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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 3 June 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, and our leader today is the Rev Mark Goodman, rector, St Columba's Scottish Episcopal Church, Largs.

The Rev Mark Goodman (Rector, St Columba's Scottish Episcopal Church, Largs): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, I bring greetings from North Ayrshire and I thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

Shortly before leaving teaching in Lincolnshire three years ago to return to Scotland and a new church ministry in Largs, I emailed the headteachers and principal of the group of schools for which I worked. I was returning to a new role in leadership and I asked them to list for me their best reads on leadership. They duly replied, and I read what they sent to me. There were some useful ideas. However, I was left with a rather particular question: "Why are we leaders?"

On one level, both you and I can answer that quite quickly and simply. You have a mandate from the electorate, and I have the approval of a congregation, a bishop and even, one supposes, the Holy Spirit. Is one better than the other? We can arm wrestle over that one later.

Those work as answers, but, although they may be necessary as to why we are leaders, I do not think that they are sufficient. What is it about me or you that would allow us to lead anything, let alone our respective constituencies?

I think that the answer comes in how we see leadership. We can present vision and authority and we can offer encouragement, innovation, strategy and ethics. Those things can bestow greatness if we get them right. However, I think that whatever ideas we are drawn towards will always be lacking if we cannot come from a place of service.

In my tradition—the Christian tradition—service allows for humility and seeing value in the other. Humility is not a synonym for weakness—it gives one strength and confidence to see the worth and value of others, regardless of which political community they come from.

Leadership that understands service allows others to rise and even shows wisdom when it allows advancement of others ahead of ourselves. Is this way of service possible in complex times? It is tricky. But it is always good to conclude hopefully, so I leave you with a quotation from Dr Martin Luther King:

"everybody can be great ... because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. ... You only need a heart full of grace".

Point of Order

14:03

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Following your decision to remove me from the chamber last Thursday, I have made several requests to meet you to discuss that. So far, you have refused all requests. Therefore, in the absence of—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mr Ross, please sit down. That is not a point of order. Thank you.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: If it is on the same matter, Mr Ross, I have already ruled that I am not discussing matters that are outwith the standing orders in this chamber. Thank you.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Carry on.

Douglas Ross: Under rule 3.1.3, you must act in a neutral manner. If a member believes—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, please sit down. I have acted in a neutral manner. I have addressed the point of order on Thursday and I will not continue to have a dialogue in the chamber about when I am meeting you.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Carry on, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I was waiting to be called by the Presiding Officer, as stipulated in the standing orders, but, if you are closing down all my attempts to raise this matter and you are refusing to meet me, how can you be acting in a neutral manner and treating all members equally, as you are required to do under rule 3.1.3 of this Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, as far as I am aware, I have not received a request to specifically meet with you. With regard to the points that you are making, in this chair I treat all members equally and I act in the interests of all members of the Parliament.

Douglas Ross: Further to that point of order—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I have addressed your point of order. There are other items of business that the Parliament has agreed to address today.

Douglas Ross: Further to that point of order—

The Presiding Officer: We are not having a conversation. I will not address point of order after point of order. There is important business that the Parliament has voted and agreed to attend to this afternoon. It is very important that we do so. There are members from all parties who wish to take part in debates and to put questions. Thank you.

Topical Question Time

14:06

Rolls-Royce Submarines (Scottish Enterprise Funding)

1. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason Scottish Enterprise has reportedly refused funding to Rolls-Royce Submarines, resulting in the potential loss of jobs. (S6T-02556)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government's long-standing policy is that neither the Government nor its agencies should use public money to support the manufacture of munitions. On that basis, Scottish Enterprise considered that the specific project that it has been discussing with the Malin Group for work on an attack submarine was unfortunately ineligible for potential funding. Scottish Enterprise did not receive a formal application for funding from Malin.

Jackie Baillie: The Scottish Government's position is, frankly, incoherent. Its policy on state-funded aid for defence is all over the place and applied selectively. I will give one example. The Scottish Government owns and funds work at the Ferguson Marine shipyard. Ferguson Marine is doing subcontract work for BAE Systems on the Royal Navy's type 26 frigate programme. There will be munitions on the frigates. Why is that acceptable but funding Rolls-Royce in partnership with the Malin Group to establish a welding school is not? Is the Scottish National Party putting its interests before the interests of jobs and the economy and the best interests of Scotland?

Richard Lochhead: It is important to reiterate that the Scottish Government values the role of the defence sector in Scotland, the many jobs that it sustains and the value that it adds to the Scottish economy. For that reason, since we came to office, £45 million-worth of support has been allocated through our enterprise agencies to defence companies or companies that are partially involved in defence activities. We continue to value the important role that the defence sector plays.

Jackie Baillie: I am afraid that the minister has not explained the inconsistency. The Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands went on television on Sunday to declare that the SNP believes that the military is very important. However, the Government essentially does not believe that the military should have weapons. What does the Government believe that the Army, the navy and the air force should defend the country with?

Peashooters? Bows and arrows? A telling-off? Will the Government reconsider its position, or does the United Kingdom Labour Government need to step in because the SNP will not step up? Is the SNP simply not serious about the security of the country, and is it also prepared to damage jobs and manufacturing in Scotland?

Richard Lochhead: I have a lot of respect for Jackie Baillie, and that is not the line of argument that I would have expected her to pursue on this very important issue. In the world at this time, the Scottish Government values the role of our defence forces. However, on the use of public money in Scotland by our enterprise agencies, and when it comes to working with the defence sector or companies that are partially or wholly involved in defence activities, we put the emphasis on diversification and skills development. That is why, as I explained, £45 million-worth of support has been allocated to defence companies through our enterprise agencies since we came to office.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The SNP has long taken a principled position that taxpayers' money will not directly fund arms positions but will instead support the diversification of industry away from core defence activities. Will the minister say more about how the Scottish Government engages with industries across the country, including with the defence sector, as part of its work on skills reform? What will the £2 million that was announced in the programme for government to develop engineering skills in the Glasgow city region support?

Richard Lochhead: Bill Kidd highlights many important areas in which the Scottish Government works with the defence sector in Scotland to provide high-value jobs. As I mentioned, it adds £3.2 billion to the Scottish economy and deploys 1,500 apprentices each year. I hope that that number will continue to be sustained in the years to come, given the way that things are going in the world at the moment.

We work very closely with the trade association that represents the defence sector in Scotland, ADS Scotland, and we have regular engagement with defence companies. I note that the Deputy First Minister last year visited the Malin Group's Scottish marine technology park at Clydebank, and we continue that good engagement with the defence sector.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government's position on the matter is not just incoherent; it is grossly hypocritical. It is totally hypocritical. The minister is standing up and going on about how the Scottish Government will support the defence industry sector, but the Government is undermining the sector; it is undermining high-value, high-skilled jobs for

young people; and it is undermining Scotland's contribution to the UK national defence.

Ministers cannot claim to have been caught off guard by the issue. In responding to me in a letter dated 1 April—I hope that there is no significance in the date, by the way, but I am beginning to think that there is—the First Minister stated that there would be a review of Scottish Enterprise policy to ensure continued support for Scotland's defence sectors

“in an increasingly uncertain world.”

Minister, did that review take place? If so, what was the outcome? Given the Government's actions since, how can anyone take any assurance from the promise that the First Minister gave me?

Richard Lochhead: I am pleased that the member mentioned the review of Scottish Enterprise that was agreed to by the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, the Parliament voted for the amendment to the motion from the Labour Party that said that we should review the due diligence that Scottish Enterprise carries out of money that is awarded to companies that are involved in defence and arms activities.

Due diligence is a serious issue that all parties—perhaps not the Conservatives, but certainly other parties—have shown a very careful and intense interest in.

We have a long-standing principle that any public money that our enterprise agencies use to support companies that are wholly or partially involved in defence activities focuses on skills development and diversification. It is complete nonsense for the member to say that the Scottish Government is not supporting skills development in the defence sector in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Patrick Harvie.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Stephen Kerr: What about my question?

Patrick Harvie: Will other members permit anyone else to speak? Yes? [*Interruption.*]

I am someone who would like to see stronger ethical constraints placed on public funding for the arms trade, not weaker ones. Does the minister share my dismay at hearing the defence secretary use what was, frankly, insulting and demeaning language to describe the application of any ethical constraints at all, such as those that the Scottish Government applies currently? Is it not all the more galling when those comments come from a Government that is willing to see arms provided to a genocidal regime such as Israel?

Richard Lochhead: The member raises the importance of all Governments throughout the world, including the Scottish Government in the context of Scottish devolution, taking into account ethical considerations when it comes to the funding of companies that are partially or wholly involved in defence activities. We urge the UK Government to take a similar approach.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): What is the plan for munitions in an independent Scotland? Where will we buy them from? Will we make them ourselves? If it is not the taxpayer, who will fund them? Those are serious questions that highlight the inconsistency in the SNP's approach. Would an independent Scotland have any munitions at all?

Richard Lochhead: Of course an independent Scotland would have conventional defence forces. Defence and defence spending are reserved to the UK Government. The member should be aware of that.

In the context of our principles, we believe that any public money that is used to support companies in the private sector that are involved wholly or partially in defence activities should focus on diversification and skills development; it should not be used to fund munitions.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister will be aware that the Scottish Government, through Scottish Enterprise, recently grant funded BAE Systems' applied shipbuilding skills academy in Scotstoun to the tune of half a million pounds. That project is similar to the marine welding project run by Rolls-Royce and the University of Strathclyde, and I do not see how the latter can be assessed any differently.

In that spirit, will the minister undertake to conduct discussions with the UK Government, and with Rolls-Royce Submarines and the University of Strathclyde directly, to get this investment back on track? I have been told directly by the investors that this decision is sending a toxic signal about investment in advanced manufacturing in the Glasgow area.

Richard Lochhead: As I said previously, the Scottish Government has allocated £45 million of public support through enterprise agencies to the defence sector in Scotland since we came to office. That is an illustration of the value that we attach to that very important sector.

The Scottish Government's long-standing principle that we should not fund the manufacturing of munitions has been in place for a number of years, so Scottish Enterprise and other enterprise companies have to look at each application on its merits. In this case, Scottish Enterprise took the decision that the application

does not align with Scottish Government policy, as I have outlined.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Point of Order

14:15

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In response to my earlier point of order, you said that you were not aware of any requests to meet me. Can I, therefore, get confirmation from you as to whether people in your office respond to invites to meet MSPs without consulting you before they decline them, or did you mislead Parliament? How would you correct the record?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mr Ross, points of order are to ascertain whether proper procedures are being or have been followed in the chamber. Therefore, the point that you have raised is not a point of order.

Just Transition (Aberdeen and North-east Scotland)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Alasdair Allan on a just transition for Aberdeen and the north-east. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:16

The Acting Minister for Climate Action

(Alasdair Allan): Aberdeen and the north-east have been an energy powerhouse for 50 years. As we transition from the boom years of oil and gas towards the renewables revolution that is on the horizon, I think that all of us in Parliament can acknowledge the opportunities that a just transition can now bring.

At the heart of that transition is our oil and gas workforce—experienced, highly skilled workers who are passionate about their work and their industry. Those workers are the latest in a long line of people who have had opportunities to provide for their families, experience work overseas and build a modern, successful city in Aberdeen through the oil and gas industry. Beyond anything else, a just transition must exist primarily for them. It must ensure that they have good, well-paid jobs, so that they can thrive in the region and be proud to live and work there.

This statement has been prompted by the publication of the Just Transition Commission's report into Aberdeen and the north-east. I thank the commission for its work, especially in travelling around the country and speaking to those who are directly impacted by the transition to net zero. However, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the report follows on from a concerning series of announcements that affect jobs in the region, especially in the oil and gas industry.

As members know, most of the key policy levers for the North Sea oil and gas sector, including decisions on licensing, consenting and the associated fiscal regime, are matters that are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, so it is not surprising that much of the report is addressed to that Government.

The UK Government has recently concluded several periods of consultation on key aspects of the future of the North Sea. We, along with industry, workers and other stakeholders, are awaiting its next steps. Those steps will be of vital importance for all aspects of the energy transition, including the workforce.

We are content to accept in principle the headline recommendations in the commission's report. However, as the commission recognises, clarity on the direction of travel from the UK Government will be vital before we can undertake some of the planning that the sector needs. That is not a process that the Scottish Government can do alone. In order to support workers and create an improved environment for investors, the UK Government needs urgently to provide stability and certainty in several key reserved areas.

First, the UK Government holds the powers to act in areas of taxation for the North Sea oil and gas sector. We therefore continue to call on it to listen carefully to concerns that are being expressed by businesses about the impacts of its energy profits levy. The energy profits levy was always supposed to be a temporary measure, and we must see an end date for it, as it is now affecting investment and jobs in the north-east.

Given that we are now seeing adverse effects of that policy, the UK Government should be considering when the earliest possible end date could be in order to avoid more decisions such as the one that we saw from Harbour Energy last month. The UK Government must urgently work with industry through its recent consultation, which closed on 28 May, and more widely, to set out a stable long-term fiscal regime for the North Sea. The aim must be to give the offshore energy sector much-needed certainty and to treat it fairly alongside other parts of the UK economy.

Secondly, on decisions on the licensing and consenting of North Sea oil and gas projects, which are, of course, also reserved to the UK Government, we continue to call on it to approach those decisions on a rigorously evidence-led and case-by-case basis, with climate compatibility and energy security as key considerations. The UK Government needs to bring forward its finalised positions from recent consultations on the future regulatory regimes as soon as possible to provide businesses and workers with much-needed certainty and stability.

Thirdly, it is essential that the UK Government provides clarity and certainty for the Acorn project in the upcoming spending review. A positive final decision on Acorn and the Scottish cluster, including announcing a full funding package and a clear timeline to achieve a final investment decision, is required so that investors can continue their work in developing that vital project. We stand ready to work constructively with the UK Government and to increase our funding for Acorn. If the UK Government commits, we will work with it and industry to ensure the fastest possible deployment of the Acorn project and the Scottish cluster, so that a just transition for our energy workforce can be secured.

Although clarity from the UK Government is needed in the key areas that I have mentioned, that will not stop us taking the actions that are possible within our devolved competence. Our £500 million just transition fund for the north-east and Moray is currently open for new applications, with £8.5 million of new funding available this year. I once again call on the UK Government to match our investment in that area. In the next session of Parliament, we will meet the remaining commitment for the fund and work with partners to deliver strategic investment in the region.

As part of the fund, we have been prioritising skills investments through the industry-led offshore energy skills passport and the energy transition skills hub. We have also supported key projects in the region through our energy transition fund and we are currently working with the UK Government to develop a new regional skills pilot scheme for Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire. The expansion of offshore wind represents a significant opportunity to create thousands of high-quality jobs, offering opportunities for those who are entering the job market for the first time and for those who want or need to change careers, including as part of a just transition.

We are investing up to £500 million over five years to support market certainty, to create a highly productive and competitive offshore wind economy and to support thousands of jobs. We are providing funding to colleges in 2025-26 to establish an offshore wind skills programme, helping to create region-specific training hubs for offshore wind skills, and we have convened a short-life working group with industry and public sector partners to develop and deliver an evidence-based offshore wind skills action plan at pace.

That activity by the Scottish Government could be even more impactful with the appropriate UK Government actions that I have mentioned. To secure project delivery in Scotland, as well as investor and supply chain confidence, the UK Government must prioritise the critical reforms that are necessary to improve the contracts for difference scheme, make transmission charges fairer and bring forward grid connection dates.

At this end—the Scottish Government end—we are increasing the impact of the UK Government investment that is being provided. The north-east investment zone will unlock a funding package of up to £160 million from the UK Government over 10 years to invest in a range of interventions that are designed to attract investment, boost innovation and create jobs. The Scottish Government will also provide a package of non-domestic rates retention at the sites, which the regional economic partnership can use to further

investment in the zone and associated economic infrastructure.

In addition to all that, the Scottish and UK Governments have worked together on the Aberdeen city region deal, on initiatives such as the offshore energy skills passport and now on the investment zones.

We know that joint working will be essential in order to unlock the potential of the north-east and the city of Aberdeen during the transition. As I said at the beginning, we can all acknowledge the opportunities that can be unlocked through a just transition, and the Scottish Government will continue to take forward efforts in the areas that are in our power as we await clarity from the UK Government on its next steps.

I look forward to contributions from members and their matched support for our calls on the UK Government as we express our collective commitment to the industry and workforce that has made Aberdeen and the north-east so economically important to our country.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of the statement. It is clear that he has his head in the sand, because the north-east faces an emergency. The Just Transition Commission report needs to be a wake-up call for this devolved Government, because it sets out something that we already know and have been warning about. It says:

“There is still no transition plan for oil and gas workers.”

We know that because the just transition plan and energy strategy were meant to be delivered years ago. I have repeatedly asked when they will be published, but it is clear that the minister and the cabinet secretary simply do not have a clue.

While that uncertainty continues, thousands of jobs in the north-east are being lost. The Scottish National Party cannot keep passing the buck, because we need an affordable, commonsense transition. The front page of today's *Press and Journal* lays bare that 400 jobs are to go every fortnight over the next five years. That is like a Grangemouth facility closing every two weeks. The SNP is doing nothing to stop that, and it is continuing with its presumption against new oil and gas.

Does the minister accept that there can be no transition if oil and gas jobs are lost because the SNP is demonising the industry? Will he apologise to the people of the north-east for his Government's failure to plan properly and publish its energy strategy and just transition plan?

Alasdair Allan: I could begin by saying that many of the plans that have been referred to exist in draft form. I could talk about the fact that some of the plans are dependent on court decisions at UK level. However, more relevantly, I will respond to the real and significant points that Douglas Lumsden raised about the challenges that the north-east of Scotland and his constituents face.

