investment that I think is required. I am sure that the member also understands the United Kingdom subsidy control measures that were brought in by the then Conservative UK Government. If she understands that and the basis of business commercial

negotiations, she will understand that there must be space and time for successful negotiations to take place. Her line of questioning does not help with that.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I met campaigners from Ardrossan in my office in Largs just before the recess. They made it clear that, although any move to end the impasse over Ardrossan harbour is welcome, businesses on Ardrossan high street are going bust now. They are losing footfall, traffic and money.

Will the cabinet secretary speak with Cabinet colleagues and establish a small business fund that would help those small local businesses in Ardrossan, to tide them over in the meantime? They simply cannot wait for footfall to return while the port is redeveloped.

Fiona Hyslop: I understand the member's request. It can and should be considered at the appropriate time. He might have heard me say that I was committed, because of the intervention by Kenny Gibson and by the Isle of Arran ferry committee, to ensuring that Ardrossan harbour operates as long as possible. Obviously, the MV Caledonian Isles, when it returns to sailing from Ardrossan, will help in the short term.

I will make an important point about regeneration. The member is aware that the works that will be required at Ardrossan harbour will cause disruption. He is quite right to identify that that will need active and on-going discussion with local businesses as to what happens in that period.

Sex Offenders (Name Changes)

2. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that 506 sex offenders in Scotland have changed their name in the past two years. (S6T-02471)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): There are not 506 individuals who have changed their name; there are 506 instances in which any form of registered name was changed or updated.

When a name is changed, that change is made across multiple records, so such a change would involve a change to, for example, registered email address, registered gym membership card et cetera. Therefore, multiple instances of a reported change could be attributed to a smaller number of individuals who might have changed some detail of their name.

Sex offender notification requirements apply to the individual irrespective of the name that they use, and, when a registered sex offender changes their name, they must let the police know within

three days or they will breach their notification requirements.

Liam Kerr: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but I am not sure that querying the figures in a freedom of information response will reassure the public.

Disappointingly, what I did not hear in that response was a commitment to legislate to ensure that the system is absolutely watertight. The cabinet secretary must surely see that it is open to abuse. For years, the Scottish Conservatives have been calling on the Government to implement changes with regard to sex offenders changing their name that are similar to the changes that are now proposed in the United Kingdom Crime and Policing Bill. Will the cabinet secretary commit to bringing similar legislation to Scotland before the next election?

Angela Constance: I assure Mr Kerr that my officials are in regular contact with Police Scotland and officials across the UK in relation to all matters around public protection. The UK Crime and Policing Bill, which is currently before the UK Parliament, includes proposals around sex offender name changes, and I assure Parliament that the Scottish ministers are actively considering extending those measures to Scotland.

Liam Kerr: I thank the cabinet secretary for that assurance, but people will also be worried about whether, in addition to the up to 506 sex offenders who we know have changed their name, there are others who have done so but have failed to report or register that change. What steps has the cabinet secretary taken since the Scottish Conservatives revealed the scale of the problem to find out who those people are and to ensure that those who have changed their name in the past two years are being monitored properly?

Angela Constance: There are very strict requirements for registered sex offenders. I am sure that all members will appreciate and accept that Police Scotland takes its obligations in that regard very seriously.

There is an important matter to consider here, particularly with regard to the Crime and Policing Bill. I am very mindful of the need, at times, for consistency across these small isles and across borders, particularly on sensitive matters of policing. I reassure the member and Parliament that I have written to the UK Government and that I am following an internal process within the Scottish Government on this very important matter. As soon as I am able to, I will inform Parliament of our next steps on it.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Perhaps the cabinet secretary can clarify something. Liam Kerr was quite explicit in his question that the FOI information that he received

said that 506 sex offenders had changed their names. The cabinet secretary seemed to suggest that something else is the case, so I ask for clarity on the veracity of the information that Liam Kerr received.

I also ask the cabinet secretary how many of the 506 name changes were followed by breaches of licence conditions, reoffending or disappearance from police data.

Angela Constance: I have answered a similar question to that in the chamber before; if my memory serves me correctly, it might have been a question from Murdo Fraser.

I repeat that, when a name is changed, that change is made across multiple records. As I said earlier, that would involve a change being made to gym membership, registered email addresses and so on. One name change can be made on multiple records, so the number of changes will be attributed to a smaller number of individuals.

The information that Mr Liam Kerr and Mr Stephen Kerr refer to relates, I believe, to a freedom of information response from Police Scotland. We can try to clarify that information further, and I would be happy to write to both Mr Kerrs further on the matter.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am sorry, but I do not think that the cabinet secretary should be offering to write to members. She has come to the chamber today to respond to a lodged question that she knows is about 506 sex offenders changing their names. If she can confidently stand up and say that that number does not reflect 506 individuals but is the number of changes that have been made, can she tell us how many sex offenders have changed their names? That is a simple question that she must be able to answer, given what she has previously said.

Angela Constance: It is of deep regret to me that members seem incapable of listening. I repeat once again that, on the information that is at my disposal from Police Scotland, there are not 506 individuals—

Douglas Ross: So how many are there?

Angela Constance: Presiding Officer, I am not putting up with this.

The First Minister (John Swinney): This is just appalling.

Angela Constance: I am not putting up with this.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, when you have put a question, please be courteous and listen to the response quietly. *[Interruption.]*

Douglas Ross: Ach, John—that was the First Minister, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry—I did not hear what was going on there, but I ask members to behave in accordance with our standing orders.

Angela Constance: Mr Kerr asked a reasonable question, but it is of deep regret to me that members in this Parliament behave like children when we are discussing the most serious matters of public protection and the risks that are presented to members of our community as a result of sex offending.

I have gone to lengths that are right and proper in my engagement with the past and current UK Governments in and around how we can co-operate on these matters in a pragmatic way, bearing in mind that we all share an island, irrespective of our different legal systems. Let me repeat, for accuracy's sake, that there are not 506 individuals who have changed their names.

Douglas Ross: How many are there?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I will not ask again that you refrain from shouting from your seat when you have not been called to speak. That is the last time that I will ask you.

Angela Constance: Perhaps it would be better if I just referred the member to the earlier three answers that I have already given on this matter. I repeat my commitment to both Mr Kerrs to write to them further.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You have been very critical of those of us who have spoken from a sedentary position, and I accept that. However, can you confirm from the chair that, despite being asked on three occasions, the cabinet secretary has not been able to inform the Parliament of how many sex offenders have changed their name? It is a basic question that we are not getting an answer to.

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order. *[Interruption.]* Mr Ross, that is not a point of order.

Douglas Ross: It is not an answer, either.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, would you like to leave the chamber? If you wish to remain here, you must adhere to our standing orders.

That concludes topical questions.

Supreme Court Judgment

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on the United Kingdom Supreme Court's judgment in relation to the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:48

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for this opportunity to update Parliament on the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the For Women Scotland appeal. The Scottish Government, of course, accepts the judgment of the Supreme Court. It is a significant legal ruling, and it is right that we take time to consider it carefully.

Before I turn to the details of the judgment, it is important to recognise the tone and the temperature of the surrounding debate, which concerns real individuals in our community, our workplaces and our families and which has often been deeply distressing to them. It should be clear to all of us in the chamber, regardless of our view on any of those matters, including the judgment last Wednesday, that the situation has had a very significant impact on many people.

As the Supreme Court made clear, the judgment must not be used as a licence for division and hostility. The pursuit of equality for women and for trans people is our collective responsibility. All of us in the chamber must ensure that the rights and dignity of all are upheld, and our debate must be rooted in empathy, compassion and equality. Indeed, in his delivery of the judgment, Lord Hodge, giving the opinion of the court, said that the court

"counsel against reading this judgement as a triumph of one or more groups in our society at the expense of another—it is not."

Let me turn to the judgment. This case centres on the guidance that was issued for the Gender Representation on Public Bodies (Scotland) Act 2018 and the meaning of "woman" that was set out in that guidance, which is the same meaning as under the Equality Act 2010. The Scottish Government successfully defended its guidance twice, in both the outer house and the inner house. However, the Supreme Court is the final decision maker on such legal issues, and it has delivered a carefully considered judgment. The definition of women in the guidance was the definition in the Equality Act 2010, and we were guided on the meaning of that definition by guidance from the

Equality and Human Rights Commission, which is the enforcement body for the 2010 act.

As we heard in last week's judgment, issues arose from a tension between two pieces of Westminster legislation and how they interact. The question of compatibility between the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010 was central to the court's ruling. In paragraph 8, the Supreme Court said:

"The central question on this appeal is whether the EA 2010 treats a trans woman with a GRC—

a gender recognition certificate—

"as a woman for all purposes within the scope of its provisions, or when that Act speaks of a 'woman' and 'sex' it is referring to a biological woman and biological sex."

The Supreme Court concluded:

"The meaning of the terms 'sex', 'man' and 'woman' in the EA 2010 is biological".

The Supreme Court noted within its judgment that, in the statutory guidance to the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018, Scottish ministers reflected the stance of the EHRC that a person issued with a full GRC in the acquired gender of female is a "woman" within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010. It concluded that the Scottish Government guidance on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 is incorrect in relation to its definition of "woman".

The judgment also makes it very clear that trans people continue to have protection and rights. As the press summary issued by the Supreme Court on the judgment said:

"Trans people are protected from discrimination on the ground of gender reassignment. They are also able to invoke the provisions on direct discrimination and harassment, and indirect discrimination on the basis of sex. In the light of case law interpreting the relevant provisions, a trans woman can claim sex discrimination because she is perceived to be a woman."

We fully accept the Supreme Court's judgment and have begun to analyse the impact. We are amending the guidance on the 2018 act in order to take account of the ruling.

There has been commentary as to the implications of the ruling in respect of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. The bill was prevented from proceeding to royal assent by an order that was made by the then Secretary of State for Scotland. Following the judgment last week, the Scottish Government has no plans to bring the bill back.

While the UK Government has indicated that it intends to bring forward proposals to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004, we have not yet seen any firm proposals. This Government stands ready to engage constructively on any plans

following last week's judgment. Gender recognition is a fundamental piece of equality legislation. Let me be very clear: this Government does not support the repeal of the 2004 act.

Immediately following last week's judgment, I wrote to UK Government counterparts to seek an urgent meeting. That reflects the fact that the judgment has implications across the UK, given that the 2004 act extends across the UK, and the 2010 act extends to England, Wales and Scotland. I am awaiting a response to that letter.

Along with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I will be meeting with the EHRC on Thursday and will seek an update on its plans for renewed guidance by the summer. This Government calls for that process to be inclusive and to ensure that there will be engagement with all those on whom it will impact. The guidance is important for Governments across Scotland, England and Wales, as well as public authorities and private and voluntary sector organisations, following the Supreme Court judgment. All organisations must comply with all relevant legislation, and guidance from the EHRC will be key in that process.

I wanted to reach out to stakeholders as soon as possible after the judgment, to give the Government's initial response and to offer to meet again to discuss the Scottish Government's ongoing work. Stakeholders that represent trans and non-binary people are reporting real anxiety among their networks and service users and concerns about their daily lives. It is significant that the Supreme Court stated in its judgement that the rights of the trans community are enshrined in law. I want to reassure our trans community that you are valued and the Scottish Government is fully committed to protecting everyone's rights—that includes your community.

I have also had the opportunity to speak to the Women's Rights Network, and I was grateful for its time and to hear directly from it about its views on the judgment and its implementation. As I have done today, I restated categorically to the network that the Scottish Government fully accepts the Supreme Court's judgment and is now working on next steps. Given the length of the judgment, it is important to work through it in detail, and I offered to meet again once that work has been undertaken.

An invite was also sent to For Women Scotland. It has chosen not to accept that invite at this time, but it has fed back that it wants us to move on with implementation. I assure it and the chamber that that work is progressing.

I spoke earlier about the principles of empathy, compassion and equality. With those principles, I firmly believe that the role of this Parliament is to

provide leadership in ensuring that equality, inclusion and human rights are not optional values but the foundation of a fair society and at the heart of our public services. This Government—and, I hope, all in our Scottish Parliament—will continue to advance equality and protect the rights of women, girls and the LGBTQI+ community. Our work reflects a clear and enduring belief that everyone in Scotland should be free to live their lives with dignity, safety and respect. We will continue to work closely with LGBT+ organisations to ensure that their communities are empowered and that human rights are protected.

Our Parliament has a strong track record of advancing the rights of LGBT+ people, and I am sure that we will all continue to ensure that further progress is made. We engage proudly and visibly with LGBT+ communities during pride season and LGBT history month, and we must do so throughout the year.

The Scottish Government will continue to accelerate equality through our national advisory council on women and girls. We will drive real change in Scotland by challenging systemic inequality and ensuring that the voices of women and girls are not only heard but acted on. Indeed, this Parliament has been at the forefront of many changes, including legislation on domestic abuse and on victims of sexual violence. That is why this Government has, for example, progressed our world-leading equally safe strategy, which tackles violence against women and girls.

However, I am sure that we all recognise that there remains so much more to do to tackle the challenges, barriers and dangers that women and girls face. To that end, I announced at the end of February that the Scottish Government will work in partnership with the national advisory council, as it has requested, to develop an equality strategy for women and girls before the end of this parliamentary session. Those actions demonstrate that equality is not just a principle but something that we are committed to making real in people's lives every day.

In conclusion, I will return to where I began: the people we all serve. The issues that surround the Supreme Court case are challenging and will need careful consideration so that the public sector can ensure the dignity and safety of everyone who uses its services. It is vital that the EHRC now issues clear and practical guidance in response to the judgment, which has confirmed the definition of "woman" under the Equality Act 2010. There have been many challenging arguments over the past five years, and I hope that we can move to a point at which we again focus on progressing equality for the people of Scotland. The pursuit of equality is not a contest between communities; it is a collective effort to build a fairer Scotland for all

and is the foundation on which this Parliament was built.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 35 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): From the very beginning, my party has been the sole voice of reason in this Parliament in warning of the dangers of gender self-identification. We stood up for women's rights and urged the Government to drop this toxic and divisive issue.

John Swinney wants to distance himself from it all, but, as Nicola Sturgeon's deputy and strongest ally, he was right behind it. He was willing to sacrifice women's rights, including the right to single-sex spaces and services. He voted down reasonable, commonsense amendments to the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, including my own, which would have stopped predatory men, including rapists and other sex offenders, from exploiting self-ID.

In the light of the momentous Supreme Court judgment, John Swinney owes an apology to the people of Scotland, but especially to women. This harmful ideology must now be rooted out of our entire public sector—schools, prisons, hospitals and policing. Far too much time and taxpayers' money has been wasted on it already. The country needs to move on. Politicians must focus on the concerns of people in the real world.

I have three questions. Will the SNP Government now say sorry? Will it give a clear and categorical commitment not to resurrect the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill in any way? Will it guarantee that gender self-identification will be excised from public bodies?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that Russell Findlay heard the part of my statement in which I talked about the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill and the fact that the Government has no plans to reintroduce that work.

Importantly, I also mentioned in my statement that the Government absolutely accepts the judgment of the Supreme Court. We have acted in good faith on the question. As I said in my statement, it was important that the Supreme Court recognised that the work that the Government undertook on the issue was based on EHRC guidance. However, now that the Supreme Court has made its decision, it is important that we move forward to look at policies, practice and guidance across Government and public bodies. As I said in my statement, that work has begun and I will keep Parliament updated as it progresses.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The judgment from the Supreme Court in the case of *For Women Scotland v Scottish Ministers* was unanimous and clear. The term "woman" in the Equality Act 2010 relates to biological sex.

The Scottish Government has, however, got itself into a position in which it encouraged practice to get ahead of the law. The Government has issued guidance to a range of public bodies, including the NHS, that now needs to be revised at considerable cost to those organisations in time and money. It is not just a matter for the EHRC. Can the minister set out the timetable for the Scottish Government producing revised guidance, and can she advise members when it will be implemented in the NHS and across the public sector?

It is also the case that the SNP Government's track record in relation to legal action is poor, whether such action is related to aspects of the Salmond inquiry and former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon or to the Supreme Court action on an independence referendum. There have been at least 10 failed cases and this is another case for which the taxpayer is picking up the tab. Can the minister advise the Parliament how much taxpayers' money has been spent on defending this case and all the other unsuccessful legal actions taken by the Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said earlier, the Government won cases on the matter in the inner and outer houses of the Court of Session. However, the Supreme Court is the final arbiter and, now that it has made its judgment, it is important that we respect that judgment. It is also important for the Scottish Government to undertake cases when we need to explain and defend our position. Once the judgments have been made, it is important that we respect them and move on. That is exactly the point that we are at.

We will be able to publish the cost of the case when it is fully complete. As further costs might emerge, at this point I am unable to give Jackie Baillie a number. However, those matters will be made public—that is certainly what I have done in previous cases. I will keep the member updated on that.

Jackie Baillie mentioned the guidance. In respect of the guidance, whether that is in the NHS or elsewhere, it is important that we take account of what happens on Thursday when I and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care meet the EHRC. I have listened carefully to press reports that the EHRC intends to have guidance in place by the summer, but I look forward to getting a bit more detail on that in person and to seeing how much more information the EHRC can provide at that meeting. I hope that Jackie Baillie

will forgive me for saying that, of course, that will be up to the EHRC, because it is its guidance and its timetable.

As I am still waiting for that meeting with the EHRC, I am not in a position to say when guidance will be updated across Government. It is important that I hear directly from the EHRC first, rather than just going on what I have read in the press. My colleague and I need to have that meeting with the EHRC on Thursday.

I assure Jackie Baillie that, across the Scottish Government and, I am sure, across the public sector, we are looking carefully not just at guidance but at policy and practice. Those matters—*[Interruption.]* If members on the Conservative benches will forgive me, I will be happy to take their questions in due course, once I have responded to Jackie Baillie.

Once we have the timetable from the EHRC, and as we know more about what the EHRC intends to say, the Scottish Government and I will be able to move forward across the Government guidance.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I, too, accept and respect the court ruling.

As the cabinet secretary has said, Lord Hodge stated that the ruling should not be viewed

“as a triumph of one or more groups ... at the expense of another”,

and he stressed the legal protections currently afforded to trans people.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that any implications of the ruling, which forms part of a complex area of law, must be discussed sensitively and carefully, with the right advice in respect to all groups affected?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Fulton MacGregor is quite right to use the words “sensitively and carefully” and “with the right advice”. That is why, in my answer to Jackie Baillie, I mentioned the meeting that I will be having with the EHRC.

I say once again that we accept the judgment of the Supreme Court. We have to remember that it has had a real impact on people across our communities and in our workplaces, and many have found that distressing. However, as we move forward with the implementation of the Supreme Court judgment, we always have to ensure that we proceed on the basis of the rule of law, equality and inclusion, and respect for human rights for everyone. I reassure Fulton MacGregor that the Government will be holding to those principles: the rule of law, the work and the judgment of the Supreme Court, equality and inclusion, and human rights for all.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Scotland’s public bodies are, by definition, an extension of the Scottish Government. Last week, the Supreme Court exposed the Scottish Government’s fallacy, but the SNP’s reckless ideology has become embedded, like Japanese knotweed, in our public institutions.

