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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 25 November 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Very Rev Dr Andriy Chornenko, vicar for Scotland of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of the Holy Family of London.

The Very Rev Dr Andriy Chornenko (Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of the Holy Family of London): Good afternoon, Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament. Thank you for allowing me to share a few moments of reflection with you today.

Human history, as well as our personal lives, is often marked by moments of darkness—times of fear, loss and struggle. Despite that, across faiths and cultures, we find the same conviction: light has the power to overcome darkness. Even a single flame can break through the heaviest night.

In the Christian tradition, light is a symbol of hope, guidance and renewal. Jesus Christ, the light of the world, said:

“Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness”.

Other religions also speak of light as wisdom, compassion and truth. This reminds us that, even in the most difficult times, there is a way forward.

For me, as a Ukrainian, that image carries special meaning. My people face the darkness of war, destruction and displacement, yet, even in such pain, the light of courage, solidarity and faith has not been extinguished. Families, communities and entire cities continue to choose life over despair.

I would like to take this opportunity to express deep gratitude to Scotland and to the people of this land. Your welcome to Ukrainian families, your compassion for the displaced and your unwavering support in the face of injustice are rays of light that reach far beyond these shores. They remind us that humanity is bound together, and that when one nation suffers, others can carry part of its burden.

Each of you, as leaders, carries such a light. At times, it may seem small compared with the vastness of the challenges that are before us, but its impact is real: a word of encouragement; a just decision; a compassionate gesture.

In winter, we notice how darkness arrives quickly. We also notice the stars, the lights along our streets and the warmth of community. In the same way, it is in times of trial that faith, hope and love shine most brightly.

May we each nurture that light—within ourselves, in our communities and across nations. May it guide Scotland, Ukraine and our world toward justice, peace and unity.

Business Motions

14:05

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19913, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 25 November 2025—

after

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill: Emergency Bill Motion—[Graeme Dey]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19913, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee meeting times.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament during Members' Business on Tuesday 25 November 2025.—[Graeme Dey]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:06

Prostate Cancer Screening

1. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the TRANSFORM—trial of randomised approaches for national screening for men—prostate cancer screening trial, including any implications this may have for improving prostate cancer screening in Scotland. (S6T-02767)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government desires a screening test that can improve outcomes for men with prostate cancer and for which the benefits clearly outweigh the harms. TRANSFORM is a vital step forward in making that a reality. It will test the efficacy of different screening methods, such as rapid MRI and DNA testing, in addition to the standard prostate-specific antigen—PSA—blood test. The trial is recruiting participants and is expected to provide its first results in about two years.

Crucially, Prostate Cancer UK designed the trial in collaboration with the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which will ensure that its findings inform that committee's review of prostate cancer screening. In Scotland, as in all nations of the UK, screening policy is underpinned by the UK NSC's recommendations. We are monitoring the on-going review carefully.

Rachael Hamilton: In Scotland alone, every year more than 4,300 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer and, sadly, 1,000 men die from it. They are fathers, brothers, uncles and friends. It is the most common cancer in the UK among men.

In July, I met a constituent who had just had the all-clear from prostate cancer following months of diagnostic care and treatment. My constituent told me that his cancer was detected purely because of Sir Chris Hoy's personal campaign and the support of a very good local general practitioner. Like Sir Chris Hoy and other well-known figures such as David Cameron and Stephen Fry, my constituent wanted to use his experience to raise awareness of the condition.

Although the screening trial is a positive step, the initial results will not be available for two years, which means that thousands of men in Scotland will continue to go undiagnosed. Will the minister outline what the Scottish Government is doing to improve awareness of prostate cancer and encourage men who are at higher risk to get tested?

Jenni Minto: I recognise absolutely everything that Rachael Hamilton said. Sir Chris Hoy's sharing of his story—along with those shared by others, such as Kenny Logan—has made prostate cancer much more known in our male population. To add to that, there was a very good phone-in on the topic yesterday morning on BBC Radio Scotland.

As I said in my first answer, the Scottish Government will continue to be guided by the advice of the UK National Screening Committee on population-based screening. A clinically reviewed refresh of our Scottish referral guidelines for suspected cancer was published in August 2025. For the first time, those guidelines now incorporate advice on key groups that should consider speaking to their GP about PSA testing from the age of 45. Those groups include men with a family history of prostate cancer; black men, who are around three times more likely to develop prostate cancer than white men; and those who have a genetic predisposition to the condition, such as men who have BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutations.

Rachael Hamilton: I appreciate the minister's response and welcome the good work that is already being done alongside charities such as Prostate Cancer UK and Prostate Scotland, but there is still a long way to go, not only on early detection but on cancer waiting times, for which the Scottish National Party's target of 62 days has not been met for more than a decade.

It is suggested that early detection can help more than 80 per cent of men to survive prostate cancer, which is why it is important to improve awareness and encourage those who are at higher risk to get tested. Once the short-life working group on prostate cancer has published its findings, will the minister commit to making a statement to Parliament to outline the suggested actions? Will she provide a clear answer on how she aims to meet the 62-day target?

Jenni Minto: I, too, recognise the important work that Prostate Cancer UK has been doing. The Scottish Government invests in early detection work, with the "Be the Early Bird" campaign specifically focusing on more deprived areas.

I will check with the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans about making a statement to Parliament after the working group has finished its work.

The Scottish Government continues to invest in reducing cancer waiting times. I, too, recognise the importance of early detection, early diagnosis and then treatment.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I note that the First Minister and the Cabinet

Secretary for Health and Social Care recently met Sir Chris Hoy and Sarra Hoy to discuss Sir Chris's experience of prostate cancer. As Ms Hamilton mentioned, Sir Chris has been a great advocate in encouraging men to recognise the signs and symptoms of prostate cancer. What can the minister say about the outcome of that meeting? Following it, what work is on-going to encourage men to get checked if they recognise symptoms?

Jenni Minto: I thank Alasdair Allan for raising that important meeting, which was held on 8 August. The aim of the event was to discuss how to better raise awareness and increase understanding of prostate cancer. We appreciated Sir Chris Hoy's participation in that meeting. As a result of it, the chief medical officer will chair an expert short-life working group on prostate cancer, which will meet for the first time next month. The group will consider how to reach those who are at higher risk of developing prostate cancer and how we can take actions to improve diagnosis and care pathways in Scotland.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have increased my knowledge of prostate cancer and screening for it following my dad's diagnosis, and I asked the cabinet secretary a question about the issue last year. The Government's response has been positive, but I am still hearing about too many cases of people asking for a PSA test and not getting one, with their GP advising that it is not suitable for them. If people have concerns, should the GP not allow the PSA test to take place, to either rule in or rule out prostate cancer, because we know that early diagnosis really makes a difference?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the work that Douglas Ross has been doing to raise awareness of prostate cancer. Yesterday, I was made aware that, in relation to prostate cancer, there are some areas of health where PSA tests are not being offered to men. It is important that they maintain that. I might get this quote slightly wrong, but Kenny Logan and Sir Chris Hoy have talked about the importance of people writing to their GP to request a test, so that that is on their records. If I have got that incorrect, I apologise, and I will correct the record.

Care Provision (Immigration)

2. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the warning from Scottish Care that the United Kingdom Government's immigration proposals risk destabilising care provision in Scotland. (S6T-02772)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): I am deeply worried about the new changes, which fail to reflect Scotland's distinct demographic needs and pose a

significant risk to our economy, communities and public services. Workforce shortages across the care sector are already exacerbated by a significant decline in the number of health and care visas being granted by the United Kingdom Home Office. There was a 77 per cent drop in the number of health and care visas issued in the year ending in June 2025. The UK Government has now gone a step further and closed the social care worker visa route.

Those are uncomfortable truths for the Labour Party. Donald Macaskill, the chief executive of Scottish Care, has said this week that, at best, the Labour Government's policies

"will have a profoundly negative impact"

and

"will deter much-needed talent from staying in Scotland."

Clare Haughey: I am reassured that the minister shares my frustration and disappointment with the proposals, particularly following research that was published last week that showed that up to 50,000 migrant nursing staff could leave the UK if ministers press ahead with plans to extend the qualifying period for applying for indefinite leave to remain. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to support and encourage our international social care staff, who make such a valued contribution to the sector, to make Scotland their home amid these difficult times?

Tom Arthur: As I stated, the Scottish Government is deeply concerned about many of the planned reforms of the route to settlement that the UK Government has announced. The Scottish Government is taking action to mitigate the devastating impacts of the changes that are being introduced by the UK Government. We have announced a £500,000 package that will provide targeted support to displaced social care workers; enable such workers to come or continue to work in Scotland; and provide information, advice and support to employers, investors and individual migrants through Scotland's migration service.

Clare Haughey: The minister will be aware that Anas Sarwar, the Scottish Labour leader, called the callous proposals, which include plans to make people wait up to 20 years to apply for settlement, "very brave" in an interview that he gave on Sunday. Does the minister agree that the language and rhetoric surrounding immigration policies and proposals are dehumanising? Will he join me in calling on Labour to consider the damaging impact that those reforms will have on our health and social care sector?

Tom Arthur: Clare Haughey has made some very important and powerful points. The reforms seem to be entirely focused on what migrants living in the UK earn, not what they contribute. It is

not acceptable that international care workers, for example, now face 15 years of high immigration fees and no recourse to public funds before they are deemed to have earned settlement. That is despite the significant contribution that they make to our communities in providing care for some of our most vulnerable citizens. Indeed, Scottish Care has said:

"These changes will have a profoundly negative impact on the sustainability and quality of care and support services across Scotland."

That should concern us all across the chamber.

Teachers' Working Week (Educational Institute of Scotland)

3. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported concerns and frustration of the Educational Institute of Scotland about its four-day working week proposal for teachers. (S6T-02771)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Last week, the Scottish Government published proposals to deliver a reduction in teachers' class contact time, including a four-day teaching week, improved maternity pay arrangements and an agreed national minimum learning hours standard for all schools across the country. That will form part of a new national deal for teachers, which is our opportunity to reaffirm the value that we place on teaching and to build a system that truly supports the profession.

The proposals will be consulted on via the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers and a paper has been shared to that end. Last week, I was pleased to meet with the EIS in the Parliament to discuss the proposals in more detail. It is also imperative that the views of parents and young people are listened to through consultation.

I was also very pleased that the Scottish Government was recently able to settle the teacher pay dispute, which means that Scotland's teachers remain the best paid in these islands. Scotland's teaching profession will now expect the Government to move forward at pace on delivering a reduction in teacher-class contact. That is what the proposals seek to deliver: improved working conditions for our educators in order to unlock better outcomes for our pupils.

Willie Rennie: The cabinet secretary said that she was very pleased a number of times, but the teaching unions have reacted with utter fury and have said that the proposals are deeply disappointing. They have accused the Government of imposing a diktat. The SNCT, which she referred to, has expressed dismay and the unions are still threatening to strike by the end of January. Why does the cabinet secretary think

that her positive announcement has gone down like a cup of cold sick?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not necessarily think that the language that Mr Rennie has just used is appropriate.

I met the EIS in Parliament last Thursday, the day that I announced the proposals. I listened to the concerns that Mr Rennie has outlined today—I will not repeat the language that he used—and I will tell him exactly what I told the EIS. I share the teaching unions' frustration that the reduction in teachers' class contact time is moving too slowly and that discussions to date have focused too much on the technocratic barriers to delivering the change that we all want to see and too little on what our vision should be for the teaching profession.

On Thursday afternoon, our detailed proposals were sent to the EIS and the other teaching unions. I have not heard commentary on the proposals themselves. I have heard a mixture of responses from some of the other professional associations, which I note welcomed them.

Willie Rennie: My language is nothing compared with that used by teachers when they told me about the reaction to the cabinet secretary's proposals.

In answer to my parliamentary question, the cabinet secretary said:

"I am pleased that earlier this year the SNCT subgroup on Reducing Class Contact Time agreed with the Scottish Government proposal to develop a workplan to deliver a route map towards reducing class contact time, at pace."—*[Written Answers, 24 November 2025; S6W-41769.]*

Is not the truth that, five years on, nothing is being done "at pace" by the Government and that it is moving towards the next election having failed to deliver that important policy and promise for teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not recognise what Mr Rennie has just iterated. It is important that we reflect on the progress that has been made in the past year.

I observe that the teaching unions in Scotland take the position that there should be separate negotiations on pay and conditions. That matter is entirely within their gift, but it is important that we move forward with the improvements on reducing teacher-class contact time that we need to deliver, because that is what will make a difference at the chalkface.

Unfortunately, I did not hear Mr Rennie comment on the differences in maternity pay that Scotland's predominantly female teaching population experience currently. Teachers in Scotland get 13 weeks' full pay, unlike local government staff, national health service staff and

civil servants who get better maternity pay than teachers, so I thought that Mr Rennie would welcome the proposals for his constituents.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The problem is that the cabinet secretary has complete disrespect for the Parliament. She is lifting her eyes to the ceiling as though I should not be bringing this matter to her attention, but we are talking about a press statement. Where is the detail? Was something distributed to the convener of the Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee? I do not think so. Was anything shared with the committee members? Nothing at all. This just smacks of a gimmick, because the cabinet secretary is failing to deliver a manifesto commitment—a number of such commitments were made on education.

My question to the cabinet secretary is very simple. She has already admitted that the ideas that she has floated will have major implications for parents, councils, pupils and, as Willie Rennie said, teachers. When exactly will she respect the Parliament sufficiently to publish detailed proposals? When will we have sight of the rationale for them? When will we see the evidence for this set of ideas? When exactly will she come to the Parliament to make a statement or hold a debate on the issue, so that we can properly scrutinise her actions?

Jenny Gilruth: "She" is not the cat's mother, and "she" is not looking to the ceiling—I am looking directly at Mr Kerr currently while I address him in the chamber, showing respect to this institution.

Stephen Kerr: You were doing that.

Jenny Gilruth: I hear Mr Kerr commenting from a sedentary position. I often hear him comment about behaviour in schools. I think that he could set a better standard for our young people than the standard that we are experiencing today.

On the Government's detailed response, this is not a matter for the Education, Children and Young People Committee or the Parliament; it is a matter for the SNCT to negotiate on. That is why the proposals are in draft form. A detailed paper has been put to the SNCT. I see Mr Kerr looking as though he wants to be a member of that negotiating committee.

Stephen Kerr: No, I want the Parliament to be respected.

Jenny Gilruth: I am sorry to hear that he is not a member currently, but that committee needs to negotiate these things. The tripartite agreement is hugely important.