Douglas Lumsden mentioned the idea that the challenges that the industry faces are somehow the consequence of being demonised by Government policy. I have to push back very strongly against that, and I merely point to the fact that the north-east of Scotland faces real challenges, as he and I both acknowledge, due to the maturing of the North Sea basin and the changes that will come regardless of Government policy. All Governments—the Scottish Government and the UK Government—have to prepare for that and are devoting real resources, as I have set out today.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. Will he acknowledge the critical points that were made in the Just Transition Commission report about the need for significant acceleration of the development of offshore renewables in order to give confidence to those investing in supply chains and renewables manufacturing, which will create the jobs and deliver the skills that we urgently need?

I am told that we need 8,000 welders, so where is the training coming from? Will the Scottish Government act to speed up the process for renewables projects and work to ensure that jobs in offshore renewables are attractive enough in quality to retain workers with oil and gas experience? The Just Transition Commission highlighted the role of trade unions in negotiating decent terms and conditions, but the minister did not mention that.

It is clear that workers need the Scottish Government to invest now and deliver the transformation that is promised by its £500 million just transition fund. Given the warnings from Robert Gordon University about the need to act now, why is the minister kicking the investment that is urgently needed into the next parliamentary session?

Alasdair Allan: The member rightly pointed to the RGU report, which I am sure the UK and

Scottish Governments will draw many important lessons from.

Sarah Boyack will be aware of the investment that the Scottish Government has made, working with the UK Government, in initiatives such as the offshore skills passport and in many other wider projects that are within our responsibility—no least the wider investment in Aberdeen and the Aberdeen area through the £125 million that has been allocated for its economic development. I accept what the member says about the importance of the RGU report. We will learn from it, and we hope that the UK Government will, too.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The extension of the energy profits levy, previously by the Conservatives and now by the Labour Government, has had an adverse effect on Scotland's industry. Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce has said that 10,000 North Sea jobs have been lost since 2022 because of the levy. As Westminster policies inflict hardship on Scotland's workforce, will the minister give details of any engagement between the Scottish and UK Governments on the issue?

Alasdair Allan: Publicly and privately, the Scottish Government has made plain to the UK Government its position that the levy must have an end date and that we have concerns about the increase in the levy and the impact that it clearly has, as the member is only too aware, on investment decisions that are made in the sector in the north-east of Scotland. We will continue to make that position clear publicly and in our engagements with the UK Government.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): A 2010 report found that offshore wind could create 28,000 jobs in Scotland by 2020, but, 15 years on, the latest figures show that fewer than 4,000 jobs have been created. Today's RGU report, "Striking the Balance", says that up to 400 North Sea oil and gas jobs could vanish every two weeks over the next five years. What precise steps is the minister taking to address the Government's failure to create offshore wind jobs for oil and gas workers to transition to? What are the measurable outputs and when will they be delivered?

Alasdair Allan: The member will not be too surprised to know that I do not accept every premise of that question—[*Interruption.*]

Liam Kerr: It is a stat.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Alasdair Allan: As I just said, some areas are within our responsibility, but some are matters for conversation between the two Governments and some are plainly reserved to the UK Government—the member is only too keen on that fact—and we must get adequate or helpful

decisions from the UK Government on everything from the Acorn project to licensing and all manner of areas that are within the UK Government's responsibility—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Alasdair Allan: One of the messages that come through clearly from both reports that we are talking about today is that we need to avoid a gap in the coming on stream of offshore wind jobs and in addressing the issues that have been caused by the decline of the North Sea basin, as I mentioned.

In the areas for which the Scottish Government has responsibility, everything that we are doing—from the investment in the north-east that I mentioned to working consistently with offshore wind developers—will contribute to minimising the gap and addressing the real issues to which the two reports point.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The RGU “Striking the Balance” report and the potential job losses are stark and worrying for people in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland. Has the Scottish Government had any indication from the UK Government that the UK Government will help to attain a just transition by making changes to the energy profits levy to save oil and gas jobs, by giving the go-ahead for the Acorn carbon capture project or by match funding the Scottish Government just transition fund—or does it not care?

Alasdair Allan: The Acorn project, which the member referred to, is not only vital in supporting decarbonisation in Scotland; as the member has made clear, it is an opportunity for new industry, as has been outlined in project willow, among many other places. Business leaders including Sir Ian Wood have made it very clear that any further delays to Acorn would have serious economic consequences for Scotland.

The UK Government has, it must be said, acted swiftly south of the border, and it is now vital that it takes action to support Acorn and avoid a cliff edge of job losses in Scotland. It must also provide a full funding package and timeline for the Acorn project in next week's comprehensive spending review.

On the member's other points about the billions of pounds that will be added to the Scottish and UK economies if we get the transition right, I can only concur.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The UK Labour Government has listened to and acted on industry concerns over activity in the North Sea basin, and I am very sure that it will continue to do so—in fact, it is vital that that happens.

What is the Scottish Government going to do about the skills shortages that are already undermining the prospect of employment in the north-east? Sarah Boyack highlighted a shortfall of 8,000 welders, and a question just a few minutes ago also related to the Government's performance in that area. In the budget, there was a welcome announcement of a very small sum of money for an offshore wind skills programme in colleges, but progress has been grindingly slow—as in so many of these areas—in actually seeing the money on the ground. When will that money be available to colleges in the north-east?

Alasdair Allan: My understanding is that the college money has just recently been approved. The member makes an important point about skills and the transfer of skills. The Scottish Government certainly recognises the critical importance of providing the current and future workforce with the lifelong skills that they need.

The recently published 2024 “Green Jobs Barometer” shows that

“Scotland continues to lead the way in the creation of green jobs, with new data showing the number of”

such green jobs

“advertised has tripled since 2021.”

We will continue to work on areas such as the skills passport, which I mentioned, and on areas with the UK Government, to ensure that we have in our workforce the skills that we need for the future.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Between 1990 and 2022, Scotland's emissions halved, while the economy grew by 66.6 per cent. That shows us that climate action and economic growth and prosperity can be achieved simultaneously—Scotland has already done it.

Ensuring the future security and prosperity of our oil and gas workers must be at the heart of our plans for a just transition towards net zero. How will the Scottish Government ensure that that is the case, and what is the minister's message to the sector?

Alasdair Allan: First, the member is quite right to point to the fact that economic growth and the decarbonisation of our economy go hand in hand. We are committed to achieving net zero by 2045, and we are proud of our record of climate action to date.

Any further decisions in this area have to be got right, and have to be the product—as I have mentioned many times—of co-operation between Governments. That is why we continue to call on the UK Government to approach decisions on, for

instance, the North Sea oil and gas projects case by case, led by rigorous evidence.

A truly just transition will involve building on our strengths as an energy powerhouse, utilising—as I have mentioned many times—our skilled workforce. There are real economic opportunities around net zero and, as I have said, our record in Scotland is one of marrying up our aims on the environment with real economic growth.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Last month's Just Transition Commission briefing report on "A Just Transition for Aberdeen and the North East" is pretty scathing. It states:

"There is still no transition plan for oil and gas workers"

and no clear training plan to retain skills. It notes that accelerating

"offshore clean energy is essential"

and it states that regional planning with genuine community participation is vital.

The minister did not mention communities once in his statement. Can he say how communities can expect to benefit from the collective commons that are our renewables as we harness them for our future, and how communities will be involved in the planning that must happen now with urgency?

Alasdair Allan: The member is right to say that communities must be involved in the planning of those matters. That is one of the reasons why the Scottish Government is committed to initiatives around the environment within communities.

The point that has been made about planning for skills is clearly important, too. In the programme for government for 2025-26, the First Minister reaffirmed that point, committing to

"Introducing a new Scottish Government-led approach to national skills planning, and strengthen regional skills planning, to ensure that post school provision"

is aligned with and

"responsive to Scotland's strategic skills needs"

in this area.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank the minister for early sight of his statement, which pointed to a number of areas where action and direction from the UK Government are required—and that is not unreasonable, not least in relation to the decision on the Acorn project. However, he will be aware of the action and direction that are needed from the Scottish Government as well. In that context, and in relation to the offshore energy skills passport, the project needs to be industry led, but there are concerns around the exorbitant retraining costs. What steps is the minister taking to engage with the sector to ensure that the

funding that is available is directed to where it is most needed?

Alasdair Allan: The member is right to point to the areas that are within our responsibility, which we take seriously. Not least, he has mentioned our involvement in the skills passport, the aim of which is to be a free-to-use tool, which addresses his point about the need to ensure accessibility. The Scottish Government has previously provided £3.7 million of funding from the just transition fund to support industry-led development of an energy skills passport—as the member is right to mention. We will continue to work with the UK Government and industry to develop that.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): The minister has already referred to the repeated delays that we have experienced with the progression of the Acorn project: delays that were caused by the previous Conservative Government and indecision, causing further delay, by the present Labour Government. Does the minister recognise that one of the real risks of those repeated delays is that investors in the project might start to back out, such that the partnership could break up? If the Acorn project does not move forward at an urgent pace, what does the minister believe will be the economic implications for the north-east of Scotland and for the rest of the country? What will happen to the economic importance of carbon capture and storage in the North Sea to meeting our net zero targets?

Alasdair Allan: All those concerned—including, as far as I can see, the Climate Change Committee—acknowledge that carbon capture, utilisation and storage is essential to meeting the net zero aim that we all have for Scotland. I do not want to point too much to the negative scenario that the member outlines, although he is right to outline the risks. However, if we are to find alternative industries in Grangemouth and the member's part of Scotland in the future, and if we are to develop the infrastructure that is needed for carbon capture, utilisation and storage, decisions at UK Government level are needed. I do not say that to make a political point, but they are simply needed. The decisions have been made elsewhere in the UK, and it is time for them to be made regarding Scotland now.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): At the current glacial rate of investment, it would take the SNP Government until 2083 to spend the so-called just transition fund. The cabinet secretary will be 114 years old, and the minister will be 112 years old. Against that background, could the minister outline how the SNP Government will meet the remaining commitment for the fund in the next session of the Parliament?

Alasdair Allan: It would be ungallant to try to work out what the member's age would be in that scenario, were I to accept the premise of the question, but I do not accept the scenario or the premise. The commitment of up to £500 million over this period has been given. Our track record in providing other investment, such as the £125 million for Aberdeen and that area, shows that our commitment is real.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Learning from the just transition for Aberdeen and the north-east, can the minister advise how communities and businesses across Scotland will benefit from the just transition to net zero and how the Scottish Government will ensure a greener, fairer future for all?

Alasdair Allan: The just transition to net zero is clearly a huge economic and social opportunity, not just for the north-east—which we have quite rightly been focusing on today—but for Scotland as a whole. Communities are uniquely placed to play a critical role in shaping and driving forward that transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy.

That is why the Scottish Government has committed up to £6 million of funding this year for our network of 24 climate action hubs. We are delighted to see the impact that the hubs are having in enabling communities to make positive changes for a more sustainable and resilient future.

Additionally, the just transition fund for the north-east and Moray has, so far, allocated £75 million to supporting projects and communities across the region to create jobs, support innovation and secure the highly skilled workforce of the future that, throughout this debate, we have rightly pointed to.

The Presiding Officer: There are additional requests to ask questions. If members are concise, we can get more in.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): According to the report published today by Robert Gordon University, 400 people in the oil and gas industry will lose their jobs every fortnight. The only transition that those 400 people will face every fortnight is a transition to take up a job in the Emirates, Houston in the US, Norway or other countries that believe in developing their own oil.

The windfall tax must surely end now—there is no windfall; it is just a tax—and consents to our own gas and oil reserves must be granted. My question to the Scottish Government is this, minister: when will you come off the fence? We know that there is evidence that Rosebank and Jackdaw will emit in their production a fraction of the fracked gas that is supported by Donald Trump. Why are we becoming Donald Trump's

little helpers? Why are we not pressurising the Labour Government to do what everybody in Aberdeen can see must be done without delay, because we are in the biggest jobs crisis that this country has seen?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Alasdair Allan: Fergus Ewing will appreciate that nobody in the chamber is disputing the enormity of the problem for any individual or family in the north-east of Scotland who is facing the kind of situation that he describes. I do not want to minimise that in any shape or form.

Fergus Ewing is well aware that the Scottish Government has no role in the consents process, other than that we believe that they should be subjected to not only economic but environmental tests.

I think that Fergus Ewing and I are in agreement on the windfall tax: the point is passing at which it could be described as a windfall tax or at which its current level could be described as such. The Scottish Government has made it clear that the UK Government needs to clarify its position on that now.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the minister confirm that it was the SNP Scottish Government that called for the energy profits levy to be introduced? When does he think that it should have been removed?

Alasdair Allan: As Douglas Ross is well aware, we supported the levy as a temporary measure. We do not support the increase in the levy to its current rate, and we do not support the fact that the UK Government appears to have put no end date on it.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. We have heard from several members today about the new report by Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, which warns that the energy workforce could shrink by 400 jobs every two weeks for the next five years. However, instead of using his statement to outline a much-needed industrial strategy for the north-east, the minister tries to blame job losses on the redistributive windfall tax on the obscene profits made by Shell and other oil and gas multinationals. In all the years of rampant profiteering, my constituents in the north-east were no safer from economic shock, energy poverty or job insecurity. It does not trickle down. Why does the minister want us to believe that it does?

Alasdair Allan: I am not sure what kind of conversations Mercedes Villalba is having with industry, the workforce or, for that matter, her constituents in the north-east of Scotland. All I can

say is that I receive regular representations about the levy and the fact that it constrains much-needed investment not only in the oil and gas industry but in decommissioning work.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Public Participation Inquiry

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17733, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, on “A blueprint for participation—embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament”. Members who wish to participate in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Jackson Carlaw to speak to and move the motion.

14:50

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Given my advanced age, and in case I forget to do so otherwise, I will move the motion in my name.

I begin by referring back to the recent Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee debate on committee effectiveness, because the Minister for Parliamentary Business, who I am delighted to see will be participating in today’s debate, challenged me to delve into history because he was very disappointed that, in the committee, I had not come up with an example that predated one that had been quoted to us. I will therefore start in the fifth century BC, on the hill of Pnyx, where citizens could gather in the agora to discuss and vote on matters. Those were the first citizens assemblies, so the concept is not a new one, although it is true that diversity may have been somewhat lacking, with only men able to vote—and probably only such as those able to vote besides.

The concept of giving citizens an active role in democracy is one that the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee has been exploring throughout this session of Parliament. Two and a half millennia on, the blueprint that we have proposed will help to embed the spirit of the Athenian agora in the work of the Scottish Parliament, which, appropriately, sits in the Athens of the north. Here, then, is an opportunity for the minister to become Scotland’s Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. I am not sure that that is exactly what I see when I look at him, but today is his opportunity to prove himself the equal of ancient Greece’s finest and I look forward to his confirmation of the same.

In all seriousness, participation is not a new principle in respect of the way in which this Parliament operates. It is in the foundations: it was one of the principles set out by the consultative steering group on the Scottish Parliament and it is part of the way that we work in the chamber and in committees.

After almost a full session of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

looking at how to embed participation in the work of the Parliament, I hope that the principle of public participation now sells itself, and so, this time, I am here to talk about the approach that the committee set out in our report and blueprint. Our proposals represent a relatively modest investment and are an incremental way of embedding an approach that is at the cutting edge of deliberative practice, has an incredibly positive and powerful impact on participants, supports scrutiny and can help to address some of the most important challenges that we face as a Parliament.

Since we debated our previous report in this chamber, there have been two further people's panels. One group considered the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and the other group looked at reducing drug harm and drug deaths in Scotland. The panels involve groups of 25 randomly selected people who broadly represent the demographic make-up of Scotland. They do not decide things but make recommendations that the committee, Parliament and parliamentarians ultimately decide on. They are brought together to consider a particular question: they hear from experts and are supported by trained facilitators as they consider the information in front of them and agree on recommendations.

People's panels in the Scottish Parliament context are very much tied to the scrutiny work of Parliament's committees. They are not muscling in on the role of committees or duplicating the work being done by members.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will Jackson Carlaw take the opportunity in his speech to talk about the importance of the questions that are framed for those groups? What is asked, as well as how that is asked, is of great importance.

Jackson Carlaw: I entirely agree with that point and will seek to address that in my contribution.

The panels look at issues where a committee feels that the input of a panel would be useful and the panel's report and recommendations go back to that sponsoring committee to inform its scrutiny work. I am not going to claim that people's panels are a panacea, but it is clear from the work that my committee has undertaken that they can be an important part of the solution to a number of problems that we must address if the way in which the Parliament delivers for the people of Scotland is to evolve.

All members will be concerned about the shocking figures on people's declining trust in politics. Last year, the National Centre for Social Research reported that the British social attitudes survey had shown that

"Trust and confidence in government are as low as they have ever been."

Further, the "Life in the UK 20204 Scotland" report gave Scotland a democratic wellbeing score of just 39 out of 100. It found that 63 per cent of people disagreed with the proposition that they could influence decisions that affect Scotland and, sadly, that 38 per cent had low levels of trust in members of the Scottish Parliament.

From the independent evaluation of the people's panels we know what a positive impact they have had on participants' trust in the Parliament. I will give just one example:

"More than 90% of participants"

in the panel on climate change

"responded 'Very' or 'Extremely' to the statement: 'I feel like participating in the People's Panel has improved the way I feel about the Scottish Parliament and the work it does to hold the Scottish Government to account'."

That impact is to be welcomed, but there is also potential for the impact of panels to be felt beyond individual participants, because they take their experience and knowledge back with them to their own families and communities.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Jackson Carlaw: Panels also show the Parliament at its best, by giving focused and considered attention to important issues and drawing on a wider range of diverse voices to hold the Government to account.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackson Carlaw: Of course I will.