While this smacks of asking an arsonist to extinguish the fire, will the cabinet secretary secure written assurances from all the Government’s public bodies that they will put in place policies complying with the Supreme Court ruling within three months of her meeting with the EHRC?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important to give the EHRC more time than the meeting that we will have on Thursday. With the greatest respect to Tess White, I can absolutely understand the need, desire and indeed obligation for pace on this matter. We will see what the EHRC is able to share with Scottish Government ministers on Thursday.

I can give Tess White the reassurance that, across the Scottish Government, work has now begun to ensure that policies, practices, procedures and guidance are absolutely compatible with the judgment of the Supreme Court and with the law. The rule of law is exceptionally important to the Government—right across the Scottish Government and right across the public sector. Further to that, this is a matter not only for this Government but for other Governments in the UK, so it is important that Governments can have discussions on the issues, to be able to deal with the collective challenge of ensuring that our guidance is fit for purpose.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Many trans people in Scotland and across the UK will be confused and frightened by the Supreme Court judgment. Can the cabinet secretary clarify again how the rights of trans people, including those who already hold gender recognition certificates, can be protected and upheld?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Last Thursday, I met stakeholders representing the trans community and non-binary people. It is exceptionally important to recognise the real distress that people from those communities are reporting.

In paragraph 100 of its judgment, the Supreme Court talked about the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and gender recognition certificates. Other aspects of the Supreme Court judgment have perhaps had more public scrutiny and traction in the media, but it is important to draw the attention of the Parliament and wider society to what paragraph 100 says about the 2004 act, the continued relevance and importance of GRCs, and

the provision of a legal recognition of the rights of transgender people.

I hope that that gives some reassurance as we go into what is a difficult time for many members of the trans and non-binary community.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It is important that the court’s ruling and the court itself are respected. We should also reflect, as the cabinet secretary did, on the words of Lord Hodge: the judgment must not be read as

“a triumph of one or more groups ... at the expense of another”.

I return to the issue of the legal advice that the Government receives. As has already been raised, this is not the first case that the Scottish Government has lost. It joins a long line of court cases that the Government has lost on not just this subject matter but many others.

Does the cabinet secretary have confidence in the legal advice that ministers receive from the legal directorate? Given this point of reflection, and given the number of legal cases that have now been lost by the Government, will she consider reviewing how legal advice is sought by the Government and how it is delivered and acted on?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Paul O’Kane is absolutely right to talk about respecting the court ruling and discussing it in the right manner, as Lord Hodge said. I thank Paul O’Kane for the basis of his question.

When we talk about this particular case, it is important to recognise—I make no apology for restating this, Presiding Officer—that the Supreme Court said in its judgment that, at all times, the Scottish Government followed the guidance of the EHRC when developing its own guidance. I would have thought that that is what stakeholders and Opposition members would like us to do. The Supreme Court has made a judgment on that guidance. It is important that we reflect on that, and it is important that the EHRC updates its guidance as well.

That is exactly the basis of the case that we brought forward. Having said that, I accept the Supreme Court’s judgment, and we will move forward with that basis of implementation.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Speaking to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, the United Nations independent expert on sexual orientation and gender, commented:

“Mention has been made of trans rights, but there is no such thing as trans rights or gay rights or lesbian rights; there are human rights of people who are gay, human rights of people who are lesbian and human rights of

people who are trans.”—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 21 June 2022; c 44.]

Given that, what steps is the Scottish Government taking to uphold human rights for all?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Joe FitzPatrick will be aware that the Government has been working on a human rights bill, and we are absolutely committed to bringing that forward in the next session of the Parliament—subject, of course, to the 2026 elections. It is important that we continue our work on the detailed policy proposals for that bill, which we hope to be able to publish before the summer recess. That will allow constructive engagement on that important piece of work so that we can move forward with what I see as the Parliament’s good track record on developing human rights for all.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Last week, I was at the UK Supreme Court and witnessed a monumental legal judgment on the definition of the word “woman”, which was issued thanks to the excellent work of For Women Scotland. In recent days, statues have been defaced, death threats have been issued against women’s rights campaigners, and the deputy convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, Maggie Chapman MSP, has been seen on video accusing the Supreme Court judges of bigotry, prejudice and hatred. That is shocking behaviour and has been condemned by the Faculty of Advocates. Does the cabinet secretary condemn that behaviour? What action is being taken by the Scottish Government to guarantee the safety of women?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that, for the avoidance of any doubt, I answer that away from the issue in question and give a general response, which is the response that we should give to every example of such behaviour.

There is no excuse for vandalism or criminal behaviour, and there is no excuse for death threats, regardless of whom such behaviour comes from, regardless of whether that is towards activists or members of this Parliament, and regardless of people’s views on the Supreme Court. It is very important that I say that. Regardless of what people’s views have been at the beginning of this discussion or at any stage in it, there is no excuse for criminal or poor behaviour. Those of us in the chamber have a particular responsibility with regard to that.

I say again that the Scottish Government accepts the decision of the Supreme Court and respects its right to issue it.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): A number of trans constituents have got in touch, distressed about the judgment. It is still unclear how it will impact many situations in

practice, and although reviews of policy will be carried out with the necessary thought and time, not everybody will consider things so carefully. People have jumped to conclusions, and that has a direct and immediate impact on interactions in the real world.

I reassure those affected that I continue to be their ally, and many of their neighbours have reached out to offer their support as well. Can the cabinet secretary offer any further reassurance for the LGBTQ+ community in the Highlands and Islands and beyond, and will she speak to the Scottish Government's position on upholding and progressing their rights?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Emma Roddick for that question. I once again restate this Government's determination to uphold human rights for all communities, including the trans and non-binary communities. Trans men and women are our friends, neighbours, work colleagues and members of our family. It is important that we recognise that the trans community has always been, and will always be, a valued part of our community.

From the discussions that I have had with members of the trans community, I am sure that there is a great deal of upset and worry following the Supreme Court's decision. That is why this Government—and, I hope, this Parliament—will go forward with careful consideration and due diligence, in a manner respectful of everybody involved.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Last weekend, thousands of trans people and their friends and allies gathered across the United Kingdom, including on the streets of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen. Trans people, like any of us, want to be able to live their lives without fear of prejudice or violence, but they are concerned about how their lives will be affected, including their access to healthcare and other essential services.

I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments about advancing the equality of women, girls and the LGBTQI+ community. However, what further assurances can she provide today that the dignity and safety of trans people will be upheld and that they will have access to the services and facilities that they need in order to participate fully in daily life?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We should all be able to live without prejudice and violence in our society. It does no one any favours if there is prejudice and violence, or even just the threat of violence, as we discuss particularly sensitive issues. I said in my answer to Emma Roddick that it is important that we recognise the trans and non-binary community as our friends, neighbours and

members of our family. That is how I will continue my work as minister with responsibility for equalities.

The Scottish Government, in our acceptance of the Supreme Court judgment, will have to look at policies, practices and procedures across Government. That may mean that services and facilities have to be delivered in a different way in some aspects, but it is important that everyone has access to services and facilities. That is an important point that we will continue to consider.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): My party accepts the judgment of the Supreme Court and the legal clarity that it provides, but we also recognise that the trans and non-binary people whom we all represent will be afraid today. They are concerned about what the judgment will mean for them in practice and about what rights and protections the law now provides them with. Given the tone of some of the attendant coverage around the judgment, they will even have questions about how welcome they are in our society. Does the cabinet secretary agree that there is now a job of work for both of our Governments to do with some urgency to provide them with the reassurance and the legal guidance that they need in order to live their lives with acceptance and in dignity?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Alex Cole-Hamilton raises a very important point. He is quite right to talk about the real fear in the trans and non-binary community. People in that community are afraid, and it is important that we all recognise that. In recognising those fears, we also have to follow our work through on the basis of what the judgment means in practice for the trans and non-binary community. How welcome those people feel is not just about what it means in practice but is about how we carry on our debate and discussions on these issues. It is important that we talk about the practicalities and also the perceptions that people will have and will pick up in the way that we carry the debate forward.

I give Alex Cole-Hamilton my assurance that, as we move forward with the implementation of the Supreme Court judgment, we will give very careful consideration to ensuring not just that we are obeying the rule of law in implementing that judgment, but that we are doing so in a sensitive manner and that we are speaking to everyone, regardless of people's opinions and what community they are part of. It is important that we speak to everyone; but then, once we have spoken to people, our policy, practices and guidance will always be based on the rule of law.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I note the conciliatory tone that the cabinet secretary has adopted. I am especially pleased now that women's voices will, eventually, be listened to. I

add to the list, in addition to For Women Scotland, the likes of Sex Matters, Murray Blackburn Mackenzie, which has done such sterling work, LGB Alliance and so on.

Many of us noticed at the weekend the really quite shocking and disgusting language being used at some of the debates, including wishes to urinate and defecate on women. It is ironic that sex was not included as a protected characteristic in the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, with the promise that there would be a misogyny bill. Can the cabinet secretary give any indication of when that bill will be introduced—I appreciate that it is under a different portfolio—and, fundamentally, whether it will have women as a sex class at its heart?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Again, I reiterate that there is no excuse for poor, bad or, in particular, criminal behaviour. There is simply no excuse for that, and that is particularly pertinent when we are discussing an issue of such sensitivity and one where, as Alex Cole-Hamilton and others have spoken to, there is real fear from people who have raised their voices.

Michelle Thomson is quite right to point to the fact that gender or sex was not part of the hate crime legislation. I know that she is well aware of the work that has been undertaken towards a misogyny bill. We are now carefully considering the impacts of the Supreme Court ruling on the work that will be undertaken on the misogyny bill. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will be able to update Parliament in due course, but I stress once again that it is important that we take time to look at the 88-page judgment from the Supreme Court and give it exceptionally careful consideration, particularly in relation to an issue of such importance as the misogyny bill.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The SNP has tied itself in knots trying to define what a woman is. John Swinney still does not know. Discussing women's rights has been met in and outside this chamber with accusations of transphobia. Stating the obvious has led to women being called bigots, but, thanks to the Supreme Court, we all know where we now stand. Will the cabinet secretary now apologise to all women who have been vilified, lost their jobs or experienced sexual harassment, voyeurism, serious assault or intimidation, all because of her Government's self-ID policy? Will the Scottish Government instruct all public sector authorities to settle any on-going legal cases or employment tribunals relating to the provision of single-sex spaces?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Presiding Officer, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on on-going legal cases. That is an important obligation on Scottish ministers.

As I have said before, the Scottish Government carried out its work on the guidance on gender representation on public boards in good faith, using—as the Supreme Court said in its judgment—the EHRC guidance. That is what was followed as we developed our guidance. In saying that, we of course recognise and accept the judgment of the Supreme Court; that is exactly why we are now moving forward to the implementation of that judgment. The rule of law must be followed not just by the Scottish Government but by everyone who is impacted by the Supreme Court judgment.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The ruling provides clarity on the interpretation of two pieces of legislation, both of which were passed at Westminster. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about any relevant engagement with the UK Government going forward?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: My officials are meeting their counterparts from the UK Government on Thursday 24 April. As I said in my statement, I wrote to the UK Government immediately following the judgment, seeking an urgent meeting. As the UK Government and the Scottish Government work through the impacts of the Supreme Court judgment, it is important that discussions take place, both at the official level and—I hope—at the ministerial level. As I think I said in my statement—for the avoidance of any doubt, I will say it again—I am still waiting for a reply to the letter that I sent to the UK Government.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has indicated that she is soon to meet the EHRC to discuss guidance. I have previously raised the issue of how intimate care in medical and care settings is delivered and the patient's understanding of the description of a woman doctor or carer. Does the cabinet secretary think that the Supreme Court judgment has any implications for the definition of a woman in those settings? Will that be part of the planned discussions with the EHRC?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Of course, the amount that we will be able to discuss in one meeting with the EHRC will be limited. As I am sure that Claire Baker will understand, particularly since the Supreme Court judgment, there is quite a lot to get through, so she will forgive me if I am not quite sure how much of that discussion we will be able to have on Thursday. Following that meeting, I hope that there will be a regular dialogue so that the EHRC can keep the Scottish Government informed about its work. It is up to the EHRC—rightly so, as it is independent of all Governments—to take forward that work on guidance. However, it is important for us to know

the timetable for that work—or, at least, to know when the EHRC hopes that the timetable for that work will be published.

I hope that what we are able to discuss on Thursday will provide us with the principles and a wider understanding. We might not get to the level of detail that Claire Baker wishes us to get to on Thursday, but, as we work through this in the NHS and in other parts of Government, ministers will keep Parliament updated as guidance changes or if policy and practice change. I give her that reassurance.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): There is not a single mention in the cabinet secretary's statement of the huge amount of taxpayers' money that has been wasted by the Scottish Government arguing about the definition of a woman. Taxpayers expect their money to be spent on helping our NHS, improving our roads and keeping our streets safe, not on court cases that aim to defend the indefensible, so will the cabinet secretary come clean with the public and confirm how much money was spent by the SNP Government to argue against biological sex in court?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said, the Scottish Government had already taken its case to both the inner house and the outer house of the Court of Session, and the reason that it got to the Supreme Court was that due process was followed. Now that we have got to the final decision point, we respect the court's judgment on that.

I hope that Meghan Gallacher will genuinely understand that the final costs of the case are still being calculated. The judgment was issued only in the middle of last week, and some final aspects of the case still need to be finalised, but, once those final costs are calculated, they will be published in due course.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I go back to the cabinet secretary's response to my colleague Paul O'Kane. In her statement, the cabinet secretary talked about the Scottish Government successfully defending its guidance twice. That seems to have arisen because the Scottish Government followed the EHRC's advice. Does the cabinet secretary have any concerns about the quality of advice that the Scottish Government is receiving when it is just taking into account another body's legal advice, and will she look at that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With the greatest respect to Martin Whitfield, I say that the EHRC is not just another body—it is the arbiter and regulator of issues to do with equality. To be quite frank, I would be astonished if the Scottish Government did something that was not reliant on

EHRC guidance. The EHRC is not just another body—that is why it is important that the Supreme Court referred to the fact that the Scottish Government had followed EHRC guidance, and that was the basis on which our case was taken forward.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): We all owe For Women Scotland and the many people who supported them a huge debt of gratitude. One of them is in the public gallery with us today.

By contrast, this Parliament and this Government have let the women of Scotland down badly. They lectured us about tone, including again today, and patronised us while, at the same time, giving away women's hard-won rights. This Parliament and this Government turned away as women's reputations were being trashed and women were being suspended from or hounded out of their jobs simply for stating that sex is immutable, and they refused to listen when women were being harmed in single-sex spaces, services and sports. Politicians who did not stand up for women should hang their heads in shame.

How did this Parliament and this Government get it so wrong and let Scottish women down so badly? If I can contradict the cabinet secretary, I would say that there should be no more delay in acting on the judgment, because Scottish women have waited long enough.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would hope that we could all agree that tone is important in this. I have heard from members today about the fears and concerns of both activists who have taken—

Ash Regan: You have been getting it wrong so consistently, and women have been patronised—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am sorry, Presiding Officer—I am slightly struggling. I was going to say that I am struggling to know whether Ms Regan wants to make an intervention, but I have just remembered that this is a statement. Nevertheless, I am happy to try to answer her questions, if she will let me.

I think that it is important that we look at the tone in all of this. We have heard today the concerns about threats and intimidation to the women who took the case, and also threats and intimidation towards the trans and non-binary community. That is why the tone is important—it is important for everybody who is involved in this.

As a Government, we have always respected single-sex spaces and respected the exemptions in the Equality Act 2010, and it is important that we move forward on that basis. I can reassure the member that there is not a delay and the work is continuing, but I hope that she would also recognise that the EHRC has an important role to play in this, which is why what it has to say on the

matter—both what it may be able to say on Thursday in our initial meeting, and in its guidance that will follow—is so exceptionally important.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I appreciate that the debate raises many emotive issues and that there are strong views on all sides, which is to be accepted and respected. However, whatever one's view on the debate, I hope that we all accept that at the heart of it lie people: human beings, who are our fellow Scots—those who vote for us and those who do not.

It is also true that gender recognition certificates have been issued in Scotland for nearly two decades. Although those relate to a relatively small group of people, many of the holders of those certificates will now be wondering what legal rights, if any at all, the certificates still offer them. My question is on a specific technical level: is the Scottish Government willing to undertake any legal advice or analysis or to offer guidance to holders of those certificates about their future and their day-to-day lives?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome Jamie Greene to his new position in the chamber. It is important that he talked powerfully about the fact that people are at the heart of the matter. As we go through the discussion, regardless of people's views on the issue and regardless of their views before the Supreme Court reached its judgment—it has reached its judgment and we must move to implementation—we must always bear in mind, as he rightly says, that people are at the heart of everything that we do.

I mentioned in previous answers and in my statement that important parts of the Supreme Court judgment, such as paragraph 100, refer particularly to gender recognition certificates. The 2004 act was passed by Westminster, and it has been there for some time. It is important that we now reflect on what is in the judgment from the Supreme Court about the importance, still, of gender recognition certificates and on the Supreme Court's statements about the rights of the trans community due to gender reassignment still being protected in the Equality Act 2010.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The position of NHS Fife in relation to the Sandie Peggie employment tribunal must now be entirely unsustainable in the light of the Supreme Court judgment. Like me, the cabinet secretary will have constituents in Fife—thousands of individuals—who have been waiting too long for vital treatments because NHS Fife is starved of resources, and yet it is spending what must now be hundreds of thousands of pounds in legal costs defending the indefensible. Is it not time that the Scottish Government instructed it to throw in the towel and to stop wasting our money?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Murdo Fraser well knows, that is a matter between the employer, NHS Fife, and the employees. It is subject to on-going judicial proceedings in the employment tribunal, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on a live case.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary has stated many times that the rule of law is important and must be followed right across the public sector. I trust that that extends to organisations that receive grant funding from the Scottish Government. Will the Scottish Government now support organisations financially only if they respect and abide by the rule of law?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have said on a number of occasions, it is important that the Scottish Government, public bodies and other organisations reflect very carefully on the Supreme Court judgment and ensure that they abide by not only the Equality Act 2010 but all other relevant pieces of legislation.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Will you accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate to allow those of us, including me, who requested to ask a question of the cabinet secretary to put our questions to her on this monumental statement? It is only right that the Parliament is able to hear all voices on the issue and, I hope, to get answers from the Scottish Government.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ross. The Parliamentary Bureau discussed the allocation of time for the statement this afternoon. That time was extended, and I have now extended the extension. It is important that we protect time for other issues. There will be further opportunities this week to put questions to the Government on the matter.

That concludes the ministerial statement.

International Situation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate on the international situation. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to please press their request-to-speak buttons.

I call the First Minister to open the debate. First Minister, you have up to 13 minutes.