I would have thought that Mr Kerr would have welcomed the idea of considering, for example, a national approach to learning standards and

learning hours across the country, given that there is variation all over the country. I would have thought that, as a democrat, Mr Kerr—who respects this institution so much—would have welcomed the move to democratised the approach to the hours that are taught in our schools in order to ensure fairness across our curriculum system and for all our children and young people.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's proposals. Ensuring the wellbeing of the teaching workforce is key to improving educational outcomes for children. Tackling workload is, quite rightly, a key aspect of that, and remuneration is another. Will the cabinet secretary update us on the outcome of this year's pay negotiations for teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: I am delighted that teachers have accepted a new pay deal that ensures that Scotland's classroom teachers on the main grade scale continue to be the best paid in the United Kingdom. The agreement shows what can be achieved through constructive dialogue. The deal means that the starting salary for a qualified teacher in Scotland will increase to more than £41,900, with further increases in April and August. Furthermore, the salary for classroom teachers at the top of the main grade scale will have increased from £37,575 in April 2018 to more than £52,600 by August 2025—an increase of 40 per cent.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Teachers have been waiting for action on workloads since the Government made them promises four and a half years ago, yet there was no movement until, in a desperate attempt to act at pace, it made a rushed announcement. The trade unions have said that the announcement appears to

"undermine the established SNCT negotiating machinery", and has caused dismay on the teachers' panel, which says that the cabinet secretary has circumvented

"the well-established collective bargaining structures of the SNCT".

What does the cabinet secretary intend to do about that, or will collective bargaining be the latest casualty of this Government's incompetence?

Jenny Gilruth: I am surprised that Ms Duncan-Glancy did not listen to the answer that I gave to Mr Kerr, whereby I set out that, on the day that the announcement was made, a paper was shared with the SNCT. Of course, it is for the SNCT to consult on that tripartite arrangement and its basis. There have been no changes on how that will be agreed to.

It is important that the Government commits publicly to its vision for how we might reduce teacher-class contact, and I want the teaching profession to hear the ways in which that might be delivered. That includes a four-day teaching week, which would help to reduce teacher workload. I know that that is a matter that Ms Duncan-Glancy takes seriously, so I hope that she will engage with some of the proposals and share any thoughts that she has about how we can lighten the load on our teachers and let them get on with teaching our children and young people.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary says that it is important that the Government commits publicly. It committed publicly four and a half years ago in its manifesto, but it has not delivered on that promise.

Last Friday, Pam Duncan-Glancy, Willie Rennie, Ross Greer and I attended the conference of the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland, in Glasgow. I have to say that teachers are cynical about what the Government can or will deliver.

When will the pilot project that the cabinet secretary announced report, and will it be before the election?

Jenny Gilruth: On Mr Briggs's final point, that would be my expectation. I was at the same conference and discussed the matter with all the attendees, probably before Mr Briggs arrived on Thursday.

Mr Briggs asked about how the pilot project might be delivered. I remind him that, in last year's budget, we put in an extra funding uplift for teacher numbers to recognise inflationary increases to teacher pay. That would allow councils to go back to 2023 levels. From our modelling, which was published last year, we think that there are enough primary teachers in the system at the current time to deliver on reduced class contact. That is predicated on the 2023 numbers. The funding in last year's budget allows local authorities to move forward at pace with the pilot; I look forward to working with them through the SNCT to get it up and running in advance of the election.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19866, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I would be grateful if members who wish to take part in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased to present the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill. The bill is an important opportunity to strengthen the rights of children and young people in Scotland, building on our commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

First, I thank the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for its careful and considered work on the bill and for its stage 1 report. I welcome the fact that the majority of committee members supported the general principles of the bill, but I also acknowledge that members had a variety of views on the bill's measures and that not everyone is in agreement on both parts, nor on all provisions. I recognise why that might be. As I stated in evidence to the committee only last month, the issues are finely balanced and sensitive for many people. I assure the committee and the Parliament that I look forward to further constructive engagement on the issues that are raised.

I thank the stakeholders who took the time to express their views on the bill through evidence to the committee, the public consultation and my own engagement.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Liberal Democrats will support the bill tonight, but we share the considerable concerns of stakeholders in the chamber and beyond it about part 2 and the Government's failure to make the case for what seems to be a dilution of our commitment to incorporating the UNCRC.

Jenny Gilruth: I will come on to talk about part 2 later, but I recognise that there are a number of different views, particularly about part 2 and on stakeholders' views. I will continue to listen as the bill makes its way through the Parliament.

The bill serves two main purposes: first, to strengthen children's rights in decisions about religious observance and religious and moral education; and, secondly, to clarify the legal duties of public authorities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 in situations where provisions in acts of the Scottish Parliament conflict with UNCRC obligations.

The bill is technical in nature, dealing with those two separate but related objectives, as is set out in parts 1 and 2, respectively. As such, the bill has been drafted very narrowly, and deliberately so, as it is intended to address those specific points within the current parliamentary session. However, I want to assure stakeholders and children and young people themselves that the bill does not mark the end of our efforts to strengthen and improve children's rights.

Religious observance and religious and moral education are two distinct but important aspects of school education in Scotland. Sections 8 and 9 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 provide for the long-standing parental right to withdraw a pupil from religious observance and/or religious and moral education. Guidance on religious observance notes that pupils' views should be considered in the withdrawal process. Currently, however, there is no requirement in legislation to consider them, and the decision rests entirely with the parent. Part 1 proposes to change that to provide a legal right for a child to be consulted where a parent has made a request to withdraw him or her from religious observance. That would provide certainty in the law that children and young people's views should be considered when parents are exercising their withdrawal right. It does not introduce an independent right to withdraw for the child, nor does it alter the parent's right to request a withdrawal. In practice, it also gives the child the ability to opt back in.

Without those changes, pupils might be denied those aspects of their education against their wishes, and their rights under the UNCRC might not be upheld. The committee has heard divergent views on the topic and, given that plurality of views, the Government's approach is to chart a middle course: to strengthen children's rights while balancing the three key considerations of parental rights, the recognition of stakeholder views and the practical implications for schools.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to give way to Mr Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary, given the plethora of choice that she had.

The cabinet secretary has already spoken about the complexity between education and religious observance. What is the Scottish Government's position on how that dichotomy will be addressed by its middle way?

Jenny Gilruth: The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee raised and reported on that point. The 1980 act does not currently separate those two distinct parts of our education system, but that is something that we might wish to come back to and reconsider at stage 2. There were mixed views in stakeholder consultation as to how that might be addressed, with the parental right to withdraw perhaps not applying to certain aspects in the future. We need to be mindful of that at stage 2.

As Mr Whitfield will know, we are making good progress in this space in the curriculum improvement cycle. All of those things need to be considered in the round.

I turn now to part 2, to which Mr Cole-Hamilton referred earlier. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 requires public authorities to respect and uphold the rights that are set out in the UNCRC requirements in the act when they exercise functions under acts of the Scottish Parliament. The 2024 act places a clear duty on them not to act incompatibly with those rights, and it gives children and their representatives a route to challenge decisions and seek redress. To ensure that that duty operates fairly in every situation, the bill introduces a very narrow exemption. Where another act of the Scottish Parliament leaves a public authority with no discretion to act compatibly with UNCRC requirements, the public authority would not be in breach of the duty for doing what the law requires.

Stephen Kerr: If we could go back to the issue of the rights of the child for a moment, I understand that that is a focus of the cabinet secretary's speech, but she said that there was a balance in the bill in relation to parents' legal rights and responsibilities. How does the bill address that at all, given that it gives the child the right, as prompted by the school, to decide for themselves something that their parents—who have a legal duty to them—will already have decided?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not necessarily follow Mr Kerr's line of questioning. The amendment to the 1980 act that is being proposed does not allow children an independent right to withdraw from religious observance or religious education. Any withdrawal from that subject or from that observance in school has to be initiated by the

parent or carer. It is not about taking rights away from the parents. The bill does propose, however, that we put into law the requirement for the child's views to be taken cognisance of.

Returning to part 2, I have mentioned the safeguards that are being included in that regard. If we had not put the safeguard into part 2, a public authority could be put in an impossible position: compelled by law to act in a particular way, while being told that to do so would breach the compatibility duty, thereby creating a conflict that could lead to disruption or even a pause in vital services. The exemption avoids that conflict by allowing services to continue.

We do not believe that any current acts of the Scottish Parliament require incompatible action, and there should be no future acts of the Parliament that require incompatible action because of the safeguards for new legislation that are built into the UNCRC. However, this is about future proofing, and our understanding of children's rights will continue to develop over time. Court judgments can shift interpretations over time, too. In short, although we do not see any incompatibility now, we cannot rule out the possibility of it arising in the future. The risk to essential services is material and not one that the Government is willing to take.

Martin Whitfield: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I am mindful of the time, Presiding Officer, but I will do so.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for giving so much time to interventions. Does the Scottish Government recognise that the potential of the exemption that is being created in the bill could be replicated in the future and, more importantly, that it will turn any case that an individual young person has with regard to their human rights back against the proposed legislation rather than the council, thus making it a far more complex way of trying to enforce their rights?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Whitfield for his question. In relation to the exemption being replicated in other legislation, it is important to note that a similar safeguard already exists in the Human Rights Act 1998, and the approach that we have taken is much narrower and more targeted, so we believe that that allays the risk that Martin Whitfield has spoken to.

A number of stakeholders, including Together, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make some progress, but I am happy to take interventions in closing.

Those organisations, as well as children and young people, have been broadly supportive of our approach and have recognised that, where the issue lies in legislation, the focus should be on fixing that legislation.

I have carefully considered the points and the recommendations made by the committee in the stage 1 report and have responded formally.

I am now mindful of the time, so I will move to my concluding comments. In summary, the bill builds on the progress that we continue to make on children's rights. It strengthens the protection and promotion of children's rights in education and strengthens the legal framework for children's rights in Scotland. I recognise that, as we have heard this afternoon, there is a range of views on those areas, but the bill offers the Parliament a very clear opportunity in this parliamentary session to make further meaningful progress on children's rights.

I welcome the recommendation by a majority of the committee members to agree to the general principles of the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill. I hope that the Parliament agrees to the general principles.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: I call Karen Adam, on behalf of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.

14:37

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the bill in my capacity as convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.

It is a short bill with two main purposes. On the face of it, it appears to be quite limited in scope and, to some extent, it was presented to the committee as a technical bill. It has, however, been an immensely challenging bill for the committee to consider. There was not one stakeholder whom we heard from who offered unreserved support for it. As I will return to at the end of my speech, ultimately, a majority of members have decided to recommend support for the general principles of the bill, but it has not been an easy decision to reach, and a minority of members have either been unable to make a recommendation on the general principles or do not support them.

Irrespective of the view that we came to on the bill, we all recognise that there are many serious concerns about it. If the bill progresses to stage 2 today, it will have to be amended to respond to those concerns.

Moreover, since we reported, the United Kingdom Supreme Court has issued its judgment in relation to withdrawal from religious education in Northern Ireland. I appreciate that the judgment is specific to the education system in Northern Ireland, but we nonetheless welcome the cabinet secretary's letter noting that the Scottish Government is confident that the judgment does not impact on the bill.

Significant concerns were expressed to us about parts 1 and 2 of the bill. Currently, parents and carers have the legal right to withdraw children from religious observance and religious and moral education. We heard that there is a general impression that the numbers of withdrawals from religious observance and religious and moral education are low. However, the committee found that there is very little information on the numbers of withdrawals, nor is there any information available to us on what the children who are withdrawn from religious observance and religious and moral education do during the lessons from which they are withdrawn.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The member is linking religious observance and religious education, but questions have previously been raised about that. Did the committee look at that point? It seems to me that all children should be educated, but not all children should be taking part in observance.

Karen Adam: I will come to that point in my speech. The difference between religious observance and religious and moral education did come up in committee.

Stephen Kerr: The convener said that there is little or no data on withdrawals. Did the committee have any concerns about that? Why would we legislate in an area on which there is no data? Did that come up? Was it a consideration for the committee during its proceedings?

Karen Adam: We did not doubt that withdrawal is happening—there is evidence that it is. I was referring to the specific and particular data that we wanted to see in order to know and understand the issue a bit better. We have asked the Scottish Government to look into providing us with that data.

We have asked the Scottish Government to undertake research to better understand how withdrawal is monitored, and to look at what schools put in place for young people who have been withdrawn. As it stands, if withdrawals continue to be at a low level, the impact of the bill

might be minimal, but its impact must be monitored, as greater numbers of withdrawals could have a significant impact on schools.

I turn to the main concerns about part 1 of the bill. First, the committee heard concerns about the bill's conflation of religious observance and religious and moral education. Under the bill, withdrawal from both is treated in the same way. However, witnesses told the committee that the two should not be treated equally. It was suggested that withdrawal should apply only to religious observance. A majority of the committee agreed with that, recommending that

"opting out from RME should not be possible for either young people or their parents/guardians. In an ever more fragmented society, RME seems an increasingly important subject and one from which the Committee considers children should not be withdrawing."

We note the Scottish Government's reasoning for not adopting that approach, but we urge it to reflect again, and lodge amendments in that respect. That approach has been adopted in Wales, and we do not see why it could not be adopted in Scotland, too.

We also heard concerns that familial conflict might be precipitated as a result of the bill. We recognise that there is the potential for such conflict, and we urge the Scottish Government to monitor the impact of the bill and ensure that schools have the resources and training to enable them to meet those challenges.

Witnesses also expressed disappointment about the lack of an independent right for the child to opt out of religious observance. The bill provides a right for the child to opt into religious observance and religious and moral education where a parent has exercised their right to withdraw a pupil, but it provides no right to independently opt out. In that regard, the bill falls short of meeting the concluding observations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

While we recognise the support for that independent right, a majority of the committee understood why the cabinet secretary had sought to chart a middle ground on the issue in seeking only to make provision for the opt-in. However, we still appreciate that there are strong arguments for that independent right, and a majority of the committee agreed to invite the cabinet secretary to consider making provision for that in future legislation.

Some of the evidence that was presented to the committee expressed concern about the absence of a prescribed age at which a child is considered to be capable of forming a view on withdrawal. It was suggested that that would place undue pressure on teachers to make decisions on capacity. Others suggested, however, that

teachers are making those kinds of decisions on capacity all the time.

A majority of the committee agreed with the approach that is taken in the bill not to prescribe an age at which a child is considered to have capacity. However, we recognise that that will present challenges for teachers, and they will need to be supported and resourced to make those decisions.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Does Karen Adam recognise that capacity is defined in several different age brackets by various acts of this Parliament? I have sought to clarify that and bring cohesion on it. Should the bill seek to do so, too?

Karen Adam: It is not a committee bill—it is a Scottish Government bill. We had a great deal of discussion on the age at which a child could have capacity, but the majority of us decided that teachers deal with such things all the time and have to make those kinds of decisions.

Another concern that was presented to the committee was that part 1 of the bill has been drafted as an amendment to existing pre-devolution legislation rather than as stand-alone legislation and that, as a result, the bill is not within the scope of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. A majority of the committee was disappointed by the approach that has been taken. It would have been preferable for the bill to have been drafted as stand-alone legislation. Stakeholders have recommended that the bill be amended to bring it within the scope of the 2024 act. The committee acknowledges that an amendment of that significance might not be admissible, but we would nonetheless welcome the cabinet secretary's reflections on that concern.

Turning to part 2, I note that the bill seeks to amend the 2024 act in order to add an exception to the duty on public authorities under section 6 of that legislation to act compatibly with the UNCRC in circumstances where the authority is compelled to act incompatibly in reliance on another act of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government explained that that is intended to remove the potential for public authorities to have to decide whether to act in a way that puts them in breach of the compatibility duty in the 2024 act or another statutory duty.