Christine Grahame: Having pressed my button, I thought that seeing my image on the screen would be enough to halt you in your tracks, Mr Carlaw, but obviously it was not.

I have huge regard for those efforts, but a little bit of me always says that, even with the holding of people's panels, the people that I—and, I am sure, all members—want to reach are the very ones who have never voted, who are in housing schemes and who see nothing of worth in any politicians, whatever political hue or rank we might be, and regardless of whether we are on councils or whatever. How on earth do we reach out to those people? I do not wish to undercut what is being done; it is just that, somehow, I feel that we are never going to reach those people.

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

Jackson Carlaw: I am very grateful for that intervention, and I apologise to Christine Grahame. Her uncustomary lack of bling today meant that I did not quite catch the fact that she

had stood up when she did. I see her now, even though my eyesight is failing in my advanced years.

Ms Grahame will be pleased to know that the way in which we reach out through panels specifically does what she asks. Often, the people who are randomly selected to take part have never participated in anything similar, some have never voted and some have never had any engagement in the political process at all. The way in which the members of people's panels are selected reaches and brings in some of the very voices that Christine Grahame is concerned that we should seek to reach.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am sure that Jackson Carlaw will agree that part of the problem is that the 2.7 million people who voted in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election currently feel real disenchantment with this place and its members. I do not mean this in a derisory way, but can he articulate how the work of 25 people can make any difference to those 2.7 million?

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

Jackson Carlaw: I said that the panels are not a panacea. The recommendations on the principle of deliberative democracy in people's panels extend to the Government, too. The Government will make its own decisions on whether it wishes to pursue the idea of having a wider national forum in which people are able to participate, as happens in Ireland and Paris, and in other countries and cities that the committee visited.

Our recommendation is one for the Parliament. It is modest, because we recognise the current financial constraints. We propose that there should be four people's panels during the next parliamentary session—one in each of the years from 2027 to 2030. Those panels should be run in line with the more detailed principles that we set out in the blueprint. The overall approach to the panels should be evaluated during session 7 in order to maintain quality, and then to determine what we might do during session 8.

That is where the question that Martin Whitfield wishes to raise is important. We have identified that the broader the subject, the less able a panel is to come to a specific conclusion. It is therefore important that the question that people are debating be tightly focused and well understood. That is what the two pilots have demonstrated. In many ways, the pilot on drugs was more successful than the one that considered the post-legislative aspects of climate change more generally. Climate change is such a huge topic that people might have been bewildered about what the focus of their inquiry should be.

We have also highlighted other areas in which we would like the work of panels to develop, particularly on ensuring that innovation and continuous improvement remain part of their approach. We are also exploring how we can best harness the extremely positive impact on individual participants in order to amplify other participation and engagement work. We have been clear that that is only one part of the overall scrutiny and engagement landscape.

I hope that I have explained to, engaged with and enthused members, as that is what I am here to do on a sunny and dry summer's afternoon, when people's minds stray elsewhere. However, if anyone is still unsure of the value of people's panels, I leave them with this quote from one of the participants:

"deliberative democracy is a gift to the people of Scotland and its electorate. In Scotland, we appear to be ahead of the game compared with many countries ... In the people's panel, we felt representative, represented, relevant and listened to".

That is how people should feel when they engage with the Parliament; that is, in the words of one participant, the "gift" of people's panels; and that is why I urge members to support the motion and ensure that the Scottish Parliament's proud tradition of innovation in public participation continues incrementally and modestly in the next session of our Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament* (SP Paper 789), including the blueprint for this work in Session 7 with a view to making the use of such panels a regular feature of committee scrutiny from Session 7 onwards; endorses the principles for the future use of deliberative democracy that are set out in the blueprint, and acknowledges the work already being done by Parliament staff to develop and improve engagement methods.

15:00

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): I commend the committee for the work that it has undertaken on its inquiry and report, and I commend the convener for rising to the challenge and taking us further back into the realms of history. That challenge began with Stuart McMillan, who started in the 1930s, and continued through Mr Whitfield, in a subsequent debate, to the 18th century and Edmund Burke. There is quite a leap back to the fifth century BC—we should stop the challenge before the next debate, in which someone might cite Fred Flintstone—but I will resist the temptation to reflect on Aristotle's six forms of democracy, save to say that we can remind ourselves of his great concern over democracy: rule by the "demos", or mob. I will

not reflect on which group in the Parliament I consider to be the mob.

I will begin as Jackson Carlaw did. He quoted the powerful words of one participant, and I was struck by the words of another who was cited in the report:

“I’ve still got a voice, I still get to dream.”

There is something powerful about those words. They speak directly to the founding principles of the Scottish Parliament on power sharing and equal opportunities. We should be endeavouring to ensure that every person in Scotland feels empowered in that way. What impresses on me most is the way in which such people are reclaiming their power.

That is not to say that there are no concerns in that regard. Concerns are being heard about those who are not involved in public discourse, and those concerns are growing not just here in Scotland but internationally, which is a point that is raised in the committee’s report. If people feel that they have no voice and that they are not heard by their Parliament as an institution, their parliamentarians individually or their Government, the trust that is vital to our ability to deliver better outcomes for them is chipped away.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, someone feeling as though they have a say in Government actions has a greater influence on trust than socioeconomic or demographic characteristics. The principles and methods of public participation are vital in rebuilding that trust in Scotland. I was pleased to see the report say that

“tools ... alone will not restore trust in politics.”

In April, the First Minister convened a gathering of civic, faith, trade union and political leaders. They committed to taking action to safeguard Scotland’s democracy and tackle people’s feelings of being unheard and disempowered. We members have a shared responsibility to support the growth of trust in the institution of the Parliament—and, for those of us who serve in ministerial office, in the Government.

I record my support for and appreciation of the committee’s ambitious work in putting forward its blueprint for participation and deliberative democracy, which is an important step in acknowledging the positive impact of participatory approaches on people and the way in which decisions are made. I commend the report’s acknowledgement of the resource-intensive nature of that work, as well as its clear, long-term plans to make efficient and cost-effective choices that take into account the future resilience that is needed to support that work.

I reinforce the importance of the evaluation process, the inclusion of seldom-heard voices, and the involvement of the voices of, in particular, children and young people in the plans. In relation to that work, I welcome and will continue to encourage collaboration between the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government, local government and, indeed, other institutions across these islands.

The report is geared towards consideration of how the Scottish Parliament might think about public participation in the longer term. As a member of this Parliament, I consider that to be an important area for us to collectively reflect on. I speak today on behalf of the Government and—as I reflected on in the recent debate on committee effectiveness, and which is important to re-emphasise—it is not for the Government to tell Parliament how to do its work. However, I can perhaps set out a few ways in which the Scottish Government is working to the same agenda of public participation.

As a member of the Open Government Partnership, the Scottish Government is committed to building trusted relationships with civil society to deliver on our mission to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. This year, we will be co-creating our next action plan, bringing together different areas of Government and civil society to drive forward innovative, ambitious and impactful actions to ensure that people can see, understand and be involved in the decisions that affect them and their communities.

Participation is one of the core principles of open government. In this year alone, I have seen what can be achieved through that approach. Recently, colleagues worked with students at the University of Edinburgh to create a framework for case studies that showcase the value and impact of open data.

We are now seeing the impacts of year 3 of the just transition participatory budgeting fund in the north-east. More than 18,000 people took part in determining how the fund could best be disbursed, with 47 successful projects. With the next Open Government Partnership action plan, we are looking to take a more strategic approach that will enable us to achieve even more on trust, transparency, and involving the public over the course of the next session of Parliament.

Looking at the Scottish Government’s efforts to embed and institutionalise participatory methods and approaches more widely, we place great value on community empowerment and providing opportunities for people to participate in the decisions that matter to them. To give one example of that, just last month we announced £50,000 of funding to support piloting a citizens assembly in Dunfermline, in partnership with Fife

Council and the Electoral Reform Society. The project will also provide valuable learning for our joint democracy matters process with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, designing new community decision-making models to support communities across Scotland to take ownership of important decisions. That is a reminder that transparency and participation in public life are matters not only for this Government and Parliament, but for local authorities.

I thank the committee for its acknowledgement and support of the Scottish Government's work in exploring the potential of deliberative democracy. I also welcome the scrutiny and accountability that the work of the different panels and the committee brings to the activities of the Government.

The committee wishes to explore two areas regarding the Scottish Government's work to embed participatory and deliberative approaches. The first is the work of the institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy working group, which I met last week to discuss how we can work together to progress and move forward the agenda of participation. Although progress has been made in some regards, there have been some significant limits to the delivery of those democratic innovations. However, we are working to progress the recommendations where we can. We have held pupils panels, citizen juries and lived experience panels. Work is under way across Government to build capacity, capability and the skills of Scottish Government civil servants through the development of guidance, training and procurement frameworks for our colleagues. We are not as far advanced in progressing the recommendation to create a centralised team with the authority to co-ordinate participatory work in Scottish Government, but I continue to explore that and work with my officials on it. I will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Scottish Government and the working group to progress its key recommendations and uphold Scotland's commitments to deliberative democracy.

The second issue that the committee has raised is the payment of participants. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government has published guidance on paying participants' expenses and compensating them for their time. Scottish Government officials have been in conversation with United Kingdom Government officials on whether payments for involvement in research or public participation interact with benefit entitlements. Understandably, that is of great concern for stakeholders and members of the public, and I am grateful to the committee for identifying that as an issue.

Unfortunately, at this stage, a shared understanding with the Department for Work and Pensions on the issue has not yet been reached.

We remain concerned that restricting benefit claimants to voucher payments communicates a lack of trust and risks discrimination. We will continue to raise those concerns with the DWP and hope to be able to resolve them.

I very much look forward to hearing from other participants in today's debate. I am encouraged by the ambition and forward thinking that I see in the proposals that the committee has put forward. As is pointed to throughout the report—and as I know from my experiences as Minister for Parliamentary Business and co-chair of the Open Government Partnership steering group—this work is part of what Dr Marc Geddes would describe as a wider ecosystem, so it cannot be done in isolation or with tools alone. Cultural, behavioural and structural changes need to take place in collaboration and partnership between Governments, Parliaments and civil society. This work is continuing to take us further forward in helping more people in Scotland realise the power and importance of their voice and the impact that they can have on the decisions that affect them.

15:11

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):

As a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, I thank all those who participated in the committee's review of the embedding of deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament. Particular thanks go to the members of the public who took part in the Parliament's people's panels and to the clerks who supported the committee in its work and in the production of the report.

It would be worth Parliament's while to reflect closely on the wider issues that are alluded to throughout the report, notably the issues of the erosion of public trust and a feeling of disenfranchisement in our political processes and institutions.

The first point of the report notes that, when this Parliament was established, one of the founding principles that the consultative steering group on the Scottish Parliament set out was that

"the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation".

The second point of the report highlights the warning from the 2017 commission on parliamentary reform, which stated that

"Failing to engage meaningfully with citizens can lead to dissatisfaction with democracy and a lack of trust in the decision takers."

The stark reality is that, in Scotland, public trust in our politicians is at an all-time low. The "Life in the UK 2024 Scotland" report gave Scotland a

democratic wellbeing score of just 39 out of 100. The findings included the fact that 63 per cent of people disagreed that they could influence decisions that affected Scotland. I wonder what percentage that would be for members of the Scottish Parliament.

Stephen Kerr: Mr Golden mentioned the 2017 commission and the statistics on Scots who feel that they cannot influence this Parliament. However, if I am correct, the 2017 commission made a number of really straightforward, low-hanging-fruit recommendations on how this Parliament might be reformed. To my knowledge, none of them was taken up. It was an excellent report, and nothing was done about it.

If parliamentarians and other people who sit on commissions cannot effect change in this Parliament, it is no wonder that ordinary Scots feel that they cannot influence it. Does the member agree?

Maurice Golden: Some of the recommendations were taken on board but, to be honest, they were largely niche and limited in their nature. Ultimately, in order to build trust, we need to go far further, far faster.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Similar to what was just said, does Maurice Golden agree that, although recommendations and formal consideration are important, a lot of the challenges that we face relate to the broader context and style of our politics, and that we need to think about how we address participation in that regard?

Maurice Golden: I will come on to the culture that is developing, which is quite concerning for our society and our politics. Members need only look at some of the language that is used routinely in press releases to share—I hope—my fear about the direction of travel.

It is easy to blame external factors for the dissatisfaction. However, that is too convenient, because it ignores our responsibility as elected representatives to promote and protect the public's trust in our democracy.

After 14 years in government, the UK Conservative Party—for a number of reasons—lost the trust and support of the electorate and was handed a resounding defeat in last year's general election. The electorate handed power to the UK Labour Party but, in less than a year, it has had what can only be described as one of the most spectacular falls from grace in recent political history, with the polls now showing that the public's confidence in it has evaporated.

For the Scottish National Party's part, its mission to separate the UK has led to deep rifts in Scottish society. At the same time, confidence in

Holyrood has been undermined by a series of policy failures in areas such as our education system, net zero targets, our health service and antisocial behaviour—the list goes on. I could easily be accused of political bias in calling out the failings of the Scottish Government, but the crux of the matter is that the public are aware of those issues—they see them every day in their communities and in schools and hospitals.

The public also see their elected leaders of all colours playing the spin game and being completely unwilling to put their hands up and take responsibility for any of what has happened. Instead, they tell the public that they have got it all wrong, that things are not really that bad or that the problems that exist are actually someone else's fault. Again, the public can see right through that, and they are fed up with the spin, the false promises, the half-truths, the gaslighting and the shifting of blame.

Where does that leave us? If the doorstep activists from all parties are to be believed, Scottish politics may be facing a seismic event this Thursday. Whether that is a small tremor or a political earthquake, the ramifications will be felt by all the major political parties in Scotland and beyond. When that happens, the political class may be better served by a period of self-reflection in which it asks itself why that has happened and searches for the answers internally. However, a moment of self-reflection may mean that it will need to address some hard truths.

To go back to the point of this debate, deliberative democracy is characterised in the report as

“an approach to democratic participation that allows members of the public to engage in inclusive, respectful, reasoned and informed discussion and debate on significant issues.”

According to the report,

“Decision making is informed by this deliberation.”

This parliamentary session, the focus has been on utilising people's panels that have been focused on policies on climate change and drug deaths. I welcome that approach and would like it to be expanded, which I hope that the Parliament will agree to. In addition, I would welcome the expansion of people's panels to involvement in budget allocation processes. Such panels are already used at Mearns Castle high school for classroom resources and by Angus Council in the design of play parks, with children being the key decision makers in both examples.

However, I sound a note of caution on people's panels. Even when the Government accepts recommendations, that does not mean that the desired outcome will be met, as we have seen with the climate change people's panel.

That brings me back to the central point of trust. If we are serious about embedding deliberative democracy throughout the Scottish Parliament, Scotland's elected representatives should reflect carefully on the state of politics right now. We must start listening to the concerns of the electorate, engaging them in a meaningful way and, most important, being honest with them. If we want members of the public to engage in inclusive, respectful debate, maybe politicians should try a bit harder to do the same.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Martin Whitfield, who has a similarly generous seven minutes.

15:20

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I am very grateful, Deputy Presiding Officer.

It is a pleasure to follow Maurice Golden's comments on where we are right now. In some senses, he went beyond the point of today's debate, but he gave some fascinating insights. However, I think that it is only fair that we hear the end of the part of the commission on parliamentary reform's report that Mr Golden was quoting. It went on to say:

"Effective engagement, particularly using more deliberative methods, can improve transparency and policy making by bringing different perspectives, knowledge and skills to the scrutiny process."

Interestingly, that second part very much encompasses the excellent work of the committee. I pass on my thanks to the convener and to the committee and those who supported it for what has been a fascinating journey on deliberative democracy over this session of Parliament. Indeed, the convener will admit that he has been on a journey as to the validity of deliberative democracy.

It speaks to one of the strengths of this session of Parliament that people have been able to change their minds on certain things. On the issue of trust, which was mentioned earlier, I note that the ability for people to change their minds and for that change to be accepted because the evidence now points in a different direction is a very important, empathetic element of being a politician. The participation of citizens in deliberative democracy, as articulated in the blueprint, is an opportunity to show that.

My intervention on the convener was about the importance of the questions that are put, which is one of the fundamental challenges. Where we have asked too much or have asked a question about a different problem, deliberative democracy does not produce an answer. When we pose a problem that we do not have an answer to and on which there is not an agreed or entrenched

position, our citizens—those who are responsible for sending us here in a variety of ways—are given the opportunity to truly influence the really important part: the thinking that goes on afterwards as to what the solution is. It might not be the solution that the citizens assembly comes up with, and there is nothing wrong with that. It might be only part of the solution. It might even lead to our recognising that there are unknowns that we were unaware of.

All the post-scrutiny work that has been done with the panels that we have had shows us something about their involvement. When a panel is properly engaged, with a proper question, proper framing, proper support and a response at the end—even if it is one of disagreement—people take satisfaction from their participation, which allows them to give up their time over three or four weekends or whatever it is. More important, it brings them closer to their Scottish Parliament.

I had some concerns about something that the Minister for Parliamentary Business mentioned in discussing the Scottish Government's point of view. I will be critical on this point. The most disappointing results from citizens assemblies that we have seen are perhaps from those that were started by and operated through the Scottish Government rather than the Scottish Parliament.

However, this is a learning exercise for everyone in Scotland. The debate is probably not the place for a discussion of where responsibility for the vehicle should lie. Should it lie with the Parliament, where the Scottish Government could come and pose a framed question or a problem, or should it lie with a lot of different people? Experiences of differently run, supported and articulated citizens assemblies show that we run the risk of damaging the concept to the point at which everyone will say, "Oh, it's just another citizens assembly." That would be disappointing. Perhaps that is a topic for the next session of Parliament.