15:41

The First Minister (John Swinney): We began our business this afternoon by expressing our condolences on the death of Pope Francis, recognising the significance of his spiritual leadership in the world. It seems appropriate that we continue our business today by considering the current international situation, which was a subject of concern in the comments and contributions of His Holiness on so many occasions.

In these times, it has never been clearer that we live in an interdependent world in which the idea of being a by-stander—for any country—has gone for ever. Decisions on trade that are taken, for example, by the United States or China are bound to have an impact on living standards here in Scotland. Russia's on-going barbaric invasion of Ukraine or the brutal attack by Hamas on Israel, as well as the killing of Palestinian children by Israel, have deep and significant consequences far beyond those conflicts. More than that, aggression on such a scale and the apparent disregard for human life offend any sense of common humanity.

Today, the Scottish Government is bringing forward a debate without motion on the international situation. I hope that this will be an occasion when members of the Parliament can speak freely and openly on the major international issues of the day that have implications for our country and the communities that we serve. We have an opportunity to listen carefully to one another's contributions and to learn from one another as we navigate these difficult days.

The relative stability that the international system has provided us with in the past 80 years has, in many ways, been assumed to be able to go on for ever, uninterrupted. With every civil liberty gained since the end of the second world war, every rise in living and educational standards, every international agreement signed and each advancement in knowledge and technology, few imagined that we would arrive at an age in which leaders actively seek to roll back universal progress in favour of protectionist measures once more.

In these circumstances, it is more important than ever for Scotland to champion the benefits of international trade, co-operation, and solidarity. As the leader of the Scottish National Party, I obviously believe that we could help people in Scotland to cope with these challenges and make our voice heard more effectively as an independent nation state within the European Union. I acknowledge that others take a different view. However, the vast majority of members in the chamber share common values. I believe that those common values reflect the founding values of the European Union—

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

The First Minister: Of course.

Daniel Johnson: I agree with the First Minister's points about the assumption of progress and the benefits that globalisation and trade have brought. Will he, like me, also reflect on the costs of globalisation, which we need to think about? Some of the circumstances that we find ourselves in may be because we did not pay enough attention to the inequalities and inequities that were created by globalisation and trade, despite the benefits that they have brought.

The First Minister: Mr Johnson makes an absolutely valid point. Globalisation has huge benefits but, at the same time as globalisation has happened and progress has taken place in countless societies around the world, there will be other societies that have experienced prolonged inequality. There will also be profound inequalities even in some of the societies that have benefited from globalisation. He is intimately familiar with the agenda that my Government is pursuing, which is addressing inequalities that exist in our society.

There is much substance to Mr Johnson's point, and we must be alert to the implications of those inequalities and dangers as we wrestle with the fast-changing environment that is in front of us.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On the basis of that response, does not the First Minister accept that our debating time in the chamber today perhaps would have been better used to discuss how we can extend opportunity and freedom of choice—and all the other things that I was heartened to hear him say that he agreed with in answer to a question that I asked him at First Minister's question time before he went to New York? Would not it have been better for us to have spent our time discussing how we can make those things happen in Scotland, rather than having an open-ended debate on the international situation?

The First Minister: When I began my speech, I made the point that we are now in a situation in which we are not immune from changing

international events. That is why we are having this debate. It is important that this Parliament reflects on the fact that the international community in which we reside is changing dramatically around us, and we have to be conscious of the implications of that.

If I want to give Mr Kerr a substantive answer on the implications of international trade changes that are emerging in the international community, I must have an understanding of those questions. I have to be held to account about my understanding of those questions by Parliament, because they will shape the response that I bring forward in leading the Government in exercising our devolved responsibilities.

We will, of course, have plenty of opportunity to discuss the domestic implications of those issues on 6 May, for example, when I will set out the programme for government, which will set out the further steps that the Government will take to implement our domestic agenda.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The First Minister spoke about giving a substantive answer. Given that this is a wide-ranging debate with no motion, I believe that we can ask any questions that seek a substantive answer from him.

The First Minister repeatedly refused to answer this question at the weekend. This has nothing to do with accepting the Supreme Court judgment or otherwise; it is about his Government. Do John Swinney and the Scottish National Party Government believe that a trans woman is a woman or not?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before the First Minister rises to his feet, I point out to Mr Ross that wide ranging is wide ranging, but I am looking at the title of the debate, which is that it is a Scottish Government debate on the international situation. That is important to underline at this early stage in the debate.

First Minister, I will leave it to you as to how you wish to respond.

The First Minister: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. Mr Ross is obviously very familiar with the answers that I gave at the weekend. Given that, I will stick very strictly to the context of the debate—[*Interruption.*—]—to take this forward.

Douglas Ross: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I will give way to Mr Ross again.

Douglas Ross: I am familiar with the answers that the First Minister gave at the weekend. Five times he was asked this question and he would not give a clear answer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross—

Douglas Ross: —and the people of Scotland—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, could you resume your seat for a second? Thank you very much.

I have made it clear—this is a normal rule of this Parliament—that we seek to debate the subject matter of the debate. I am always happy to take a wide view of what that is, but I am looking at the title of the debate, which is that it is a Scottish Government debate on the international situation. With the best will in the world, Mr Ross, please bring your remarks within the remit of our debate today.

Douglas Ross: I have been contacted by a constituent who wonders about the international response to the Scottish Government and the First Minister's answer to this question. Does the First Minister believe that a trans woman is a woman—yes or no?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, we have dealt with that. First Minister, please resume and carry on with your speech.

The First Minister: The international community will have seen that the Scottish Government has continued the important tradition of believing in the rule of law and accepting the Supreme Court judgment, which was at the heart of my responses last week.

I was developing a point about the importance of our having a values-based approach to the international situation that we face. Much of that is focused on the values of the European Union, which have served us well and which this Government would want to see endorsed in the future.

Our stance on international conflict is also relevant to the situation that we face. As a country, we have experienced the immediate implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Its displacement of people led to increased levels of migration that this country has positively responded to, but significant disruptions to economic activity have also come as a consequence of that conflict. I make that point to illustrate that the consequences of the international situation are felt directly and acutely here, in Scotland.

Parliament has also debated the horror of the attack by Hamas on Israel and the significance and the brutality of the Israeli response. We have been at the forefront of calling for a ceasefire in that conflict, which has enabled us to make our voices heard in arguing for peace and stability.

A benefit in recent weeks has been a sustained effort, which will be marked in Bute house this

evening, of collaboration between the Jewish and Islamic communities in Scotland. They have come together to sign what is becoming known as the Drumlanrig accord—a unified declaration by representatives of the Jewish and Islamic communities that condemns hate crime, bigotry and xenophobia and sends a crucial message of unity and mutual respect when it is much needed. I applaud everyone who has been involved in shaping that declaration for what it does in our communities.

The issue of climate action has also been relevant to the formulation of our response to the changing international situation. There is more and more dismissing of the climate emergency, with populist leaders increasingly ready to trade the hope and the health of future generations for short-term gains. We have to recognise that climate change will increase conflict, hunger, disease, inequality and mortality. It has undeniably done so for some time. Last year alone, flooding displaced thousands in Brazil and South Sudan, and wildfires swept through regions of Canada, Portugal and California. In Scotland, we have seen the effect of severe storms, and we must act together to build a fairer, greener and more resilient economy and society as a consequence.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am grateful to the First Minister for addressing the climate issue in the context of the international situation.

In the First Minister's recent visit to the US—a country where a full-on ideological purge is under way against climate science, climate scientists and those who seek to bring about positive and rational climate action—did he take the time to meet any of the people in that area who are on the receiving end of the brutality of the Trump regime?

The First Minister: I did not have the opportunity to do that in the format that Mr Harvie mentions, but I did engage with the Council on Foreign Relations, with which I had a helpful dialogue about many of the strategic issues that we face.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Scottish Government's international development programme—a significant milestone in Scotland's commitment to addressing poverty and inequality overseas. At a time when the United States, the United Kingdom and other donors have slashed their aid budgets, we in Scotland are committed to continuing our support to partner countries in the global south and, more widely, to responding to humanitarian emergencies.

Today I am pleased to announce a contribution of £240,000, through our humanitarian emergency fund, to the Disasters Emergency Committee's appeal for the middle east, along with £30,000 for

the Scottish charities the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund and Mercy Corps for their responses in Lebanon and Syria. That is in addition to the £250,000 that we provided to that appeal last November. It comes at a time when humanitarian needs continue to increase across Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and Syria. Scotland will continue to take forward our trusted approach to partnership in the international community.

In recent weeks, the global economy has been significantly disrupted by the steps taken by the United States to introduce tariffs. Volatility in the global markets has had the effect of undermining the patterns of international business activity to which we have become accustomed, and it poses risks to our ambitions to grow and strengthen the Scottish economy.

The Scottish Government's priority has been to act to support Scottish business in dealing with those turbulent events by engaging with the business community on the circumstances that it faces; by pursuing with the UK Government the issues that matter to different sectors of the Scottish economy; and by continuing to promote Scotland as an attractive and secure place for international investment. Indeed, in recent weeks, the Deputy First Minister, the Minister for Business and I have all been involved in promoting investment in Scotland in the United Arab Emirates, China, Japan and the United States. We continue to seek deeper engagement with the United Kingdom Government about the content of any trade deal with the United States and to encourage better and more effective trading partnerships with the European Union, which lies at the heart of the Government's international investment strategy.

It is absolutely vital that Scotland recognises the significance of the international situation as it affects our domestic priorities. As First Minister, I am interested in raising standards of living in this country; building community; investing in our culture, services and businesses; and supporting the health of the planet that we share. However, I recognise that we cannot take forward all the action that we wish to take in all those different areas without properly and fully recognising the scope and extent of the influence of the international agenda on our community. Today, I hope that we can have a debate that reflects the significance of the international situation and of the change in international circumstances, and that we recognise the extent to which that affects our prospects as a country and the need for us to have a resilient and effective response to all those challenges.

15:56

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): First of all, I join the First Minister in expressing condolence to Catholics all over Scotland and around the world on the passing of a holy man, Pope Francis. I also join the First Minister in praising the accord that has been reached between Jewish and Muslim leaders in our country to deal with some of the issues that we see reflected in the international situation.

I also agree with the First Minister on the interconnected nature of our existence. However, this Parliament was not established to play at being the Foreign Office. We are not the United Nations. We are not here to simulate debates from the House of Commons. We are a devolved legislature with a defined purpose—namely, to improve the lives of the people of Scotland by delivering better devolved public services and outcomes.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Does the member not appreciate that improving the wellbeing and prosperity of the people relies on exports? Let us take the visit to the UAE as one example. In terms of single-country sales forecasts for Scottish companies, the UAE is now second only to the US. He knows how exposed we are to the turbulence that is caused by US tariffs. Does he not think that it is in the interests of the people of Scotland to improve exports?

Stephen Kerr: Of course I agree that export sales are an important part of a prosperous and growing economy, but this debate has been deliberately framed as being on the international situation. We are spending valuable time on it in the chamber, and we have only a few hours of debating time in the chamber each week. With all respect to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, this debate is a distraction. It is orchestrated sleight of hand by a failing Government that is desperate to change the subject. The Parliament was created to be accountable to the people of Scotland for devolved responsibilities around health, education, transport, housing, justice and local government.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): The member describes the debate as “orchestrated sleight of hand”. Will he reflect on the fact that the Parliamentary Bureau met, agreed to schedule the debate and brought it to the chamber in a business motion, and that the Parliament agreed to have the debate?

Stephen Kerr: I return to my point, because the member’s intervention makes no difference to that. My point is that the primary function of this devolved Parliament is to hold the Government to

account for issues that are devolved. However, when the SNP is confronted with its dismal domestic record, it does not face the music—it changes the tune. Rather than deal with the growing crisis in our national health service, the SNP wants us to take time to debate Gaza. Rather than talk about the collapse in our education standards, it would prefer that we discuss Ukraine. Rather than account for its economic underperformance, it would like us to stand up and offer comments on American politics or French farming.

Daniel Johnson: I have to disagree with the member up to a point. Although this chamber is about devolved matters, the international situation impacts Scotland. For example, Scotland makes a vital contribution to the defence of this country. We have a substantial defence sector footprint, which this Administration has sometimes been rather coy about discussing. Is that not a relevant issue that we should absolutely be discussing in order to highlight some of this Administration’s shortfalls?

Stephen Kerr: The whole point of the precious time that we have in the chamber is that we should focus our attention on matters that are relevant to this Parliament’s purpose. Those are important matters, and the subject and content of the First Minister’s speech this afternoon were full of important matters, but that does not mean that debating those issues should take up the very little time that we have in this Parliament as we hold the Government to account.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Does Stephen Kerr not agree that the rise of right-wing politics across the world should absolutely be front and centre in this debating chamber, if history tells us anything?

Stephen Kerr: The way that we address the extremes in politics is by making sure that we do justice by the people of Scotland in areas that impact on the quality of their everyday lives. For example, on education—

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I give way to the First Minister.

The First Minister: I tread delicately here in order to point out the total contradiction in the point that Stephen Kerr is putting to the Parliament today. In the precious time that is available to the Parliament, Mr Kerr chose to lodge a question for First Minister’s question time to ask me about international trade. Does that not point out that Mr Kerr is talking absolute nonsense in today’s debate?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please always be courteous and respectful, First Minister.

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure that “absolute nonsense” is a respectful term. We are all

entitled—[*Interruption.*] First Minister, might I have your attention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr has the floor, members.

Stephen Kerr: Sorry?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was saying that you have the floor.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you. The whole point is that I am not talking nonsense. I asked a question at FMQs, and the Minister for Parliamentary Business said that he would log that I brought up an issue that involves Scotland's place in the world, which I accept. However, this is a debate entitled, "The International Situation". I want to talk about situations that impact the people of Scotland and look at them from the vantage point of the rest of the world.

For example, the SNP inherited the highest-performing education system in the United Kingdom. In 2012, we led the UK in core subjects. Fast forward to 2025, and we are languishing near the bottom of the UK rankings and far behind many of our international peers. In the most recent programme for international student assessment results—2022—Scottish pupils ranked 30th in mathematics, 14th in reading and 32nd in science out of 37 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. We now sit behind countries such as Slovenia and Latvia. It is not a record to be proud of, and that is the international situation that we should be focused on, because it is a national embarrassment.

What did the SNP do in response to those issues? It pulled Scotland out of key international comparative studies. The official reason that was given was "budget priorities". The real result was fewer benchmarks and less scrutiny. That is not reform; it is retreat. On health, the SNP tells us that the NHS is safe in its hands, but the facts tell a different story. In the OECD's regional wellbeing index, Scotland scores just five out of 10 for health. Life expectancy is falling: for men, it is now 76.2 years; for women, it is 80.7 years. That places us behind Ireland, Canada and countries that once looked to Scotland as a standard setter.

The crisis in accident and emergency departments is now chronic, and 723,000 Scots are now waiting for out-patient or in-patient procedures. The legal 12-week treatment guarantee, which the Government introduced in 2012, is now routinely breached. In 2024, only 60 per cent of patients received treatment within that timeframe—the guarantee is, in practice, a fiction.

On social care reform, £30 million was spent on plans for a national care service, but those plans have been shelved, have stalled and are subject to indefinite delay.

Audit Scotland has described NHS Scotland as being in crisis without a plan. Staff are exhausted, and infrastructure is crumbling. That is not world-class healthcare; it is failure institutionalised.

On the economy, let us not be seduced by SNP talking points on foreign direct investment. The real measure of a healthy economy is whether the country's own citizens are investing and creating. On that metric—domestic business investment—Scotland ranks 34th out of 35 OECD countries. That is second from the bottom. Only Cyprus fares worse. Scotland's employment rate sits at 73.5 per cent, which is below the UK average of 75 per cent. We now rank below Portugal, Spain and Poland. Ministers talk about attracting investors, but they will not talk about the growing number of businesses that struggle to start or survive. Productivity remains low, confidence remains flat and child poverty persists.

When it comes to transport, few scandals match the ferry fiasco. The Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa ferries, which were ordered in 2015 for £97 million, are expected to cost more than £300 million. Let us consider the A9. In 2007, the SNP promised to dual the road by 2025, but not a single new mile was delivered between 2017 and 2022.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you need to bring your remarks to a close, please.

Stephen Kerr: As of 2024, only 11 miles had been dualled.

Let me talk about the international situation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In concluding your remarks, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: No one is calling Bute house for advice. The idea that foreign leaders are queuing up to learn from the SNP Government is pure delusion. If they are calling it at all, it is to ask how it all went so wrong. The answer is this—a Government that is obsessed with image over substance, a Parliament that is distracted from its purpose and a politics that values posture over performance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, please conclude your remarks. I have been generous, but please conclude now, otherwise we will move directly to the next speaker.

Stephen Kerr: I think that that means that I will sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is one way to do it. Thank you, Mr Kerr.

16:07

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): In opening the debate for Scottish Labour, I join other members in marking the sad passing of His

Holiness Pope Francis. He was a much-loved, compassionate and humble man who cared deeply about the poor and welcomed the marginalised. He will be missed, and my thoughts are with all those who are mourning his loss.

We meet today to debate global events and their implications for people here and across the world. There is much to discuss, from the new US Administration's intentions to the war in Ukraine and the humanitarian crises in Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar and many other places. Like other members, I cannot possibly begin to address all those issues and more in the time that I have, so I refer members to my previous comments on the need for peace and for international law to be upheld in the middle east and in Ukraine.

I will focus my remarks on Scotland's and the UK's place in the world—what we must do, what we must not do and the opportunities in relation to our diplomatic, economic and defence policies. A lot of those policy areas are reserved, but, as Daniel Johnson said, some are devolved.

It is important to note that there is no motion for today's debate. That might well reflect the uncertain times that we are living in. My initial thought when I discovered that there would be no motion was that that was perhaps an admission from the Scottish Government that a single motion cannot simply provide the answers to the countless complex challenges that we currently face. That is, on some level, welcome, because anyone here who pretends to have all the answers is, I fear, mistaken, so I welcome the fact that the debate is being facilitated in that way.

The international situation is unpredictable and is evolving rapidly. As the Prime Minister said recently,

"The world as we knew it has gone."

The world is changing, trade-offs will be required and we also need to adapt and move with the times. However, we should do so with caution, because misinformation, which we see so readily on social media, can lead to miscalculations. Reliable intelligence from reliable sources and cool heads are required to navigate the difficult terrain that we are in.

That is why I am pleased that the new UK Labour Government and the Prime Minister are providing serious leadership for serious times, with an approach that seeks to bring countries together in co-operation with our global allies and partners, particularly when it comes to our support for Ukraine, for example, but also one that seeks to protect our national security at the same time. Strengthening relations with others while also focusing on our own self-reliance is a difficult but important balance to be struck. Countries always

have acted in their own national interest—they always will—and we should be no different.

We should also seek to work with international partners on the basis of common goals.

Patrick Harvie: Will Neil Bibby say a little more about what he means by international partners with whom we share common goals? Given the Trump regime's alignment with anti-democratic forces and its direct threats against previously friendly democratic countries, surely the UK must conclude that it can no longer be treated as a reliable ally.