Stakeholders were concerned about the implications of part 2 and perplexed about the rationale for it. It is unclear to the committee why part 2 is essential at this juncture, given that a scoping exercise has not been undertaken to understand whether there is a need for it. We note that the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has proposed mitigations

to part 2, and we invite the Scottish Government to reflect further on those.

The committee is concerned, too, about the precedent that that approach sets in establishing carve-outs from legislation. We ask that, should the bill be passed, the Scottish Government ensures that Parliament is kept updated about the operation of that provision and how it may be used.

As I noted in my opening remarks, after careful consideration, a majority of the committee agreed to recommend to Parliament that it should agree to the general principles of the bill. It should be recognised that that support is predicated on amendments being made to the bill to respond to the concerns that I have outlined this afternoon. I look forward to listening to the remainder of the debate and seeking to work towards a bill that can further the rights of children effectively.

14:46

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary opened her comments by saying that the issue is finely balanced and sensitive and that the Government has looked for a middle route. However, it is clear that, in some cases, there is no middle route. I think that many members who speak in this debate will find the bill difficult in that it does not deliver the middle route that the cabinet secretary has talked about.

I thank the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for its work, and I thank all those who gave evidence and the organisations that provided helpful briefings ahead of today's stage 1 debate.

I believe that it is important for children to have a say in their education, but any change must also respect the crucial role that parents and carers play in shaping their upbringing. We should never forget that. Too often, debates do not include the supporters of our young people—their parents and carers. Scottish Conservatives are concerned that the bill risks creating confusion and conflict, not only within families, with unclear safeguards around how—

Jenny Gilruth: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I will.

Jenny Gilruth: I am interested in Mr Briggs's point, because our approach maintains that only parents may initiate a withdrawal from RO or RME. Mr Briggs also mentioned conflict. However, as Together observed in its evidence to the committee, conflict already exists in the current system. Putting children's rights into law and listening to them is a simple approach that balances calls from other stakeholders to go

further and recognises the role of parents and carers. I wonder whether Mr Briggs will respond to some of those points.

Miles Briggs: I do not disagree with some of the points that the cabinet secretary has made. The issue is about balance. Earlier, she outlined a system of opt-in and opt-out for young people—the hokey-cokey system that has been created. Ultimately, it feels like the bill is flawed and not fit for purpose, which is where the committee's work—

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I will.

Martin Whitfield: Is the challenge not that we are moving the decision making for the conflict—the tension between two different groups of human rights—on to teachers in the classroom? They are in a stressed position, but they will have to take a position that they could subsequently be criticised for taking.

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree. I will come on to talk about that later in my speech. We are concerned about the impact that the bill will have in our classrooms.

As we have heard, we are making laws without having data available, but we believe that what is proposed is, in effect, already happening in Scotland. When we look at the survey that the Scottish Government undertook in three council areas, we see that, potentially, about 4,000 pupils are currently being withdrawn from RME and RO without any legislation needing to be put in place.

I agree with the point that the Church of Scotland raised in its briefing, which was that the issue that the Scottish Government is trying to address would be better dealt with through training, learning and development, rather than by imposing those duties on teachers.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Does Miles Briggs recognise the concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which has repeatedly said that we are out of step with the provisions of the convention by not legislating to allow children the right to have their voice heard?

Miles Briggs: What is important is how that can work in practice. The work of the committee has exposed that what that means in practice is often contradictory. Having taken a number of interventions, I want to come on to what that will mean in classrooms. I wonder what the cabinet secretary, as a former teacher, has thought about how it would work in practice were she back in the classroom.

I will concentrate on the workability of the proposal in the school environment and the

impacts that it will have on the wider school community. As Sarah Quinn of the Educational Institute of Scotland said,

“we have significant concerns about the apparent underestimation of the resources that will be required for implementation and about the potential impact on workload and relationships. We do not feel that the bill fully realises our policy intentions for pupils’ rights”.—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 7 October 2025; c 26.]

We have just had a question about less contact time. The bill would put more duties on our teachers.

Dr Douglas Hutchison of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland said:

“it is difficult to imagine any straightforward or consistent mechanism to make it work that would not be burdensome for the school and onerous for”

the relationship between

“the child and parent.”—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 7 October 2025; c 33-4.]

That is where I have concerns over what that will mean for those children who will, potentially, be withdrawn from those lessons. There is a concern—which I also note from the committee’s report—about the isolation of young people in our schools in the model that would be delivered.

Also not touched on are care-experienced young people and the decision making around them. I do not know whether that has been overlooked by the Scottish Government. Is it the case that we have not looked at that very important group of people, as part of the Promise, when it comes to decision making in schools?

I studied higher religious education when I was at school. As the convener has stated, it is very important that we make the case for a greater understanding of different faiths and beliefs and, through learning and experiences in our schools, break down the barriers that debates in the chamber often look towards.

We live in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. In a world in which global connections and communications are deeply entrenched, we need to understand one another and our religions. I therefore express concern that the bill would create a situation in which some young people could go through their education without having the opportunity to understand other religions and faiths.

I thank my colleagues Tess White and Pam Gosal for their work on the committee. They were consistent in their questioning and in raising concerns in the committee evidence sessions.

As I said earlier, it is important that we look towards children having a say in their education,

but any change must also respect the crucial role of parents and carers in helping to shape their upbringing. We are concerned that the bill risks creating confusion and conflict within families, with unclear safeguards on how parental rights and children’s views would be balanced in practice, while placing significant burdens on our schools and teaching staff.

Rights must be workable in practice, and many education professionals, from teachers to directors of education, have warned that the bill is unclear and burdensome and that it risks creating conflict. The proposed change cannot come at the cost of damaging relationships at home or overwhelming our schools, which are already complaining of too much bureaucracy within their walls.

Given the uncertainties and the potential impact on families and teaching staff, the Scottish Conservatives will not support the bill at stage 1, and will look to lodge amendments at stage 2.

14:54

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members’ interests.

It is a pleasure to speak in the stage 1 debate of the impressively titled Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill. The bill seeks to do two things. First, it will involve pupils in decisions about withdrawal from religious observance and religious and moral education. Secondly, it will amend the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 to clarify the circumstances in which “incompatible” actions by public authorities are not unlawful—in other words, it considers where a public authority is breaching a child’s human rights.

On the face of it, those aims may sound reasonable. However, the detail in the bill and the evidence that was presented to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee reveal serious challenges that will make it impossible for Labour to support the general principles of the bill. I thank the members and convener of the committee for their excellent work on the bill, as well as those who gave evidence.

Part 1 of the bill addresses withdrawal from RO and RME. The intention of giving children a voice when parents seek to withdraw them is welcome in principle, but the challenge is that the bill fails to resolve a deeper problem, which is the continued right to withdraw from RME in non-denominational schools. RME is not a confessional period; it is an academically rigorous subject that helps young people to understand not just world religions or their own religion, but ethical issues and

philosophical perspectives—skills that are essential for life in a diverse Scotland. Yet, by maintaining the statutory right to withdraw from RME, the bill will perpetuate an outdated approach that denies children access to a full curriculum.

Almost everybody who gave evidence to the committee, including STARME, faith representatives and humanist organisations, recommended removing the right to withdraw from RME from the bill, and a majority of members on the committee agreed. Continuing that right will contradict the spirit of the UNCRC and undermine the entitlement to a broad education.

The bill also conflates religious observance with religious and moral education, despite their fundamentally different purposes—one is reflective and one is educational. That conflation is a historical anomaly that this legislation should have corrected.

I move to part 2 of the bill. In the policy memorandum, the Scottish Government gave an assurance that it is

“committed to upholding the rule of law by ensuring that laws are clear, accessible and effective. It is also committed to fully realising the human rights of all people in Scotland, including complying with international human rights obligations.”

I start with that assurance because part 2 of the bill is presented as a technical fix to provide legal clarity. However, let us be clear that it will introduce a significant risk to the integrity of the incorporation of the UNCRC in Scotland.

The 2024 act was designed to create a proactive culture of accountability for children’s rights. Section 6 of the 2024 act imposes a duty on public authorities to act compatibly with those rights. However, section 2 of the bill will carve out an exemption to that duty and allow public authorities to act incompatibly with the UNCRC when compelled to do so by Scottish legislation.

That has been described as a pragmatic solution, but, in practice, it will create blind spots. It will mean that when a child’s rights are breached because of a statutory requirement, that breach cannot be challenged under the 2024 act. The accountability mechanism shifts from the courts to the legislature, but with no guarantee that incompatibilities will be identified or addressed.

I go back to comments that were made by the then Deputy First Minister in 2019. John Swinney said:

“The key point to observe is that the purpose of incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law is to provide the highest level of protection for the rights of children in our society. If that requires Parliament to amend the existing legislation of Scotland to ensure that it is compatible with the UNCRC, that is

precisely what Parliament has to do.”—[Official Report, 20 November 2019; c 5.]

The bill will do the opposite of that. Instead of amending legislation to make it compatible with the UNCRC, which was suggested by the committee, the bill will create an exemption that will allow incompatibility to persist. There will be no statutory duty for public bodies to report when they rely on the exemption, and there will be no audit of existing legislative conflicts for at least a year. In short, we risk embedding a loophole that will weaken the very protections that the 2024 act was meant to deliver.

Stephen Kerr: Would Martin Whitfield agree that, in his description of section 2, he has actually underpinned the point that there is no place in there for the rights and responsibilities of parents? What role does he see being played by the rights and responsibilities of parents in relation to their children in this at all?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give you the time back, Mr Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful, Presiding Officer.

It is right to say that parents have the human right to parent. They have a responsibility for education, and much of that sits in part 1. As I hope the member will appreciate, I am concentrating on part 2 at this stage because of the coach and horses that it potentially drives through the protections that we have—protections that, in this case, relate to young people because of the definitions within the UNCRC. It also perhaps speaks to an incredibly dangerous attitude towards human rights that appears to be developing, along the lines of, “Human rights are fine when they’re fine, but if they cause us a problem, let’s find a way to ignore them.” That worries me.

The bill has the potential to restrict—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Does the member recognise, as I do, that the catch-all application in part 2 fatally undermines our attempts to successfully incorporate the UNCRC? Should there ever be a need to disapply the convention, we could just make that specific in legislation at that time.

Martin Whitfield: I have a fear of there being a period of time where the situation is such that we have to explicitly disapply human rights, but I agree with the substance of the intervention.

The Scottish Government wants to remove the rights of our children when compelled to do so by Scottish legislation. There is no potential end to that tunnel. I know that the cabinet secretary said that she can imagine it only ever being used once.

My greatest fear is that a vehicle is discovered that successfully moves to one side the ability of an individual—in this case, a young person—to bring a claim under the UNCRC, leaving them instead having to rely on bringing down an entire piece of legislation with regard to their rights. As soon as that vehicle is discovered, it could prove very attractive in some circumstances, and I am not prepared to endorse that message.

The stage 1 report from the committee—again, I thank the committee members for their work—supports the principle of giving a child a voice, but only with substantial amendments to the bill. In the report, the committee expresses disappointment that the bill excludes itself from the scope of the UNCRC. The committee warns that the benefits of the bill may not outweigh the negatives if it stands as currently drafted.

In short, the bill is not ready. It does not deliver the rights-based approach that Scotland is committed to, it does not reflect the weight of the evidence on RME, and it does not provide sufficient safeguards in part 2. For that reason, when it comes to the vote on the bill's general principles, Labour will abstain. I cannot oppose the general principles because—to go back to the memorandum—the Scottish Government's stated intention was to strengthen children's rights. The bill does not do that, but it could be the vehicle that does. Therefore, Labour will abstain.

This Parliament has a proud record of advancing children's rights. Even in the face of a Scottish Government that is retreating from that record, this Parliament must ensure that its reputation and responsibility are not compromised by legislation that falls short of our own ambition.

15:03

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): This Parliament has taken significant strides in promoting children's rights. After three years of delay caused by a petty UK Government, last year we enshrined the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law.

Previously, my Green colleague John Finnie ensured that all children are protected from physical assault under the guise of so-called discipline, even from their parents, yet we have so much further to go. Our age of criminal responsibility is just 12—higher than in some other parts of the world but lower than in many countries. It is lower than the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommended age of 16, and even lower than its absolute minimum of 14.

The bill concerns another area in which children's rights are not fully respected. The child-facing version of the convention says:

“I have the right to be listened to and taken seriously.”

However, the 1980 act allows children to be withdrawn from religious activities in schools without their consent and without even taking their views into account. That is clearly contrary to the convention, and I welcome this opportunity to correct that.

However, the bill, as drafted, suggests that the Scottish Government's determination to ensure rights compatibility goes only so far. It allows a young person to opt back in if they have been opted out of those activities, but not to opt out themselves. That directly contradicts the Scottish Government's draft child rights scheme, which says that it wants to give children

“the knowledge and confidence to use their rights”.

That suggests, rightly, that children should be able to use their rights proactively, and not only after an adult has acted on their behalf.

The bill also contradicts the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, who was explicit in her letter to the committee, in which she said:

“Part 1 in its current form does not achieve compliance with the UNCRC.”

The commissioner is far from alone. The committee's stage 1 report also notes that

“A majority ... supported amending the Bill to provide children with an independent right to withdraw from RO.”

That majority includes the Scottish Human Rights Commission, UNICEF—the United Nations Children's Fund—and Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights). Professor Angela O'Hagan of the Scottish Human Rights Commission told the committee that, without such a right, the bill will fail to meet its basic aim of achieving compliance with the UNCRC.

I found myself in a minority of one when the committee reported on that aspect. However, if colleagues remain opposed to amendment, I ask them to reflect on why they think that they know better than every children's rights organisation in the country, better than the public and better than their own supporters. A Survation poll that was released today by the Humanist Society Scotland shows that 66 per cent of Scots believe that pupils should be able to decide for themselves whether to take part in religious observance. The majority of supporters of every political party agree.

It is also doubtful whether the provisions of the 1980 act would withstand legal scrutiny, regardless of the bill. Last week, judges ruled that collective worship in Northern Ireland that is not “objective, critical and pluralistic” amounts to “indoctrination” and is unlawful. The Scottish Government has responded to that, but it has also been warned that a similar challenge could

succeed here unless the bill is amended to uphold young people's rights.

The bill suffers from another major flaw. Like the 1980 act, it conflates religious observance with religious education. Religious observance—in other words, acts of worship, especially when one faith is prioritised over another—should have no place in state schools. Young people of different faiths or of no faith should not be forced to take part in worship. Forced observance is incompatible with article 14 of the convention, the child-facing version of which says:

"I have the right to have my own thoughts and beliefs and to choose my religion".

John Mason: On that point, is such a choice not made when the parents and the child select, say, a Catholic school, and therefore choose to take part in religious observance, rather than it being made later on, halfway down the road?

Maggie Chapman: While we have religious state schools, the beliefs of a school need to be taken account of by the parents in choosing it. However, many of us would rather have complete separation of church and state in our education system.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland is clear that the right under article 14 includes freedom of religion, thought and conscience—freedoms that the current system does not adequately protect. Religious and moral education, or RME, is quite different. As we have heard this afternoon, learning about diverse religions and belief systems is an essential part of a broad education in a pluralist society. Young people cannot withdraw from science, maths, history or English, and that is for good reason. Religious and moral education is similarly vital, and teachers agree. Dr Douglas Hutchison of ADES said:

"religious and moral education should be seen as a curricular subject in the same way as any other subject."