I recognise the points in the blueprint and accept almost all of them. The principles for topic selection, for delivering people's panels and for committee engagement are massively important. However, I am concerned that decisions might rest with the Conveners Group. We do not know what that group will look like—or if there will be such a committee—in the next session. I do not think that that in any way alters the proposal, but it is, perhaps, a different vehicle.

That allows me to talk about the inquiry that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, which I have the privilege to convene, is undertaking at the moment on how we improve the culture on committees. One of the interesting things that I have read about and talked about to members of this chamber who have interacted

with citizens assemblies—this is why I pointed to the convener’s journey—is the effect of talking to members of the public who have taken part in the assemblies. That has been fundamentally moving for those MSPs who have had the opportunity to do it. They have heard from people across Scotland. Some of them represent lived-experience groups; most importantly, however, MSPs heard from people in general, who, I hope, vote in elections and who took the time to come forward. The interaction of those people with elected members has been of fundamental importance.

A quote from Frédéric Vandenberghe encompasses one of the challenges that we have, although where he uses the term “Government”, I think that the term “Parliament” might be better. He said:

“government is legitimate not so much because it represents the ‘general will’, but because its policies are, ideally and counterfactually, the result of the public deliberation of all who are concerned by the decision”.

I recall the thoughts of J P Mackintosh, the former MP for Berwick and East Lothian, who talked succinctly about decision making resting as close to the people whom it affects as possible.

In the next session, I hope that citizens assemblies consider both post-legislative and pre-legislative scrutiny. That would allow us to frame questions around what we want out of a piece of legislation and whether that legislation has been successful. It would entrust the investigation of a piece of legislation to the people whom that legislation potentially affects, or has affected. With support, they would report back on the reality of decisions. It might not be necessary to have those assemblies look at entire pieces of legislation; as has happened with certain committees, they could consider just one small part.

Post-legislative scrutiny in particular is something that we need to do better. We talk a lot about achieving across the Parliament, but we need to see the fruits that are borne. Pre-legislative scrutiny might prevent some of the substantially elongated stage 2 sessions that we have seen, because we would know what the legislation was seeking to achieve.

I look forward whole-heartedly to members’ contributions on the blueprint. With the exception of the recommendations concerning the Conveners Group, I fully support the proposed blueprint and its iterative nature; it is conservative in nature with its recommendation of four panels. I also support the request, from this Parliament to the next, to review the success or otherwise of the blueprint, and to keep building on it.

15:28

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland)

(Green): I thank and pay tribute to all the people who have taken part in the people’s panels and the other participatory and deliberative processes that the Scottish Parliament has undertaken so far. I also thank all those in our wonderful participation and communities team, who made those processes possible. I am also grateful to the members, clerks and researchers of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for their considered report and for their endorsement of people’s panels and the value that deliberative processes have for our democracy.

Today I speak not just of processes and policy but of people, because at the heart of democracy—true democracy—are the people it serves. It is long past time for our Parliament not only to speak to the people of Scotland, but to speak with them, and to listen to them and enable them to help us to shape all our futures.

The Scottish Greens have always believed that democracy must be participatory, deliberative and just. That belief in grass-roots democracy is one of our core principles, along with ecological wisdom, social justice and non-violence. Those are not abstract ideals but living commitments to transformation. That transformation begins with trust.

None of us can pretend that trust in politics is strong right now—in fact, it is crumbling. As we have heard, according to the “Life in the UK 2024 Scotland” report, only 39 out of 100 people rate Scotland’s democratic wellbeing positively; nearly two thirds of people do not believe that they can influence decisions that affect their lives; and more than a third have little or no trust in us—in MSPs. That is not a failure of the public; it is a failure of our institutions, our democratic structures and ourselves to include and listen to the people whom we seek to represent.

There is hope, however, which is found not in empty gestures or online consultations but in something deeper: deliberative democracy. Through methods such as people’s panels, citizens assemblies and co-designed processes, we can give voice to people who are so often silenced, such as those on low incomes, disabled people, young people, people of colour and those living in communities far from Holyrood.

That is not just a theoretical exercise. The people’s panels that were piloted in this session of Parliament on climate change, on drug deaths and on participation itself have shown us the power of deliberation done well, when it is informed, respectful and inclusive. The panels brought together people from across our country who deliberated with care and compassion and who

brought lived experience and local knowledge into sharp policy focus. Crucially, when asked, a majority of participants said that taking part in a people's panel improved their view of the Scottish Parliament. In a political age that is defined by cynicism, here is a model that builds hope and trust, and that builds democracy.

To realise that vision, however, we must embed it. The committee has given us a blueprint—a detailed, practical and inspiring model—to make deliberative democracy a permanent feature of our Parliament's work. The proposal is to have one panel each year, with clear criteria for topic selection, transparent processes and robust evaluation. That is not some lofty idealism; it is governance grounded in practice and principle.

We know that there will be resistance, however. Some will say that it is too expensive. I would argue that we cannot afford not to invest in democratic renewal, for all our sakes.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): On Maggie Chapman's point about panels being too expensive, £55,000 per panel is 0.054 per cent of the Scottish Parliament budget. Do you agree that that is well worth it to ensure the participation and engagement of the Scottish public?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Mr Torrance.

Maggie Chapman: I absolutely agree with Mr Torrance. It is not only worth it; it is incredible value if it gives us democratic renewal and helps us to rebuild trust in politics, which we all seek.

Jackson Carlaw: I am grateful for the point that Maggie Chapman makes. I think that Mr Torrance is correct that the cost is quite modest. A commitment to deliberative democracy seems to me to be a far better use of money than, say, the suggestion of one of my colleagues, who is retiring, that we create a Scottish house of lords. That might give people something to do, but it would be a very expensive and less democratic route than the people's panels and the deliberative democracy route that we are looking at.

Maggie Chapman: Yes—we probably all know people who would like to shuffle off into a closed room somewhere but, in the Greens, we are fundamentally opposed to any second chamber in the Scottish Parliament that is not elected or of the people. The House of Lords is undemocratic and should have no place in 21st century Scotland.

Some will say that the panels would not be representative, but these panels use sortition—random and stratified sampling—so that participants reflect Scotland's diversity, which is arguably more representative than most of what happens in this chamber and in this building more generally.

Others will argue that the process will not make a difference, but we have seen real impacts. Panel recommendations have informed debates, led to accepted Government policies and even helped to shape legislation. That is meaningful scrutiny and public power in action.

The Parliament was founded on the principle of power sharing. We committed to openness, accessibility and participation—that is the vision that was laid out in the consultative steering group's founding report. However, if we are honest, our practice has not always matched our promise, so now is the time to close that gap.

Let us be clear: the blueprint is not only about improving scrutiny, although it does that, and it is not only about better policy outcomes, although it delivers them. It is about democratic justice. It is about shifting power away from parties' rooms and towards the people of Scotland.

The issues that we face—climate breakdown, inequality, housing insecurity and drug-related harm—are too urgent and complex to be solved without the participation of the people they affect. We need their wisdom, insight and experience. That is how we move from rhetoric to reality. Deliberative democracy brings new voices to our debates, new legitimacy to our work and new energy to a Parliament that often feels disconnected from daily life. It can beautifully complement our representative democracy.

I will end where I started: with a member of the public, who was a participant in one of the people's panels. She is a woman in her 70s who had never before been involved in politics. She said:

"I thought my voice was so relevant. It feels really good to have taken part in that. People's panels would be a great thing to do for the future."

Let us honour her voice, and the voices of many others like her, with action. Let us endorse the blueprint, fund it and embed it in the standing orders. Most of all, let us continue to imagine a Parliament that is not only for the people but of the people and by the people, for a better democracy and a better Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. Members might have picked up on the hint that we have a little bit of time in hand. They will get the time back for interventions and be given a bit of latitude with their speaking time allocations.

15:36

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): We are elected to represent the people of Scotland and ensure that their voices are heard and acted on. However, as we have heard, trust in political institutions is at

a historic low. The committee's report highlighted the power of more deliberative methods, not only for improved scrutiny but improved transparency. The positive impact cannot be argued with: participants reported a more positive view of political institutions and a greater understanding of how processes work. Participants were also more willing to change their opinion when presented with new information, which is an excellent result and in contrast to the polarisation and fixed opinions that characterise much of public debate today.

I thank the convener, the committee and, in particular, Parliament staff for their work in that area. I welcome the plan set out to increase deliberative democracy in the form of people's panels, and I note suggestions for further development, such as reviewing the accessibility of deliberative processes and developing processes that work for young people.

My contribution will build on those suggestions. Participants in people's panels are randomly selected to ensure a diversity of voices and involve individuals who might not normally engage. That approach has a lot of value, but further consideration should be given to strategies to engage groups who are marginalised and might face additional barriers to access. The report acknowledges that additional support might be needed in order to allow people to engage in the panels. Additionally, there are some areas of policy and legislation that have the requisite broad impact, but in relation to which it would nonetheless be appropriate to choose a panel of people who are specifically affected by that issue, rather than have a panel that represents a broad cross-section of society.

Dr Rebecca Mason, from the Young Women's Movement, advised me that young women consistently told her that they feel excluded from politics and democratic processes in Scotland. Indeed, recent research from the Young Women's Movement found that half of young women surveyed do not trust politicians and decision makers in Scotland to advocate for their human rights, which is a really worrying statistic. When there is a lack of visibility of women in public office, young women do not feel encouraged to get involved in politics at all levels. That can have a detrimental effect on democratic wellbeing, which is compounded for young women of colour, disabled women and trans women.

I acknowledge the "positive impact", as the report describes it, of having panels in the Parliament and the ways in which that makes people feel more involved. However, going elsewhere might allow people's panels to be targeted in specific areas that face particular issues or where there is a lower level of

engagement. Measures such as the travelling Cabinet acknowledge the importance of meeting people where they are. I attended the Parliament's 25th anniversary celebrations in Alloa, and people were absolutely delighted that the Parliament went to them. It allowed them to participate more easily, and it allowed us to see the activities that they care about locally. There are also frustrations in our rural communities, which every committee has heard about. Going to them signals a commitment to hearing them and understanding the issues that they face. It also lifts the barriers of cost and difficulty in accessing public transport and childcare.

The Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament and other organisations are already doing excellent work generating a rural movement. Youth local action groups across Scotland are mobilising young people and building engagement. Could people's panels be designed in collaboration with these movements, to work with and contribute to existing networks? As the Young Women's Movement report, "The Status of Young Women in Scotland 2024-25: Gender Justice and Young Women's Human Rights" says,

"Time alone does not drive progress."

Real progress towards equality, including equal access and influence over policy decisions, needs active effort.

I ask the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee to consider those additional barriers in the next phase of its work. I also think that the committee possibly needs to consider its own gender balance. The Young Women's Movement reports that, in 2018, young women overwhelmingly called for more opportunities to engage in politics. Now, in 2025, they feel that, even if they had opportunities to engage, they would not have the power to effect change. This is an opportunity for us to show them otherwise, to show them that their voices and their experiences matter and to show them that we are listening.

15:42

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow Evelyn Tweed. She hit a nerve—certainly in my case—when she talked about members of the Parliament being prepared to change their mind when presented with evidence. If there was more evidence-led scrutiny in the Parliament, we would have an enriched Parliament and the people of Scotland would recognise that.

I begin by paying tribute to Jackson Carlaw, who is undoubtedly one of our finest parliamentarians. I can see him making fun of the compliment that I have just paid him. We can have a vote later as to whether I am right—I think that I am. The work of

his committee, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, is the very model of the engagement that Evelyn Tweed talked about, because to lodge a petition in the Parliament you need only one signatory. A young fellow approached me at the weekend, asking, “How do I make a petition to the Scottish Parliament?”, and I felt great pride in saying that all that he had to do was go to the web page. He asked how many signatures he needed, and I said, “You just need one—just you—and your petition will be taken seriously, because we have a committee that is dedicated to that.”

That is the level of engagement that we should model throughout the Parliament with regard to our accessibility by the people of Scotland, because we should be in no doubt that, although the blueprint for participation report is a serious piece of work and one that seeks to respond to the problem that we have all identified and are talking about, there is a deep and growing disconnect between the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland.

This institution is 25 years old and we are facing critical days, weeks, months and years ahead in relation to whether we will be found wanting as an institution—and as representatives and members of this institution—in the eyes of the people of Scotland in relation to a word that I do not think has been used so far in this debate, namely “relevance”—our relevance. I am really concerned about the idea that we use these tools, which are undoubtedly there and which can be useful, as a deflection from the work that we should be doing as members of the Scottish Parliament.

The work of scrutiny should not be left to an assemblage of 25 members of the public—that work should be our meat and drink in the Parliament, and I think that we can do better at it. We need, collectively, to up our game when it comes to scrutiny, particularly of the Scottish Government.

Ben Macpherson: Stephen Kerr makes some important points, but scrutiny is a broad word and can be interpreted in different ways. One of the shop windows to the Parliament, shall we say, that most people see is First Minister’s question time. Do you think that FMQs, as both a place for scrutiny and a mechanism for engagement with our democracy, should change?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Stephen Kerr: I do, and Ben Macpherson tempts me now to completely set aside anything that I had prepared for my speech to talk about the very many ways in which our Parliament could be improved. There are some simple things that we

could do to make our Parliament more watchable, more topical and more relevant.

However, I wish to return to the blueprint for participation. Its intention is clear—

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: Do I have the luxury of some time this afternoon, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have a lot of luxury, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Oh! Then I will take every intervention.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Stephen Kerr for taking the intervention, and I am very tempted to return the style of intervention that he uses so often, but I will refrain from doing that.

One of the developments that I am concerned about is that citizens panels may become solely a tool to improve the reputation of this place and of politicians. We should perhaps return to the fact that what citizens panels produce invariably turns out to be invaluable in the decision-making process. We may well hope that citizens panels would improve a lot of other things, but, in reality, as a tool for solving what is frequently a very troublesome question, they invariably work, and they come up with authoritative ideas that we can develop. Does the member agree with that?

Stephen Kerr: I agree with my friend that people’s panels are, no doubt, along with a plethora of different tools that are available to our Parliament, an interesting way of engaging with and deliberating on policy and so on. I get that.

However, my fear is that we frustrate the members of the public who engage with the Parliament because, although the member paints a very positive picture of the output of people’s panels, I am not entirely sure that that is representative of the experience that people have had with such panels in this Parliament. People have undoubtedly engaged at a level at which their words, their counsel and their wisdom have been very useful, but that has not always been taken up as evidence when we have come to deliberations on policy—

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackson Carlaw: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Martin Whitfield: Take the convener’s intervention.

Stephen Kerr: I will take Martin Whitfield’s intervention first, and then I will be happy to take the intervention.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful. I reiterate the point that the evidence from those who participated in the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee panels, in particular, and in other committee panels has shown that there is overwhelming support for the process, even when some of their ideas could not be taken forward. The panels were the completion of the loop—they were referred back to as part of what was happening. That was slightly lacking from the Scottish Government panel, but the evidence from the panel participants who have taken part in the survey has shown that there is a very positive response.

Stephen Kerr: I have absolutely no doubt that there has been a positive response from the participants—that is not what I am saying. I am talking about how responsive this Parliament is in general to the presentation of evidence, however that evidence comes to it.

When it comes to scrutiny, whether it is pre-legislative or even, occasionally, post-legislative—if we ever do any post-legislative scrutiny—the evidence is not entirely acted on. That is a failure of Parliament and of the Government.

I am happy to give way to the convener of the committee.

Jackson Carlaw: I make a similar point to the one that Martin Whitfield made. Whether we were in Dublin or in Paris, engaging with people in other countries or with the pilot panels that we have run here, the committee found that those who participate will accept that their ideas may not be taken forward—because that is for Parliament to decide—as long as people tell them that that is the case and why. The great cynicism and lack of trust in the process arises when people give a lot of time and effort to the process of making recommendations but are then left high and dry and never hear anything more about it. They wonder what the purpose and value of their contribution was. If we communicate back to them, whether we say yes or no, they will accept that.

Stephen Kerr: I really appreciate that intervention and the light that Jackson Carlaw sheds on the issue.

My basic premise, I am afraid, is that the Parliament's problem is not a lack of tools for participation but a lack of seriousness—a failure to take itself seriously as an institution of scrutiny and accountability.

Just look around the chamber this afternoon or on any of the occasions—we have had a few recently—when there has been an opportunity for members to stand up and talk to each other here about how we can be a better Parliament for the people of Scotland. Just look around you now: there is hardly anybody here, and most of the

members who are here have been sent here by their chief whip. That is the reality.

We must take the responsibility that we have more seriously, and no process or innovation, and no panel or forum, can substitute for a Parliament that has forgotten how to hold power to account. We must not allow MSPs or Government to use that or any other tool to shift responsibility or decision making elsewhere. We must not allow Government to circumvent the democratic Parliament of Scotland by creating hand-picked deliberative bodies.

Of course deliberation matters, but so do representation and accountability.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I am always happy to give way to the minister.

Jamie Hepburn: The member talks about the Government hand picking panels, but this is about Parliament creating the panels. The Government is not selecting participants at all. What on earth is he talking about?

Stephen Kerr: I think that the minister needs to go back and listen to what I actually said—I have it written down here. I am talking about the fact that we should not use these consultative tools to deflect from the work that rightly belongs on the shoulders of highly paid members of the Parliament—[*Interruption.*—]—and even more highly paid ministers: the minister is remonstrating with himself. Let us speak truthfully—

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way? I am happy to remonstrate with him.

Stephen Kerr: I would be very happy to give way to the minister.