Neil Bibby: I do not agree with that last point, but I will come on to some further thoughts on our relationship with the US.

Strong diplomacy is based on common goals and also on trust, and that trust will be tested when there is uncertainty about where countries with which we have had a long relationship are heading and the extent to which we have common goals. In times such as this, we need to ask ourselves some fundamental questions. Where do we stand? What do we want to achieve? What are we prepared to do to achieve those things?

A positive and special relationship with the United States has been vital to Scotland and the United Kingdom, and it continues to be so. It has spanned countless Presidents, Prime Ministers and generations of our citizens and Americans. Its importance cannot be overstated. Scottish Labour understands that. That is why Anas Sarwar was in New York and Washington recently, and I am sure that that is why the First Minister was also recently in the United States. That relationship has been helped enormously by the presence of the US consulate in Edinburgh since 1798, and I hope that the US State Department will ensure that it remains, as its closure would be a retrograde step.

In just a few weeks, we will commemorate the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day, when British and American forces stood shoulder to shoulder, many sacrificing their lives for the liberation of Europe from the Nazis. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was born thereafter, along with the Ottawa agreement, to protect and defend our shared values of freedom and democracy. That founding role, as well as article 5 of the NATO treaty—an attack on one is an attack on all—is as important today as it was then.

Of course, also standing with us in those dark days were our friends and allies in the Commonwealth—India, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, to name just a few. Our relationship with them remains critical, and we should support them as they have supported us. I wish our friends in Canada and Australia the best as they exercise their democratic rights in the next few weeks.

Our relationship with our closest neighbours in Europe is also critical. It is right that the Prime Minister is seeking to reset our relationship with the European Union, as well as ensuring that we work together to strengthen security on the continent and support Ukraine against Putin's aggression.

Turning to the economic situation, the news that President Trump has suspended the proposed increased tariffs for 90 days is, of course, welcome. The liberation day tariff announcement caused an immense amount of uncertainty for businesses and markets around the world. Unnecessary barriers to trade and a trade war are not in Scotland's national interest or in the interests of working people, and any prospective trade deals must be in the interests of businesses, consumers and workers. Isolationism might seem attractive to some, but it has costs. It is not for us to tell other countries what to do, but we must send a signal to the world that we are open for business.

There are opportunities from taking that outward-looking approach. I believe that, by utilising the UK's soft power and brand Scotland, we can, for example, bring more tourists to visit and students to study here.

Protecting the safety of our citizens is the Government's first duty. Security takes many forms—economic security, food security, energy security and defence security—and the UK Government is significantly increasing spending on security. That is welcome, and, like Daniel Johnson, I hope that we can have the opportunity to discuss that further.

British Steel is vital to our economic and national security and to sectors such as rail, construction and shipbuilding. The UK Government was therefore right to take decisive action to save British Steel and to pass emergency legislation to prevent the last of the UK's blast furnaces in Scunthorpe from being shut down. If they were allowed to close, the UK would be the only country in the G20 without the ability to make primary steel.

Considering the uncertainty of the international situation, we must support our industries to ensure that we are well equipped to deal with all eventualities. That is why it was right that the UK Government announced an additional £200 million for the future of Grangemouth. The investment in Scotland's industrial future will allow for a transition plan for the site.

Cementing our energy security is incredibly important, and establishing a public energy company is a key way to do that. That is something the Scottish Government promised and failed to do, but the new UK Labour Government is

now taking forward the creation of Great British Energy, a Government-owned renewable energy investment body that will be headquartered in Aberdeen, which will make us less susceptible to the volatility of energy imports.

That leads me on to the issue of nuclear energy. We can see the energy security and cheaper bills that nuclear has provided in France. Meanwhile, here in Scotland, the Scottish Government's continued opposition to new nuclear power and small modular reactors is costing Scotland jobs and investment, and I do not believe that that is in Scotland's national interest. Given the current situation, we need to look differently at our policy positions. Scottish Labour has said that we would lift the ban on new nuclear, which is holding Scotland back.

As I stated at the outset, these are uncertain times. Amid the insecurity around the globe, we must not retreat from the world but co-operate with other countries on our common goals, and we must strengthen our industries and security for the benefit of our citizens, businesses and industries.

16:16

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I often argue that hope is hard work these days. As we look at the international situation, there are so many aspects that need unpacking that it is hard to know where to begin. Whether we are talking about the economic chaos that is coming from Donald Trump's on-again, off-again, will-he, won't-he tariff chaos or the security implications of his realignment of US posture against democratic countries and with Putin's regime, there is a need for Europe and the UK in particular to recognise that, in that context, the US can no longer be seen as a reliable ally.

There is the Russian occupation and war in Ukraine, more than three years on from the full-scale invasion; there is Israel's genocide in Gaza, with more than 50,000 dead—mostly civilians, at least half of them women and children—and endless examples of the Israeli Government and the Israel Defense Forces openly committing war crimes and celebrating it; and there is the violence in the wider world.

Then, of course, there is the climate and nature emergency: despite knowing for decades about the profound danger that we have been causing, the world has continued to expand fossil fuel use, polluting at ever higher levels and devastating the natural world for profit, and we are now witnessing a reboot of denial and conspiracy theories to prevent the rational action that we know is needed.

The scale of the refugee crisis continues to grow. At the end of 2023, more than 117 million

people around the world were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and more. By early 2024, that number had grown to more than 120 million. That is before we consider those forced to move by economics or by changes in climate and food production—changes that global refugee conventions are simply unprepared to cope with.

Just as many countries enact ever more brutal and inhuman policies to control and exclude refugees, many are also becoming ever more authoritarian against their own citizens, with the so-called culture war agenda generating a wave of hatred and hostility against the most marginalised.

Are those really disparate crises, each with a specific source of chaos in a turbulent world, or are they aspects of a wider, more general crisis—one of humanity's making, which threatens our whole world? That can seem like a daunting question even just to consider but, in my view, the recent writing of Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor has come close to an answer. They talk about the rise of what they describe as "end-times fascism".

Some, of course, will scoff and splutter whenever the word "fascism" is used, despite the evidence. Some even refuse to see what is in front of them—a US Administration that is using every possible means to prevent the peaceful transfer of power after losing an election, or, once returned to power, that is overseeing an ideological and literal purge of people who are legally protected from deportation. I cannot help those who refuse to see fascism for what it is, even when it is in front of them.

However, the point that Klein and Taylor make is beyond that. They contrast the fascism of the past—which offered the selfish hope of a purified future for the chosen—with the end-times fascism of today, which is led by those who appear to be prepping for the catastrophe that they have caused. The control and expulsion of unwanted people; the seeking to exploit the resources of other countries through threat, occupation or the abuse of economic power; the attempts of the super-rich to buy their ticket out of collapse in gated communities, corporate city states or Elon Musk's absurd fantasy of a future on Mars once they have destroyed the life-sustaining conditions on this world; and the fossil fuel industry's doubling down on its own self-interest, despite knowing the consequences—all those things give the appearance of the alignment of powerful political and economic interests that have recognised that we already live in an age of consequences and crises that have been brought about by their actions. However, they are too invested in the economic model that has created those crises to consider taking the rational action that is necessary to address them.

As Klein and Taylor have argued, they are not just taking advantage of catastrophes, shock doctrine and the disaster-capitalism policies of the past; they are, simultaneously, provoking and planning for those crises. In what should be astonishing and sickening to any civilised person, those who have built the modern far-right movement around the world are now openly launching an ideological attack on the very concept of empathy. In truth, that is entirely in keeping with their values. Their ability to frame empathy as a weakness will be essential to them if they are to continue their sociopathic project. Their level of brutality against the powerless is already sickening, but, if they are successful at dehumanising humanity itself, far worse is to come.

Where can we find hope when hope is hard work? I will come back to that in my closing speech, but Klein and Taylor have set out the possible alternative of the sources of hope in the future as a counter to the apocalyptic narrative of the far right and the vested interests. It is a story about how to survive the hard times ahead without leaving anyone behind. It is about not escaping a collapsing world but, as they have said,

"staying put and staying faithful to the troubled earthly reality in which we are enmeshed and bound."

16:23

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western)

(LD): Unlike Stephen Kerr, I welcome the debate. It is right that, from time to time, members reflect on the international context in which we find ourselves. We are not governing in a void or passing policy in a vacuum, so I welcome the First Minister's remarks and, in particular, the fact that he started with a reflection on the late pontiff. That was right. There is much in the work of Pope Francis that we could fill debates such as today's with, whether on the plight of migrants or the brutality and ethnic cleansing in our world, in Gaza, parts of China and Sudan.

I want to reflect on a recent experience that I shared with Paul Sweeney over the Easter break. In doing so, I will start with the reflections of another holy man—a Greek Orthodox priest, whom Paul and I met in an army base in western Ukraine. His name is Father Taras, and he is a padre—an army chaplain—on the eastern front. He is a veteran of some 10 years in the armed forces of Ukraine. He never carries a gun. In his eyes and face, you can see a tension between his godly world view and love of Christ and the violence that he sees and has to condone every day. As we approached holy week, I asked him whether he expected wide attendance at his Easter mass. He said, "No, I don't get a lot of people coming to my services. The men really just

want me to hear their confession, because they think that they're going to die."

Paul and I were there with Mighty Convoy. We had driven 35 hours non-stop overland to deliver five NHS ambulances for immediate use on the front lines by the armed forces of Ukraine. Arriving in Ukraine, you immediately get a sense of the country that it is and the country that it is striving to be—a country that desperately wants to make its freedom mean something, and to grasp on to some sense of normality. We saw that in a stand of three billboards, which are very close to the Ukrainian border. The first advertises the armed forces of Ukraine's drone unit training programme, the next advertises watchfulness against Russian disinformation and the third brightly invites you to eat at the local burrito shack. This is a country where there is no rationing or scarcity and where people just want to live a normal life.

The other thing that strikes you, as you cross from Poland into western Ukraine, is the abundance of beautiful Orthodox churches. They are everywhere, and their beautiful domes of gold punctuate the amazing Ukrainian landscape. However, as you admire the splendour of those houses of God, you are also struck by the freshly dug graves all around them. New graves are everywhere. They are almost always marked by a Ukrainian flag, of course, but also a flag of red and black, which we understand stands for the blood of the Ukrainian defenders seeping into the soil of Ukraine.

Although there are new graves around every churchyard, they are as nothing compared with something called the Field of Mars. Before 2022, the Field of Mars was like Princes Street Gardens—it was a picturesque city park in the centre of downtown Lviv. It is now a massive cemetery for the fallen glorious defenders of Ukraine. We were both incredibly struck by that. Still, we are talking about a country and a city that are clinging to normality, and the people there make a really good job of it—until you are given your air raid briefing and realise that it is not a normal city, or until you attend your first 9 am silence and realise that it is not a normal country.

At 9 am every morning, across the country, a minute's silence is observed for those who have died, and who are still dying, on the eastern front. Paul and I observed our 9 am silence in the National Rehabilitation Centre, where we met the heroes of Ukraine. They were veterans of the eastern front who, despite having lost limbs, eyes and a lot of their mental capacity, were still defiant. That beautiful facility is constantly being expanded. We were advised that, in two months' time, a centre for survivors of captivity and torture will be opened. Such is the demand for that kind of

support for the soldiers who return from Russia as a result of prisoner exchanges.

We were grateful to be received by the mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyi, who told us about what wartime city life is like. It is just like life in any other city, only with added complications. They still have to manage the bins and fill the potholes. I ask the 32 local authorities of Scotland, which have struggled with balancing the books for this year's spend, to imagine having to hypothecate 20 per cent of their budget to weaponry for the eastern front every single year—such is the situation in Lviv.

We also visited a drone factory. Although Ukrainians are worried about the withdrawal of American support, there is some hope in the fact that they are desperately ramping up their own military capability. The drone factory that Paul and I saw was making 10,000 drones a month. The armed forces will take delivery of 4 million kamikaze drones this year alone.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will certainly take an intervention from my friend Paul Sweeney, if I have time.

Paul Sweeney: I thank my friend for giving way. He is making a very eloquent speech about our recent expedition.

One of the valuable things that we both took away from that visit was the richness of the interactions that we had with different stakeholders in Ukraine, including on the visit to the drone factory, when we discussed the opportunities for collaboration in engineering, and on our visit to the hospital, when we were able to learn about the Burn Care Alliance, which is a project that has been led by the young clinicians we met, and to discuss whether there are opportunities to develop those techniques with NHS and university practitioners.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was quite a lengthy intervention, Mr Sweeney.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I absolutely agree—Paul Sweeney is absolutely right in what he says about the importance of those relationships with stakeholders.

I will finish on this point. At the base where we delivered the ambulances from Mighty Convoy—I thank Simon Brake for his work on that—we made a ceremonial presentation to the brigade commanders. Two days after we left, a Russian spy was uncovered at that base, who had received orders to assassinate the very commanders to whom we had presented the ambulances. That took place three tanks of diesel and one set of road tolls from where we are right now. This is on

our doorstep. It is a conflict that will define our century. We must give all our thanks, support and energy to the fighting men and women of Ukraine, who, right now, are the first and last line of defence against Russian tyranny.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that the allocated speaking times were put forward by party business managers and agreed to. SNP back benchers will have up to four minutes, the Conservative back benchers will have up to six minutes and the Labour back benchers will have up to eight minutes. Saying that now will save me from having to explain it vis-à-vis every speaker.

16:30

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Where do I start and how do I summarise the international situation in four minutes? A good starting point is probably to do what our First Minister did and take a moment to reflect on the sad news of the passing of Pope Francis. I am not a religious man, but I know full well the strength and comfort that many of my constituents in Paisley and people right across Scotland draw from their faith.

Throughout my time as Paisley's MSP, I have been able to work closely with our local Catholic community, and I know just how much Pope Francis meant to them, to the diocese of Paisley and to the wider community. Today, my thoughts are very much with them as we all mark the loss of a humble and compassionate man—a man whose values of peace, dignity and kindness spoke far beyond any single faith or border. There is much that we can learn from him that is very relevant to today's debate.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): My good friend Bishop John Keenan will lead a mass for Pope Francis this evening, in Paisley abbey, on behalf of the diocese. I wonder whether Mr Adam hopes to be able to be present.

George Adam: Unfortunately, I have some other business today, but I would quite happily have been there for that.

The rise of the far right at home and abroad is very relevant to the people we represent, who are worried about what is happening. Good, honest, hard-working people are being manipulated by those on the right, who are playing on their fears and scaring them to the extent that they start to believe the lies and disinformation that are coming from those on the far right. Whether it exists on the streets of Scotland or in the corridors of power in Washington and Moscow, that ideology offers nothing but hate, division and disaster.

We have seen the damage that those fears can do. Donald Trump is back at the centre of global

politics and is stoking tension. He is slapping reckless tariffs on Scottish industries from whisky to salmon and putting thousands of jobs at risk at the same time. His ignorance of world affairs and his contempt for international co-operation are not just bad for Scotland or bad for business—they are a global threat. Now more than ever, Scotland must unite around our shared values that bind us as a nation and not around things that tear us apart.

That brings me to the tragedy in Palestine. The suffering in Gaza over the past year has been utterly heartbreaking. More than 13,000 children and 8,000 women have been killed. Innocent lives have been lost in a conflict that has shattered families and devastated people. It is my belief that standing for Palestine is about standing for human dignity and peace. Hamas cannot be defended for its actions, but the suffering of the Palestinian people cannot be ignored. The SNP has been clear from day 1 that we call for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages and the recognition of Palestine as a state. This is not about politics. It is about ending the slaughter and giving people the right to live in safety and freedom.

Today, we are also talking about Ukraine's fight for democracy. Russia's brutal and illegal war on Ukraine is the greatest attack on peace in Europe since the second world war. Scotland stands proudly with Ukraine, its people, its democracy and its right to freedom. However, we saw how President Zelenskyy was made to look in the White House by Donald Trump and JD Vance, who even had a go at what he was wearing. JD Vance is currently touring the world talking about and denying climate change just to make a buck. That is where they are at the moment.

All of that—the rise of the far right, the suffering in Gaza and the brutal war in Ukraine—shows us one thing: Scotland cannot afford to leave its future in the hands of others. We did not vote for Brexit, but we are paying the price. We look on as Donald Trump talks about turning his back on NATO and walking away from Europe. That is not the future that I want for the people of Scotland. Having an independent Scotland that is back in the European Union and that stands shoulder to shoulder with our neighbours will give us the strength, the security and the partnerships that we will need to face whatever comes next.

In the coming months, we must not look at the world as it is and accept it. We must fight for a world that is as we want it to be and as it should be. That is what built this Scottish Parliament, and that is what will create the better tomorrow that every one of us wants.

16:35

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I will say at the outset that I have a strong interest in and passion for international affairs and it is right that they are debated by parliamentarians, but this is an issue that is reserved to the UK Parliament. All the parties that are represented here have members of the UK Parliament who can ask these questions, raise these debates and have a discussion about the situation.

Some of the speeches have been very compelling. What Alex Cole-Hamilton and Paul Sweeney spoke about in relation to their visit was important, for example, but we can discuss and debate such things in members' business time at the end of the day. Right now, we are in Government debating time—this topic has been introduced by the Government of Scotland. We have been on recess for a fortnight—we have not been here for over two weeks—and what are we voting on tonight? Nothing. We do not even have a motion. We will not have a single division of this Parliament on the first day back after recess, because this is the topic that the SNP Government has chosen to debate in its scheduled time.

What could we have discussed today? I am looking at the submission of statement requests from just the Scottish Conservatives—I am sure that there were plenty of other requests from the other parties. We wanted a statement or a debate on the situation with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. Where are we with RAAC in our public buildings? We wanted a statement on agriculture policy, because it is a continuing issue that is affecting our farmers and crofters. We wanted a statement on the massive increase in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder referrals here in Scotland. We wanted a debate on the care home sector and the challenges that it is facing.

Patrick Harvie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer, the member appears to be debating a business motion that was debated and voted on before the April recess, rather than debating the international situation. I know that Mr Ross does not always follow the standing orders of the Parliament, but I wonder whether the Presiding Officer could advise members on that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can advise that, if the member remains relevant to the matter that we are discussing, I am happy to let him continue. That is not a point of order, Mr Harvie.

Douglas Ross: Can you confirm that I will get my time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will get your time back, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful, because I am just going through some of the points that one party in the chamber would have liked to be debating on our first day back after the recess.

When Mr Harvie made his spurious point of order, I was speaking about the care home sector. It is something that affects every one of our constituencies and regions, but we are not getting an opportunity to debate it. There were also some local issues that we wanted to discuss—I know that Stephen Kerr wanted to discuss the flood prevention scheme in Falkirk and the Scottish Government's decision not to call that in. I asked for a statement about the £67 million loan that has gone to NHS Grampian—there are legitimate questions to ask the health secretary, who is sitting on the front bench and on his phone, and the Government in general about that situation—but that was refused. There are issues that we could have been debating today—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I just want to make a bit of progress, if I can.