He also said:

"The idea that, in a liberal democracy, there is no place in the curriculum for religious education and there should be a right to withdraw from it does not make sense in 2025."—[Official Report, 7 October 2025; c 27.]

The Scottish Episcopal Church told the committee that RME

"stands firmly within the school curriculum",

that

"our children need to understand other faiths, beliefs and cultures if they are to grow up in the diverse, inclusive and tolerant society that we want in Scotland",

and that

"there is a big distinction between RME and RO, and the bill does not recognise it."—[Official Report, 30 September; c 10.]

The Church of Scotland and other faith groups also share that view.

I will speak to part 2 later this afternoon, so I will close for now. I welcome the bill, in part, as an opportunity to strengthen children's rights, but it clearly does not go far enough to ensure that young people's views are heard, respected and acted on.

The bill risks entrenching the idea that children's rights are to be exercised only after adults intervene, rather than independently and proactively, and it risks undermining the vital role of RME by failing to separate it clearly from religious observance. At stage 2, I will lodge amendments to separate RO and RME and to introduce the independent right of a child to withdraw from RO.

15:10

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): As I told the cabinet secretary, the Liberal Democrats will support the general principles of the bill. However, our support is finely balanced, and we do so only because the bill represents the last opportunity to extend children's rights in this session of Parliament. The legislation is very much like the curate's egg—it is good in part, but there are massive deficiencies, and I agree with much of what has been said in critique of it so far.

Presiding Officer, as you know, before politics, I was a youth worker. Fighting for the rights and wellbeing of children is in my political and spiritual DNA. The bill presents us with the question that we keep coming back to in this Parliament: do we believe that children and their rights should be taken seriously and that they should have a voice in the decisions that shape their lives? It is my belief and that of my party, as well as the settled will of the Parliament, that they should.

We have legislation that incorporates the UNCRC into Scots law, yet concluding observation after concluding observation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is the guarantor of that convention, has said that Scotland is out of step with the intent of the convention on these issues.

Stephen Kerr: Alex Cole-Hamilton said very clearly that he believes in the rights of a child, but what about the rights of parents? He will have probably noticed that that is a theme of my contribution this afternoon. We are talking a lot about the rights of children, but what about the rights of their parents and their legal duty of care for their children?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Both have rights, and neither of them should be mutually exclusive. As Stephen Kerr will be aware, from the age of 12, someone can give consent to a medical procedure, irrespective of their parents' views. That decision needs to come from the children. We already disaggregate those decision-making powers, and rightly so.

Part 1 of the bill goes some way to addressing the deficiencies in our policy that the UN committee has identified. When a parent withdraws a child from religious observance or RME, the school must inform the child, give them space to express their views, engage with the parent and child where disagreement arises, and then, ultimately, respect the child's wishes, where they have capacity. I agree that that does not go far enough, and it is confusing to conflate religious observance and RME. That should be disaggregated.

Article 12 of the UNCRC is one of the most fundamental pillars of the convention. A child has a right to express a view in all matters affecting them, and for that view to be

"given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

I need to clarify my intervention on the convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, as I do not think that I expressed myself well. Article 12 is elegant in its simplicity. It does not define the age of maturity—and nor should it, because that is a judgment call.

On sensitive issues such as this, in discussion with parents and children, a view can be arrived at, but the views of the child should never be discounted if they can be delivered and articulated.

Together, (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)—an organisation of which I was very proud to be convener—is clear that, when decisions profoundly affect a child's values, their outlook or world view, their voice must be heard. It wants the bill to go further in that regard. In its view,

"With the right amendments at Stage 2, this legislation could mark another important step"

towards the full incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law. I support some of the proposed changes that Maggie Chapman has articulated in that regard.

We need to allow for children themselves to withdraw from religious observance. John Mason said that, if a family places a child in a Roman Catholic school, that is clearly a statement of intent, and that is what they should expect, but religious observance does not just start and end at Catholic education. It happens in all aspects of life,

particularly at this time of year, as we approach the Christmas season.

It is clear that the bill needs significant work at stage 2. The committee heard legitimate concerns about the conflation of religious observance and RME, which I mentioned, the potential conflict within families and how we assess capacity. In my view, those aspects need to be looked at.

Part 2 of the bill sets out a new exemption from the compatibility duty. I have raised with the cabinet secretary my concern with that provision. It would allow public authorities to act in ways that would otherwise be incompatible with children's rights when the authorities are compelled to do so by provisions in acts of the Scottish Parliament. It is in effect a release valve—a get-out clause, or a back door—that gives local authorities the means to not observe the rights that we have asked them to observe in respect of children and young people. In effect, it limits the legal obligation on authorities to uphold UNCRC standards in specific circumstances as underpinned by Scottish law.

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee has raised concerns about this part of the bill, including about the Government's failure to make a robust case for the need for it. I do not think that I heard that in the remarks of the cabinet secretary. I am glad that she is closing for the Government as well—

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: If I have time, I certainly will.

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

Martin Whitfield: In the policy memorandum, the cabinet secretary has certified, in accordance with section 23(1) of the 2024 act, that the bill complies with the UNCRC. Does the member struggle, as I do, to see that not contradicting what appears to exist in part 2?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Martin Whitfield makes the point that I was coming on to make. I cannot see how giving an opt-out from the UNCRC legislation that this Parliament has passed is in any way compatible with that same legislation. It almost disappplies it, in the most simple analysis. I am grateful to the member for raising that.

I agree with the committee that it is not clear why these changes are needed or what problem they are intended to solve. The bill has been introduced with little clarity about its long-term implications. It also threatens the support of several parties in Parliament, which are proceeding in good faith and want to see the furtherance of children's rights in the parliamentary time that remains in the session.

There is also concern about the precedent that the bill sets in looking for these carve-outs and the implications that that might have for the future Scottish human rights bill that we have heard talked of for the next Parliament.

I am concerned that the bill risks weakening the very architecture of the incorporation of the rights of the child. A range of human rights organisations, including the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, are aligned on that point and expressed their concerns in their stage 1 evidence, as we have heard several times today.

Liberal Democrats will continue to champion children's rights. We will move forward in good faith on the bill, but our patience is finite. Until the Government can tell us why part 2 is needed, we cannot envisage supporting it at stage 3 in the final analysis of the bill.

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

15:17

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Karen Adam for her opening speech as convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. As a member of the committee, I can say that the evidence sessions were extensive. As we have heard today, the evidence that was gathered led to lots of differing opinions on the bill.

Some motives for concern were shared by many. Striking a balance with the legislation was key. The committee was split on the benefits of the bill for young people. I, like the majority of the committee, supported the general principles but, obviously, with the need for amendments.

Stakeholder engagement was wide as we discussed the bill, and I thank all stakeholders for their participation.

As a person of faith, I am very much in favour of ecumenical teachings in schools of all faiths. Understanding and respecting the views of others, of all faiths and none, is so important as we push back against prejudice and ignorance.

Religious observance and our own religious and moral education are, of course, important in their own right, and I will touch on that later.

It is important to understand the context of the bill, and one of the key issues in that context is the current level of withdrawals. One of the first questions that the committee asked was about the number of pupils who have withdrawn. There is limited information on that, and I would like to see how that can be improved. We heard that the numbers are small but, regardless of how small they are—even if it is only one, two or three

people—it is important to have that information. On the more general point, the committee has asked the Scottish Government to consider how best it can be made aware of how RO is being delivered and the number of pupils who are requesting withdrawal. It is important to keep in mind the context of what we are talking about.

As has been mentioned, conflation of RO and RME was an important topic. As I have stated, RME is increasingly relevant, and I agree with the majority of the committee that RME should not be a topic that children can withdraw from. RME is one of the eight curriculum areas in the curriculum for excellence. I understand the point that others have made that, if children can withdraw from RME, what other issues can they withdraw from? I remember how much my two kids valued RME at school, and how much it informed them in respecting others at school and even now going forward in their lives. That is important. I note that the cabinet secretary has stated that she will give careful consideration to that topic in advance of stage 2.

The committee recognised that the bill creates a potential for conflict between parents and children. That is where the key balance has to be. I acknowledge the point that Stephen Kerr made on that, and I will touch on the issue later. The intention of the bill is, of course, to increase rights for children. It is important that there is resource for schools to deal with such conflict—that issue was raised by some of the schools that we heard from in evidence.

The cabinet secretary has advised that the bill includes a requirement to seek discussion between parents, children and the school. In her response to the committee, she referred to the legal rights under article 12 of the UNCRC, which is the right to be heard; article 14, which is the right to freedom of thought, conscience and, of course, religion; and article 29, which is on the purposes of education.

The issue of the right of the child to independently opt out of RO and RME was also a topic of conversation. I was encouraged to hear that the cabinet secretary wishes to “chart a middle ground” on that issue. Again, I am cognisant of what has been said on it. The majority of the committee considered that it would be appropriate for children to have a right to object to RO and RME.

The issue of children's capacity to form a view was discussed in the committee and by stakeholders. The point was made that there can be a very mature 12-year-old and a very immature 14-year-old. The majority of the committee agreed that the bill should not specify an age threshold at which a pupil's views are considered in

discussions about withdrawal from RO and RME, which I think is the correct approach.

The committee mentioned the need for support and training on the decision-making capacity of pupils. A few schools touched on that, including denominational and non-faith schools. The training issue is an important point, and I hope that the cabinet secretary can pick up on it in summing up the debate.

As we have heard, one of the key issues all the way through the process was compatibility with the UNCRC. That was an issue for stakeholders, particularly in the panel of those with legal expertise. I am aware of the cabinet secretary's position regarding the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 in that respect.

The committee recognised concerns about part 2 of the bill. Those concerns relate to the rationale, the precedent and whether the bill is an appropriate vehicle for the measure. I note the cabinet secretary's comments in her response that the measure is

"a necessary and proportionate safeguard to ensure that the UNCRC Act operates reliably as case law develops."

Together, which has been mentioned, as well as the SHRC and the children's commissioner have all offered support for the bill, although that is caveated. The committee has asked the Scottish Government to ensure that the Parliament is kept updated with regard to part 2.

On the general principles, there was no doubt that concerns were presented to the committee, and we have heard different opinions from members. It was encouraging to see in the cabinet secretary's response to the committee's stage 1 report that she will consider some of the points that were raised by stakeholders as we move towards stage 2.

In the closing paragraph of the cabinet secretary's response to the stage 1 report, she "notes the significant concerns highlighted by the Committee and others", and says that she will "reflect carefully on all of the points made" as the bill progresses. I look forward to future discussions on the bill with her and stakeholders.

15:23

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for producing its stage 1 report on the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, as well as all the witnesses who provided evidence to the committee.

I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives in this very important debate and as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. The bill will require schools to inform a child if their parents ask them to be withdrawn from religious education and/or observance. The bill will also give the child the chance to express their views and, in cases where the child's views are different from those of their parents, the school will have to follow the child's wishes.

Although I recognise the cabinet secretary's good intentions in introducing the bill, I would like to lay out my concerns. The issues that I am concerned about include the conflict that the bill creates between the rights of parents and the views of children; the impact on families and teachers; and the reality that children develop at different stages. Let me explain some things about the bill.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: I have just started, but on you go.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am interested in Pam Gosal's choice of language about the conflict that she sees as existing between the rights of parents and the views of children. Does she recognise that children have rights as well?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back, Ms Gosal.

Pam Gosal: Absolutely. I recognise that children have rights, but we also need to understand where the parents fit in. They are their legal guardians and carers. We need to listen to parents because, as I will set out later, the fear is that precedents will be set. I hope that the member understands that, although I understand that children and parents both have rights, there has to be a balance.

Let me explain some things about the bill. First, it risks stripping parents of their rights. Although it is important that children's voices are heard, we must remember that parents are their primary guardians. Children under the age of 18 are not old enough to purchase and consume alcohol, be liable for council tax, get a credit card and more. But hold on—they are old enough to override their parents.

Another issue of concern is the precedent that the bill sets. We might be talking about religious education and observance now, but what comes tomorrow? For example, will a child be able to override their parents when it comes to education on controversial issues such as LGBT or gender ideology? Many primary schools, including in my area of East Dunbartonshire, already work with controversial organisations such as LGBT Youth

Scotland, which is not an organisation that is geared towards children of primary school age. I have been contacted by many concerned parents who have asked me for help because they believe that such organisations should not have any involvement with their children.

Therefore, a bill that would let children override their parents risks opening a new can of worms by bringing in by the back door dangerous ideologies that serve a political agenda and go against parents' rights. The bill also risks repeating the Scottish National Party's so-called named person scheme fiasco, which John Swinney, the then Cabinet Secretary for Education, had to walk back shamefully.

There are also extreme worries when it comes to determining whether a child is mature enough to override their parents. Who is to tell whether one child is capable of forming a view but another is not? That puts teachers in a very difficult place, because it potentially creates conflicts between pupils, teachers and parents. Teachers in our schools already face excessive burdens, including but not limited to excessive workload, challenging pupil behaviour and ever-increasing incidents of violence. The last thing that they need is the administrative burden of determining whether children can override their parents when it comes to religious education and observance.

The bill also risks isolating children. Allowing teachers to make a choice on this issue would lead to a lot of inconsistency, and the emotional impact on children should be recognised. In its written submission, the Catholic Headteachers Association of Primary Schools said:

"there is a very real risk that the proposed changes to the Bill could result in primary-aged children being isolated from their school community."

The children's rights legislative landscape in Scotland is already complicated and the approach in the bill adds even more complexity. In the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, we heard from several witnesses who said that they were worried that the bill is a temporary and short-term solution that does not address underlying issues. Angela O'Hagan from the Scottish Human Rights Commission said that we are

"looking at yet another add-on, with another legislative instrument added as a sticking plaster to patch up legislation whose proposals have not been well defined in the first instance."

At the same time, Fraser Sutherland from the Humanist Society Scotland said:

"the bill documentation and pre-bill consultation clearly show that the Government does not fully understand what is happening."—[Official Report, *Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 30 September 2025; c 48, 30.]

If the Government's legislation is flawed and only a short-term fix, what was the point of introducing it in the first place?

We are tasked with creating good legislation, and the committee has a duty to scrutinise it. Unfortunately, the bill is not up to the standards of the Parliament. We cannot be complacent here, especially when some might try to hijack the bill to bring in dangerous ideologies that open the back door to a political agenda that erodes parental rights. I would like to make it very clear that, for the reasons that I have stated in my speech, I will not support the bill.

15:29

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I express my appreciation to the committee for the depth and care that it has shown in its stage 1 scrutiny of the bill, and I thank all stakeholders who gave evidence.

Today, I offer my tentative support for the bill. My support is rooted in my long-held humanist values—values that are centred on the rights, dignity and evolving capacities of children and young people—and in my desire to see Scotland continue to embed human rights in everyday practice.

The bill seeks to bring our education system closer to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. For the first time, schools will be legally required to inform a child if a parent requests their withdrawal from religious observance or religious and moral education. Crucially, that child must be given the chance to express their own views. When a young person's wishes differ from those of their parents, schools must seek to understand and respect the child's perspective.