Jamie Hepburn: My remonstrations are with the member, not myself. He read out part of what he said, but he did not continue to address the point that I made. He was talking about the Government selecting participants to take part in the panels, but the Government did not do that; Parliament did that, and that is the point.

Stephen Kerr: The good thing about parliamentary speeches is that it is the speaker who gets to decide what he has said and what he meant.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I have listened very carefully to the debate so far, and I have listened to Mr Kerr's comments. My point to Mr Kerr is that, following his logic, there is surely a responsibility on every member of the Parliament to act appropriately and, to use his word, take the Parliament seriously. There have been many occasions over the past number of months, such as Thursday afternoons, when many MSPs from some parties have left early to go

home. I am one of the ones who are here on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and I would argue that every member should be in the Parliament, whether they take their place online or in the chamber, and actually participate in its work.

Stephen Kerr: Stuart McMillan makes a very good point, and I cannot really add to what he has said. This is supposed to be a full-time job—and in the way that many members pursue it, it is, indeed, a full-time job.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I hear what Stuart McMillan says. If people are checking out early to go home, that is problematic. However, many members across the chamber represent constituencies that are far away from Edinburgh, where genuine local democracy is taking place and constituents expect us to be—taking the Parliament to them, as Evelyn Tweed said. That is also part of the job of an MSP. I am worried by the suggestion that remote proceedings are being used improperly, as many members use that option to do a better job.

Stephen Kerr: Oliver Mundell makes his point really well. I am not going to speak for Stuart McMillan, but he makes the valid point that those who are elected to this place ought to do the work. I take the point that Oliver Mundell is making—he is obviously making a very valid point about distances and so forth—but the Parliament meets in the chamber for very few hours in a week.

Here we are again on a Tuesday afternoon—as Jackson Carlaw said, it is a beautiful sunny day outside—and only a few of us are gathered together to talk about the workings of the Parliament. Most of our colleagues are not here. We could be discussing many other things in the time that we are here; indeed, we could expand the hours in which we sit in this chamber. We could also expand the hours that are set aside for committees. Other Parliaments meet for far longer during the week. As members will know, I am thinking of one Parliament in particular.

The majority of people in Scotland who believe that they cannot influence what happens here are a growing majority, and that should be a wake-up call for us all. The relevance of this institution matters.

I happen to believe that how Douglas Ross was treated last week was a defining moment. Listening to the points of order that he raised earlier this afternoon, I felt that, whatever one's party, the issue of his exclusion from this chamber runs very deep in the Parliament. The justifications that were offered by anonymous spokesmen of the Scottish Parliament are deeply damaging to its reputation. That applies not just to one individual, but to the Parliament itself. When the Parliament becomes a place where political sanction trumps

public accountability, it ceases to be worthy of the trust that it ought to command.

We, as individual parliamentarians and collectively, must rebuild that trust, and we must do so not with public relations exercises or flim-flam, but by changing how the Parliament works, which starts with scrutiny—serious, unflinching, independent scrutiny. When committees do that well, as the Finance and Public Administration Committee did just last week, with its redoubtable convener at the helm, things get noticed and they are recognised as things that matter. The public want to see ministers being questioned and examined and the Parliament working on their behalf.

I will conclude, because I have had a generous allocation of time, for which I am grateful.

The bottom line is that this is the moment, in this parliamentary session, for reform—real reform, which must come from within. We have work—*[Interruption.]* Well, well—members are getting ahead of themselves. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Let us listen to the member's peroration.

Stephen Kerr: Are we now to proscribe the word “reform” in this Parliament? I do not think so, because reform is exactly what our Parliament needs. *[Interruption.]* We who are here, in this Parliament, must be the ones to make that reform happen, otherwise our relevance to the people of Scotland will continue to diminish in their estimation.

Jackson Carlaw: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Given that there is a parliamentary by-election taking place this week, I am concerned that we should not bring the politics of that into our proceedings this afternoon. I am sure that that was not my friend's intention, but it would be most unfortunate if it was seen in that way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I share your conclusion, Mr Carlaw.

I call Christine Grahame, to be followed by Foyso Choudhury, for around six minutes, Ms Grahame.

15:58

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Oh, I was hoping for 15 minutes, but there we go. I wonder, Mr Carlaw, what was making your face redden during that discussion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Christine Grahame: I will return to the report. I very much welcome the debate and assure

Jackson Carlaw that I will be wearing sufficient bling tomorrow. It is not known for me not to be noticed, if that is what it takes to get a word in.

This debate is particularly pertinent and serious, given that we see less and less engagement with the democratic process. A new low was reached at the latest UK election, when just 59.7 per cent of those who were entitled to vote did so, and Labour has an overwhelming majority with just 34 per cent of that 59.7 per cent. The first-past-the-post system also distorts the voting in the UK elections. The situation with council elections is worse; sometimes, just around 25 per cent of those who are entitled to vote do so.

In passing, I say to Stephen Kerr that public engagement and accessibility is certainly better here than in Westminster. It is not perfect here, but it is a good sight better.

One looming culprit in the erosion of democratic engagement is the ever-present social media, where there is little accountability for content and where serious political issues can be, and are, reduced to a Twitter exchange. That cannot, in any shape or form, be defined as a debate. Whatever one thinks of the Beeb, it at least has to aim for journalistic standards.

I here make the pedantic distinction between misinformation and disinformation. The former is information that is inaccurate or wrong when that is not necessarily deliberate, whereas disinformation is deliberately misleading—you cannot take the teacher out of me. Let us not muddle them but, instead, call something a spade when it is one.

The report by the Parliament's Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee—what a title—takes on the tough issue of how to engage with the public at large, which is something that we have been trying to do in this establishment for many years. This Parliament particularly does that through its committees. I have convened four committees, convening justice twice and health twice, and I know how hard it can be through initial calls for evidence, and certainly through calls for oral evidence, to avoid having the usual suspects as witnesses. I do not mean that disparagingly. It is merely shorthand, and we do need to hear from chief executives of national health service boards or from the chief constable of Police Scotland, but it is difficult to hear from what one might term ordinary members of the public.

I agree that it is best and the interaction will have most import if the focus is narrow. That can be achieved through private briefings.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member accept an intervention?

Christine Grahame: Certainly, if I can just finish this particular part of my speech.

That can be achieved through private briefings, one of which I chaired when I was convener of the justice committee and we looked at the impact of the court process on victims of rape and sexual assault. It was harrowing, but it also allowed the participants to expand on the difficulties they had to overcome in giving evidence to the court. I recall one participant stating that she just wanted her day in court. She was quite taken aback when I gently corrected her and said that she did not want only her day in court but her day in court and a conviction. I gently asked her to consider whether it would be worse to have that day in court followed by a not proven or not guilty verdict. That difficult exchange could have happened only in the security of a private briefing where we could speak freely and it was a two-way street.

I will take Mr Mundell's intervention.

Oliver Mundell: I am interested in a point that the member made during an earlier intervention. I worry about the danger of participative committees becoming an alternative to having real people taking part in the committee process. They might be an easier way to do things, but I think that we need to look at how our committees gather evidence. As she says, there are good ways of doing that. I worry that our committees might become secondary and that we might lose the chance for those who are most disadvantaged to participate in our Parliament, so we should look at other processes, too.

Christine Grahame: I do not think that that is the thrust of the committee's report. Also, those difficulties are sometimes overcome by having a round-table discussion that allows the various witnesses to interact with very little intervention by members. You can sometimes get good evidence from that, although it is very difficult for the purposes of the *Official Report*. That is another method and can be part of the process.

I recall something similar to what is being suggested happening when the justice committee held a light-touch, regulated discussion in which mock criminal cases were presented to different groups. It was structured to allow each group to determine the penalty to be given to the accused who was on trial, which meant that there was a narrowly focused topic. At first, there was limited evidence about the background of the accused, and the penalties given were pretty draconian. More background information was then introduced, with the effect being that the judgments about the appropriate disposal changed and were modified. What had been black and white became, if members will forgive me, shades of grey—not 50, but shades of grey. I thought that that exercise was successful because it had a

narrow focus and because there was detailed discussion about what was appropriate in each case, which led to complex, not simple, judgments.

The report supports that, saying in paragraph 65 that

“Participants in deliberative processes tend to come out knowing more about the topic and are willing to revise their opinions in light of new information and opportunities to deliberate together. This is in striking contrast to much current public debate, which tends towards polarisation, fixed opinions and misinformation.”

I refer members back to the example that I gave from many years ago of the justice committee looking at the penalties for various crimes.

I also caution against giving members of the public an expectation that their views might have greater or, indeed, lesser value than those of their elected representatives, which would undermine people’s trust even more. It reminds me of the perceived effects of victim impact statements, which people think will do far more than they actually do—they will not change the conviction that is given at the end of a trial. Therefore, we must make it clear exactly what that the panel process is and is not for.

Martin Whitfield: The issue goes back to formulating and framing the question. It is about understanding what that group of people is being asked to do and what the potential effect could be, then taking feedback on what the effect was. It is also about being very open with group members about their expectations, and completing the process by telling them what has happened is important, too.

Christine Grahame: Indeed, and that relates to what Oliver Mundell said about the work of panels not being a substitute for the formal processes of Parliament.

I refer members to paragraph 66 of the committee’s report, which says:

“While deliberative democracy, and participation more generally, are important tools to support the work of the Parliament, we agree ... that ‘public participation will not be suitable for or resolve every issue, and will be one of many evidence sources used to make decisions. In these situations, credibility and trust can be maintained by being open and transparent about how decisions are made.’”

That underlines the importance of making clear exactly what the panel is for. The elements that public participation brings out might be valuable, or they might not, but it certainly means that people can genuinely be part of a process of involvement.

I agree with members who have said that we must improve engagement with the wider public, particularly through our work on committees. I think that people’s panels are a modest

improvement, which I support. That is not a criticism—I am simply being realistic. I will give an example of what we could do. Personally, I hold my surgeries in Tesco, with my messages and my trolley at my side, right next to customer services. I hope that, in a small way, that reduces barriers to meeting me as a politician—Ah’m jist a wumman out wi ma shopping. That small change in my approach has helped people to engage with me. If that could be expanded so that people were generally less intimidated by politicians and politics, we might get even more value from the participation process.

16:07

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I join other members in thanking the clerks and parliamentary staff who assisted with the work on people’s panels, including those who supported their operation. I also thank the researchers who completed the evaluation of the people’s panels that were held during this session.

We often hear about the bubble that supposedly surrounds Holyrood, whereby members of the public feel disconnected from decisions made on their behalf that affect their lives and priorities. That disconnect is well documented, with polling showing that people’s trust in politics and politicians is falling. Through the committee’s work on improving participation, we have endeavoured to break down those barriers and move towards having a system that builds understanding.

When the subject was last brought to the chamber in 2023, after the committee published its report on public participation, one recommendation was for the launch of two people’s panels. Two such panels have now been completed: one on drug harm and deaths and the other on post-legislative scrutiny of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009.

Looking at the results of the work of both panels, we can see that the deliberative approach that the committee recommended has been successful in informing both the Government and the Parliament, and has been welcomed by those who took part in the panels. The Scottish Government accepted 18 of the 19 recommendations made by the people’s panel on drug harm and deaths. Its work also informed the questioning of ministers, and it was praised by members and also in its evaluation. The recommendations of the people’s panel on climate change were accepted by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and will be implemented in the Scottish Government’s strategy.

The evaluation of the people’s panel shows that those who took part not only gained knowledge of major issues that Scotland faces but had their

estimation improved of the Scottish Parliament and its work. Seventy-five per cent reported that they would get involved in the work of the Parliament in the future—including one woman who described herself as “a serial non recycler” saying that she was seriously considering setting up a climate action group in her community. That is welcome, of course, and, if our target is to improve trust and participation in politics, can be considered a success. However, participants reported only a moderate level of confidence in the political impact of the panel.

We should be clear that the success of deliberative democracy depends on the ability of Parliament and Government to seriously listen and put recommendations into action. If the public believe that they are completing a pointless exercise, the results will be worse and the benefit lessened, leaving us back at square 1. That is why I welcome the clause in the blueprint for participation that recommends that committees seek responses from the Scottish Government and commit to

“giving a considered and reasoned response”

to all the panel’s recommendations.

That brings me to my final point, which is about tracking the impact of people’s panels. It is important that participants are well informed of the workings of the Scottish Parliament and about how their recommendations may be implemented. If the work is continued in session 7, improving the tracking of impacts in the long and short term could help to inform future practice on the impact of expectation of participants, and allow for consistent readjustment of the deliberation process.

Ultimately, the power to rebuild trust in politics relies on us. It relies on MSPs being out and visible in our communities, listening to people’s concerns. People’s panels are not a panacea for rebuilding trust in politics or solving complex issues. However, the evaluation of both panels that have completed this session shows that they have a serious role to play in informing scrutiny and delivering improved public participation. I hope that members agree that we should look to take that further next session by embedding people’s panels into the work of the Parliament and building a new process of deliberation with the people of Scotland at its heart.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ben Macpherson is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:13

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): When the first speaker in this

important debate talked, on behalf of the committee, about historical examples, it took me back to last year, when I was in Iceland at the Althing in Thingvellir—an important place in the countryside, between two volcanic plates, where, from 930 AD, the oldest Parliament sat. However, that was not a Parliament with the sense of equality that we now have. The franchise was not as it is; human rights were not as they are; and engagement was not as it is now. Whether we are thinking back to that time in Iceland or about ancient Greece, as I cited earlier, or walking around the old town here in Edinburgh and thinking about the progress that we have made in our country, what a remarkable journey we have been on. How precious that is. Such progress has been made. There is much to be positive about.

I think back to being a child, when this Parliament was begun. It started off with the ethos of being more accessible and engaged with the public, and easier to access and participate in than other examples. There is much to commend in that regard, thanks to the staff of the Parliament who work to create greater engagement, and to the approach that is taken.

The clearest example that I always go back to is from 2 July 2016, which was the day of the first formal opening of Parliament that I took part in as an MSP. I remember very well that the late Queen addressed us from where the Presiding Officer is sitting now, and that, an hour or two later, there were children sitting in that seat. The fact that that happened at the official opening of the Parliament symbolised just how accessible this chamber is—we opened the doors and let the people in.

Much good has been done. The work of the people’s panels that is summarised in the report, and the propositions in the blueprint, speak well to that. I am also thinking of examples of what we as a Parliament have mandated the Government to do. The experience panels of Social Security Scotland have provided invaluable insights in the creation of our new social security system, utilising the powers of the Scotland Act 2016.

Other members have talked about the importance of us going into the community and being accessible, whether that is in the supermarket, doing our surgeries, being out and about attending community events, supporting organisations, or doing wider engagement. That is the work of politics just as much as what happens in here. The Scottish Parliament has a lot to be proud of in that space. The blueprint, and the proposed extra engagement of people’s panels, will help with that.

It is also about communicating in a way that is helpful for creating greater engagement. I have spoken before in the Parliament of what I call the “Leith Walk test”, which is where if you cannot

explain something quickly in passing to someone on Leith Walk, your communication is not effective enough. When you are dealing with the complexity of reserved powers, devolved powers and local authority powers, that is sometimes difficult. We can improve things, but we have done some things well. Next time you are the bus stop in Leith—I should maybe upgrade that to tram stop now—ask yourself, “Could I explain the policy that we’re talking about in those terms?”

In many ways, we do participation well here in the Scottish Parliament. However, I will conclude by touching on how we could do it better, which will connect with what a lot of other colleagues have said. Although we have reminders in the chamber architecture of those whom we represent, when I am in here but not speaking, I often turn my head to look behind me, at the public gallery. Covid had a negative effect for us in here, because we did not have people up there enough during the pandemic years, although that was understandable. We maybe did not turn our heads quite as often as we should have.

I look up at the public gallery during FMQs in particular. I have had concerns, since way before I was elected, that although FMQs is the most prominent shop window for our Parliament, it does not show us at our best. It is about the amplification of conflict, which is unnecessary, and the spin game, as another speaker put it. It is about giving more consideration to what is being thought up there, in the press gallery, than to what is being thought up there, in the public gallery. We have to improve that, given the seriousness of the times, as others have articulated. However, no matter how much we are all working hard to do good engagement, if our constituents are seeing only a snapshot of their democracy that shows politicians taking lumps out of each other for party-political gain, that does not show us at our best.

Stephen Kerr: As usual, Ben Macpherson is making a very thoughtful speech. However, the bigger concern, which I share with him and other members, is how few people actually watch any of this chamber’s proceedings. Viewership is decreasing, so the bigger issue that we need to tackle is the relevance, topicality and viewability—if that is a word—of this Parliament.

Ben Macpherson: That is a good intervention, and I am grateful for it, because it allows me to talk about something that I wanted to mention. What does grip people? All my experience outside of this Parliament tells me that what people want from their politicians is genuine collaboration, care for those whom they represent, a sense of duty to the public interest, and for them not to play the political game of getting one over on the other party, person or idea. The issues that we face are serious, and the public know that.

The point has rightly been made about how much people see of what happens in the Parliament. Most people do not tune in for some of our best work, whether that is at committee or in certain debates in the chamber, but see only a clip on the evening news. The way that proceedings are structured, including the culture of how First Minister’s question times are organised and the routines and habits that have been set, is not representative of what most people want, which is for their politicians to be serious and constructive, work together, achieve things, determine solutions and then deliver them.

Much more could be achieved—in how we present our democracy and engage people with it—if we did things slightly differently in the proceedings that most people watch. If members want to see that people think that the way that we do things at the moment is wrong, they should just turn around to look at the young people and other folk in the public gallery. Members should speak to their constituents and ask them whether we could do the way that we debate things better. Most of the time, they will say yes, and those are the answers that we need to look for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to the closing speeches, and there is no time left in hand. I call Maggie Chapman to speak for up to six minutes.