We could have spent longer today debating the Supreme Court ruling, which has an international context because it has been reported on around the globe. The Scottish Government went to court over the definition of a woman and lost, and we got 30 minutes as parliamentarians to debate it. Maybe if we had had a full debate this afternoon on that ruling, Nicola Sturgeon would have turned up. All we have had from her, the former First Minister who took that legislation through this Parliament, is a selfie from the gym. We have had not a single comment on what she believes the judgment means about the legislation that she tried to pass, about the Government that she led and about the Government that she is still part of.

Another point that I was hoping to discuss in the Parliament is the massive pay increase that has been awarded to Scottish Government ministers.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The member needs to correct the record. There has been no increase in the wage for ministers. Ministers' pay is merely being aligned with that of every other MSP sitting in the chamber.

Douglas Ross: I am not going to correct the record. Ministers are getting an extra £20,000 a year. In any other world, that is an increase, so let us put that point. I was not allowed a statement, and the Scottish Government has so far not made time for the matter.

When we started this debate, there were about a dozen Government ministers in the chamber. We are now down to three and the First Minister. I am happy to use my remaining time to say this to

Mr Gray, Mr Robertson and Mr Fairlie: as a result of the decision that was taken by John Swinney, Scottish Government ministers and cabinet secretaries will get an extra £20,000 per annum. Can any minister or cabinet secretary say that they have earned that increase and deserve it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I encourage you to stick to the theme of the debate—there is no motion, but there is a theme. That would be helpful.

Douglas Ross: My point is very clear—

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: No, I will not.

My point is clear: Parliament could have been discussing those issues today. I will say it again, because there was a slight interruption. Can any of the ministers on the front bench say that they deserve, and have earned, their £20,000 increase? *[Interruption.]*

I am quite happy to continue to wait; I have about another minute, because of the intervention, so I am just going to stand here and wait. If any of these highly paid Scottish Government ministers can defend their £20,000 increase to the public, they should tell us now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I ask you, if you could, to return to the topic of the debate this afternoon in your remaining 30 seconds or so.

Douglas Ross: I make the plea again—come on. If Mr Swinney believes that ministers deserve that increase of £20,000, he should tell us about it—I will give way to the First Minister. I will give way to the cabinet secretary, to Angus Robertson, or to Jim Fairlie—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If you could conclude, Mr Ross—

Douglas Ross: Can no Scottish Government minister defend it? Maybe that is why we are debating the international situation today. Maybe that is why the SNP Government chose a topic that it is not in charge of—because it cannot answer simple questions about an area for which it has responsibility. I think that the people of Scotland can see that. They can see that this is a Government that takes them for granted, that provides massive pay rises for its ministers and that cannot even hold itself to account.

16:42

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To start with, I hope that the Scottish public can see that the Tories would rather stand in silence than stand with us against the rise of the

far right, which affects absolutely every person in society. There is no way to describe it other than dangerous. We keep sitting through that lesson as a species, and I do not know how many times we are going to have to learn it.

Anyone who believes that they are not at risk if the far right takes power should take a step back, look at history and rethink, because they are. Everything from the price of bread to the risk of early death is thrown into uncertainty under far-right Governments. It is reasonable to listen to a charismatic person talking about how unfair society is, because it is; how we need change, because we do; and how resources are not shared equally among citizens, which is, again, true, and think, “Oh—that’s a good point.” The danger is then accepting it when the speaker concludes those reasonable statements by taking the time to blame a minority group or to suggest that removing fundamental human rights from those groups is the right thing to do or that doing so is the only way forward. It is never the only way, and it should not even be on the table.

There have been some interesting statements on globalisation and trade from members, and I will be thinking about some of them for a wee while. Again, I found myself sitting at the back of the chamber, thinking that if we were an independent country, we could really get into the detail of trade decisions and how they impact on many of the various priorities on which we actually have a consensus in the chamber. My concerns about globalisation include things such as protecting high-quality Scottish lamb and whisky and the sustainability of our consumer practices. With regard to today’s debate, however, the globalisation of information, misinformation and disinformation is at the front of my mind.

Many of us have had first-hand experience of very believable disinformation on Gaza or Ukraine or even the legitimacy of the rights of women becoming unavoidable on the phones that we carry everywhere. In the past decade, we have seen Facebook criticised by the UN, not just for not stopping people making use of its platforms to incite violence but for actually designing algorithms that, in their prioritisation of promoting engagement, actively contributed to inciting genocide in Myanmar, because that is what got the comments and the shares that its creators said that they wanted.

Today, the artificial intelligence models that are involved in social media analytics and promoting news content have even more autonomy and even less oversight than the algorithms that favoured videos promoting genocide. These models do not just learn that people engage when they are angry and then show them what makes them angry—they can actually create the anger. When AI

models are being created and invested in by those who do not just want to be at the forefront of technological advancement but are working to advance their own interests, we must be extremely aware of our collective vulnerability to manipulation. Opinion, fact and voting habits are up for sale.

It can seem very difficult to be a force for good in this world, but, when it comes to the far right, it really is easy. We have to draw a line somewhere, and it should always be drawn in advance of the point at which we start seeing some humans as less than others. Countless people and algorithms are out there trying to convince each and every one of us to turn on other people, often for the sake of somebody else's investments. We—ourselves—have to know what is not okay and what is over the line, because very clever models are out there learning how to make us cross the line without even noticing.

Human rights are fundamental. When I first started watching this Parliament's proceedings, nobody would have disagreed with that, but the lines are now blurred and so much of that area is now grey. We need to hold on to what we know to be true. Human rights are fundamental and they are under threat across the world—the UK is not exempt from that. Draw your line, because we have to refuse to cross it.

16:46

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): As we come together this afternoon to discuss the international situation, it is clear that we live in very uncertain times. Already, many of the speeches have highlighted the backdrop of conflict and violence—particularly violence against women and girls—that we see in the world, and the harmful rhetoric that we see in online spaces, as well as the fact that the global economic consensus, which we have known for so long, is, in essence, being turned upside down. It is in that context that we hold this debate, and uncertainty is the key theme.

In times of uncertainty and in an ever-changing and uncertain world, people will cleave to constancy. We gather today as we return from our Easter recess and after the great Christian festival of Easter, which speaks about hope, faith and endurance. A lot of people around the world find constancy in their faith, which is rooted in their hope for a better world. Recently, we have also marked Eid, Passover, Vaisakhi and other festivals, as the seasons change and winter gives way to spring and darkness gives way to light.

I mention that at the outset of my speech because we live in a world where, all too often, our respect for and understanding of one another's

beliefs and one another's faith have, in some ways, been forgotten. We have forgotten how to co-exist, how to live together peaceably and, I think, how to disagree better. Therefore, it is important that we start by acknowledging the sense of hope that is felt by so many people in the world.

I will offer a few reflections on some of the corners of the world that are acutely in our minds at the moment and on some areas on which we often do not focus as much as we should.

In March, I had the opportunity to travel to Bosnia-Herzegovina with a delegation of people from the Parliament, public life in Scotland, academia and the media, along with the excellent Beyond Srebrenica organisation, which will be known to many colleagues across the chamber. Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Balkans are a part of our world that have truly experienced the darkest moments of humanity through a long conflict in the 1990s, the ramifications of which continue today, and the people who lived through the experience of genocide at Srebrenica and other places around Bosnia-Herzegovina still feel the impact of those events. The opportunity to visit those sites and to meet people who experienced the war and the genocide to gain a better understanding of their experience and of the issues that persist in that country today was hugely moving, but it was also hugely informative for me and for those who joined the delegation.

Today, there are far too many people in Bosnia-Herzegovina and that part of the world who engage in denial of what happened at Srebrenica. There are actors in that complex country, in relation to which a complex agreement was made after the war, who seek to diminish and reduce the stories of the genocide to nothing more than what they would call rumour. There have been attempted coups in parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly in the Republika Srpska, and there are still people walking the streets of communities side by side with those against whom they would have carried out horrendous acts.

The plea from everyone I met in Bosnia-Herzegovina was not to forget about the Balkans, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the real challenges that exist and persist. I had the opportunity to speak with many people who are afraid of the current context of the international situation. They are deeply concerned about the actions of Russia and Vladimir Putin—as we know, they live very close to countries that border Russia and, indeed, to the conflict in Ukraine.

In particular, one man I met spoke about how he feels more afraid now than he did at points as a child growing up in the 1990s, and he is worried about what the future holds for his children. He told me that, when the war in Ukraine started, he

went out and bought a gun. When I asked him why, he said, "I do not know how to use a gun and I am not sure that I ever will. I just need to know that I have done something to try to protect my children."

That brought home to those of us who were speaking with him how people feel in that region of the world. They need the support of the international community and for it to stand with them and not to forget about them, and to offer a degree of protection and support that will ensure that, in the future, we do not see the aggression that we have seen in recent years in the regions in and around Ukraine and bordering Russia.

I wanted to put all of that on the record because the experience that I had in Srebrenica will not leave me—those rows and rows of white stones that mark where so many Muslim men and boys were massacred. There is a stillness and a sadness there, and there is evidence of the reality of what human beings can do to one another when they do not heed the calls of history or the need for us to understand one another better.

I am pleased that, on Holocaust memorial day, the Scottish Government made a commitment to on-going funding for wider genocide education. We recognise the importance of Holocaust education within that and of the work that is being done across Scotland to tackle rising antisemitism.

Daniel Johnson: My friend Paul O'Kane talks about education. One of the things that I remember about the Bosnian conflict was that it was seen as war returning to Europe, but we seem to have treated it as almost an aberration. With the war in Ukraine, does he agree that we need to take the matter and the prospect of war in Europe much more seriously, and that that is the real lesson from the Balkans conflict of the 1990s?

Paul O'Kane: Daniel Johnson is absolutely right. What we heard time and again from people we met in places such as Sarajevo and Srebrenica was how quickly we forget. For a period of time in Europe, we saw stability and peace that we thought was the consensus, but the reality is that that has been shattered once again. It is important that we all take the issues in Ukraine seriously.

We have also reflected today on the passing of Pope Francis. I add my voice to the tributes that have been paid across the Parliament, because he was another constant in an uncertain world. The global situation was never far from the mind, the words and the actions of Pope Francis, because he was a Pope who prioritised leadership on the world stage and ensured that people could find reflected in him their aspirations for a better world. He was a Pope for the poor and the dispossessed. He opened doors in the church and in the world to mercy, compassion and hope. He

was a Pope for our environment. "Laudato si'" was a transformative document that called on us all to be "stewards" of the world and the environment that we live in.

The Pope also spoke out passionately and with compassion on the situation in Palestine and Israel. Indeed, most recently, on Easter Sunday, he called for a ceasefire, for a release of hostages, for aid to get through to starving people and for an end to the killing and the violence. We have also heard how the Pope spoke with the parish priest in Bethlehem each and every day of the conflict right up until he died.

We should all rededicate ourselves to following the Pope's example. We must not forget the corners of the world where there are conflicts, and we should unite as a Parliament to do that.

16:55

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Rarely has the international situation been so bleak on so many different fronts, from Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza to America's trade war with the entire world. We are seeing the rise of the far right globally, with their lies and disinformation, which have become accepted by many in our world. These are truly dark days.

There is no immediate end in sight for the conflict in Ukraine, with Ukrainians being given just enough support to hold ground but not enough to win. To make things worse, President Trump insists on plundering any riches of Ukraine that Russia has yet to steal as the price of his half-hearted support. Although Russia announced an Easter ceasefire, it did not stop raining down missiles on Ukraine. Now that that false hope has gone, Russia's aggression has intensified.

Meanwhile in the holy land, there was not even the pretence of a ceasefire this Easter. The situation in Gaza remains dire, with the conflict remaining intense and civilian casualties continuing to grow. I hesitate to use the word "casualties", as it is clear that, in many cases, civilians have been deliberately targeted. The word "victims" is more apt. However, although bombs and bullets have killed many in Gaza, with most victims being women and children, it is starvation and disease that are bringing apocalyptic levels of suffering to the children of Gaza. I take this opportunity to join the late Pope's calls for a ceasefire in Gaza and in the holy land, and I praise him for his constancy in doing so.

The world today is not only ravaged by hot wars; it is blighted by an economic war the scale of which the world has never seen. Let us be clear: Trump's tariff policy is the type of economic madness that only a toddler could produce.

Therefore, it was no surprise that President Trump announced it with a felt-tip pen and a marker board on the White House lawn. He claims that it is about fair trade and protecting jobs, but he slapped the UK, which does not have a trade deficit with the US, with the same 10 per cent tariff as he slapped on penguins living near the south pole. So much for the special relationship.

Perhaps worst of all, President Trump's back-of-a-fag-packet calculations have placed the highest tariffs on the world's poorest countries. For example, he slapped a 47 per cent tariff on Madagascar. Its main export to the United States is vanilla. That export allows Americans to enjoy a single venti vanilla latte for a price that would feed a family of vanilla farmers for a week. Of course, in Trump's world, it is the dirt-poor vanilla farmers who are exploiting the American megacorporations and not the other way around.

We, in Scotland, are not immune to the international situation, and we, too, will suffer Trump's tariffs, but we must all come together to fight the far right and its rise here and across the globe. I welcome the First Minister's efforts to prevent the far-right ideology, which is prevalent abroad, from getting a foothold in Scotland.

16:59

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): For the record, I state clearly and openly that I am dismayed by the rise of the far right across the world. History has shown us that, when the far right is strong, it can lead to wars, poverty for many, the removal of rights and the weakening of the judiciary. It seems ironic that, in Scotland today, women have had to battle to reassert their rights and science has been consistently denied. Just at the weekend, we had dangerous commentary about the judiciary, which we should all condemn wholeheartedly. I say that because we cannot afford to be complacent and we need wise heads to prevail.

In my short remarks, I want to focus on Trump's tariffs and their implications. First, it is useful to understand how arbitrary they are. Their levels are based on dividing the US trade deficit in goods with each country by the value of that country's imports, then dividing by 2. However, if that formula had been imposed consistently, countries such as Australia, with which the US runs a trade surplus, would be due money back. Instead, the calculation was abandoned for countries that have little or no trade deficit with the US and a 10 per cent tariff was imposed on them. It is a myth that the UK got a better deal because of Keir Starmer cosying up to Donald Trump.

The most obvious consequences of the tariffs have been a destabilising of international markets.

At close of play yesterday, the Dow Jones industrial index was trading approximately 6,000 points lower than it was at the end of January, while the relative safety of precious metals such as gold meant that their price was up again.

For many, the biggest concern is the less-well-reported impact on the bonds market. The US has introduced a rise in the cost of debt of which Liz Truss would be proud. The cost of debt has risen for the US but also for the UK, which is paying over 4.5 per cent—in the eyes of investors, that is a clear measure of a lack of fiscal resilience. That will ultimately lead to a decrease in public sector spend and Barnett consequentials, or tax rises. That is why this debate is highly relevant for the Scottish Parliament.

A fear of rising inflation in the US and the possibility of a global recession are just part of the price that is being paid for Trump's incompetence. It is not only the large advanced economies that are being hit; poor countries are affected as well. Malawi, for example, has been hit by a 17 per cent baseline tariff by the US.

US stocks ended sharply lower overnight after Trump intensified his criticism of the Federal Reserve chair, Jerome Powell, raising concerns about the central bank's independence and unsettling investor confidence. That has further weakened the US dollar, with further overnight declines against most major currencies.

What, then, of trade negotiations? Some countries, including the UK, seem to be signalling that they will go down the path of appeasing Trump. Fears are being expressed that that might include compromising on domestic standards, particularly for our Scottish food products, for which provenance and quality are our calling card. My fear is that taking the path of appeasement will only embolden Trump. I can see no sign that he is open to calm reasoning.

I end by making the obvious point that we need to revisit and revise Scotland's export strategy in the light of world events, as well as our economic and financial policies.

17:03

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am very pleased that we are having this debate on the international situation. I have never understood why we have not spent a bit more time debating issues that impact Scotland in the international space and that have the potential to threaten our democracy, our security and our future. That said, I commend the scrutiny that has been undertaken by the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee on a range of issues, such as Brexit, the implications of the United Kingdom Internal Market

Act 2020 and the review of the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement.

However, across the world, democratic systems are under pressure, with fundamental principles being challenged and, in some cases, actively undermined. Where does Scotland see itself in all that? How do we remain safe and prosperous? I propose that we give it less passing attention and instead recognise how our domestic policy can and should intersect more closely with international policy across a range of areas, including defence and the security of our energy infrastructure.

Scotland is a peaceful and prosperous country, but we are not immune to the impact of the global events and conflict that have been raised by colleagues this afternoon, such as those playing out in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan, or to the implications of globalisation withering on the vine, courtesy of US tariffs. Some might welcome that, of course.

On energy infrastructure security, the UK strategic defence review is considering the reforms that are needed to meet the challenges of the 21st century and is expected to advise on an expansion of our military footprint in the Arctic and high north, as the region becomes increasingly contested owing to melting sea ice opening up access. On a recent parliamentary visit to the Faroe Islands, we discussed high north security in the context of undersea infrastructure, which, in the main, means gas pipelines and data cables.

Just last week, we saw two incidents in which Royal Air Force Typhoons were scrambled to intercept Russian intelligence aircraft in NATO airspace. Indeed, in 2023, 50 Russian aircraft were intercepted by RAF jets scrambled from RAF Lossiemouth. That is not an unusual scenario, but it demonstrates the fragility of Scotland's undersea infrastructure. The issue cuts across domestic and international policy but has significant implications for our energy industry and communications capability. I, for one, will be interested to see what comes forward in the defence review.

That leads me on to Ukraine. In recent months, the situation in Ukraine has been peppered with increasing uncertainty, largely courtesy of the United States pulling back from its previous commitment to support Ukraine and, in particular, the withdrawal of aid and intelligence support. In response, the UK Government has committed to a coalition of the willing, which involves bringing together European countries, NATO and others to drive progress towards lasting peace.

The UK and Europe have committed to rearmament, so what can Scotland do to support that endeavour? I and others contend that, although defence is reserved, Scotland cannot

stand still as the world changes around us. We have an opportunity to support our defence industry across skills development, recruitment and research and development—all competencies that lie here in Scotland, not London. In 2022, Scotland's defence sector added £3.2 billion to the Scottish economy and employed more than 33,000 Scots, including 1,500 apprentices.

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

Audrey Nicoll: I am just finishing.

However, the value of the industry is not just economic; it is also crucial to the wider defence picture in the UK, Europe and Ukraine. I look forward to seeing our new Scottish defence industry strategy soon.

17:07

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, once said:

"The task today is to link struggles which appear separate and local, to show how they are part of the same global process."

He said that in the context of rising global inequality and political unrest, arguing that, if we fail to see the connection between what is happening across the world and what is happening in our communities, we risk misunderstanding both. That quote is very powerful because, when we talk about the international situation, we often speak in far-off terms about wars in other lands, authoritarian regimes and political instability, but we must recognise that those crises do not only happen somewhere else; they reach us and echo throughout our society, and they are repeated and replicated right here at home, in our communities and on our doorsteps.