As a child in a Catholic school setting, I was opted out of RO, and I opted my children out of RO. However, I fundamentally believe that my children should have the right to challenge me. Indeed, I hope that I have raised my children to have the capacity to challenge me if, for example, I was to seek to withdraw them from sexual health education. From a humanist standpoint, that matters immensely.

The bill's approach recognises children not merely as passengers in their educational journey but as rights holders—individuals who are capable of forming and expressing their own beliefs. The Government's assessments acknowledge that that strengthens articles 12 and 14 of the UNCRC, on the right to be heard and on freedom of thought, conscience and religion. That is a welcome step forward.

The bill attempts to resolve a long-standing tension in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 by creating a narrow exemption for public authorities when they are caught between conflicting legal duties. I understand why the Government feels that that is necessary. Our schools and public bodies should never be placed in an impossible legal position, so the bill aims to provide clarity.

However—this is why my support for the bill remains cautious—the committee heard compelling evidence that the bill, as it stands, will not fully realise the rights that it seeks to protect. The Scottish Human Rights Commission, the National Secular Society and the Humanist Society Scotland made the particularly powerful case that the bill does not provide children with the independent right to withdraw from religious observance. Only children whose parents initiate withdrawal are given any voice at all. That falls short of the UN committee's recommendations.

As things stand, under the bill, a child whose parents have opted them out of religious observance is empowered, once they are sufficiently mature, to opt themselves back in. However, a child whose parents do not opt them out has no equivalent right to opt out on their own. That is a fundamental asymmetry and would create a hierarchy of rights, which would be wholly contrary to the UNCRC's emphasis on the child being a rights holder, with their own capacity, not merely an extension of parental belief.

The committee heard concerns about access to justice. By carving out an exemption to the 2024 act, the bill risks weakening the framework that was expressly designed to help children to challenge rights breaches.

Martin Whitfield: In a most articulate way, Elena Whitham has encompassed the challenge that will be created by giving local authorities an exemption to the UNCRC. In relation to enforcing their human rights, a child might not be able to opt themselves out. If the bill is passed, the child will have to go all the way to Europe to do that, because they will have to challenge the legislation, and they will need support to do so. However, if there was not that opt-out, once we knew the domestic procedure, such issues could perhaps be dealt with locally and far more civilly, while retaining the relationships that are needed for good schooling.

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

Elena Whitham: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I recognise the argument that Martin Whitfield has made.

The commission warned that, without safeguards such as requiring public authorities to notify the Scottish ministers when relying on the exemption, we risk creating a lack of transparency and undermining accountability. Those concerns struck me as reasonable and serious. Human rights organisations contend that, if those concerns are not addressed, the bill will not fully comply with the UNCRC.

It is also worth drawing attention, as Maggie Chapman did, to the polling that was commissioned by the Humanist Society Scotland that shows that 66 per cent of the population support a young person's right to withdraw independently.

Another issue that was raised repeatedly was the lack of clarity that has been created by treating religious observance and religious and moral education as though they are interchangeable. We have heard a lot about that already today. As the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland reminded us, they are different activities with different purposes and, therefore, different rights and implications. Blurring that distinction does not help pupils, parents or teachers. It only adds to confusion and it could undermine community cohesion, and none of us wants that to happen.

All this takes place against the backdrop of last week's Supreme Court ruling in Northern Ireland that found that a predominantly confessional approach to religious education, even when accompanied by the right to withdrawal, was incompatible with human rights standards. That ruling is a stark reminder that relying on withdrawal alone is not enough. Education must be objective, critical and pluralistic from the outset. For someone with a humanist world view, the significance of that decision cannot be overstated. It aligns with what many of our stakeholders have been telling us for years, in the context of Scotland, and issues that have been laid bare in the Humanist Society Scotland's recent report, "Preaching is not Teaching".

I want Scotland to be a place where every young person, whether they come from a faith tradition or have no faith at all, feels equally respected in their school environment, and where their conscience, curiosity and developing sense of identity are nurtured rather than constrained. Although I am therefore willing to support the general principles of the bill, my support comes with a clear expectation that the Government will take seriously the evidence that is offered in the committee's report. We must strengthen children's agency, ensure transparency and guard children's access to justice. We must clearly distinguish religious observance from religious and moral education, so that rights and expectations are

clearly understood. If the Government addresses those issues—and I sincerely hope that it will—the bill has the potential to move Scotland meaningfully closer to having a rights-respecting, pluralistic education system in which every child, no matter their belief or background, is truly seen, heard and respected.

15:36

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for its scrutiny of the principles and basis of the bill. From reading through the committee's report and having listened to members' contributions, it is clear that the committee covered a lot of ground in preparing for the bill to be debated today. The committee and members from across the chamber have identified areas that should be explored further before my party and I can comprehensively consider supporting the bill. The report shows gaps in the foundations of the bill that should have been filled before the Parliament was asked to draw conclusions.

It is worth saying that the fact that, in its response to the bill, the Government outlined that this is its third attempt at making changes in accordance with the UNCRC shows that, yet again, it is legislating in panic mode. That is no way to address such fundamental issues as children's rights.

The committee and witnesses all outlined concerns about the foundations on which the bill rests, the lack of data on the number of withdrawals and what schools put in place for such withdrawals, the burden on schools and a child's capacity to form a view, and the conflation of religious observance and religious and moral education. The committee has identified other gaps. I encourage anyone who has not had a chance to read the report to refer to it to get a picture of the concerns and flaws in the bill.

The committee recommended that the Scottish Government should undertake research to understand how withdrawals are monitored. I believe that that data is key to members' decisions on the bill as it moves through the Parliament, and it should have been available ahead of time. The gathering of that information is patchy, at best, and it could not in any way be called consistent across the country. Without those key statistics being gathered in such a way that they can be compared and contrasted accurately, it will be difficult, if not almost impossible, to assess the impact of the proposed legislation on the capacity of schools to deliver on its intention.

Parliament has a responsibility to legislate in practice, not in theory. That means thinking about

what a bill will look like when it leaves the Parliament and touches reality, and what impact it will have, intentional and unintentional, on the people who will be primarily affected by it—in this case, children, their parents, teachers and, as they are referred to in the report, the operator of the school.

The committee report refers to the school as the body that will be asked to evaluate whether a child has the capacity to form a view. In practice, that means that people who we know are already hard pressed—teachers, school administrators and school leadership—will have to make difficult decisions on a new area. In that respect, I agree with the several respondents who spoke of the burden that the proposed legislation could place on schools.

The Parliament must match ambition with resources. Teachers watching the debate, many of whom are already shouldering more responsibilities than they have contracted hours in the day for, would want me to press the cabinet secretary on whether she believes that the financial memorandum would benefit from more relevant and comprehensive data to inform its projections—and, indeed, to inform workforce planning.

The financial memorandum states:

“There is no available evidence to inform an estimate of how often these disagreements will take place.”

That means that it is impossible for the Government to quantify the amount of staff resource, time and energy that will be needed to ensure that the legislation can be enacted. Without understanding that, it is impossible for us, as members, to appreciate both what the burden could look like and what will be needed to mitigate it. Although we cannot gather data on something that does not yet exist, we can gather better data on withdrawals as they stand now, so that we can better understand the extent of the demand that will be placed on school administrations.

Respondents raised concerns that the bill does not distinguish between religious observance and religious and moral education, despite those things being very different. As has been said, RME is part of our curriculum and of children and young people's education. It encourages pupils to learn about different beliefs, to open their minds to different views and to consider what they themselves believe. In that respect, it is a key pillar of the Government's education framework. I think that we can all agree that religious observance is different.

Scottish Labour supports faith schools and parents' right to make decisions about their children's education. We respect the importance of involving children in decisions, and we understand

the wish for legislation to address the issue. However, due to the significant problems with the drafting of the bill, as well as the lack of existing data, the pressure on already overstretched schools, the lack of consideration by the Government, so far, of how it will support and resource schools to implement it, and the lack of delineation between observance and education, I and my fellow Scottish Labour members will, regrettably, not be able to offer our full support for the bill at stage 1.

15:41

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): As a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank the clerks for their assistance in drafting the stage 1 report. I am also grateful to all stakeholders and witnesses for taking the time to submit their views on the issue and for their helpful briefings.

As has been mentioned, the bill has two main objectives: first, to require schools to consider pupils' views when parents withdraw them from religious observance and religious and moral education; and, secondly, to amend the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 so that public authorities do not face a conflict between complying with the act and adhering to other Scottish legislative duties.

To give some context, section 9 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 gives parents the right to withdraw their child from both religious observance and religious and moral education in schools. The purpose of the bill is to give greater autonomy to young people when a parent has made a request to withdraw a pupil from instruction in religious observance or religious and moral education. When that occurs, the school must inform the pupil about the request and must consider the pupil's view as part of the withdrawal process.

I will touch first on part 1 of the bill, which focuses on withdrawal from religious observance and religious and moral education in schools. We received helpful evidence from many different stakeholders, and the committee is of the view that religious observance and religious and moral education should be separated in the bill. Most of the committee agreed that they are distinct, with RO being about worship and RME being about education.

With the rise of political figures who are intent on division, it is of the utmost importance that young people continue to be educated about different cultures, faiths and practices. That is not the same as worshipping in accordance with those

faiths. I believe that it is essential that young people learn as much as they can about different historical events and about different countries and cultures, so that they can transition into a diverse world. Claire Benton-Evans of the Scottish Episcopal Church put it best when she stated:

"our children need to understand other faiths, beliefs and cultures if they are to grow up in the diverse, inclusive and tolerant society that we want in Scotland."—[Official Report, *Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 30 September 2025; c 10.]

Indeed, the evidence from stakeholders across the board was clear on that point, as both faith-based and secular organisations argued for removing the option to withdraw from RME from the bill.

As a result, the committee has urged the Scottish Government to

"reflect further on this approach and to bring forward amendments at Stage 2 to provide that withdrawal only applies to RO."

Nevertheless, the purpose of the bill is to increase children's rights, and it was noted that the majority of those who offered a view on whether the bill should be amended to include an independent right for children to opt out of RO and RME supported giving children that right. However, respondents to the Scottish Government consultation differed in their support for an independent right to withdraw from RO, so most of the committee felt that

"it would be more appropriate ... to progress with the right for children to object to their parents withdrawal of them for RO/RME alone."

We would welcome the cabinet secretary giving further consideration to that point.

On the bill's compatibility with the UNCRC, a majority of the committee recognises that it would have been preferable if the bill had been drafted in such a way as to bring its provisions within the scope of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

On part 2 of the bill, which seeks to amend the 2024 act so that public bodies do not face a conflict between complying with the act and other Scottish legislative duties, the committee notes that there are very strong concerns about the rationale for it, the precedent that it would set and whether the bill is an appropriate vehicle for the provisions.

Overall, the committee supports the premise of the bill, which is to improve young people's rights, and a majority supports the general principles of the bill. That said, significant amendments will be necessary, as serious points have been raised on both part 1 and part 2. Therefore, I support the bill progressing to stage 2 but note that much work

requires to be done on the bill to further the rights of children.

15:46

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the stage 1 debate. The bill raises profound questions about how we balance children's rights, parental responsibilities and the practical realities of delivering education in Scottish classrooms. At the outset, I want to be absolutely clear that children must have a say in their education. Their voices matter, their experiences matter, and their wellbeing—in particular, their emotional wellbeing—must guide our thinking.

Over many years, Scotland has rightly taken steps to ensure that children are listened to, which I whole-heartedly support. However, through the bill, the Government is asking the Parliament to make significant changes to how families, schools and children navigate decisions about religious observance and about religious and moral education—we have already heard that those two aspects are not the same. Those are deeply personal areas of a child's education, so any changes to them must treat families with the respect that they deserve.

Scottish Conservatives absolutely believe that children should be heard in decisions that affect their lives. Their voices matter, their experiences matter, and their wellbeing—emotional or otherwise—must always be at the heart of what we do. However, listening to children must sit alongside a practical, commonsense approach that respects the crucial role that parents play in shaping their children's upbringing. It should not create conflict; it should not place new emotional burdens on young people; and it should not put teachers in the impossible position of having to navigate family disagreements—yet that is what the bill does.

Under the proposed process, schools would have to inform a child of their parents' withdrawal request, gauge the child's capacity, gather their views and then, potentially, override the parent. That might look tidy on paper, but, in a real school, with real families and real pressures, that would be far from straightforward. Stakeholders have been crystal clear. Susan Quinn of the EIS warned of significant concerns about resources, workload and the impact on relationships. Douglas Hutchison described the practicalities as

"burdensome for the school and onerous for the child and parent."—[Official Report, *Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 7 October 2025; c 34.]

Teachers across Scotland who work every day with children of vastly different developmental

stages have said plainly that the process would be hard to implement consistently or fairly.

We cannot ignore the reality. We cannot legislate in a way that sounds good in theory but causes stress and confusion in practice. We must put children's wellbeing at the forefront so that we do not create situations in which a child feels torn between their parents and their school or responsible for making decisions that they might not be emotionally ready for.

Respect must be the thread running through all of this: respect for parents as primary educators; respect for teachers as professionals; and respect for young people as developing individuals who need guidance, not pressure.

Religious and moral education, and indeed religious observance, play an important role in helping children to understand different cultures, beliefs and world views. As Claire Benton-Evans reminded us,

"children need to understand other faiths, beliefs and cultures"—[Official Report, *Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 30 September 2025; c 10.]

in order for them to grow into the inclusive and tolerant citizens that we want for Scotland. It is about fostering understanding, not promoting doctrine.

In a time when division and misunderstanding are so easily amplified, removing children from opportunities to learn about other people would risk deepening social fractures. We should be encouraging tolerance, not unintentionally narrowing young people's horizons.

Again, we must approach that with common sense. The number of withdrawal requests is very small, at around 4,000 children across Scotland, yet the bill will introduce a legally complex, administratively heavy process that will affect every school and every teacher, and every family regardless of whether they have ever considered withdrawing their child. That is neither proportionate nor practical.

The Government's proposal to amend the UNCRC compatibility duty raises more questions than it answers. Stakeholders, including the Law Society of Scotland, have said that the bill addresses only part of the issue. Crucially, there is still no clear example of where such a conflict in Scots law would arise, and yet here we are, placing another layer of complexity on to public authorities without clear justification. At a time when schools are stretched and teachers are under pressure, and when we should be doing everything possible to support them, the bill risks adding confusion rather than clarity.

We should all share the intention of strengthening children's rights, but those rights

must be implemented in a way that supports families and does not strain them; in a way that considers children's emotional needs and does not burden them; and in a way that respects the vital partnerships between parents, teachers and schools.

The bill as it is currently drafted does not strike that balance. It does not provide the clear safeguards or commonsense guidance that is required to protect relationships and wellbeing, and—despite its intentions—it risks creating confusion, inconsistency and conflict.

We need an approach that is grounded in common sense, clarity and genuine respect for all those at the heart of education: parents, teachers and, of course, our young people.

15:52

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I have no objections to part 2 of the bill, other than to reiterate the committee's reservations about why both parts of the bill are being put through together. However, I have questions about the pairing of religious observance and religious and moral education in the bill. After all, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee accepted that it should be possible to withdraw from religious observance, but the majority of members were opposed to the idea that children could be withdrawn from RME. Indeed, even some secular organisations agreed with that.