16:22

Maggie Chapman: Donkeys years ago, during my first term as an Edinburgh councillor, I was proud to be the first elected representative to bring in a participatory budgeting project—the Leith decides initiative. It became possible only because of the dedication and determination of a council officer, and it continues to this day in the form of the Leith chooses initiative.

I remember making the case for giving members of the public the power to choose how a small amount of money should be spent in their area. That required an acknowledgement that we as politicians should pass on some of our power to the people whom we represent.

I also remember those who were very resistant to that. They were wary of the time and resources that it took to organise, they were worried about losing control of decision making and they were not sure about trusting our citizens with what was a very small amount of power. They asked, “What if they make the wrong decisions?” Of course, we politicians never make wrong decisions.

As someone who has sought different ways to include people in our decision making, I am pleased to have been part of this debate. If we truly believe that deliberative democracy strengthens scrutiny, renews trust and revitalises

participation, we must be bold enough to ask what more we can do.

Deliberation cannot be a bolt-on or something that happens only when committees choose to use it; it must become part of the fabric of how this Parliament listens, learns and leads. That means going further. We must reimagine where ideas come from. Too often, the agenda is set from the top—from Government priorities, committee timetables or legislative calendars—but deliberative democracy offers us the opportunity to turn that on its head.

Imagine a standing citizens assembly—a permanent, resourced body of everyday Scots that is reflective of our communities and has the power to set, as well as respond to, priorities. Such an assembly would not just advise the Parliament; it could identify areas that require urgent attention, issues that have not yet reached our radar, gaps in policy and deep-rooted structural problems that our current systems gloss over. Whether it is food insecurity, youth mental health or the democratic deficit in local government, communities know where the pain points are—we should create space for them to tell us.

However, we must also always remember that deliberation is not a destination; it is a method and an approach. There must always be what I would call an off-ramp—a clear pathway from conversation to change. We cannot just hold a panel, publish a report and then walk away; that would be performative, and our people deserve better.

Every deliberative process must end not with thanks but with action: clear commitments, transparent responses and, perhaps most critically, mechanisms for feedback, so that participants know how their voices were heard and what came of their contributions, as Jackson Carlaw indicated earlier.

That is particularly important if we want deliberation to be widely available. If people do not see any outcomes, they will disengage. If only a few privileged topics get deliberative space, we will entrench inequality. The process must be accessible to rural communities, marginalised groups, disabled people and migrants—those who are traditionally excluded from political spaces. To achieve that, we must embed elements of deliberation across more of the Parliament's work. Not every issue needs a full citizens panel, but we can make our processes more deliberative and participatory across the board.

Imagine committee inquiries that begin not just with scoping sessions among MSPs but with co-designed workshops involving people with lived experience. Imagine evidence sessions that include structured public dialogue facilitated by

trained staff. Imagine brief micro-panels, if you like, of five or six people who are randomly selected but supported to offer reflections before or after committee scrutiny. Those would be small but meaningful steps.

We can also think about deliberative tools in education. Schools, youth groups and community colleges can host mini-deliberations on parliamentary issues with outcomes fed into relevant committees. That would not just be about gathering views; it would be about building democratic literacy and belonging. It would tell young people, "Your voice matters, and this Parliament is yours, too." It would say that decision-making is for everybody, not just for the handful of us who are lucky enough to be in the Parliament.

We must also support the skills and systems to deliver that well. Deliberation needs resourcing, but, more than that, it needs cultural change. It needs us, as elected members, to be open to being challenged, to listen with humility and to accept that good ideas might come from outside these walls.

I am grateful to Maurice Golden, Ben Macpherson and others for highlighting the urgent need for cultural change in the Parliament—we have work to do. We need our staff—our clerks, researchers and communications teams—to be trained, supported and trusted to design participatory processes with care and creativity.

Deliberative democracy is not about a single event; it is about shifting the centre of gravity in our politics and building a culture in which people are not passive recipients of decisions but co-creators of them. In a climate crisis, a housing crisis and a crisis of political trust, that is not a luxury but a necessity.

It is time that we built a democracy that is fit for the challenges of our time—one that is messy, inclusive, imperfect and alive. Let us not settle for anything less.

16:29

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

We have had an interesting debate today. In the lead up to the previous Scottish Parliament election, a survey by the Electoral Reform Society showed that two thirds of the people who were surveyed—that is 67 per cent—said that they had

"little or no influence over decisions that affect their local community."

That is an issue—it shows that people feel quite alienated.

Jackson Carlaw spoke about the low level of trust in politicians, which is a fact. I should be clear that I blame the politicians, particularly the political

parties, for that low level of trust. We have had a nice debate in here today, but the reality is that afterwards, the political parties will be back at it, trying to score points off each other every day. People have said that if that is the only way to reach power, that is fine, but the fact is that that approach is causing dwindling trust in politics and political parties and is damaging democracy itself.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Rowley: I will take an intervention in a second.

We need only look at some of the reporting on the by-election in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse. People are being interviewed on the doorstep and they are saying, "They all promise you the world when they are looking for your vote but, when they get into power, they don't deliver." That view is pretty common.

As Foyso Choudhury said, this place is not the only issue. Members need to be out there, so that people do not say that they only see their politicians at election time; we have to be out there, listening to and meeting groups.

As many members have said, there is a whole raft of things that we can do to try to tackle some of those issues.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention now?

Alex Rowley: It will have to be very brief, please.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Christine Grahame.

Christine Grahame: I will be extremely brief. Mr Rowley and many other members of the chamber work very hard as MSPs, as do I. They are really decent people who work for their constituents. Do you not think that the media holds some blame for the way in which we are presented given that most of us are very hard working?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, I ask members to speak through the chair.

Alex Rowley: If I get a chance, I will come on to the media.

First, the committee's report is a good report, and I have no issues or problems with it, generally. As Jackson Carlaw said, it is not a panacea, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. However, as Stephen Kerr has said, we are talking about only having four panels over four years, so between 100 and 140 people would be involved in the process. I support the proposal, but I stress its limitations.

As Christine Grahame asked earlier, who is it that we are trying to reach? Evelyn Tweed referred to the Presiding Officer's tour of the regions. I, too, attended the Alloa event that day. I found it really quite inspiring. MSPs had opportunities to talk to others and to listen to the many different issues that were being raised.

We should be trying many different things. We should be monitoring and evaluating those, and seeing what is successful and what is not.

Jackson Carlaw referred to the effectiveness of the committees. That is an issue, along with the point that Martin Whitfield raised about giving authority to the Conveners Group, as recommended in the committee's report, and whether that would be the right way forward. There is also a feeling that, if we elected the committee conveners, that would perhaps be more effective, too. There are a number of aspects that need to be looked at.

Ben Macpherson touched on a number of issues as to how we move forward. One of the Parliament's strengths that I have seen in the time that I have been here is the number of schools and pupils who visit the Parliament. Many of the pupils who have visited since I started here will have left school and will be working in different areas, but they will remember their visit. I know that a good number of MSPs in the region that I represent make an effort to meet those pupils.

The education service in this Parliament does a brilliant job. I am constantly encouraging people through local press and social media to visit. A number of months ago, I met a guy who was really interested in politics. He had not been to the Parliament. I told him to come and that I would arrange for him to visit. He responded by saying, "But I'm SNP!" I told him that that did not matter to me and asked him to come along. He had a great day and went back and told others. We should be encouraging people to come to the Parliament.

I do not have a lot of time left to make my real point. The point that I want to get across is one that was made by Professor Jim Gallacher, who said:

"Scotland is one of the most centralised nations in Europe."

Since the Scottish Parliament came into being, that centralisation has been quite incredible. If we are serious about wanting to address democracy, we have to return to the principles upon which the Scottish Parliament was set up, which held that we should have power coming down the way from Westminster, but then power should be going out the way from this place and into local authorities and communities. That has to be addressed as part of the debate.

16:35

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am glad to follow Alex Rowley's speech, because he hit the nail on the head. He is right that it has been a nice debate, but we spend too much time thinking about ourselves. As a Parliament, we have a false impression of how good we are at outward engagement. Yes, the Parliament might feel open and accessible to those who know about it and feel confident coming here to engage, and yes, it might feel open and accessible to those who are in close proximity to it, but for many people, the Parliament feels remote and distant from where and how they live.

I worry when I hear about the Leith Walk test in relation to the proposal. I am supportive of the proposal: its scale makes it worth a try, and it is worth exploring as a tool, in addition to the other things that we do. However, the Leith Walk test is problematic. Many people who we might meet on Leith Walk, or on any other wander through Scotland, already regard the Parliament as a talking shop, and I am not sure that 14-minute speeches necessarily help that—I say that in the unlikely event that people have tuned in to this debate. [*Laughter.*] By the same measure, I am not sure that listening to me will dispel that myth.

People already think that we spend a lot of time talking and not a lot of time doing. If they hear that £55,000 is going to be spent four times over, they will probably wonder whether we will be losing a few MSPs to make up the difference, since we are asking the public to do more of our job.

There is a challenge around the concept. It sounds nice. The evidence from people who have participated in the people's panels is that it works, they feel valued and the output is useful to parliamentarians. However, when only 100 or 140 people are experiencing it for themselves, many other constituents and people across Scotland will struggle to connect with the idea. I think that they will question why it is needed, why the existing committee structures do not work and why MSPs do not already communicate better with the public.

We have a big job of work to do if we want to go down this route and sell the idea to the wider population who are disengaged and uninterested. I am not sure that what is proposed will be a meeting point with Parliament that will engage or capture their interest.

I am interested in what Christine Grahame said in her intervention about other techniques that can be used.

Maurice Golden: I wonder whether the advantage of the people's panels is that their format allows people, particularly with lived experience, to contribute. That format might offer a better way of getting those views into our

democratic structures than a formal committee session, in which the witnesses might be sitting at the edge of a very large table. The panels are an interesting portal for the gaining and gleaning of lived experience.

Oliver Mundell: I was coming to that point in relation to Christine Grahame's comments. I think that there are better ways of engaging people within committees. There are some very good committee clerks and others with great experience in this building who find ways and means of doing that. I am not lucky enough to be a committee member currently, but, having been on many committees across the time that I have been in Parliament, I have seen that engagement done well.

However, it is often the MSPs who are most resistant to trying new things or doing things differently. We talk about doing things differently, engaging new approaches and following evidence-based approaches, but it is often MSPs who want to go to the usual suspects and bring in such organisations. MSPs want their moment in the sun—not literally the sun, but probably *The Sun* newspaper—giving professional witnesses a dressing down and capturing a 30-second clip for their social media. We could do more to ensure that we get the best evidence.

Christine Grahame: I have two comments. First, when we had our usual suspects, that certainly was not because of lack of effort by me, committee members and officials to have other people come in. We could not really compel people—we can, but nobody has ever used that power. Secondly, the private briefing that I referred to was very important because it allowed vulnerable people to speak off the record. They were free to say what they did. Although we could not directly refer to what they said, it was at the back of our minds when we were dealing with oral evidence in a formal capacity later.

Oliver Mundell: I had the same experience on the justice and education committees. There is a balance to be found between transparency and proper process, but we are sometimes too keen to put witnesses in front of the camera and have a formal evidence-taking process. With the expertise that exists in the Parliament, there are better ways to do that.

Despite those reservations—if members want to call them that—there is merit in proceeding with the proposal on the scale that is proposed to see how the process works in practice, to gather evidence and to see where it takes us. However, I come back to the point that I made earlier: if we are to go down that route, we have a job of work to do to explain it to the public and justify the expenditure. A figure of £55,000 per panel might seem modest to us but, to many of our

constituents, it will seem like the Parliament is spending more money on something that is not one of their core priorities.

If we are going down that route, we must ensure that we make it work. As Christine Grahame and others have said, we must ensure that the input from the public is not treated with lesser respect or as having less value than that of MSPs, and that it makes genuine changes to policy and outcomes.

16:42

Jamie Hepburn: I again thank the committee for bringing this subject to the Parliament for debate. It is important for us to consider how we can best enable participation by a wider range of people in the activities of the Parliament. I will try to pick up on as much as I can from what has been said in the debate.

I am not sure who it was from Jackson Carlaw's side who proffered the suggestion that there should be some form of Scottish second chamber in the guise of a house of lords. I can absolutely assure him that the Government has no plans to facilitate or enable the creation of a Scottish house of lords. As an aside—this speaks to our being accountable and responsive to Parliament, which Stephen Kerr is rightly concerned about—I point out that we have been charged with introducing regulations to ensure that peers of the realm cannot participate as members of the Parliament, and that work is being taken forward. I will be happy to update Parliament on that in due course.

Stephen Kerr was correct to say that any speaker gets to choose what they say, and I suppose that he is right that they also get to decide what they meant. All that I can respectfully say in response to his suggestion that the Scottish Government has somehow been involved in choosing the participants in the panels is that that is not accurate. On that, I have no idea what he meant, but at least I heard what he said.

A number of members spoke of the challenges of trust in democratic institutions and people's concerns about their ability to influence decisions that are made. Maurice Golden and Maggie Chapman said that at the outset of the debate, and Alex Rowley has just said something similar. We are not unique in that regard. It is not just the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament that suffer from that; institutions across the rest of these islands and further afield suffer from similar issues.

However, I observe that those are not insurmountable challenges, as international experience demonstrates. Let us take the case of Taiwan, for example, where trust in the Government was, at one stage, as low as 10 per cent. As a result of the Government re-engaging

with the wider population and involving it in the deliberative process through a variety of means—largely electronic and digital—trust in the Government increased to 70 per cent, which is a fairly dramatic shift that shows us what is possible.

I was about to come on to what Mr Whitfield said, so I will give way to him.

Martin Whitfield: I hope that I will pre-empt that. Does the minister share my concern that we exchange the word “Government” for the word “Parliament” far too frequently in this place, to the extent that it becomes quite a challenge to identify what and who we are talking about when it comes to the taking of decisions?

Jamie Hepburn: I am not convinced that we do that too often in this Parliament, but I recognise and understand Mr Whitfield's point, which is that there has sometimes been confusion about the delineation of responsibility.

That leads me neatly on to my response to a point that Mr Whitfield made earlier, when he raised the issue of where responsibility should lie for this area of activity. He mentioned the Scottish Government and raised some concerns about processes for the citizens assemblies that we undertook. I would be happy to engage with him to hear more about that. We had positive feedback from participants in those assemblies, which have been well remarked upon internationally. He also posited the example that we are discussing today—that of the Parliament taking forward citizens panels, and where the balance of responsibility should lie. Again, I would be happy to engage in dialogue on that.

The truth is that responsibility probably lies between the Government and the Parliament. Both have a role to play, and let us not block out the role of local government, which is responsible for many of the day-to-day issues that most directly impact people's lives. That relates to the fundamental point—which, again, was raised by Mr Whitfield—about whether the panels' purpose should be about enhancing the Parliament's reputation. By my estimation, it absolutely should not be, although I am speaking on the Government's behalf, and it is for the Parliament to determine such things. The panels should have purpose and some form of meaningful role in influencing public policy. Mr Whitfield's suggestion about panels being involved in pre or post-legislative scrutiny is interesting and could be explored further.

Maggie Chapman raised the issue of the cost of such processes. I largely agree with her point that the price that is paid is worth it in order to enable participation. However, we should not pretend that cost is not a factor. The citizens assembly model that the Government previously took forward was

a pretty expensive way to achieve the outcome of participation. I hear the point that Oliver Mundell made about the perception of the cost of the panels that the Parliament might take forward. Compared with the process that we took forward previously, the two latest panels were certainly more cost effective. Indeed, we are now helping to fund the citizens assembly in Dunfermline for £50,000, which is a much lower cost. Cost must be a factor, but it is not beyond us to develop a process by which meaningful participation can best be achieved, to go back to the point about the purpose of such processes.

Evelyn Tweed rightly mentioned the need to consider how we can involve those who might be marginalised as a result of disability, socioeconomic status or, as Mr Mundell mentioned, being further afield from the Parliament. Therefore, as well as the question of purpose, inclusivity issues can be considered and balanced against how we pay for such processes. It is not beyond us to consider how we do that properly.

Maurice Golden: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I think that I have eight minutes in total, so I do not have time to give way to Mr Golden; otherwise, I would have been delighted to.

I will conclude by reflecting on Ben Macpherson's contribution. First of all, I very much enjoyed his notion of the Leith Walk litmus test. I think that we could all apply that to our own constituencies in different ways, perhaps even by going to Tesco, which Christine Grahame mentioned. Irrespective of the case for reform of our processes, Ben Macpherson reminded us of the founding principles of this institution, which include accessibility. I do not think that we should beat ourselves up about that, because I think that we do it fairly well, but I suppose that the purpose of the debate is to remind ourselves that we can always seek to do better.

In that regard, I very much welcome the fact that the committee produced its report and that we have had this debate. Of course, the Government will be happy to engage with the Parliament in any way that it can to ensure that we continue to refine and improve our processes for deliberation and public participation.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call David Torrance to wind up the debate on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

15:42

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank all my colleagues who have participated in the

debate. The work of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on citizen participation has been so long running that only the convener and I have lasted long enough on the committee to see it through from the start—although I am not going as far back as Jackson Carlaw did today, when he referred to ancient Greece. Having been on the committee since the start of this work, it has been a pleasure to be here this afternoon and to listen to a debate that, in many ways, is the culmination of our work.

Before I begin, I want to share some comments about the process from people who took part in the people's panels. From the evaluation reports, we know that the vast majority of people found participating in a panel to be a positive experience. That is summed up in this comment, which we received from a member of one of the panels:

"I would strongly recommend anyone who is selected to go on a People's Panel in the future to participate as it is a great experience and a unique opportunity."