I am deeply concerned about what I am beginning to see trying to take root in my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast. I have witnessed a growing wave of intentionally planted hostility online, but it is bleeding into conversations offline and working its way into my surgeries. That hostility is being directed at people who are already marginalised. I have noticed that the noise is getting louder, more confident and more organised—it is strategic and deliberate.

When people are hurting and when services are stripped away, fear rushes in and opportunists pour their poison. It starts with fear; it starts with rumour; and it starts with blame. In my constituency, the council proposes to close day centres for people with learning disabilities and is discussing shutting down sheltered housing. The individuals who are affected by that, and their

families, are terrified about what may happen to them. People are left confused, anxious and afraid. Rumours have started as a result of unscrupulous people stating, “They are taking the housing,” with “they” being asylum seekers. The blame is not laid on those cutting the services; it lands on the most marginalised. One vulnerable group is pitted against another—it is a vile tactic. It starts with fear; it starts with rumour; and it starts with blame.

We have seen where that leads. In the 1930s, Jewish people were portrayed as greedy and getting more than their fair share. It was a manipulation of public perception. The lies were repeated for long enough until people believed them, and we know where that ended. It did not begin with violence; it began with division, mistrust and disinformation. We must be alert when seeing such posts and hearing such rumours. Who is pitting one vulnerable group against another, and for what purpose? It is a disgrace, it is disgusting and it must be called out for what it is.

I support the Scottish Government's clear stance against the international rise of the far right. We are right to stand up for peace, democracy and international law; we are right to invest in humanitarian aid; and we are right to speak out for those without a voice in Gaza and Ukraine—wherever the rise of hate rears its head. History will judge us, not just on how we responded to global crises, but on whether we defended democracy in our own communities and whether we stood up for human rights here in Scotland. Very often, the politics of division tells us to look at the wrong 1 per cent and to believe that someone else's survival is the reason for our suffering. It is a lie, it is cruel, and we must always reject it.

I end with a plea to my constituents. This is where it starts: not in government but in our communities. It starts in fear, in rumour and in blame. If you hear a rumour online, please come and talk to me. There is no such thing as a silly question, and you will not be judged. I can help you check the facts and get you sources. Let us be vigilant against those who seek to use the suffering of our most vulnerable for their own ends.

It starts with fear, it starts with rumour, and it starts with blame. However, it can end with courage, it can end with truth, and it can end with compassion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to closing speeches.

17:11

Patrick Harvie: It is a pleasure to follow the closing speaker in the open debate, as she clearly understands the reason why we are having this

debate. I am afraid that far too many members have questioned that and simply do not understand the relevance of the issue that has been brought to the chamber today. The First Minister said, in masterful understatement, that the debate would raise issues that have implications for our communities. It is clear that the implications of those issues are deep, widespread and extremely troubling.

I find it easy to see justification for the debate. I regret that, although this Parliament has never been restricted from debating reserved matters, and even local councils are not restricted from debating UK and global matters, some members of this Parliament seem to think that we should not be doing so. The opportunity to make contributions to debates on such matters is a privilege that everyone who serves in the Parliament has, but I fear that some Tory MSPs appear to treat that privilege with contempt.

I started by mentioning Karen Adam's speech, which drew attention to the impact of far-right propaganda that is beginning to take root in her community. I see the same happening in Glasgow—first online and then, beyond that, out in the real world. I have no doubt that it is growing in many other parts of the country.

Emma Roddick took the opportunity, using the privilege of taking part in such debates, to introduce issues that no one else had raised. I think that she was the first speaker in the debate to talk about disinformation, misinformation, the growth of conspiracy theories and AI's role in the creation and dissemination of such material. As we debated in Emma Roddick's recent members' business debate, AI has both positive and negative implications. However, the unregulated rush to the development of that technology and its unregulated, disruptive application is clearly operating in the interests of the few and seeking to sow division, as well as being projected to use an extraordinary amount of energy, which ties the issue back to the climate crisis.

It is clear from several members' comments that people understand the critical choice that the UK now faces. I wish that Scotland was able to make that choice for itself, but, at the moment, the UK is faced with making it. Is it going to repair, rebuild and restore its relationship with the European Union—our wider political family of nations? That is our best path forward. It is the best path that Scotland could take, and it is the best path that the UK could take. However, that is not compatible with the continued delusion that kowtowing to Trump can, in some way, serve the country well. Fawning to a bully never works; it will only embolden him.

I was pleased that the First Minister drew attention to the Scottish Government's continued

support for international aid. That comes in the context of utterly indefensible—morally and economically indefensible—cuts to investment in international aid and development by the UK and other countries.

The First Minister said that, during his visit to the US, he did not take the time to meet climate scientists, who are on the receiving end of the Trump regime's hostility and ideological purge. Did he meet migrant rights organisations? Those are the people who are standing up for those who are being disappeared on US streets and campuses and being deported—even those who have legal protection from deportation—to other countries and, in some cases, put into prison without a trial. Did he meet libraries, universities or independent media outlets, which are also on the receiving end of the ideological purge that is taking place in the US? Did he meet equality and human rights activists and workers, who face the same thing?

Any one of those people or interest groups, knowing the threats that they currently face, would have been privileged to have a meeting with a visiting First Minister. I hope that, in the future, the Scottish Government will place emphasis on the point that, if our relationship with the US is important, that relationship is with its people, particularly those who are in the most vulnerable position in the face of the Trump regime.

I will finish with the full version of a quote that I had to curtail in my opening speech. Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor finished their article, which I referred to, with a moment of hope. They ask:

"How do we break this apocalyptic fever? First, we help each other face the depth of the depravity that has gripped the hard right in all of our countries. To move forward with focus, we must ... understand this simple fact: we are up against an ideology that has given up not only on the premise and promise of liberal democracy but on the livability of our shared world—on its beauty, on its people, on our children, on other species. The forces we are up against have made peace with mass death. They are treasonous to this world and its human and non-human inhabitants."

They finish by saying:

"we counter their apocalyptic narratives with a ... better story about how to survive the hard times ahead without leaving anyone behind."

That is the challenge that really faces us if we want to address all the interconnected aspects of the international situation that we have debated today, both globally and here at home.

17:18

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I will take a moment to add to the many reflections about the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. I would probably put myself in the latter category when we talk about people "of all faiths and

none"—at best, I would probably describe myself as a lapsed Presbyterian—but Pope Francis genuinely gave me inspiration in relation to how to reflect on the world and think about other people. That is relevant to today's debate, because we find ourselves in a unique and unprecedented global context.

In preparation for this debate without a motion, not quite knowing which direction it would take, I was reflecting on Francis Fukuyama's infamous quote about the end of history and on how wrong we were. We now have war in Europe—not just a peripheral war but one that has resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties and deaths. It is genuine interstate warfare the likes of which we have not seen in 80 years.

We are also seeing the resurrection of trade wars and tariffs, which saw the Dow Jones index drop by 5 per cent on 3 April, with a subsequent 6 per cent drop on 4 April on the back of just one announcement. That is a return to protectionism the likes of which we have not seen for generations.

Moreover, we have seen a return of the strongman, authoritarian approach to statecraft—one that is increasingly prevalent closer to home, in Europe, not in far-off lands. I do not want to name names, but we know the regimes within the European Union that are seeing those strong authoritarian trends.

I reflect on that, and I sound a note of caution for today's debate. We are right to worry about the rise of the right, but let us not treat these things as though they are happening in different places. They are happening all around us and we should have seen the signs. The reality is that the number of democracies has fallen from 45 to 29 since 2009. There has been a doubling in the number of authoritarian regimes around the world, and we have seen an erosion of the rule of law, even in Trump's approach.

We need to be cautious about our description of Trump, but we should not have been surprised. We are talking about a president who, when he was in the White House previously, blocked the appointment of judges to the appellate court of the World Trade Organization, which fundamentally blocked that institution. He did not believe in the global institutions that enable free trade and movement of goods.

During the past decade or more, we have also seen increasing levels of democratic interference and an increasing number of proxy wars. Audrey Nicoll was absolutely right to highlight the overflights of Russian aircraft and the disruption of undersea cables. It is all around us, and it has been happening for some time. It did not just start

happening in 2022; it has been happening for well over a decade.

I have to disagree with my Conservative colleagues. Although I agree with many of the points that have been raised about the way in which the Government uses its time, I point out that sometimes the Government tiptoes around some of these issues, but these are so profound that we have to talk about them. There are profound issues about national security, the relationship between national security and economic security, industrial policy and what we must do, and those absolutely touch on devolved areas.

A point that I raised with the First Minister was that, fundamentally, we need to reflect on the failure of globalisation. I would argue that globalisation has been a force for good—it raised 1 billion people out of poverty—but it undoubtedly eroded some of the economic structures in our society and increased inequality. It increased and exacerbated poverty, and we failed to address that. We need to reflect on that. We also need to reflect on the fact that co-operation requires much deeper interactions than simply membership, and we perhaps took that for granted.

Reflecting on what that means for us in this country, the interaction between economic and physical security is profound. We have to look at our industrial base. The UK Government was absolutely right to take ownership of the British Steel plant, because we have to produce things such as steel. Likewise, in Scotland, we need to think about the security of our energy generation. We have to ask questions about how comfortable we are in relying on other countries for fundamental parts of our supply chain and whether other state actors could interfere with our energy supply. Likewise, I gently say to the Government that, although I am pleased by what the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have said about our defence sector, the Scottish Government has at times been coy about talking about that sector. The past few months and years have brought into sharp relief how fundamentally important it is to our national security and in providing skilled jobs.

The prospect of independence has unfortunately been raised yet again. All I would say to the Government is that, at a time when the issues around the UK-Iceland-Greenland gap are rearing their heads, the thought that we can simply swap one union for another is a flawed concept. We are bound together in our relationship across these islands. Whether we like it or not, we have a shared responsibility to defend this patch of land that sits between the Atlantic and the North Sea. What the Russians are doing in the North Sea cannot be ignored, and we have to co-operate

across these islands to defend this part of the world that we call our own.

We must learn the lessons of history. I referred to some global institutions earlier in my speech. It is a fact that many such institutions arose from the ashes of the second world war. Indeed, the Bretton Woods conference happened during the second world war because the relationship between the economy, politics and security was recognised. We cannot allow another global conflict to be the way that we find our path back to sound global institutions and global prosperity.

17:25

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I do not think that there has been a discernible theme this afternoon; there have been a lot of very individual contributions.

I note the contributions by my very good friends and colleagues, Mr Stephen Kerr and Mr Ross. They were so well made that I will not repeat them; perhaps I will look to contribute in my own way.

I will start on the commentary from the First Minister about the Drumlanrig accord. I think that we in Scotland should be incredibly proud of it. Sheikh Razawi, my very good friend Edward Green, the First Minister and I and others were at Edinburgh city chambers last year for the candle-lighting ceremony. Against the odds, in many ways, it was decided to bring the faiths together to face the challenge that the international situation presented to the lives of all of us here at home. With the support of His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch, who was able to enlist the support of His Majesty the King, we have a very positive initiative being taken here, in Scotland, which is allowing those of so many different faiths and communities to exist in harmony here, even with the extraordinary pressures that are being applied by the events outside this country. We should celebrate the work that has been done, and we should be very proud of that Scottish initiative, which is contributing so well in the face of the international situation. *[Applause.]*

Over the Easter recess I turned 66 the day before the First Minister turned 61—so there is just five years between us. I know that, in another context, that would be regarded as a lifetime but, in the context of today's debate, it is not really that long at all. I was reflecting, in advance of this debate, on what I thought were—from a long menu—the key things that had shaped the international situation over my lifetime. I thought of the visit of Nixon to China in 1972, the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the events in New York on 9/11. All of

those events had profound consequences for the world in which we live today.

Over my lifetime, we have gone from being concerned, as a country, about the might of the Soviet Union and its empire, influence and threat, which meant that many of my generation thought that a war was at least possible in our lifetime, to the fall of the Soviet Union and the extent of state-sponsored terrorism or terrorism sponsored by nobody in particular—which nobody quite knew how to deal with, as it did not have a nation face. That receded slightly, but not so much that we can be in any way complacent. Then, the threat of the nation state emerged again, with the impact of Russia, as it now seeks to initiate military conflict on the continent of Europe, the emerging suggestion of a threat to Taiwan from China, the on-going expansion and ambition of North Korea, and states conflicting with one other in the middle east and Africa. Perhaps, for my grandchildren's generation, the prospect of a war, if not probable, once again cannot be ruled out.

There is a need, as I think Governments have recognised in this international situation, to respond to that by trying to understand how best we can be prepared. That response comes in two ways, I think. One is to ensure that we invest in the defence of the country. That is the reactive way to ensure that we are prepared, should such a situation emerge. The other is the proactive way, which involves our commitment, tradition and history as a country that is involved in international trade, that wants to engage and that has been prepared to invest in international aid. We have not talked about that today, but I was very critical of my own Government at Westminster when it temporarily reduced the aid budget, and I said that I hoped that it could be restored, so I am disappointed at the response of the Labour Party to the proposed cut in international aid, because it is that aid that helps to ensure that we are investing in countries that might otherwise become part of the very international situation and problem that we are trying to stand against and prevent occurring.

The First Minister: I could not agree more with Jackson Carlaw's substantive point about the fact that international development expenditure is critical, as an investment in building bridges and societies and in avoiding conflict—which is, unfortunately, a risk that has now been exacerbated by decisions that have been taken by both the United Kingdom and the United States.

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

Jackson Carlaw: I agree with that, and I would like to hear a little more from members of the Labour Party, who, I think, must be troubled by it. I understand the need and have just made the case

for an investment in our defences, but I am concerned that that investment is being made at the expense of the influence and aid that are vital in preventing conflict elsewhere.

In a debate that we had five years ago, I said that the Americans faced an unenviable choice between someone who was unsuited and someone who was unfit to be in the White House. In that battle, we had President Biden, but I felt that it was not the choice that the American people should have been given.

The American people need to have a complete generational shift away from those who have billions of pounds that they can afford to spend on being elected. It is ironic that Nixon was the last poor president. We need that change to take place, because Trump's election—in both cases—was almost a reaction to the candidate that he faced. Hillary Clinton was a very polarising figure. Joe Biden was not a polarising figure but he could certainly not have hoped to be a subsequent President. Had he recognised that sooner, the Democratic Party might have had the opportunity to think more widely about who its candidate should have been, although I do not know what the outcome of the election would have been.

I am not a fan of Mr Trump, but I do not conclude, as Patrick Harvie does, that we should just abandon our investment in, our relationship with and our hope in the United States. In some respects, President Trump is not wrong: 80 years after VE day, as Neil Bibby pointed out, the other countries of Europe also have a responsibility to step up to the defence of our continent. There cannot just be an on-going expectation that the United States will do that.

Patrick Harvie rose—

Daniel Johnson rose—

Jackson Carlaw: I think that I am now into my last few seconds, so I am not sure—

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

Jackson Carlaw: I will take an intervention from Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to Jackson Carlaw and I apologise to Patrick Harvie.

We should not boycott Trump. We should be robust when we disagree, because, fundamentally, that is what he respects. Ultimately, however, we cannot disengage from the world's biggest economy and, probably, our most enduring ally. Does Jackson Carlaw agree that that is the dichotomy that we must face?

Jackson Carlaw: Absolutely. This quote from *The Economist* is pretty apt:

"In a mere ten days the president has ended the old certainties that underpinned the world economy, replacing them with extraordinary levels of volatility and confusion. Some of the chaos may have abated for now. But it will take a very long time to rebuild what has been lost."

We must accept and acknowledge that we now face a very challenging situation.

I want us to respond to the international situation. We can talk about it here; I am not so averse to our having a discussion about it from time to time. However, I do not think that we have the major levers to influence it. Part of our responsibility, therefore, is to support our elected MPs at Westminster in the discharge of their responsibility to keep us safe and secure and to ensure that we are engaged positively with the rest of the world. That has to be built on two rocks: we must keep ourselves safe and invest in the security of our country, but we must also invest in outreach, engagement and proactivity in addressing the trouble spots that emerge elsewhere in the world, through which we could subsequently feel threatened.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite the cabinet secretary to wind up the debate. I would be grateful if you could take us up to just before quarter to six, cabinet secretary.

17:34

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Before I respond to the points that have been raised by members, I thank everybody who has participated in this afternoon's important and timely debate. Given the breadth of the subject matter, I am pleased that members of the Parliament have had the opportunity to listen and to contribute to this afternoon's discussion.

As the First Minister noted in his opening speech, the events of the past few days and, indeed, the past few months have challenged the international rules-based order that we have perhaps taken too much for granted. That has real consequences for people here, in Scotland. Global instability, conflict and economic uncertainty impact on jobs, investment and our shared desire for a just and fairer world. That is why taking an internationalist and outward-facing approach is vital, which means that we must actively engage with partners to protect Scotland's economic interests, create opportunity for Scotland's people and stand up for the values that we believe in. In the face of rising tensions and uncertainty, we cannot take the view that global events do not affect matters that come before this Parliament or, indeed, have no impact on Scotland more widely.

As the contributions to this debate have highlighted, a range of issues affect our international work. I will reflect on the contributions

of members who had something to say about the impact of the international situation. Neil Bibby was the first to do so. He said that there is much to discuss, and he is absolutely right. He was correct to identify the broad range of challenges, including the dangers of a trade war. I note his support for brand Scotland, which is extremely welcome, and I look forward to him and his party colleagues promoting its campaigns.

Patrick Harvie correctly warned about the range of crises and spoke about the importance of believing in hope and a better future. Alex Cole-Hamilton painted a vivid image of Ukraine and why the conflict there should matter to us all. George Adam said that we should aim for Scotland to play a part in the international community—actively doing so is, of course, the global norm.

Emma Roddick highlighted the impact of disinformation, which is ever more relevant both here and globally. Paul O'Kane highlighted the importance of co-existence and hope, and of not forgetting about frozen conflicts that sometimes appear less in the international headlines. He recounted his visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina with Remembering Srebrenica. Having led the first Scottish delegation to Srebrenica with Remembering Srebrenica, I recommend that all colleagues who have not yet been go—please ensure that the combating of genocide and Holocaust denialism remains a priority for all of us in Scotland.

Kevin Stewart made a powerful speech about the situations in Ukraine and Palestine and warned about the damage of tariffs and the danger of the far right. Michelle Thomson highlighted the impact of tariffs on bond markets and how that impacts on Scotland and our devolved governance.

Audrey Nicoll was right to reflect that we should give greater, not less, consideration to international developments. That includes the malevolent role of Russia around our shores, which we should all be alive to. Karen Adam warned of the dangers of othering, fear, rumour and blame—history is repeating itself in that regard.

Turning to the concluding contributions, I think that Daniel Johnson was right to describe the unique context that we find ourselves in at present and to say that the issues are so profound that we must discuss them. I agree with him. He went on to talk about the importance of the defence sector. I also agree with him on that and on his highlighting of northern security as an area where we all share a key priority.