The Scottish Government may have its own reasons for lumping RO and RME together; I would welcome hearing some of the reasoning behind that. However, if it is the case that there are too many elements of RO in RME, surely the bill is throwing the baby out with the bath water. Would stronger guidance on what constitutes a breach between the two areas not be a welcome first step? If there were strong dividing lines, that would still allow children with diverse faith and non-faith backgrounds to learn about the world around them.

The other issue is, I think, the strongest reason why more work is needed on the bill before it comes back to the Parliament. It will put added pressure on teachers and schools without providing them with any additional help. Although there is a need for parents to have a say in their children's education, and to respect the wishes of children, the bill is not the mechanism that can make that happen. We should not ask schools to intervene in that way.

Anybody who has kids will know that when they change class or change friends, all of a sudden, what they were up for the previous week will not necessarily be what they are up for the next week.

The bill would complicate things. If the Scottish Government does not want to have the wishes of children taking primacy, it should show some courage and ask the Parliament to vote on that.

On that matter, there is a one-sided approach that gives two opportunities to attend RME and RO, but only one chance to abstain. If parents can say that their child should not attend RO but the child says that they should, should the reverse not also be true? Given that, in the recent census, 51 per cent of people declared that they belong to no religion—the figure has been growing over the years—that imbalance seems to be counter to the direction of the country.

My view is that, if there is something objectionable about RME—for example, that it too closely resembles religious observance—that should be addressed in isolation. If the intention is for children to be able to unilaterally withdraw from RO as part of their school timetable, the Scottish Government should not pass the buck to teachers in schools; it should lay that out for the Parliament to vote on.

For me, there are too many unanswered questions about the bill. The committee is not convinced that it is evidence based, and I do not feel that what is proposed will work for schools, parents or pupils. Parents will not let it rest if we pass the bill and at some point there is a difference between their child's views and their own. Schools will end up being in the middle, and it will only cause disruption. I will abstain on the bill at decision time today.

15:56

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): At its heart, the bill is about strengthening the rights and voices of Scotland's children—something that this Parliament has repeatedly committed to doing over the years. It seeks to make two targeted but meaningful changes, and although it is somewhat technical in nature, I hope that it will bring meaningful changes to the everyday experience of children in our schools and the way that our public authorities understand and uphold the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The bill aims to ensure that, in the context of the long-standing parental right to withdraw a child from religious observance, children's and young people's views are taken into account. Article 12 of the UNCRC gives every child the right to express their views freely on all matters that affect them and to be heard—not to be listened to as a courtesy or nodded to in passing, but for their views to be given due weight.

Part 1 of the bill seeks to introduce a legal requirement for schools to inform children when a parent seeks to withdraw them from religious

observance or religious and moral education, and to ensure that their views are considered in that process. Importantly, however, it maintains parental rights at the same time as strengthening children's rights. It attempts to strike a balance between the two, and I welcome that.

Religious observance and religious and moral education play different roles in our education system, but let us remember that we are not debating the value of those subjects today. We are debating the child's right to be heard about their participation in them, and that right matters deeply.

Part 2 of the bill might seem more technical, but it is no less important. It seeks to ensure that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 can operate in a way that protects both legal certainty and the continuation of essential public services. It seeks to introduce an exemption for public authorities when they face a direct conflict between the compatibility duty and an act of this Parliament. That is a proportionate step that will allow the UNCRC framework to function clearly and fairly. Indeed, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has always emphasised that incorporation must be workable, accessible and coherent.

The Government has undertaken wide-ranging consultation on the bill, engaging with ADES, the Humanist Society Scotland, the Scottish Catholic Education Service, STARME and Together, alongside faith and belief organisations and members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. That level of engagement shows both the sensitivity of the subject and the commitment to listening to all voices, including those that too often go unheard.

Of course, no legislation is perfect at stage 1, and I understand the strong feeling of many that the legislation does not go far enough. Indeed, I have received a number of inquiries from constituents looking for the Scottish Government to amend the bill to give pupils an independent right to opt out of religious observance. I raised those in writing with the cabinet secretary. In reply, she stated:

"As all will be aware, the Parliamentary process provides stakeholders and all of those with an interest in the bill to put forward their case for amendments. Throughout this, Ministers will continue to discuss these issues with parliament and other interested parties, and I will consider all the points made in both the written and the oral evidence from those who were invited to give evidence to the Committee."

I understand that the consultation raised concerns about how an independent right for pupils would be balanced with parental rights. I also understand that, in response to the Humanist Society Scotland's report "Preaching is not Teaching", the cabinet secretary met the society

and has asked it to share further information on its examples of religious observance not being delivered inclusively. I therefore understand the conflicting opinions that are involved, and I urge all parties to raise those issues at stage 2.

The bill takes careful steps to ensure that a child's voice is part of decisions about their learning and identity. It strengthens clarity for public authorities in implementing the UNCRC and reinforces Scotland's continued journey towards making rights real not only in principle but in practice.

Children do not ask for much—at least, most of the time. They ask to be heard; to be respected; and for adults, parents, teachers and law makers to make decisions with them, not simply for them. By supporting the general principles of the bill, I hope that we can go some way to showing them that their voices matter, that the Parliament listens and that Scotland continues to take seriously its duty to uphold the rights of every child.

I therefore urge members to support the bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to closing speeches.

16:01

Maggie Chapman: In closing for the Scottish Greens, I will deal with some of the issues that I did not address in opening. First, I thank my committee colleagues and our clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre and the participation and communities team for thoughtful consideration of the bill at stage 1. I am very grateful to all who sent in their views or contributed in person to our evidence sessions. I also thank all those who sent detailed and informative briefings in advance of today's debate.

This seemingly small bill wrestles with some big questions. I have already made it clear that I will seek, at stage 2, to separate religious observance and RME and to introduce an independent right for any child to withdraw from RO. Those two positions are consistent with most of the evidence that we heard at committee and with the views of the majority of Scots.

I turn to part 2 of the bill. Martin Whitfield, Alex Cole-Hamilton and others spoke to concerns that I share. I am very concerned that part 2 fundamentally undermines the principle of enshrining the UNCRC into Scots law, as this Parliament has voted to do twice—in 2021 and 2023.

We must be clear about what part 2 does. In a bill that seeks to ensure that one of our laws is consistent with the UNCRC, it allows public officials to ignore the convention if it conflicts with

any domestic Scottish law. The Scottish Government has been unable to say why that is necessary. It has already indicated that it is aware of no existing laws or policies that present a conflict with the convention. It is therefore not clear why part 2 of the bill is needed at all. Why would the Parliament choose to pass legislation that was not compliant with the UNCRC?

Furthermore, if any future conflicts arise, the Scottish Greens are not convinced that the provisions in part 2 are the best way of dealing with them—and they should certainly not be the default. If the convention is simply set aside every time that there is a conflict, what is the point of enshrining the convention into our laws in the first place?

Witnesses told the committee that it sends entirely the wrong message to say that one of the first acts in implementing the UNCRC is to set up a system of carve-outs from it. Surely, it would be better to have a clear process by which we can amend legislation so that it becomes consistent with convention rights—or, better, just ensure that all bills that we pass are drafted to be consistent in the first place.

The situation also has potentially huge implications for a future Scottish human rights bill. It risks setting a precedent whereby we enshrine rights then establish processes for public bodies to ignore them.

I therefore ask members to carefully consider whether the decisions that we will make as the bill progresses will affect a future human rights bill. We cannot endorse a process that will create a mechanism to set aside human rights. Too many individuals and communities across Scotland currently struggle to realise their rights or frequently have their rights ignored. Those groups have waited too long for watertight legislation that safeguards their rights.

I turn to a couple of other issues that have been raised in the debate this afternoon. We have not heard much discussion on the potential that exists in the current system for othering and stigma. Nor have we heard much about how school staff can be better supported to ensure that the young people in their care can realise their rights. Indeed, the committee heard some troubling evidence of inappropriate behaviour in our schools.

The Scottish Government does not have a clear handle on all of that. It has asserted that RO is “inclusive, subjective and pluralist”. However, it has no way of knowing that, because it has not done the research to gather evidence to back that up. I urge the Government to do so immediately to remedy that.

I reiterate the Supreme Court decision from last week. Judges ruled that collective worship in the north of Ireland that is not done in an

“objective, critical, and pluralistic manner amounts to indoctrination”

and is unlawful. I appreciate that the cabinet secretary has written to the committee to confirm that the context in the north of Ireland is different with regard to the law and religious education. That is true. However, that does not mean that the court case does not have implications for us here in Scotland.

Professor Russell Sandberg, an expert in religion and the law, has said:

“The Supreme Court decision is ... about the right to withdraw and whether opt-outs for parents can excuse teaching that is otherwise not human rights compliant. In this respect, it is an important decision in Northern Ireland and beyond—especially where considerable reliance is based on the existence of opt-outs ... This is arguably true of the law on collective worship in schools in most, if not all, of the nations of the UK.”

The bill is disappointing in many ways. At the first opportunity, the Scottish Government has chosen to draft the legislation to be out of scope of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. The bill will not implement the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, and it suggests that UNCRC compliance might be optional.

However, we can remedy those issues at stage 2 and beyond. We will have a lot of work to do to ensure that the bill measures up but it is possible to do that work. For that reason, the Greens will support the bill at the stage 1 vote later this evening.

16:07

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):
My computer is not working, but I have a back-up for my notes—sorry.

That was an interesting debate. Many people have expressed concerns about the bill, and those concerns were highlighted today. It is clear that even the members of the committee who supported the bill heavily caveated that support. Therefore, there is much to deal with.

The bill was supposed to bring RO and RME into line with the UNCRC, which is something that we could have signed up to. Unfortunately, the bill does not really do that.

Martin Whitfield, Pam Duncan-Glancy, Davy Russell and others pointed out that the bill conflates religious observance with religious and moral education. Religious observance is taking part in religious practice, prayers, religious

instructions and the like. It is easy to see why people who practise a different faith might not want their children to take part in such religious observance.

Many members talked about religious and moral education being education about faiths and practices. It builds understanding of all the main faiths and beliefs, giving children a deeper understanding of what their peers might believe. Such education provides knowledge and, I hope, cuts through myths and builds better understanding of other faiths, because it does not ask children and young people to practise those faiths.

Davy Russell pointed out that if there are grey areas with regard to religious and moral education, those could be dealt with in guidance rather than in legislation. The bill conflates two subjects, one of which should have an opt-out while the other forms part of the curriculum and should not have an opt-out. Many of the members who spoke in the debate hold that view.

Part 1 of the bill seeks to allow a child to opt in to religious observance or religious and moral education if their parents opt them out. On the face of it, it sets up a conflict between the parent and child—Miles Briggs spoke about that. However, to be fair, it is unlikely ever to be a reality because children are more likely to want to opt out against their parents' wishes. Parents would rightly be concerned that children be given a right to refuse to practise their parents' chosen religion, and I do not believe that that element could easily be added at stage 2, because it was not properly scrutinised at stage 1. When there is a conflict between the rights of the child and the rights of a parent to bring up their child, it is much more difficult to deal with, and it would take much more than a short stage 2 amendment to deal with those issues, as pointed out by Davy Russell.

Pam Duncan-Glancy also spoke about teachers having to decide whether a child has the capacity to make those decisions. That is an extra burden on teachers. We need to make sure that the legislation works. As Alex Cole-Hamilton said in relation to article 12, everything we do must have children's views at the heart of it. It begs the question of whether we need this legislation if we are already bound by that.

The legislative flaw with part 1 is that it amends the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which is an act of the UK Parliament and, as we know, all UK legislation is out of the scope of the 2024 act. Also, if we think back, 1980 was a time when it was still legal to belt children in school. It is really old legislation. Therefore, legislation that has been drafted to bring religious education under the scope of the 2024 act does not itself come under the scope of that act. Therefore, no one can

challenge this bill under the 2024 act even though it is not compatible with the 2024 act.

In my opinion, putting that right is beyond the scope of the bill and beyond the scope of the stage 2 process. We need to deal with this by introducing new, stand-alone legislation rather than amending an act that is outwith the scope of previous legislation. I do not think that the bill can be amended to make it compliant.

Many members talked about part 2 of the bill, which takes the issue to a whole new level because it is not about religious observance or religious and moral education; it is about creating an opt-out from the 2024 act. Martin Whitfield pointed out that, in practice, it will give a public authority the ability to breach a child's human rights. Surely that is not right. Public authorities are currently bound to act in compatibility with the 2024 act. Part 2 of the bill gives them an opt-out from that, which begs the question, what is the purpose of the 2024 act at all?

Jenny Gilruth: I am listening to some of the points that Ms Grant has made in relation to part 2 of the bill and I have heard comments from members throughout the course of the afternoon that support her view, but she must also be cognisant of the fact that a number of organisations, including Together, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and UNICEF, support that element of the legislation. Why are they wrong, and why does Ms Grant believe that this cannot be resolved further at stage 2?

Rhoda Grant: I believe that part 2 is in direct conflict with the UNCRC legislation. It calls into question why the 2024 act exists. We know that the UK Government sought the exception in the 2024 act because it went beyond devolved powers, but surely we have legislated for what happens in the future here in Scotland. Indeed, when we asked the cabinet secretary in committee what issues she foresaw needing this legislation for, she could not name one. If it is about future proofing, surely, in the future, we should not be looking at passing legislation that is not compliant with the UNCRC. Therefore, this part of the bill should not be required.

We do not think that the bill can be amended to make it compliant. We would need stand-alone, modern legislation that takes account of all of this. Therefore, we will be abstaining tonight.

16:14

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Whenever we discuss anything here that refers to religion, I always feel that I should be transparent in referring members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a member of the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, I say clearly that I do not speak on behalf of the church, its leaders or members but that I speak today in my own right as a Conservative member of this Parliament and as someone who, I hope, would be regarded by others as a person of faith, and as one who believes profoundly in the family and in the rights and responsibilities of parents. I have intervened a number of times in this debate in order to bring the issue of the rights and responsibilities of parents to the fore in our proceedings.

The bill has an extraordinarily long short title, so I will not try to repeat it. I object profoundly to the bill. All the speeches today have highlighted the inconsistencies and failings that we find when we get down to the detail of the contradictions that are being created by an attempt to create a middle way—or third way, as that used to be called. It would be wise of the cabinet secretary, and the Scottish Government, to take the bill away, because it is not ready to be discussed. Too many pieces of legislation that appear at stage 1 debates are severely criticised so that, by the time we get them through the rest of the process, they look absolutely nothing like the original bill. I cannot see the point of that. Take the bill away, take it off the table and come back at a later date—probably in the next session of Parliament—with something that is more considered and consistent.

The bill is not just a technical tidying-up exercise, or a benign update to long-standing legislation; I very much see it as a fundamental challenge to the rights of parents, the integrity of the family and, I would argue, to the proper limits of the state, and I will explain why.

I think that Pam Gosal was right. That approach, which I think is muddled, is not inconsistent with the SNP's long and rather troubling record of attempting to replace the role of parents with the authority of the state. The central mechanism of the bill lies in section 1, which, as has been said, inserts new sections into the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. It does something unprecedented, because it subjects the long-standing parental right of withdrawal from religious observance and from religious and moral education to the veto of the child. Under the terms of the bill, schools would have to inform the pupil that their parent has exercised the right to withdraw them and must tell the pupil that they have the right to object to that. If the child does object, regardless of age or maturity and regardless of parental conviction or responsibility, the parent's decision is simply set aside so as

"not to give effect to the parent's request to the extent of the pupil's objection."