There is also clear evidence that members of the panels found that the process increased their understanding of the work of the Parliament. One said:

"Interacting with diverse individuals, listening to their views and challenges gave me an overall perspective about the democratic process."

In this afternoon's speeches, Jackson Carlaw, the minister Jamie Hepburn, Maggie Chapman and Foysoil Choudhury all highlighted the satisfaction of participants who took part in the people's panels and backed that up with some powerful quotations. On Christine Grahame's point about reaching people who had not engaged at all previously, we know that at least one of the members of the panels had never voted before and yet took part in the panel and not only engaged with the process but has continued to engage with the parliamentary process, as can be seen by their presence in the public gallery today.

On Stephen Kerr's point about the extent to which a group of only 25 people can have a positive impact on the wider disenchantment with politics, as the convener said, panels are not the only answer but they play an important role. As for the rest of Stephen Kerr's 15-minute speech, I was waiting on him bringing out his Reform Party membership.

My committee colleague Maurice Golden made important points about trust in politics, a theme that was also picked up by Maggie Chapman. They both made the point that we must look to ourselves when it comes to the decline in trust in politicians. Martin Whitfield spoke about further developing proposals and said that continuous improvement and innovation are an important part of what our committee wants to see. Evelyn

Tweed spoke about a targeted approach for marginalised groups and communities. One of the benefits of embedding people's panels would be that that would also embed and renew our skills of facilitating deliberative events, so that we can use them in a range of participation approaches. That also touches on points that Oliver Mundell and Christine Grahame made about ensuring that we continue to seek ways to engage with the widest possible range of people across committees' scrutiny work.

Although, as I have said, this debate is in some ways the culmination of the committee's work, it is hoped that it is also just the start of the next phase of the Parliament's approach. Should the Parliament agree to the motion, officials will prepare for four panels to take place in session 7, in line with the approach that is set out in the blueprint. I want to use my time this afternoon to speak more about the future of that work and how it will evolve.

The blueprint sets out a number of principles for best practice in deliberative work, notably that the process should be transparent and that deliberative approaches should support scrutiny. It also sets out more detailed principles for the use of people's panels. Those cover how the panels should be used to support committee work, how topics should be selected and how panels should be delivered. The blueprint is clear that

"The primary purpose of People's Panels is to contribute to informed and evidenced scrutiny".

We have heard today some fantastic examples of how panels have contributed to scrutiny so far. If the Parliament endorses the blueprint, officials will use the knowledge that has been gathered from the panels to date to ensure that committees in session 7 have the tools and the information that they need to get the most out of people's panels.

The blueprint also sets out the expectation that committees will give a considered response to recommendations from a panel and make the fullest possible use of panel recommendations in their own scrutiny work. That does not mean that committees are obliged to accept all the recommendations that a panel makes, but they should give the work of the panel proper consideration. With only one panel being convened per year, it is vital that committees make the best possible use of that resource. Again, officials will ensure that committees have the information, tools and resources to do that.

Principles for topic selection are set out in the blueprint and are based on criteria that were developed by Professor Stephen Elstub during his academic fellowship with the Scottish Parliament. Professor Elstub was the first of several

academics to undertake fellowship projects and evaluation contracts, and I extend my thanks to all the academics who have supported the development of the blueprint. Their work not only helps us to be sure that we are guided by solid principles and meet best practice standards, but supports innovation and continuous improvement and helps us to communicate and extend our reach.

With regard to delivery of the panels, the principles that the blueprint sets out underline some of the key elements of a panel, which include randomised selection, robust safeguarding and reducing barriers to participation. The principles also make it clear that the high quality of panels must be maintained. Crucially, the principles also set out that

"The question chosen and evidence given to Panels should meet high standards of transparency and legitimacy. The breadth and balance of evidence should take account of different kinds of expertise including specialists, advocates and those with lived experience."

Our report and blueprint also set out areas where we think that there is potential to further develop our approach to people's panels. Continuing to innovate and evaluate is an important part of the approach that we have set out, and we are clear that there should be further consideration at the end of session 7 of what the approach should be for session 8 and beyond.

One key area involves finding effective ways to harness the enthusiasm that people feel when they take part in a panel in order to give them the confidence to engage with Parliament more widely, and to increase their enthusiasm for doing so. We know from the evaluation that, when people take part in a panel, most of them will feel enthused about the work of the Parliament and their role in it afterwards. Not everyone can take part in a panel, but finding ways to work with participants to spread their increased knowledge and confidence more widely will ensure that the resources that are invested in people's panels have the greatest possible impact.

As Scotland's national Parliament, we are one of its most high-profile public organisations. We are well connected to other legislatures that are using deliberative approaches, and we know from those connections that we are somewhat ahead of the game. We might consider, therefore, our role among Scotland's public bodies. How much do those bodies connect, collaborate and share information on how they use deliberative methods, and how might we balance our ability to be a role model to those bodies with our need to carry out scrutiny of how Scotland's public services are being delivered?

Another area for further development is understanding how we might increase the use of

deliberative models on a smaller scale, outside the people's panel model. With a new session on the horizon, committees should be using the full range of tools that are available to them. I will give two examples of past work on which they might build.

We have already seen a precedent for using deliberative work to involve people in the Parliament's budget scrutiny process. The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee used such an approach in 2023 to empower participants from the whole family equality project to put questions to the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees as part of the committee's pre-budget scrutiny.

I note that, in the debate of 22 May on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's inquiry into committee effectiveness, there was an emphasis on the need for committees to spend more time on the careful development of their work programmes and scoping inquiries. The issue of reflecting the interests of the public was also raised. In session 5, the Local Government and Communities Committee did just that—it used an online deliberative platform to understand public priorities in community wellbeing, which led to post-legislative scrutiny of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

The final area for further development that I will highlight involves tracking the impact and outcomes of panels, in relation both to scrutiny impact and to the impact on participants over time. Tracking impact over time is a long-standing challenge. In the context of scrutiny, it has come up as part of the evidence that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee heard during its committee effectiveness inquiry. There are no easy answers, but it will be important for panels to reflect any applicable recommendations from that committee's inquiry in their approach.

We have spoken a lot about deliberative democracy in the form of people's panels this afternoon so, before I conclude, I will come back to the other part of our report's title, and indeed that of the debate: "embedding". If panels are to reach their full potential and deliver in the way that we hope they can, they cannot be a "nice to have" or an afterthought to other work; they must be fully embedded in the work of the Parliament. I have already spoken a bit about what that might mean for committees that want a panel to support their scrutiny work; it also means that panels should be embedded in the Parliament's wider work, looking at participation, engagement and effective scrutiny. All those aspects of our work should complement and support each other.

If we get it right, I believe that that approach can have a transformational effect on the work of the

Parliament and, most importantly of all, on the relationship that the people of Scotland have with their Parliament, and their trust and involvement in it.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

That concludes the debate on "A blueprint for participation—embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament", on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

Point of Order

17:01

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Rule 8.17 of the standing orders states that any member is allowed to

“question whether proper procedures have been or are being followed by making a point of order.”

Can I ask if you were in breach of our standing orders by not allowing me to make a point of order earlier today, under rule 8.17? Also, you made it clear to the Parliament that you had not received any requests from me to meet with you. Since then, I have been asked by multiple media outlets for evidence that I had requested to meet with you. [*Interruption.*]

Sorry—I thought we were not allowed to heckle. [*Laughter.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Carry on, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: Thank you.

I have provided that information, which shows that, last Thursday and this week, I made requests to meet with you. Therefore, have you reflected on your comments that you have received no invitations to meet with me, and on the comments that you made in the chamber earlier, and have you reflected on rule 8.17 of our standing orders?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I have responded to your earlier points of order. With regard to the latter point, the chamber is not the place to discuss diary arrangements. That would not happen in any other Parliament in these isles; it is not happening in this Parliament.

Douglas Ross: Further to that point of order—

The Presiding Officer: No, Mr Ross. I am asking you to sit down. I have responded to your point.

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today’s business. The question is, that motion S6M-17733, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, on “A blueprint for participation—embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament”, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee’s 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *A blueprint for participation - embedding deliberative democracy in the work of the Scottish Parliament* (SP Paper 789), including the blueprint for this work in Session 7 with a view to making the use of such panels a regular feature of committee scrutiny from Session 7 onwards; endorses the principles for the future use of deliberative democracy that are set out in the blueprint, and acknowledges the work already being done by Parliament staff to develop and improve engagement methods.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Point of Order

17:03

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

To follow up on what you have just said—that the chamber is not the place to make diary appointments—if you, as Presiding Officer, refuse to meet with me, where else can I make these points?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mr Ross, first of all, that has not happened, and, again, this is not the place to discuss diary appointments.

We will now move on to members' business.

Combating Commercial Sexual Exploitation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17004, in the name of Rhoda Grant, on combating commercial sexual exploitation. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that prostitution is recognised by the Scottish Government as a form of violence against women; considers that, despite the Scottish Government's commitment to deterring demand for prostitution, it is currently legal to perpetrate this form of violence against women in Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands region; further considers that Scotland is an attractive destination for sex traffickers due to pimping websites and paying for sex being legal; notes the findings of the report, *International Insights: How Scotland can learn from international efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation*, which was published by the survivor-led campaign, A Model For Scotland; further notes the support for its conclusion that outlawing pimping websites and paying for sex, and decriminalising victims, is critical to reducing the demand that drives commercial sexual exploitation; understands that the right has been secured to introduce the proposed Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill; believes that the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls recommends that states adopt the prostitution law reforms advocated by the campaign, A Model For Scotland, and contained in the proposed Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to outlaw pimping websites and paying for sex, and to decriminalise and support victims of sexual exploitation.

17:04

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the members who signed my motion, which enabled this debate to happen.

It has been a long-held view of the Scottish Government and the Parliament that prostitution is violence against women. It is the epitome of inequality when a man can buy a woman for their own pleasure—a pleasure that has, at its very core, the overpowering of another's free will in return for money. It exploits the seller's need for money to take their power and agency away from them. By its very nature, the payment is to negate the need for consent—but you cannot buy consent.

We all know that prostitution is inherently dangerous. Those who sell sex often face rape and abuse from sex buyers. Despite the recognition that this is violence against women, there is little in our law that protects women from such violence. Indeed, the law criminalises them and exonerates the perpetrator.

I commend Ash Regan for bringing forward her Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill. We need to decriminalise those who sell sex, who we recognise are being subjected to violence. We need to hold the sex buyers who perpetrate that violence and create demand to account. Although our law holds men who kerb crawl to account, it does not hold pimping websites to account, nor those who profit from prostitution by hosting the adverts and those who place them.

According to police figures from 2020, 84 women were sexually exploited by trafficking gangs in Scotland. Nine of the women were underage, with the youngest being only 13 years of age. We know that that is a tiny fraction of those who are exploited. Many women do not believe that they are being exploited because they came here of their own free will to try to find a better life and blame themselves for the situation that they now find themselves in. Others fear retribution from traffickers and flee.

The police use pimping websites to identify trafficked women. The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation carried out an inquiry into those websites and found that although they enable violence against women they are subject to no redress at all.

I am a member of the A Model for Scotland campaign group that campaigns for a law to effectively stop this exploitation. In 1999, Sweden became the first country to combat demand for prostitution by criminalising paying for sex while decriminalising the victims of sexual exploitation. Evidence shows that, in Sweden, the proportion of men who pay for sex had dropped from 12.7 per cent in 1996 to 7.6 per cent in 2008. That was the lowest level of demand in Europe. Public attitudes changed because the law acts as a deterrent to sex trafficking. Other aspects of their society also changed for the better, including the sharing of caring responsibilities and a narrowing of the gender pay gap.

For such laws to be effective, we need to empower women and address vulnerability. No one chooses to sell sex as an easy option; it is a choice that is made when no other options exist and when there is no other choice. That makes selling sex inherently exploitative—one human being exploiting another's vulnerability.

Therefore, support to exit must include health support and it must also support empowerment to work and build a future. We need support services—including the police—to be readily available and properly trained to identify this abuse, to intervene and to support those who face exploitation.

In 2020, University College Dublin examined the recent change of law in Ireland, reporting

“an increased willingness amongst women to report crimes committed against them and in their improved relationship with Gardaí overall.”

Similar outcomes have been reported elsewhere. That demonstrates that change needs to be met by a police force that is able to provide the right support.

Many of those in prostitution have multiple vulnerabilities, including a lack of money and a history of childhood sexual abuse; looked-after children are particularly vulnerable.

As an example, I highlight the case of Eva, who grew up with a chaotic home life. She battled anxiety and depression and was moved into supported accommodation for her own safety after a couple had groomed her into selling sex. Unfortunately, as is often the case, the accommodation was targeted by men who were looking to build relationships with young people and offer them drugs and alcohol in return for sex. She was approached there by a 20-year-old man who built her trust and offered her free drugs.

Eva did not recognise that as grooming. She introduced her friends to him—they would gather at his flat for drink and drugs, and he asked her and her friends for sex as payment. He then had Eva sell sex to other men to help him out financially. She believed that he was her boyfriend, and she agreed to do that to help him. She did not get involved with that man to set up a business—she was vulnerable. He gave her time and attention as well as drugs and alcohol. He groomed her into prostitution. In Scotland today, she is committing a crime but those who buy sex with her, from her boyfriend, are not.

When people see the reality of prostitution, no one can be under the impression that it is harmless. Christian Action, Research and Education—CARE—for Scotland undertook a Savanta poll of more than 2,000 United Kingdom adults, which found that seven in 10 people back a ban on pimping websites that advertise sex for sale.

In 2024, the United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, in her report on “Prostitution and violence against women and girls”, recommended that states

“Adopt the abolitionist legal framework and its five pillars, including the decriminalization of women in prostitution; providing comprehensive support and exit pathways; criminalizing the purchase of sexual acts; criminalizing all forms of pimping; and implementing sensitization campaigns for sexual act buyers”.

We must take that action, and I urge the Scottish Government to work with Ash Regan to ensure that we create a model for Scotland that

combats exploitation and prostitution, in order to create a Scotland where women are truly equal.

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

17:12

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the motion in the name of our colleague Rhoda Grant, and I pay tribute to her long-standing work on tackling human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, and in particular her advocacy for women and girls who so often feel that they are failed by the system.

It is a painful truth that, in modern Scotland, prostitution remains a legal avenue through which violence against women is perpetrated. That is not just a contradiction; it is a failure of justice. The Scottish Government rightly recognises prostitution as a form of violence against women and girls, yet we are faced with the grim reality that the law, as it stands, does not yet reflect that recognition.

Let us be crystal clear: no woman aspires to be sexually exploited, and no girl dreams of being bought and sold. We, in the chamber, have a responsibility not only to condemn this form of abuse, but to act—legislatively, practically and compassionately—to bring it to an end.

The report, “International Insights: How Scotland can learn from international efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation”, which was produced by A Model For Scotland, led by survivors, is not just a policy document, but a testimony. It is a call from those who have lived the reality, who know its cost and who refuse to accept that the next generation should suffer the same fate. It tells us that reducing demand is the key to reducing harm. It tells us that we must act on the so-called pimping websites: those online platforms that act as digital marketplaces for the commodification of human beings. Those sites are not neutral spaces—they are greedily profiting from exploitation by acting as intermediaries between buyers and vulnerable women.

The report tells us also that we must criminalise the act of paying for sex, not to punish those who are engaged in survival prostitution but to hold to account those who fuel and finance the trade. We cannot say we that oppose violence against women and then allow a system to flourish in which women are bought, sold and discarded like consumer goods.

However, the third and equally vital part of the model is support, which means decriminalising those who are being exploited. It means recognising that the women in prostitution are not

criminals—they are victims of inequality, poverty, trauma and abuse, and they deserve not just our compassion but concrete, sustained support such as housing, trauma-informed services, mental health support, education and employment. Those are not luxuries, but necessities if we are to help women to exit exploitation and rebuild their lives.

We know that the so-called Nordic model, which is sometimes called the equality model, actually works. It has been adopted in countries such as Sweden, Norway, France, Ireland and others; those countries have seen a reduction in demand and in trafficking, and improved outcomes for women. The United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women and girls has called on states to adopt those very reforms, as has the European Parliament, along with countless survivors, researchers and human rights organisations.

If we are to live up to our obligations under the Istanbul convention and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and indeed under our own human rights framework in Scotland, that is the direction that we must take. It is not about morality, but about human dignity. We must ensure that no woman in Scotland is ever left in a position in which her only choice is to be bought and used by someone who holds economic and social power over her. We must say clearly, as a Parliament, that women are not commodities and that the buying and selling of human beings has no place in a just society.

I add my voice to the calls from members across the chamber, from survivor-led organisations and from international human rights bodies to let us move forward with the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill. Let us end the legal impunity for those who exploit and dismantle the online infrastructure that profits from pain, and let us support, not criminalise, those who have been caught in the cycle of abuse. Scotland has the opportunity to lead and to make a principled, progressive stand for justice—let us take it.

17:17

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The topic is rightly receiving increased attention in the Parliament and beyond, and I look forward to engaging with another colleague, Ash Regan, as she takes her Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill through the legislative process.

I think that we can all agree that the protection of vulnerable women, many of whom have had miserable lives at the hands of abusers, criminals and opportunists, is paramount. As we have heard in evidence many times, it is often a succession of

terrible events in a woman's life that brings her to the point of prostitution or sex work. When she finds herself in that situation, it is then almost impossible for her to escape.

We know that it is not only Scottish women who find themselves forced down that destructive path. For human traffickers, especially those in places such as Romania and Bulgaria, Scotland appears to be an attractive place to send women. Police in Scotland spend huge amounts of time trying to intervene at airports and other entry points to ensure that women who are forced into coming here from those countries can be supported before they disappear into the hands of serious organised criminals. It is a tall order for officers in Scotland to dismantle international organisations that make millions of pounds from the lives of young women, many of whom are under age and forcibly addicted to drugs.