Jackson Carlaw made a very expansive and considered contribution on behalf of his party. He talked about the importance of faith, co-existence

and co-operation, about changing international relationships in a global context and the risk of war, and about the importance of trade and aid. I could not agree with any of that any more than I do.

In closing the debate, I emphasise the role that Scotland plays internationally and the importance of navigating global challenges with a clear focus on our values, interests and strategic priorities. Engagement with the international community matters to Scotland. As well as being an important opportunity to make a positive contribution on global issues such as climate change, renewable energy and economic prosperity, it affects how we are viewed by the rest of the world. Through our engagement with international partners, we demonstrate our commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the principles of co-operation between nations, which are enshrined in the United Nations charter and anchored by the rules-based system that has defined international relations for much of the past 80 years.

Many of those values are also those of our friends in the European Union, which is an endeavour that was forged in the aftermath of global turmoil and war in Europe. That is a point worth remembering—as it has been in this debate—as we approach the 80th anniversary of VE day in just two weeks' time.

We will continue to work with partners to promote and strengthen multilateralism and global institutions, to protect human rights and, through our international development programmes and humanitarian responses, to help the most vulnerable where we can.

Last year, building on our global affairs framework, I was proud to launch the Scottish Government's international strategy, which sets out our values-based approach to international relations. The international strategy emphasises Scotland's aspiration to be a good global citizen and recognises the need for co-operation to build a more just and sustainable global system. That is central to our vision for Scotland's place in the world, and it underpins the way in which we conduct ourselves internationally. In addition, the strategy's core themes of economy, trade and investment; climate change, biodiversity and renewable energy; and reputation, influence and relationships will ensure that we maintain focus on priority areas, so that our international work is impactful and delivers for Scotland's people and businesses.

I take a moment to draw members' attention to the international network of Scottish Government offices and Scottish Development International posts that do so much work to promote Scottish interests overseas, strengthen our relationships with key countries, and protect and enhance

Scotland's brand overseas. Those networks and the people who work there create links and have helped to put Scotland on a path to a greener and more prosperous future. Recent global economic instability underlines the important roles that those networks play—and will continue to play—for Scotland's businesses and the wider economy.

For those who do not know this, I note that there are 1,200 to 1,300 members of the GlobalScot network, who work on a non-remunerated basis around the world to promote inward investment, our economy and Scotland as a place to study, work and live in. I encourage members to do everything that is possible to support that network, which is the envy of many other countries.

Patrick Harvie: I support the continued existence of the GlobalScot network, which has positive value if we ensure that only people whom we are keen to work with are involved. Given the history of Donald Trump having been appointed to it and then, ultimately, having had to be removed from it, is the Government playing an active role in looking at who, historically, has been put into the network and who is still active in it, and ensuring that it includes exclusively people whom we are happy to have working with us in what is sometimes portrayed as a quasi-ambassadorial role?

Angus Robertson: The GlobalScot network is operated by Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International. No issues have been raised with me about any members of the network. Patrick Harvie brings up a historical case, which is factually correct. If he has any concerns, I am sure that colleagues at Scottish Enterprise would be happy to look at them. There is an extensive programme that involves the recruitment, retention and support of members of the GlobalScot network. The network works very well, and I think that we could look at expanding it. If colleagues have any views on that subject, I would be happy to hear them.

We live in an increasingly interconnected world in which no nation or individual is sheltered from the impact of global affairs. Indeed, this afternoon's debate has underlined the influence and impact that global issues have on our nation. Whether we consider the United States tariffs and the knock-on effects on the global economy, the devastating impact of conflicts and climate change or the weakening of the rules-based system that governs co-operation between nations, the issues affect all of us here in Scotland. That is why I will close by reflecting on what can be achieved when we work together, collectively, across the chamber and across the country, to take a positive view of international engagement.

A very good example of that is the establishment of the Scottish Council on Global

Affairs. The council, which has had the backing of other parties in this Parliament and, indeed, the United Kingdom Government, is helping to enhance Scotland's reputation and to encourage others to think about what Scotland has to offer to global affairs. Its work has also helped to raise the quality of debate and the understanding of modern international issues across Scotland.

By working together in this Parliament, we can—and we must—continue to advocate for Scotland internationally to ensure that our voice is heard on issues that affect our international relations and our domestic policy, and to stand up for the democratic values of the rule of law, co-operation and respect for human dignity.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:45

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-17266, on committee membership, and motion S6M-17267, on substitution on committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Joe FitzPatrick be appointed as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee; and

Emma Roddick be appointed to replace Joe FitzPatrick as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Stephanie Callaghan be appointed to replace Jackie Dunbar as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:45

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. Unless any member objects, I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member objects, the question is, that motion S6M-17266, on committee membership, and motion S6M-17267, on substitution on committees, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:45

Meeting suspended.

17:51

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on the motions. I propose to ask two questions. The first question is, that motion S6M-17266, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on committee membership, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry, but I could not connect to the app. I would have voted yes.

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

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

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

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have not been able to connect. I would have voted yes.

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

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I had a similar problem. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Dey. 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)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 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)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-17266, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on committee membership, is: For 109, Against 1, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Joe FitzPatrick be appointed as a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee; and

Emma Roddick be appointed to replace Joe FitzPatrick as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S6M-17267, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Edward Mountain: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am afraid that I could not connect to the app. If I had connected, I would have voted yes.

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

Gillian Martin: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I had the same issue. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Martin. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

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

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

For

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)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 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)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-17267, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership is: For 108, Against 1, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Stephanie Callaghan be appointed to replace Jackie Dunbar as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

NHS Grampian Waiting Times

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17011, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on addressing waiting times in NHS Grampian. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to please press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the reported concerns regarding challenges that NHS Grampian is facing in relation to staffing shortages and resource limitations, which it understands has contributed to delays in patient care and increased pressure on existing medical personnel; acknowledges that, in September 2024, NHS Grampian reported that over 3,000 patients were waiting over two years for hospital treatment, which it believes was the highest number among Scottish NHS boards; understands that, in November 2024, NHS Grampian declared a board level critical incident, which led to the diversion of ambulance patients to hospitals outside the region due in part to sustained pressures at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary; notes that, in late November 2024, NHS Grampian experienced a significant rise in delayed discharges, with 199 cases, which according to the NHS board accounted for 13% of all beds in the region; believes that hospitals in the area are using outdated medical equipment, including an MRI scanner and an X-ray machine that are 15 and 27 years old, respectively, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to develop an urgent plan to tackle what it regards as the ongoing issues within NHS Grampian that are impacting on patient care and service delivery.

18:00

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In the interest of transparency, I declare that I was a board member of NHS Grampian between 2017 and 2021.

I thank members from other parties who signed my motion, which has allowed the debate to take place. By bringing this debate, in no way am I criticising staff in our national health service, who work tirelessly to care for our constituents. However, given the level of correspondence that I receive from constituents, I felt that I had to try to do something to highlight the issues that are faced at present.

You will be surprised, Presiding Officer, that I do not want tonight's debate to be a political knockabout with the Scottish Government. I have genuine concerns and would like to hear what the Government can and cannot do to improve the situation that patients in the north-east currently face.

Data so far this year shows that NHS Grampian is failing to keep pace with other health boards across Scotland. The majority of patients within the board's area of responsibility are waiting longer than the 12-week target, with thousands

facing waits of more than a year and some of even two years. Accident and emergency performance is among the worst in Scotland.

I have seen the consequences of that at first hand—not just through the many constituents whom I have met and who have explained how they have been let down, but within my own family. They have faced long, agonising waits in the back of ambulances outside an A and E department that is bursting at the seams, and they now face more long waits for much-needed surgery with no news or updates and no end in sight.

The board has explained that, due to what it calls its “extremely challenging” financial position, it must reduce spending. That is despite £92 million in Scottish Government bailouts and the Scottish National Party claiming to have increased funding for NHS boards. That will not give my constituents confidence in the healthcare system or that they will get the treatment that they need, when they need it, nor will it give them confidence in the leadership of NHS Grampian. How on earth will it get waiting times down when it is forced to make cuts to critical services? That will surely mean more waiting, more delays and more uncertainty.

Compared to other Scottish health boards, NHS Grampian stands out for all the wrong reasons. It has the worst performance against the 12-week treatment target and the greatest number of extremely long waits for treatment, and is near worst in relation to unscheduled care.

I am concerned that it is our elderly constituents who are being disproportionately affected by those waiting times, who are suffering the most and who are having their quality of life impacted. In audiology, there is more than a two-year wait for a hearing aid. In relation to cataracts, there is a 60-week wait for the first appointment and who knows how long for the operation. In orthopaedics, Scotland Versus Arthritis has analysed the waiting times in NHS Grampian and the waiting lists for trauma and orthopaedic treatment have increased by 25 per cent in the past two years, with orthopaedics currently making up 38 per cent of NHS Grampian's total waiting list.

The financial situation, bed capacity issues, limited staffing and growing demand are all contributing to NHS Grampian's floundering position. The new Baird family hospital is already five years late, with no opening date set. The board's reliance on Government bailouts underscores the seriousness of the situation, which simply cannot continue.

The time has come for a robust and meaningful response. The Scottish Government must take steps to put patients and staff first and place NHS

Grampian in special measures. Putting NHS Grampian into further enhanced measures would be the first step, but not the last. We need a clear recovery plan, leadership changes where necessary, independent oversight and emergency investment in the services that are under the most pressure. The Scottish Government must make this a priority, not just for the sake of the north-east but as a signal to every patient in Scotland that they matter.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): When Douglas Lumsden talks about patients in the north-east, does he recognise that NHS Grampian serves the island constituencies as well? I have a constituent who is waiting for a hip replacement and who was told that the waiting list for elective surgery at Woodend hospital in Aberdeen was more than 3,000 people and that it would be impossible to predict when he would be seen.

Douglas Lumsden: I completely agree with Beatrice Wishart—the problem that she describes is the one that most people face. They are on a waiting list but they have no visibility as to how long the wait is going to be. A lot of people will therefore go private if they can afford it. There needs to be a change.

During the recess, I spoke with residents in Turriff, where constituents have repeatedly raised the continuing lack of services in the local hospital. Those services were reduced during the pandemic and have never returned to full strength. This is not the first time that I have raised the situation in Turriff in the chamber. In January, I highlighted how many rural communities across North East Scotland were being let down by the huge reduction in local services, forcing them to travel to hospitals such as Aberdeen royal infirmary, which simply cannot cope. It is a hospital that is severely under pressure—so much so that staff were forced to declare a major incident and turn patients away, with a winter plan that had unravelled by November.

This all matters because, at the end of the day, it affects people—the people whom we were all elected to this place to serve.

I will conclude, therefore, with a story of someone who contacted me last week. My constituent has been diagnosed with basal cell carcinomas on a number of occasions. Normally, those were dealt with by the general practitioner performing minor surgery at a nearby minor surgery centre, but that does not seem to be an option now.

My constituent was instead referred to the dermatology department at the ARI. It took nearly two years for the carcinoma to be removed, and he was warned that there was a strong likelihood

of the cancer returning. It has returned, and he has been referred to the dermatology department again; however, he has been warned that it may be over two years before he gets an appointment. He is rightly worried. We often hear about early intervention. In that case, I am sure that early intervention would have led to a better patient outcome and would most probably have been more cost-effective for our NHS.

I am normally a strong believer in local devolution, and I admit that I would be the first to complain if the Scottish Government were undermining local decision making. However, I feel that, with NHS Grampian, we have reached a point at which the Scottish Government needs to be bold. It needs to step in, steady the ship and provide a service that the people of the north-east deserve.

Let us make no mistake about it: these failings are not down to the thousands of dedicated doctors, nurses and surgeons, nor to the many other front-line staff; they are a direct result of mismanagement.

I therefore ask the cabinet secretary, considering the growing waiting lists, the financial interventions and the failure of enhanced monitoring, to turn the ship around. Does he have confidence that he will find the right candidate for the role of chief executive, considering that the interim chief executive has had enough and is going before a replacement has been found? Does he have confidence in the board of NHS Grampian to do its job, to deliver the leadership that staff need and to ensure that patient care is put back on track? If not, what plans does he have to step in and assist the people of the north-east, who are being so badly let down?

18:08

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I welcome the tone of Douglas Lumsden's speech; I have to say that there is much in there with which I agree. I put on record my thanks to all the staff in NHS Grampian, from consultants to cleaners, because they do an exceptional job. However, I am not convinced that they are listened to when they should be by senior management, and that is part of the problem. There also seem to be excessive bureaucracies in NHS Grampian that do not seem to exist elsewhere; I will come to that before I finish my speech.

I disagree with Mr Lumsden on some points with regard to some of the difficulties and the resourcing. If we had followed Tory spending plans, there would have been even less to spend. However, I am not entirely convinced that spending is being utilised in the right manner. Let us look, therefore, at the record £2 billion increase

in front-line NHS spending, which takes overall health and social care investment to £21 billion.

In a meeting that we had on Friday, delayed discharge was highlighted as a problem. However, delayed discharge is not a problem in the city of Aberdeen to the same extent as it is in Aberdeenshire and Moray. I say to the cabinet secretary that I have asked the following question before, and I will continue to ask it: why have the lessons learned by the city of Aberdeen not been exported to Aberdeenshire and Moray? That would make a great difference and would keep people out of hospital.

In Aberdeen city, the Granite Care Consortium has given its front-line staff the ability to increase care or, on a few occasions, to decrease care, when they have seen patients or potential patients suffering, which often prevents them from going into hospital. Let us keep folk out of hospital if we possibly can. Those lessons need to be exported from the city of Aberdeen to Aberdeenshire and Moray to reduce the pressures.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I recognise the disparities in delayed discharge performance, not just in the NHS Grampian area but in other parts of Scotland.

Mr Stewart's ask of me is to ensure that lessons are learned from the better performing areas. At the weekly collaborative response and assurance group, which is chaired by me or Maree Todd, we ensure that exactly what he asked for is conveyed across Scotland.

Kevin Stewart: The cabinet secretary is well aware of questions that I have asked about NHS Grampian, and I have relayed to him some of the situations that exist with the Baird family hospital and ANCHOR, which is the Aberdeen and north centre for haematology, oncology and radiotherapy. Even on Friday, NHS Grampian could not give us opening dates. That is unacceptable. It says that there are not enough acute beds, but if it opened those units, there would be no difficulty at all. We have yet to get clear answers on those issues. I again ask the cabinet secretary to approach NHS Grampian about that, so that we can have that family hospital to deal with maternity, gynaecology, neonatal and breast services as well as reproductive medicine, and the ANCHOR unit, which will bring together oncology, haematology and radiotherapy, with a capacity to see 65,000 out-patients each year. That would make a real difference.

My other ask of the cabinet secretary is simple. It is about recruitment, including internal processes for staff changing jobs. I have been told that NHS Grampian's processes are far more bureaucratic than those anywhere else. I will give an example. A nurse told me that she wanted to

move ward. It was not a promotion or anything, and it was a similar discipline, but she was told that she would have to be interviewed for that job. What is the point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Stewart, you are over your time. Could you please conclude?

Kevin Stewart: I will finish.

I have heard the same from cleaners who have had to be interviewed to move wards. None of that makes any sense whatsoever. That bureaucracy, in my opinion, should not be there and needs to be investigated. There are other issues around bed counts, but I will write to the cabinet secretary on that point.

18:14

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Douglas Lumsden on lodging the motion for debate and for the way in which he has led the debate.

Kevin Stewart and I knew each other before either of us was elected to the Parliament. We fought like cat and dog on Grampian joint police board. However, perhaps uniquely during the time in which we have known each other, today I agreed with almost everything that he said. I have seen from my own case load that there is too much bureaucracy in NHS Grampian.

I echo the point that there are outstanding staff at every level of the organisation dealing with patients on the front line but they are not being listened to by the decision makers and senior managers. I hope that the cabinet secretary will take that on board. He is hearing that not just from Opposition members but from his Government colleagues.

I hope that this is a wake-up call to NHS Grampian and those at the higher echelons of the board, because, day in and day out, we are seeing what our constituents are having to put up with. So far, managers and senior managers have been getting away with allowing the care for our constituents to be sub-par—that is the most polite way that I can put it.

In the short time that I have, I will discuss a couple of issues. One is a case that I wrote to the cabinet secretary about. I received a response from him, and I wrote to NHS Grampian and received a response on behalf of the interim chief executive. It is such a shocking case that it highlights what, sadly, too many patients in Moray, which is part of NHS Grampian, are facing.

Linda Fraser from Forres agreed to allow me to mention her case in the chamber today. She came into my office in Forres and outlined what she had gone through. On 3 October last year, Linda had a

neck dissection to remove a lump. She was in Aberdeen royal infirmary for six days and, at the end of that time, she was told that tests proved that she had an aggressive form of melanoma. On 5 November, she saw her surgeon, who went through the next steps for her, which included oncology and physio. Because it was an aggressive melanoma, she expected—as her surgeon did—that she would immediately or very quickly get further information about her next steps. However, nothing came, and she became worried and frustrated. She kept on contacting NHS Grampian to find out more.

Let us remember that Linda's operation was on 3 October and that she met her surgeon on 5 November. She waited and waited and waited. She contacted the health board repeatedly—that was all done by the patient rather than the health board coming to her. Eventually, her condition got so bad that her neck and cheek started to swell again and she was struggling to swallow.

Linda went to see her local GP, who was so worried that he got her booked in for an appointment at ARI on 23 December. To get to ARI from Forres, she has to get a bus from Moray to Aberdeen, because she does not drive. With a swollen neck and cheek and with difficulty swallowing, and with her GP's concerns, she got on the bus and went through to ARI. She waited all day for a CT scan on 24 December. She was told at 4 o'clock in the afternoon that it was not going to be possible for her CT scan to be done that day, and she was asked whether she could come back after Christmas, on 27 December. She was sent home on the bus, and then she had to come back through on the bus on 27 December. There seemed to be little care or compassion for this woman, who was clearly suffering and just wanted to get a resolution for her issue.

This has been going on for some time now. When I wrote to the cabinet secretary and the health board, the situation still had not been resolved. Linda has an appointment for an MRI scan on Saturday morning. After an operation in October, she finally has an appointment for an MRI at the end of April. Because it is a morning appointment and she is a Moray patient, she has to get the 10 past 6 bus to that appointment.

When she came into my office, Linda said that she is devastated, that she feels that she is treated as if she is a number and that no care or compassion is shown. That is just one of many cases that I could raise with the cabinet secretary that highlight shocking waiting times and the board's lack of courtesy and respect for patients.

I will quickly raise another issue. Moray has one of the highest rates of Huntington's disease anywhere in the UK. In Grampian, new research indicates that the north of Scotland has the highest

rate of Huntington's disease on earth, at a rate that is five times the global average. People with Huntington's have such complex needs that they need specialist support.

The cabinet secretary will be aware of Aberdeenshire health and social care partnership's potential decision to remove the funding for specialist Huntington's support. I am grateful that it is reconsidering that, but will the cabinet secretary apply as much pressure as possible to state that, given the prevalence of Huntington's disease in the north of Scotland and particularly in the Grampian area, that would be the wrong choice for Aberdeenshire health and social care partnership? We need to maintain that specialist support.