That is not listening to children in the way that this particular bill dresses it up as.

Martin Whitfield: I am not sure that that description of the bill is accurate. Is the challenge not that we will end up with someone in the school having to arbitrate between two positions, with the arbiter probably being the last person who ought to be involved in trying to make a decision about supporting the rights of the parent or, indeed, of the child?

Stephen Kerr: That is absolutely right. Teachers, and school leaders in general, do not want to be put in that position, but that is what the bill does.

Martin Whitfield raises an important point, but I am also really concerned that the bill has the potential to weaponise children against their parents on matters of conscience and belief. It inserts the state into the heart of family life, elevating the child's immediate preference above the parent's settled moral and spiritual responsibility. As a Conservative and, as I have already said, a person of faith, I cannot overstate how alarming that is.

For centuries, across Scotland, the rest of the UK and, indeed, every liberal democratic society, the family has been understood as the primary community—the foundation of moral formation, education, identity and belonging. Parents are not optional participants or obstacles to be worked around; they are responsible for raising their children in line with their religious, moral and philosophical convictions.

The importance of that parental role rests on a principle that has been recognised across the generations: parents have the primary right and responsibility to direct their child's religious and moral education in accordance with their own convictions. The bill overturns that hierarchy and, as Martin Whitfield said, makes school teachers arbiters. Indeed, it empowers the state and distorts the meaning of children's rights into a mechanism for undermining family authority.

Let us be absolutely clear that the bill interferes directly with a parent's freedom to raise a child within their faith or philosophy. For millions of people across Scotland, faith is not a private hobby; it is foundational to culture, identity, community and moral development.

If the Government somehow believes that that principle should be undermined, it raises the inevitable question, where does that end? The bill is not limited to religious observance or RME; it creates a model in which a child's immediate preference is elevated above the parent's long-term judgment, in which the school staff become the arbiters between the parent and the child, and

in which the state asserts itself as the higher authority over the family.

I thought that Davy Russell's contribution in that respect was absolutely bang on the money. He injected a much-needed dose of reality into the proceedings, when he described what every parent knows about our children as they grow up, which is that they can be incredibly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, could you please bring your remarks to a close? You are over your time.

Stephen Kerr: Adults can be very fickle, but I agree with Davy Russell that children can be, too. Look—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude. You are over your time, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Yes. I conclude by saying that Scotland's families do not need the state to sit in judgment over their values. The bill is wrong in principle and in detail, and it is wrong as it stands for Scotland. The cabinet secretary would be well advised to take it away before it ends up being challenged—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. I call the cabinet secretary to close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:22

Jenny Gilruth: We have heard a number of contributions this afternoon, and I will come to those in due course. First, I would like to highlight the support from a number of stakeholders for the intention behind, and the general principles of, the bill. Those include the Humanist Society Scotland, which wrote to the committee to express its support for the general principles of the bill, and Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights), which highlighted in a recent briefing for MSPs that the

"Bill is an opportunity to take practical steps towards stronger protection of children's rights"

across Scotland. Given the bill's subject matter, perhaps most important, children and young people who were consulted also broadly support the intention behind the bill.

Tomorrow, I will meet faith and belief groups and, throughout the passage of the bill—depending, of course, on this evening's vote—I will continue to engage on a cross-party basis, as I have listened and reflected on a number of points that have been made this afternoon, to which I now come.

Mr Cole-Hamilton, Mr Whitfield and Mr McLennan asked about the rationale behind the bill. The bill is necessary because it gives Parliament a real opportunity to strengthen

children's rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 is a landmark piece of legislation, but the incorporation is not in itself a single event; it is a process of building a clearer, more workable framework that protects children's rights in practice. The bill is part of that work.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The cabinet secretary is right to reference my contribution and that of Martin Whitfield, in which we questioned the rationale for the bill. However, our issue is not with the rationale behind part 1, which we broadly agree with, albeit it needs some amendment; it is with the rationale behind part 2, which we fear creates a back door by which aspects of the UNCRC, or the UNCRC in its entirety, could be disappledied in certain circumstances.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his point. As I said in response to Mr Whitfield earlier, the approach in part 2 that proposes the carve-out very much reflects the approach that exists under the Human Rights Act 1998, and its scope is limited. It is a future-proofing power that already exists in legislation.

However, having listened to members' views on that point throughout the course of the debate, I am content to continue to engage on the matter, as members have raised a number of issues in that regard.

Martin Whitfield: I genuinely welcome the cabinet secretary's confirmation of how she intends to approach that issue going forward. However, is she still confident in the certification that she gave, under section 23(1) of the 2024 act, that the bill is compatible with the UNCRC, given that the bill agrees to disapply that convention?

Jenny Gilruth: To confirm, Presiding Officer, I would not be able to bring the bill forward were it not compatible. That is the advice that I received from officials. All legislation that ministers in Government bring forward must be compatible in that regard.

I will move on to some of the other commentary that was shared with the chamber this afternoon. Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke, quite rightly, about our lack of data, and a number of other members mentioned that, too. The data that we have shows that the levels of withdrawal from RO and RME are incredibly low, at an estimated 0.59 per cent of pupils across Scotland.

Maggie Chapman: I hear what the cabinet secretary is saying about data, but we also heard clearly in committee that there is no consistency in how that data is collected, so we do not know whether that data reflects the real numbers. We also do not know what happens to the children who are withdrawn.

Jenny Gilruth: I was coming to that point. The issue of data collection is one that Ms Duncan-Glancy and I debate and discuss pretty regularly, and it is not limited to this bill. Data collection is an issue in a number of other aspects of Scottish education, particularly in our schools, including in relation to additional support needs and the recording of bullying events. There is a lack of national data at the current time.

Rhoda Grant picked up on that point in relation to the 1980 act and how it interacts with the bill. That is one of the reasons why John Wilson, a former headteacher, is carrying out an independent piece of work, on which I updated the committee when I gave evidence, to look at how we provide for school governance when we fund our schools. Those aspects are live and relevant to the data collection issue. I confirm to Ms Duncan-Glancy and Parliament that I have instructed officials to gather further data on that issue, because I agree with the points that she and others have raised.

The convener spoke to the complexities that are associated with the bill and, quite rightly, mentioned that the Scottish Government's approach involves driving a middle road between competing views on these matters. As cabinet secretary, I have been incredibly mindful of that throughout the bill process.

Early in the debate, Mr Briggs was provided with a bit of assistance from Mr Whitfield, who claimed that the bill would add to teacher workload, and a number of other members made that claim. I think that that assertion fundamentally misunderstands what the bill proposes. If anything, we can expect more young people to be opting in to—not out of—RO and RME.

Miles Briggs: The cabinet secretary has just made that statement following her statement that we do not have data. It seems a bit ridiculous to say that fewer will opt out when we do not know how many are opting in or out—that is the hokey-cokey around this bill, as I described it earlier—and what that means for schools. Who will be responsible for those young people when they are not in either the classroom or in RO? I am not sure that the cabinet secretary really knows what the impact of the bill will be.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that Mr Briggs is conflating two separate matters and deliberately trying to insinuate that the bill is about more young people opting out of religious education or religious observance. That is not the case. The right still rests with the parent, and the legislation will now ensure that children's rights are taken cognisance of.

On the numbers, the Scottish Catholic Education Service—which I have engaged with,

as, I am sure, Mr Briggs has—was keen to make the point to me that the numbers nationally are incredibly low. However, I gave a commitment to Ms Duncan-Glancy that we would interrogate that data.

Miles Briggs: Will the cabinet secretary take another intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make some progress, as I have just two minutes left.

I am also thoughtful about my engagement with the Church of Scotland on this point. It was keen to state to me that teachers regularly and routinely discuss those issues with children and young people. We should be mindful of the professional capabilities that are at play in that regard.

Martin Whitfield will be reassured to hear that children and young people can still challenge the actions of public authorities. The exemption that we have heard a number of different views on this afternoon helps us to look at where the legislation is a problem, so that we can help to protect our children and young people's rights, while recognising where there might be conflict in the delivery of services.

Although Parliament cannot control the evolution of the legal interpretation in the future, much of the purpose behind part 2 is to avoid that disruption to essential services. It would not be fair to hold public authorities, such as our local councils, responsible for simply following the law.

On the points that have been raised this afternoon, I point out that we have published the children's rights scheme to ensure that there is a process for identifying potential legal incompatibilities.

I am extremely mindful of time, Presiding Officer. Forgive me, but I have not managed to get to a number of contributions from other members that I thought were worth recounting, not least that from Maggie Chapman. I am keen to engage with members as the bill progresses through Parliament.

I conclude by encouraging us all to reflect on why we, as an increasingly secular society, seek to continue to enable religious observance and religious and moral education in our schools. Enabling school communities to come together to share common values and to engage with other faiths and beliefs aids understanding, tolerance and acceptance. The same applies with regard to religious and moral education for individuals, which allows children and young people at different ages and stages to learn about others' values and beliefs. Such understanding and awareness are vital to encourage tolerance, invite respect and address prejudice. It is arguable that fostering and nurturing that sort of opportunity for

cohesion in our schools is needed now more than ever to better equip our young people to handle the increasingly turbulent and fractured society that they will enter as adults.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the bill at stage 1. It is now time to move on to the next item of business.

Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19890, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill: emergency bill motion. I remind members that, as per rule 11.3.1(h) of standing orders, the question on the motion will be put immediately after the debate. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button. I call the minister, Graeme Dey, to speak to and move the motion.

16:31

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): In 2020, the Scottish Parliament voted to devolve empty property relief to local authorities to provide greater local fiscal empowerment to councils. That came into force on 1 April 2023. However, it was recently identified that the Government amendment to the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill in December 2019, which repealed legislation from 1966 to give effect to that, contained an error.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The minister said that the error was “recently identified”. Can he tell us how recently?

Graeme Dey: I am more than happy to do that. In August—

Douglas Ross: August?

Graeme Dey: If the member would allow me to explain—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please resume your seat for a second.

We are not proceeding like this. We are going to hear the person who has the floor, and then we are going to call the next person, and everybody else will listen to them with courtesy and respect.

Graeme Dey: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

As I said, in August of this year, a query was raised with the Scottish Government. That was investigated and, in mid-September, it was identified that there was indeed an issue. Since then, Scottish Government officials have worked at pace to develop the proposed remedial legislation. Once that was finalised and completed internally, the bill was introduced to Parliament at the soonest opportunity, with business managers informed last Thursday, ahead of publication on Monday. I explain to Mr Ross that, under parliamentary process, that is quite a rapid

exercise. [Graeme Dey has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]

Douglas Ross: I do not think that it is rapid. People outside this building would not think that a Government finding out about a major flaw in its own legislation in the summer and then bringing emergency legislation in the last week of November is rapid. How would the Government view amendments to the bill, if it proceeds as emergency legislation, to ensure that the Government publishes all evidence—all details and all written and email communications—about the bill, so that we can see that it was treated as an emergency and has not been added in the week of the United Kingdom Government budget to try to hide it among other stories?

Graeme Dey: This is a serious matter. It would be a matter of regret for the Parliament to have the process clouded by conspiracy theories of the type that Mr Ross is seeking to advance.

The amendment in 2019 did not indubitably have the intended legal effect, and it appears that there has been no certain legal basis to charge rates on unoccupied non-domestic properties since that date. The bill seeks to correct that legislative error, give effect to the original policy intent and bring matters into line with the position as understood by local authorities and ratepayers.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): Will the minister take an intervention?

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Graeme Dey: I will give way one final time, to Mr Simpson—my apologies, Mr Hoy.

Graham Simpson: Can the minister say who raised the query with the Scottish Government?

Graeme Dey: I am not in possession of the exact detail. What I can say is that a local authority raised the query with the Scottish Government. That is the detail that I can offer the member at the moment. I hope that that is of some help to him.

The process that we are following will ensure that there is a clear and certain legal basis for local authorities to collect non-domestic rates from the owners of unoccupied properties. It will bring the statute book into line with the position as understood by local authorities and ratepayers, as applied by local authorities and as voted on by the Parliament in 2019. Without this bill, local authorities might decide that the rates that have been paid by owners of unoccupied properties since 1 April 2023 need to be refunded and that rates can no longer be collected on unoccupied properties in future.

The bill seeks to protect revenue that is already collected in line with the Scottish Parliament vote

and in subsequent budget bills. If the bill is not passed, those who paid rates on unoccupied properties will likely receive an unexpected and unjustified refund of rates paid since 1 April 2023. That could require cuts to public spending and a significant future rates increase to make up for that loss. The sums at stake would fall to the Scottish Government and would be estimated at more than £100 million a year if local authorities decided that they had to repay the rates collected on those properties and cease future collection.

There will be no change to rates bills as a result of this legislation, and if the bill passes, it will not introduce any additional new costs to businesses or individuals compared with the Scottish Parliament's original intended policy.

I therefore seek the chamber's support today for the bill to be taken as an emergency piece of primary legislation that is subject to that support. Stage 1 would take place tomorrow afternoon, and stages 2 and 3 would take place on Thursday afternoon.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill be treated as an Emergency Bill.

16:36

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The Government is asking us to set aside concerns about transparency, legitimacy and competence, and we should not be prepared to do so when such a significant sum of public money is in play.

I have been an MSP for just over four years, but I have been a political journalist since 1996. I have seen my fair share of Scottish National Party incompetence, but this latest fiasco possibly tops it all. Let us explain to the paying public exactly what nationalist ministers are asking us to rush through today under this emergency procedure. In 2020, the SNP Government, backed by the Labour Party, passed legislation to reform business rates. At the time, we said that it would lead to an increased tax burden for businesses, and we were right. However, it turns out that the legislation was even more shoddy than the SNP minister who introduced the bill at the time. That minister was the disgraced Derek Mackay, the same minister who botched the award of the contract for the two ferries.

The bill then fell to Kate Forbes, who completed it in its final stages after Mr Mackay left the Government. The bill was meant to allow SNP ministers to levy business rates on companies that owned unoccupied properties, even if there was a legitimate reason for the property lying empty, such as the building not being fit for purpose or, as is increasingly the case in areas such as

Aberdeen, because the loss of jobs in sectors such as oil and gas means that nobody is left to fill the offices and the firms are falling into administration. What ministers did not realise at the time—despite the ever-increasing numbers of civil servants and the army of bureaucrats that support them—was that the legislation was incompetently drafted. It was deficient, like much of what this Government does.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Would the member accept that he is somewhat overegging this? Everyone makes slight administrative mistakes, and this is not a major issue.

Craig Hoy: Mr Mason might have left the party, but he is still an apologist for the Administration. We are talking about £400 million being taken from struggling businesses in order to help to fill the SNP's coffers.

We have to be aware that there could even be legal challenges to the legislation. The Government clearly made a mistake. It disregarded the legislative requirements that are laid down in the Valuation and Rating (Scotland) Act 1956, which was completely overlooked by the Government as it sought to mount yet another cash grab on businesses and property owners. We now know that the Government found out in August that there was a problem with the legislation, but it chose not to tell anyone.