We, in Parliament, can do our bit by making Scotland a more hostile place for those twisted and dangerous individuals to target. We may not agree on every facet of the motion or on Ms Regan's bill, but I think that we would all like the same outcome: that the days of Scotland being a soft touch for the criminal sex trade be consigned to history. We have the benefit of being able to look at how other countries have addressed the problem, and it is important that we learn from their progress and from their mistakes. We can examine how some Nordic countries have flipped the onus on criminality, moving it from the woman who provides sex work to the male customers who pursue it. We can look to Northern Ireland, where offenders who are engaged in human trafficking and sexual exploitation receive fines of up to £1,000 and up to a year's imprisonment.

We should also learn from those who have been tasked with dealing with the problem in the past. Many of us in the chamber will have been moved by a recent account that was provided by the commentator Susan Dalgety, who was formerly a senior councillor in the City of Edinburgh Council. She recalled, in an article in *The Scotsman*, how applications would come before committee for the capital's notorious saunas. On the face of it, those were meant to be above-board facilities that were simply offering an innocent sauna experience for anyone who wanted it. However, Ms Dalgety told how everyone, from the police to council officials, knew exactly what was going on and nodded through those de facto brothels anyway. Of course, she now regrets that such attitudes prevailed, and it is important that we do not now take a similar approach to sex work and prostitution. We must pay attention to the women themselves who have lived through it. What would they do to solve the problem?

The Scottish Conservatives look forward to participating in the debate as it moves forward, working constructively with all other parties in the chamber and finally reaching a resolution to this long-standing, complex and deep-rooted issue.

17:21

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I commend Rhoda Grant for lodging this important motion for debate and for her long-standing commitment to work in this area. I also commend the cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation for the excellent work that it has done recently. I extend my thanks to the members of the Parliament, and to those outside the Parliament, who have supported me in my journey towards getting the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill to its current stage.

As we have heard this evening, prostitution is a system of violence that reduces women to commodities, and it affects the ability of all women to achieve equality. There is currently—as, I think, we all recognise—an absolute epidemic of violence against women and girls in our society, and I believe that commercial sexual exploitation is a very important area from which we should not look away. It is connected to that epidemic and is a great place to start.

It is already policy and strategy that prostitution is violence against women. That is the Scottish Government's position and the position of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and it is reflected in the way that we police the issue. To put it simply, the law now needs to be updated. My "Unbuyable" bill reflects international best practice and what all the available research data shows to be the best way to challenge the demand for prostitution, which is what drives human trafficking, and reduce the number of women who are then exploited in prostitution.

It is necessary that we do that, because prostitution is harmful. In all my years of research and work on the issue—I think that it has been more than a decade now—of all the women I met who had been exploited in prostitution, not one wanted to stay in it for a moment longer than they had to. In many cases, although they had left the sex trade decades before, I could see that the effects of what they had been through still haunted and harmed them. One trafficking victim I met in a safe room in Glasgow said that she had been trafficked and that what was happening to her was so horrific that she prayed every day that she would die or that the pimps or punters would kill her.

Prostitution cannot be made safe—it is inherently harmful. A US study said that women who are exploited in prostitution are 18 times more

likely to be murdered than a member of the general population. Another study, on rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, put the rates of PTSD among women who have been through prostitution at 70 per cent, which is higher than we see recorded in combat veterans and is consistent with rates among victims of state torture.

There is no way to make prostitution safe. That being the case, we need to reduce it as much as possible, and my bill will do that. If we do not change the law, we are protecting and enabling pimps and punters, abusers and exploiters. If anyone does not believe me on that, even a cursory glance at the contents of Punternet would confirm it. That is a website where men review women like takeaway meals, rating their bodies, their compliance and their willingness to endure abuse. Prostitution is not a normal job—it is a marketplace of degradation and abuse.

If we change the law, we will be protecting the victims. They are girls who have entered prostitution as children; girls who have been through the care system; girls who have been victims of child sex abuse; and girls and women who have been coerced and trafficked into this trade. Surely, in modern Scotland, we know—or we should know—who the exploiters are and who the victims are, and it is long past time that the law reflected that.

17:25

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I, too, thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

I wanted to speak in the debate in order to be sure that at least a few men would be taking part. The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation tends to have mainly women attending, both among MSPs and other members and speakers. That is understandable, as women are by far the main victims of CSE. However, men are the main perpetrators, as we have heard, and we need to hear some of them speak in favour of the motion and Ash Regan's bill.

I can accept that a very few women see prostitution as a glamorous career, can be choosy about whom their clients are and are largely in control of what happens. However, as other members have said—and as we have heard repeatedly at the cross-party group and in other meetings—in the vast majority of cases, the women involved are clearly victims and do not want to be involved in the trade. We have often heard from survivors about how they were treated as men's possessions to be bought and sold, and about how they were expected to take part in various weird sexual activities just to satisfy the warped desires of some men.

Most women who are involved in prostitution are there only because they are in the direst of circumstances, whether they are being exploited by a partner or, as is very often the case, in financial need and debt. We see that in the Ken Loach film "I, Daniel Blake", from 2016, in which Katie turns to selling sex only because of her need to feed her children. How can we say that we are serious about tackling male violence against women when, at the same time, we allow women to be bought and sold by men?

We all accept that there is a gender pay gap, that women still get overlooked for promotion in some jobs and that misogyny happens, as does domestic abuse. All of that is broadly accepted to be happening, and the vast majority of us are signed up to tackling those interrelated sets of problems. Surely we also have to accept that being able to buy sex is not unrelated to those other issues and that it devalues women in the eyes of boys and men.

Similarly, we are all signed up to ending human trafficking, yet we need to remember that one of the drivers of human trafficking, whether that is from Nepal to India or from eastern Europe to Scotland and the UK, is commercial sexual exploitation. I would not argue that changing the law would, in itself, sort everything, but we understand from the Nordic countries that such a change, along with education, is part of achieving more respect for women and promoting more equality for women in all parts of society.

I have to say, however, that we are making very slow progress on the subject. I became a councillor in Glasgow 27 years ago, in 1998, and I was a councillor there for just over 10 years. The subject was on the agenda then thanks to excellent Labour councillors such as Jim Coleman, and Glasgow City Council, the police and the health services were all on board. The phrase "routes out" was frequently used at that time, in recognition of the fact that we needed not only to come down more heavily on the purchasers of sex but to give more support to women who wanted to escape from the trap in which they had found themselves.

However, here we are, in 2025, and very little seems to have changed. A number of other countries have moved against CSE, but, so far, we have not, despite the fact that the Scottish National Party supported Ash Regan's position and the fact that, as the motion states, the Scottish Government recognises prostitution as violence against women. I have to say that there has been a certain timidity on the part of successive Governments. Therefore, I whole-heartedly endorse both Rhoda Grant's motion and Ash Regan's bill, and I express my frustration at the

lack of progress in Scotland when other countries have been taking real steps forward.

17:29

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Rhoda Grant for bringing to the chamber an important debate that has not, in the Parliament, moved on as it might have done. I support the motion and the introduction of the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill, and I pay tribute to Rhoda Grant and other members in the chamber who continually raise the voices of those who often have no avenue to do so themselves.

I also thank those women who have been trapped in the sex trade for coming to Parliament and speaking to us, as parliamentarians, about the reality of the life that is led by so many women. That includes the grooming, the vulnerability and the trapped, helpless, hopeless feeling that many women have spoken about. Those conversations have really developed my thinking in the area.

If we are truly to realise our shared ambition of eradicating male violence against women and girls, Scotland needs a progressive legal model for tackling prostitution that shifts the burden of criminality from the victims of sexual exploitation on to the people who perpetrate and profit from such activity. Having spent time talking to women about this trade, I see no other way of ensuring that we start to protect women and girls.

We know that much of this activity is underground and not visible to many in society. We also know that, for many years, the attitude to prostitution was that the women were in the wrong or were unable to better themselves. In reality, it is a business that profits from the vulnerability of so many women.

In a previous debate in the Parliament, my colleague Rhoda Grant said:

“It is essential that we deal with demand, because trafficking for sexual exploitation is the most profitable form of modern slavery in the world and is fuelled by demand.”—*[Official Report, 18 January 2024; c 35.]*

Trafficking is a global industry of more than \$100 billion per year. Money is such a driver in manipulating and exploiting vulnerable people, and vulnerable women are exploited all over the world.

In earlier debates in the Parliament, we have discussed how, in countries that take the liberal approach of normalising prostitution, there are higher levels of trafficking, and how, in those that take the opposite approach, human trafficking has decreased. That is where the evidence is leading us. As legislators in Scotland, we must listen to that evidence and act with some urgency.

As we have heard from other members, a more effective solution has been found in the Nordic model approach, as implemented in countries such as Sweden and Norway, which criminalises the purchase of sex and decriminalises those who sell it, thereby recognising the true victims of exploitation. The bill that was introduced by Ash Regan recognises that, and it would add legal rights to support exit services, counselling and real alternatives that aim to give the women involved a genuine path out of prostitution. That is what struck me at a recent meeting in the Parliament, where women were discussing what it was like to be trapped and to feel that nothing could change, and it is an important part of the bill that Ash Regan has introduced.

In the time that I have left, I want to talk about the online pimping websites that other members have mentioned. If we do not start to tackle them, things will only get worse. Those men hide behind the internet and their computers, and we need to look for good examples of how we might be able to change that.

In closing, I thank everyone for speaking in the debate. I hope that the Government can shed some light on the work that it is doing to progress this matter, and on how it might work with Ash Regan on her bill, because it is so important that we work together. I thank Rhoda Grant for continuing to push the issue in the chamber and out in communities.

17:33

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank Rhoda Grant for creating the opportunity for us to discuss the issue in the chamber, and I agree with John Mason that men need to speak up.

Listening to Ash Regan today, I have learned things that I did not know and that I wish did not exist. I wish her all the very best with her bill, and I hope that we will all work together to make it happen in our country.

The motion and the bill are all about affirming the principle that prostitution is not a lifestyle choice—it is a form of violence against women. It is an expression of exploitation, often brutal and hidden, and it is too often enabled by our current laws.

Scotland rightly aspires to be a nation that defends the dignity and worth of every individual, but while we continue to allow the purchase of sex, we undermine that aspiration. We are failing to deter the demand that fuels not only prostitution but sex trafficking—two industries that are deeply interlinked. I find it deeply disturbing that, according to the motion, Scotland has become a destination for traffickers. Why? It is because our

laws still permit the buying of sex and allow online pimping websites to flourish.

The evidence is clear. We now have the benefit of decades of international learning from countries that have adopted the so-called Nordic model, which is a legal framework that criminalises those who buy sex, decriminalises the women who are exploited, and provides exit supports. A list of countries has been mentioned, and I will recite them because this is not new territory: Sweden, France, Ireland and Iceland have all shown that demand can be reduced, trafficking deterred and women's lives changed when the law sends a clear moral message.

I am not one who will apologise for using the word "moral". In Sweden, the proportion of men who buy sex halved after the sex purchase legislation was introduced; public attitudes shifted profoundly from toleration to rejection of this form of exploitation; and enforcement, education and victim support worked together to change not only behaviours but hearts and minds. In France, more than 5,000 buyers of sex have been prosecuted, and almost 600 women have been supported through funded exit programmes, with 90 per cent of them going on to find stable employment. In Ireland, decriminalisation has empowered women to report violence without fear of criminalisation. Scotland can and must do the same.

The Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill provides the vehicle for that change. It reflects the international evidence base as well as our moral responsibility; it rightly targets those who exploit, not those who are exploited; it proposes practical, funded support for those exiting the sex trade; and it aligns with our international obligations under the Palermo protocol and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women to actively discourage demand for sexual exploitation.

I am no libertarian—I am a social conservative and I believe that the law must uphold moral order and human dignity. There is nothing empowering about being bought and sold. No economy should tolerate a market in human bodies, and no society that claims to stand against violence against women can allow that form of violence to continue unchallenged.

Let us show courage. Let us act not in fear of criticism but in fidelity to the evidence and experience of survivors. I commend the motion and the leadership behind it; I support the bill that flows from it; and I say clearly that Scotland is not for sale, women are not for sale, and this Parliament will not stand idly by while modern slavery is disguised as choice. When the minister comes to reply, I hope that we will see beyond all the party politics that might surround this issue

and the people who are involved with it, so that Scotland can rid itself of this terrible reputation as a favoured destination for traffickers.

17:38

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I thank Rhoda Grant and all those in the chamber this evening for their considered contributions on tackling and combating commercial sexual exploitation. Let me be very clear at the start—we all want to see an end to commercial sexual exploitation in Scotland. I will take this opportunity to outline what the Scottish Government is doing to combat it.

I take on board John Mason's point that he feels that there has not been much progress. Although there has not been any legislative progress in recent years, some things are under way.

I recently invited Rhoda Grant and other MSPs to an update on the work that we have been doing with Police Scotland to agree a national approach to prostitution. The new Police Scotland approach, known as operation begonia, was adopted at the end of April, and it recognises that those who are involved in prostitution are victims of exploitation. It will ensure that police use the powers that are available to them to challenge demand. Through dedicated patrols in areas where street-based prostitution takes place, police will challenge and deter men's demand.

Ash Regan: On the point that the minister has just raised, the powers that the police have are only for combating on-street prostitution. We think that we know—the data is a bit sketchy—that 90 per cent of prostitution has moved indoors. Therefore, is it not now the time to update the law and to give the police the powers that they need to combat prostitution?

Siobhian Brown: I will go on to talk about online, because work is being undertaken in that area as well.

We have provided funding to support the patrols are currently operational across Dundee, Aberdeen and Glasgow and we will work with Police Scotland to build on that.

I recently visited Dundee to see operation begonia in practice, and I was able to see the difference that it makes. This year, operation begonia has carried out 100 patrols, resulting in 42 men being charged and 62 women being routed to support services. As Detective Superintendent Steven Bertram, the lead on prostitution for Police Scotland, said:

"This is about building trust and confidence in policing."

I agree that that is key. I want any women with experience of commercial sexual exploitation to

feel able and comfortable to engage with police to report concerns and to access justice and trauma-informed support, if they so wish.

The new police approach includes the development of new training and awareness programmes, the first of which will take place this month. We are also working with Police Scotland to help to strengthen the connections between the police and local support provision, as the relationships between the police and local support services play a key role. Later this month, I will visit a local stakeholder network that supports begonia in Aberdeen.

We will build on that good practice and will hold a meeting in Edinburgh this month to discuss establishing a similar network with local organisations here. Ensuring that local stakeholders are better connected and have clearer links to local police will help to ensure that women have supported access to justice and have clearer routes to local support. A joined-up response will also help us to take a preventative approach to tackling exploitation.

Informed by the implementation of begonia, the Scottish Government will always consider what more we can do to combat commercial sexual exploitation. Taking an evidence-based approach, we will consider what further intervention is necessary.

Earlier, I referenced, as did Rhoda Grant in her motion, the importance of learning from international experience. I am therefore mindful of the difficulty that Ireland has had in policing the legislative framework that it was presented with, and of the lack of cohesion within support services in France. Both scenarios have led to a review of the approaches in those countries.

The Scottish Government is working with Police Scotland to better understand any additional powers that it considers are required and the reasons why, in order to effectively tackle demand, particularly online.

Rhoda Grant: With any piece of legislation, there must be tweaks to ensure that it works properly, but does the minister agree that in the countries that she mentions that have had to make tweaks and invest more in training and support, the legislation is working well and is preventing violence against women? We could learn from that and put in place legislation that would save many women from suffering violence at the hands of perpetrators.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I can give you back the time for the intervention.

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government is not opposed to the intent of Ms Regan's proposed

bill, but I will touch on a few of our concerns later in my speech.

We must be mindful of the challenges online and the need to keep pace with them. Rhoda Grant, Bill Kidd and Carol Mochan mentioned that issue, particularly the websites. The regulation of the internet and online services remains a reserved matter, but there is an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill going through Westminster, which addresses the issue, and my officials are talking to the Home Office about it. My officials are meeting Ofcom tomorrow to further discuss online safety in respect of human trafficking.

Those online challenges are why we are providing funding to support Police Scotland's work to tackle the online aspects of commercial sexual exploitation, increasing its capability in that area—

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure that I understand what the minister is saying the Government's position is in relation to the bill. I think that she said that she was going to talk about that, but she seems to have moved on. Can she be—

Siobhian Brown: I said that I would get to that at the end—I will come on to that.

That is why we are providing funding to support Police Scotland's work to tackle the online aspects of commercial sexual exploitation, which is increasing its capability in that area and helping to inform our approach on how to better reach victims. Rhoda Grant came to a meeting on that with Police Scotland recently.

The Scottish Government's focus will remain on providing a sustainable pathway to enable those who are involved in prostitution both to exit and fulfil their potential in a sustainable manner.

It remains imperative that we change the culture that drives the acceptability of violence against women and girls and commercial sexual exploitation. Therefore, we will continue to look for opportunities to support that change through educational and public awareness initiatives.

As I said to Mr Kerr and Ms Regan, the Scottish Government is not opposed to the intent behind the bill. As with all members' bills, we will give it full and careful consideration and take into account Parliament's scrutiny of it. However, I must raise a few concerns that I have about the bill at the moment. How will it work in practice? What support is intended for those who are involved in prostitution, and what is the cost of that? I note that we cannot support quashing previous convictions.

Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Rhoda Grant: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, are you taking the intervention, or have you concluded?

Siobhian Brown: I have concluded.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:47.

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