18:19

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Douglas Lumsden for securing the debate. I echo his and other members' tributes to the staff of Grampian health board and their work to support constituents in the region.

The declaration of a critical incident at Aberdeen royal infirmary in November 2024 crystallised what was already known to many people across the north-east—that NHS services in Grampian are just one bad night away from collapse. Any increase in demand can send hospitals into crisis, with ambulances diverted across the region in wintry weather. All of that is happening while the health board plunges further into financial difficulties, as Mr Lumsden set out.

Earlier this month, it was reported that the Scottish Government will lend a further £67 million to NHS Grampian, on top of an existing loan for 2023-24, which takes the total loan to £92.2 million. The loan was required despite the health board having made £46.2 million of savings in the year to February 2025. The board appears to be burning through money just to stand still.

Although the loan is required to keep the lights on, the Scottish Government must work with NHS Grampian to determine what is going wrong and to urgently set out a plan to make things better. That seems to be the consensus across the chamber today. It is the SNP's refusal to interrogate, innovate and introduce any real and meaningful reform that leaves Scotland's NHS lagging behind and NHS Grampian using X-ray machines and MRI scanners that are decades old and prone to breaking down.

The crisis in social care in the north-east has been touched on. It means that patients are kept in hospital for far too long. That will only be exacerbated by the series of cuts to social care and community services as health and social care

partnerships grapple with financial difficulties and budget cuts.

Kevin Stewart: There is innovation but, unfortunately, that innovation is often not exported. The problem with delayed discharge, for example, is that the innovation that is taking place in Aberdeen is not being exported to Aberdeenshire and Moray. Doing that would make sense and stop suffering.

Michael Marra: Mr Stewart makes a fair point, which I was going to come to. I think that Mr Ross also agreed that there is a question about what is being shared between city and shire. The cabinet secretary has recognised that and has set out that there are mechanisms by which such learning can take place, but we need to see evidence of it happening.

We have heard about some of the challenges as a result of the cuts to the health and social care partnership, particularly in Aberdeenshire. I have received an awful lot of communication from constituents on that. I share Mr Ross's concerns about the Huntington's situation and the acute need of people in the area, given the higher levels of need among people in the region. It would be good if that issue could be revisited, and I would like to hear from the cabinet secretary in closing about what he is doing to support those calls.

I say to Mr Stewart that it is not a case of just reacting now. In some places, things are happening, but we know that a large part of the issue relates to the region's ageing population. There has been a 9 per cent increase in the number of over-65s in the NHS Grampian region in the past five years, and acute and social care need come with that.

However, Scotland's ageing population is not news. It has not happened overnight; indeed, it has been long modelled and predicted for many years. A serious approach from the SNP Government would have been to change the services and prepare for it but, over 18 years, the Government has simply not done so.

While I have time, I will come on to another area of the health and social care partnership's work. I have been contacted by constituents who were informed that the adult autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment service, which is run by the partnership, was closed on 31 March. I was contacted today about that, and there have been comments about it in the chamber previously.

The First Minister has been very critical of the situation in NHS Tayside, where the child and adolescent mental health service for diagnosis of autism and ADHD has been stopped. The situation in Grampian is very similar. Does the cabinet secretary share the First Minister's

concerns about how such changes are being made? Services are being closed entirely, so it looks as though people who have already been on waiting lists for a long time will be on waiting lists in perpetuity.

It is abundantly clear that the situation in NHS Grampian is neither safe nor sustainable, but it serves as a microcosm of what is happening in Scotland's NHS on the SNP's watch. One in six Scots are on waiting lists, and there is chaos in A and E, with 1,040 patients waiting for more than 12 hours in the past week alone. The scandal of delayed discharge is costing Scotland nearly £1.7 billion. People are remortgaging their house or taking out loans to pay for private cataract, hip and knee operations and even for chemotherapy. That is the record of this Government. Can we hear some solutions to the Grampian situation tonight?

18:24

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Douglas Lumsden for bringing this debate to Parliament, and I quickly remind members that my wife is a GP in the NHS Grampian region.

Pretty much every speaker so far has commented on the value of the staff that we have in NHS Grampian and all NHS boards in Scotland, and that is touching to hear. My wife would be pleased to know that they have political support, because they are out there every day doing amazing things for the patients who can get through the door. That is not to take anything away from the problems that we have heard about, but we do value the staff who are on the ground.

Other members have mentioned points that I whole-heartedly agree with. NHS Grampian reports that more than 3,000 patients were waiting for more than two years for hospital treatment, which is the highest number among Scottish NHS boards. Michael Marra pointed out that, in November 2024, NHS Grampian declared a board-level critical incident, which led to the diversion of ambulance patients to hospitals outside the region. The board is using outdated medical equipment, including a 15-year-old MRI scanner and a 27-year-old X-ray machine. There are too few acute hospital beds and too few staff in some key service areas to cope with demand.

Kevin Stewart: I am not intervening to have an argument. We need to look at the counting of acute beds. I understand that what Public Health Scotland counts is acute beds in acute hospitals, but NHS Grampian has a number of acute beds in hospitals that are not acute hospitals. I have a simple question—why are they not counted and what are they being used for? How are they being utilised for the benefit of patients?

Tim Eagle: That is a good question that it would be great to have an answer to. All that I know is that NHS Grampian has pointed out that it has the lowest number of acute hospital beds of boards in Scotland. I take Mr Stewart's point about what that means, but NHS Grampian is saying that it is the second-lowest-funded board per head of population. To put that into numbers, NHS Grampian has 1.4 beds per 1,000 people, while NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has 3.6 and NHS Tayside has 2.8. If we are talking about delayed discharge in our hospitals, we also have the problem that we simply do not have enough beds for patients, which causes all the problems for constituents that we have heard about today.

I cannot miss the opportunity to mention Dr Gray's hospital, which is in my region. It is a vital hospital for local people but, all too often now, I hear locals speaking about deep worries about staffing levels, reduced service levels and long waits. To my mind, that is not acceptable. We must all work together to alleviate the woes of rural depopulation and at least provide appropriate delivery in our rural hospitals, which truly are vitally important.

Today, as Douglas Ross, Douglas Lumsden and Michael Marra did, I will highlight the human impact of waiting times. One of my constituents, who contacted me in January, has been in pain with gallstones since July 2024. She is regularly in A and E with crippling, indescribable pain. She has been given different concoctions of intravenous painkillers, but she is not getting the surgery that would quickly fix the problem. For months, my constituent waited, growing more and more jaundiced, in pain and having been on four types of antibiotics due to inflammation.

After

"six months of hell with no end",

a family member stepped in—this is not a rich family—to pay nearly £9,000 for private treatment. That should not have happened, and it should not have had to happen. My constituent commends the hard work of their GP but is utterly shocked by the waits in secondary care.

Let me share a different case—that of a care worker, whose work we desperately need in our society. For more than a year, she has been waiting for a cataract operation. My constituent's eyesight is deteriorating so rapidly that she is no longer able to drive. With the desire and passion to continue to serve those in her care, my constituent now walks 5km a day to the person she cares for, so that she can be with them, and walks 5km back. The situation has got so bad that a family member has had to reduce their working hours to provide support and care for that care worker. That family member sent me this quote:

"The impact has been huge, she has lost independence, self value and had a detrimental effect on her mental health. It has put enormous pressure on myself having to care, she even finds cooking difficult as she cannot see that temperature on her oven or safely use the cooker. Waiting times really need highlighting more!"

How can it be right that, in modern Scotland, either of those cases is crossing my desk? I know that there are complexities, but my message really is simple—whatever it is that is required needs to happen now. My constituents need action that truly delivers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Carol Mochan, who joins us remotely.

18:29

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Today's debate is of critical importance, and it is right that we use our time in the chamber to debate topics that match the Scottish people's priorities.

The SNP Government might want to hide from its responsibilities and its record when it comes to the NHS, but Opposition members have a responsibility to hold the Government to account on behalf of patients and staff, who have been let down for far too long. I therefore thank Douglas Lumsden for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I share his concern for his constituents. As the motion states, more than 3,000 patients in NHS Grampian have waited more than two years for treatment. That is unacceptable.

The Government's record is also appalling in my South Scotland region. The issue of waiting times for NHS treatment is perhaps the one that I hear most about from my constituents, and I also hear from overstretched staff members in the areas that I cover. Constituents say to me that waiting times are too high, that there is unclear information on what is happening and that the Scottish Government has no real plan to address the issue. Staff tell me that thousands of registered nursing staff are missing from health and care services, that the number of nurses leaving the register within their first 10 years is increasing and that the number of students applying to study for a nursing degree is falling. The SNP has no credible plan to rectify that, as NHS staff can see.

We are hearing in the chamber tonight that, whether someone lives in a rural area or an urban area, whether they are young or old or whether they have a long-term condition or are seeking new advice, worries about NHS waiting times are a constant.

So far, I have raised the concerns of constituents and staff who have reached out to me. In the few minutes that I have left, I want to raise the voices of women living in Scotland.

Recent reporting suggests that women across Scotland are suffering “structural neglect” by the NHS, with hundreds being left to languish on waiting lists for years. Weekend papers highlighted the extreme waiting times that are being experienced specifically by women for female-only medical interventions.

Currently, almost 1,500 women in Scotland have been waiting for more than two years for vital gynaecological surgery. My research shows that women in three health board areas—NHS Grampian, NHS Tayside and NHS Lanarkshire—have been waiting for more than four years, often in agony, for laparoscopies. The response to a Scottish Labour freedom of information request shows how many women are being badly failed by the SNP when it comes to hysterectomies. We revealed a wait of almost six years in NHS Grampian, and in NHS Borders, in my South Scotland region, the longest wait in 2024-25 was 10 times longer than in 2019-20. That is absolutely scandalous. I could go on. Waits for a colposcopy—a test that can help to identify cervical cancer—are unacceptably high. In Ayrshire, the average wait time is continually increasing, with the longest wait at the time being a shocking 238 days.

Bringing down waiting lists must be an absolute priority. We must have a plan that actually delivers for patients and staff. Under the Scottish Government, our tremendous NHS staff have been pushed to the limit, services are at breaking point and patients suffer on endless lists. For patients and staff, this is a Government without a plan, and that must change.

18:33

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank Douglas Lumsden for securing time for this important debate on NHS Grampian.

Healthcare in the north-east is in crisis as a result of years of chronic underfunding of NHS Grampian by the SNP Government. The health board is financially crippled. The situation is so desperate that it has had to take out a £67.5 million loan from the Scottish Government, bringing the total debt that it owes to £92.2 million. There are huge questions about how that debt will be serviced, given that the health board is already trying to make eye-watering savings. It is almost impossible—how can it pay a debt when it cannot make ends meet?

The reality is that NHS Grampian has been short-changed by more than £260 million—a quarter of a billion pounds—since the SNP got into power. The SNP Government’s parity formula is not worth the paper that it is written on.

That underfunding has resulted in the erosion of community hospitals, closed in-patient facilities and the end of night-time minor injuries units. It also means that NHS Grampian has the lowest bed base in Scotland.

All that has created substantial pressures on hospitals, GPs and the Scottish Ambulance Service, with crews queuing for hours just to get in the door of Aberdeen royal infirmary—a symptom of a system that is stretched beyond its limits.

That is why a critical incident was declared at ARI last November, when patients were diverted from the hospital because the capacity simply was not there. On that day, a dedicated ambulance crew saved the lives of a couple. The crew decided that, if they went to NHS Grampian, the couple probably would not have had their lives saved. The ambulance was diverted—it was blue-lighted all the way through to Dundee and NHS Tayside, double or triple the distance.

Upwards of 3,000 patients in the NHS Grampian area have been languishing on waiting lists for more than two years. The health board’s cancer waiting times are the worst in Scotland, with more than 40 per cent of patients waiting longer than two months to receive their first treatment after being referred. That means lives not just put on hold but put at risk, because we know the pivotal importance of early intervention. It is a ticking time bomb.

Despite the brilliant efforts of NHS staff, NHS Grampian received red ratings for nearly two thirds of its key targets between October and December 2024.

I rarely agree with Kevin Stewart, but, as my colleagues have said, he was spot on when he rightly pointed out that the national treatment centre for Grampian is on ice. The Baird family hospital and the ANCHOR projects have been beset by problems, delays and design issues. What is the SNP Government’s response? To carry out a patchwork of short-term fixes and make empty promises. It is no wonder that Audit Scotland has highlighted the lack of a strategic vision, and that NHS workers are sounding the alarm.

The SNP has failed the north-east. It has failed our NHS. Today, Neil Gray must apologise for the harsh financial conditions that his Government have created for NHS Grampian. My constituents, and the constituents of other MSPs who are speaking on their behalf, deserve better than this.

18:37

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I thank Mr Lumsden for securing the debate, for bringing it to the chamber

and for the way in which he introduced it. Like him, I have family members who reside in the Grampian area, and I, too, thank the staff for the work that they do day in, day out, and for serving my family members, as they do his.

I recognise the significant pressures that NHS Grampian has been experiencing over recent months, which have specifically impacted on delays at the front door of its emergency departments and Scottish Ambulance Service turnaround times. That is largely due to capacity issues in the community as well as in the acute hospital—Kevin Stewart raised some of those issues incredibly well—and the availability of appropriate beds for patients who are ready to be discharged.

I am not going to stand before you, Presiding Officer, and suggest that the delays to patient care that have been raised by Mr Ross, Mr Marra and Mr Eagle and the increased pressure are at all acceptable. They are absolutely not. However, we are committed to supporting NHS Grampian to turn the position around.

Earlier this month, Ms Minto and I met Mr Lumsden, and we discussed audiology services. We are aiming to move more of those services from secondary care into primary care. Mr Lumsden raised minor injuries units, which I explained are specifically for non-urgent interventions. They can provide services by appointment or otherwise for injuries that do not require accident and emergency attendance, thereby reducing pressures on emergency services. Local communication with the public is key so that people know what services are available to them and where.

During the meeting, reference was also made to leadership and the process for the appointment of a new chief executive, which Mr Lumsden has raised again today. When the new chief executive is in post, we will continue to work with them to ensure that NHS Grampian moves into a more sustainable financial position and to being a more resilient service. As I communicated to Mr Lumsden, I can say to Mr Ross, Mr Stewart and others that we also keep the escalation framework under review.

In February, I visited Elmbank medical practice in Aberdeen and the Aberdeen royal infirmary, where I met—

Douglas Lumsden: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Neil Gray: Of course.

Douglas Lumsden: The cabinet secretary mentioned the escalation procedure. Has he considered moving NHS Grampian to a higher level of escalation? There are a lot of problems

that are not unique to NHS Grampian, but they seem to be worse there.

Neil Gray: As I said, we keep the escalation framework under review. A recruitment process for a new chief executive is under way and we are sensitive to ensuring that support is provided to NHS Grampian and its leadership to ensure that it can navigate through the situation that it is currently in. However, we do keep the escalation framework under review.

Douglas Ross: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: Briefly, yes.

Douglas Ross: One of the challenges for the new chief executive will be funding and finances. Will the cabinet secretary explain the £67 million bridging loan? How can an organisation that is having to ask for so much money from the Scottish Government possibly continue to deliver for patients while having to look to pay that money back?

Neil Gray: We have been clear in the support that we provide to NHS Grampian that the way in which it delivers its services should not impact on front-line services, in spite of its financial difficulties. The repayment of that money can come only when NHS Grampian is on a more sustainable financial footing. We are not going to be requesting repayment to the detriment of front-line services. I hope that that will reassure Mr Ross and others.

Some of the key improvement works that we expect to be done include optimising and enhancing pathways that streamline patients away from the emergency department to be seen more quickly and in more appropriate areas, such as the rapid ambulatory assessment centre—

Carol Mochan: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Neil Gray: I am really sorry, but I have to make progress.

That work includes the expansion of acute medical initial assessment, increased respiratory and frailty capacity, and the enhancement of the call before convey service, which provides clinical advice to Ambulance Service crews to enable other pathways to be utilised to reduce the number of conveyances to hospital. On that point, 79.2 per cent of ambulances currently do not convey to the ARI emergency department, and that is the best conversion rate in Scotland. The central aim is to improve patient flow through the system, including from the Ambulance Service to NHS Grampian's acute sites as well as back into the community as soon as patients are fit for discharge.

Kevin Stewart: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: I will give way briefly.

Kevin Stewart: I welcome what the cabinet secretary has said, but the ambulance staff and hospital staff often feel that they are not listened to when they suggest improvements. Through his officials, will he ensure that folk start listening to those front-line staff and their good ideas?

Neil Gray: I heard Mr Stewart's point, and I was going to come it and to the points that other members have made about staff feeling listened to or otherwise. Clear routes are available to staff to ensure that their voices are heard, but I will take the point away and make sure that it is raised with the board.

Further support that has been provided includes the centre for sustainable delivery providing bespoke clinical support to NHS Grampian. It has identified some opportunities that will support improvements, including for the women's services that Carol Mochan raised. That support also includes a focus on reducing hospital occupancy to improve flow and reduce turnaround times for the Ambulance Service. There is also the potential to build on the current model of flow navigation, and we will work with the board to develop that in the coming year.

I will approach NHS Grampian again regarding the Baird and ANCHOR, and I will provide Mr Stewart with an update on his point about ensuring that facilities open so that capacity can be built. I will also look at the points that he raised about recruitment.

I will look at Mr Ross's point about Huntington's disease. He will understand that that is a local decision, but I will follow up in writing with more detail on the reasons for the decisions that have been taken.

Let me be clear. Addressing the pressures on NHS Grampian is a priority for the Government and for the new chief executive. However, I also want to recognise, as Mr Lumsden did in his opening speech, the hard work and dedication of the staff in Grampian, who go above and beyond to deliver the best quality of care to their patients. I know that there is more to do, but we must not overlook some of the progress that has been delivered by those staff in the past year.

By accessing extra funding from an additional £30 million national investment in planned care, NHS Grampian was able to deliver more than 23,000 additional appointments and procedures last year. We will support NHS Grampian to build on that work in 2025-26 through further investment as part of the £200 million to reduce waiting lists and support the reduction of delayed discharge.

In the motion and during the debate, Douglas Lumsden and Michael Marra also raised the issue of ageing equipment, including scanners and X-ray machines. From the additional £200 million investment this year, we are providing an additional £3.3 million to NHS Grampian for two mobile MRI scanners and one mobile CT scanner, which will deliver more than 19,000 additional scans in the coming year.

Finally, not only do my officials work closely with NHS Grampian on a regular basis, but I meet the regional chief executives on a monthly basis. My next meeting with the north, including NHS Grampian and—I say this for Beatrice Wishart's benefit—NHS Orkney and NHS Shetland, is this Thursday, when we will discuss the issues that have been raised by colleagues today to ensure that we deliver for the people of Grampian and beyond.

Meeting closed at 18:46.

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