When I look through the bill documents, it is like an episode of "Yes Minister". The civil service jargon says:

"the amendments made by the 2020 Act to devolve EPR had not had the intended legal effect".

To use plain English, the SNP Government simply cocked up. Its legislation provided no legal basis for companies to be paying business rates on unoccupied properties over three budgetary years. As the minister said, the money that is involved amounts to £400 million. Businesses across Scotland have, in good faith, been paying non-domestic rates on unoccupied properties that they should not have been paying. That is not a trivial amount of money, and this is not a trivial issue. That £400 million could have been used, in the interim, to support businesses to invest in jobs and growth, but that has not been happening.

Graeme Dey: I have listened with interest to Craig Hoy's comments, but I have a question for him. Given the significant sums of money involved, what will his party do? Will it resist the approach to fixing the problem, or will it act responsibly? Which is it?

Craig Hoy: I am going to hold the minister and the Government to account, and I am going to ask for more transparency and scrutiny so that the

Government does not repeat the mistake that it is presently trying to fix.

Having messed up once already, the Government is now seeking permission from the Parliament to rush through a piece of legislation to cover a mistake that is entirely of its own making. As Opposition MSPs, we do not have an army of civil servants at our disposal to produce amendments at short notice and, unlike the SNP Government, we do not have dozens of spin doctors to create a smokescreen. We need time to scrutinise the bill. The SNP Government published it only yesterday, but it wants it to be passed in two days.

The SNP is using the distraction of the UK budget as a smokescreen to cover for its own incompetence. Worse still, it is trying to fix rushed legislation with rushed legislation. Given the Scottish Government's track record, we believe that there should be much more scrutiny of the bill, because how do we know that it will not make the situation worse?

John Swinney's Government wants to pass an emergency law to keep £400 million that it took from businesses but was not legally entitled to take. I recognise that what has happened creates financial pressures—pressures that the Scottish Government has brought on itself through its incompetence—and those pressures could add to the pressures that are already felt by local government.

Let me ask the Government a few questions. It might want to respond to them in writing or find a means to respond to them today. Given that we are being asked to pass emergency legislation, will the Government confirm that it has taken sound legal advice on the competence of the bill? If so, is it watertight? What is the Scottish Government's assessment of the likely success of any legal challenge that might be initiated against the new legislation? My understanding from speaking to stakeholders today is that several property owners are giving active consideration to such legal challenges. Most important, does the minister think that it is right for businesses and Scotland's councils to pay the price for the SNP's incompetence?

For those reasons, we cannot support the use of emergency powers. Even if the motion is agreed to, we cannot support the timetable for the bill, which is the direct result of SNP incompetence. That reflects the fact that we need significantly more scrutiny and transparency in relation not just to this SNP bill but to its general dealings with the Parliament.

16:43

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):

Today, we are being invited to agree to treat the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill as an emergency bill and to consider it under an accelerated timetable. The bill is necessary because of a legislative error in the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020, which, inadvertently, according to the Government, removed the legal basis for charging non-domestic rates on unoccupied properties.

In the debate so far, we have heard a dispute about what should and should not happen and who should and should not be responsible. Those are genuine arguments, and there need to be answers to those genuine questions. We have been presented with a piece of defective legislation. When it was passed, everyone had one understanding of what it achieved, but the legal understanding of it is different.

The Parliament is being asked to pass an emergency bill to repair a small error. That is not to make excuses for the error; we should explore why it occurred in the first place. Indeed, we in the Parliament have faced a number of challenges around the competency of legislation, and yet we have heard on a number of occasions an urge to cut debate times so that legislation cannot be explored. Maybe that is something that we all need to look at.

Craig Hoy: Does Mr Whitfield have any suggestions about why the Government has chosen to introduce the bill this week of all weeks?

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for the intervention, but that lies outside my knowledge. At the simplest level, we are just trying to restore Parliament's original intention. We are not introducing any new costs or changing policy. We are seeking continuity and the creation of legal certainty.

However, the challenge is that this is retrospective legislation, which should always be exceptional. The challenge is in the fundamental principle of legal certainty and the idea that people should know what the law is before acting. Applying new rules to past actions risks unfairness, undermines trust in the Parliament and could invite challenges on the basis of human and other rights.

Douglas Ross: Martin Whitfield is rightly speaking about the interpretation of the proposed legislation. Where has that interpretation been between August, when the Government first found out about it, and yesterday, when it introduced the bill? Surely we need absolute clarity and transparency on that. If the bill proceeds and we have amendments at stage 2, will the Labour Party support amendments, were I to lodge them,

that ask the Government to release all documents and correspondence around the bill?

Martin Whitfield: There needs to be absolute transparency and understanding—and not necessarily for any party-political reasons. There needs to be an understandable, honest narrative about how we got here. I am not entirely convinced that that could sit within amendments to a bill, I must say—that matter rests with the Presiding Officer—but I absolutely agree with calling for it. There certainly needs to be an explanation, and I will be calling for co-operation across the Parliament in that regard, given the importance of the issue.

This is a tight and short bill that seeks to rectify a problem, but we must have the transparency that is being asked for around how the error occurred and how we can ensure that it does not go further and is not repeated in any future legislation. Yet another error has occurred and we need to restore the reputation of the Parliament and the Scottish Government in passing competent legal legislation.

We will support the motion tonight, because we believe that the bill fits the definition of emergency legislation as required in standing orders, and it needs to be passed swiftly so that we have the clarity that is required inside and outside this place.

16:47

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I do not intend to use my full time. The Scottish Greens understand the need for the bill and the proposed timetable, and will support the motion this evening.

The Presiding Officer: I call Graeme Dey to wind up. You have up to four minutes, minister.

16:48

Graeme Dey: I will be equally concise. I call on members to support the motion to bring the law, as quickly as possible, fully into alignment with the position as intended by Parliament and with the system that has been universally understood and operated in practice since 1 April 2023.

Craig Hoy: Will the minister take an intervention?

Graeme Dey: We must maintain the credibility of the tax and protect public finances, and the bill will do that by clarifying the legislative position as quickly as possible.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I understood that you called on Graeme Dey, the minister, to wind up the debate. The minister is repeating his pre-prepared remarks. Serious questions have been raised across the

chamber, and I wonder whether we will get an opportunity to hear the minister's response to those concerns. If this is an emergency and if there is urgency, we deserve a minister who will respond to a 15-minute debate.

The Presiding Officer: As members will be aware, the content of a member's contribution is a matter for the member.

That concludes the debate—

Douglas Ross: The minister is not finished. That was a point of order during his speech.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister is not finished.

The Presiding Officer: The minister has concluded.

Stephen Kerr: No!

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, colleagues.

That concludes the debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill: emergency bill motion. We move straight to the question on the motion.

The question is, that motion S6M-19890, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill: emergency bill motion, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:50

Meeting suspended.

16:55

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-19890, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill: emergency bill motion. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to log in. Had I logged in, I would have voted yes.

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

Martin Whitfield: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. There was chaos—I would have voted yes.

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

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect. I would have voted no.

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

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My proxy vote on behalf of Paul O'Kane did not register. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 88, Against 22, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill be treated as an Emergency Bill.

Urgent Question

16:58

Grooming Gangs

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will now hold an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland, in light of the recent reported comments by the NSPCC that the country lacks a clear understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse.

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are abhorrent crimes with devastating impacts on victims and their families, which is why the protection of children is an absolute priority for the Scottish Government. It is why we established the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, of which the NSPCC is a valued member. At a meeting today, the strategic group agreed next steps in its programme of work to improve our response to child sexual abuse, which includes on-going actions on workforce, data and consideration of mandatory reporting.

As has been set out to the Parliament on several occasions, the Scottish Government will give every consideration to holding an inquiry if we feel that it is necessary. The work of the strategic group, as well as the on-going work by Police Scotland, will help to inform our thinking.

Meghan Gallacher: We have a minister appearing online, but here in the chamber is a cabinet secretary who has previously answered questions on grooming gangs. I am a little confused as to what the process is and who is leading on what.

The NSPCC is the leading Scottish child protection charity, and it sits on the Scottish Government's national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. Its intervention is unprecedented. The national child sexual abuse and exploitation sub-group produced a 27-page deep dive on child sexual abuse, yet there was not one mention of grooming gangs—not one single reference. That is more evidence that the national structures that the minister points to are focused on general practice, not on identifying or analysing organised group-based exploitation.

Given that that detailed report has overlooked the issue of grooming gangs entirely, does the minister still believe that the Scottish Government is truly committed to confronting the issue?

Natalie Don-Innes: I have been very clear that—as I outlined in my first response—we are

prepared to give an inquiry every consideration, but surely members want to ensure that we are diverting resources in the most appropriate way by strengthening our response to this abhorrent crime and supporting any victims.

As I said, I have been very clear that we are not closed off to the holding of an inquiry, but we want to ensure that we put in resources in an appropriate way that is inclusive of the on-going work by Police Scotland and the national group to inform that.

Meghan Gallacher: The minister talks about resources, but the report that the Scottish Government has issued does not mention grooming gangs once. The Government does not know what it is doing.

The minister will be aware of the inquiry that is taking place in England. The sheer scale of offending that has been uncovered has led to the collapse of the grooming gangs inquiry there. The task force made more than 1,000 arrests in its first year, and survivors have said that they were taken across the border to be exploited right here in Scotland. It is impossible, therefore, for anyone in the Scottish Government to argue that Scotland is immune, given the large scale of what has happened down south.

So far, the Scottish Government has rejected calls from victims to hold an inquiry here, but the NSPCC has been clear that Scotland still lacks a clear understanding of the scale and nature of child abuse. Victims deserve better than that, so will the minister take this opportunity to finally agree to our calls for a grooming gangs inquiry to be established in Scotland so that we can uncover the true scale of child abuse that has occurred across the country and provide victims with justice and closure?

Natalie Don-Innes: I think that I have been very clear in my responses to Meghan Gallacher. We are not closed off to holding a grooming gangs inquiry; I have said that we want to ensure that that is where resources need to be diverted.

I am confident that we need to build a clearer picture in Scotland of the nature of such group-based activity. I met with Police Scotland representatives just last night, alongside the First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, to receive a progress update on the on-going work. I am confident that we are building that picture, both with the work that Police Scotland is undertaking and the further work that has just been agreed today by the national group. I think that that speaks to exactly what Meghan Gallacher is calling for in ensuring that we have a clear picture of the scale of such activity in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Pauline McNeill.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): —what approach to take in tackling organised—

The Presiding Officer: Ms McNeill, I ask you to begin again. We were unable to hear you at first. Thank you.

Pauline McNeill: The Scottish Government is in danger of completely losing its grip over what approach to take in tackling organised child sexual abuse. Last week, the Government would not say whether it had spoken specifically to expert Professor Alexis Jay, after having to apologise to her. Now a respected organisation—the NSPCC—has questioned whether the Scottish Government can provide the leadership that is required, citing a lack of reliable information.

Has the Government now finally spoken to Professor Jay? Will it conduct a case-by-case review so that we can establish the scale of child sexual abuse in Scotland? How will the Government restore confidence among experts, agencies and victims that it has a serious strategy to combat child sexual abuse in this country?

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: —take this seriously—

The Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask you to begin again, as we were unable to hear you.

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course. I have been very clear and outlined the steps that the Government is taking, to assure members that this is an absolute priority and something that the Scottish Government is extremely committed to.

I think that we need to look in full at the quote from the NSPCC, which as I have said, is a very valued member of the national group. It stated that “the formation of the Scottish Government’s ... Strategic Group has been an important first step”,

and I think that the actions that were then taken speak directly to the asks that the NSPCC has made, which were

“ministerial leadership ... a clearer picture of the problem and greater investment in prevention and recovery.”

Based on the actions that the group announced today that it will take, as well as the work undertaken by Police Scotland that I have already alluded to, I am confident that we are taking the correct approach, and we will be informed by the data and the evidence that we gather from those approaches.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party’s justice secretary misrepresented the views of Professor Alexis Jay on grooming gangs, so will the minister be very clear in responding to this question? Will she

make public any correspondence from Professor Jay on this matter?

Natalie Don-Innes: I think that I was very clear in the chamber last week, to Mr Findlay’s colleague Mr Kerr, in relation to the misunderstanding and the way that that was appropriately cleared up. I have been very clear that Professor Jay is another valued member of the national group, and I will continue to be informed by the work of that group and those expert voices.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): A Scottish Conservative freedom of information request revealed that, on 14 October, the cabinet secretary’s own strategic group corrected the misrepresentation of Professor Jay in the presence of SNP ministers. Shortly after that, officials briefed the justice secretary in writing, yet the *Official Report* remained uncorrected, Parliament remained uninformed and the cabinet secretary failed to attend for my urgent question, even remotely, to fess up. The public learned the truth only when journalists investigated.

Will the minister explain—or perhaps the cabinet secretary could, as she is sitting in the chamber—why no correction was made for weeks, and why it took a media investigation to reveal the truth?

Natalie Don-Innes: I think that Mr Kerr is focusing on the wrong areas here. What has been brought to the chamber today is an extremely serious matter. I was in the chamber last week, answering questions in relation to the quote and the way that that has been resolved, and I think that what we need to focus on now are the actions that have been taken to deal with these abhorrent crimes and support the victims who have suffered through them.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I have brought up the issue of grooming gangs several times in the chamber, but, instead of taking real action, the SNP Government has chosen to bury its head in the sand, all in the name of political correctness. Let me give it a news flash. Grooming gangs are a real problem, and not just in England and Wales—they are present in every part of Scotland. Why is the minister afraid of calling for an inquiry?

Natalie Don-Innes: I think that the way in which people are trying to politicise this issue is awful. The matter that we are discussing is extremely serious. I think that I have been very clear in the responses that I have given today, and the responses that I gave last week, on the action that we are undertaking in Scotland to understand the true scale of child exploitation and child abuse, to support victims who have experienced them, and to move forward in the best way possible for our children and our young people.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Russell Findlay asked the minister a very specific question, which she refused to answer. Without saying the words “I have been very clear”—here in the chamber, it does not feel like she has been—can the minister just tell us whether the Scottish Government will release all correspondence between it and Professor Alexis Jay? Yes or no?

Natalie Don-Innes: I will have to get back to Douglas Ross on that point, because I do not have the information—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: —in relation to the correspondence that has been passed back and forth. I will be more than happy to follow up on Mr Ross’s question in writing.

Business Motions

17:09

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19916, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the timetable and procedures for consideration of the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill. Any member who wishes to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That, subject to the Parliament’s agreement that the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill be treated as an Emergency Bill, the Parliament agrees to consider the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill as follows—

Stage 1 on Wednesday 26 November 2025;

and, subject to the Parliament’s agreement of the general principles of the Bill, Stages 2 and 3 on Thursday 27 November 2025.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Ross.

17:10

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Thank you, Presiding Officer. Will you confirm how long I get for this?

The Presiding Officer: Up to five minutes.

Douglas Ross: That is perfect.

I was not going to speak in this debate at all, but I thought it disrespectful and, frankly, disgusting for a minister summing up a debate about such important legislation—not just any minister, but the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans—to be so disrespectful to the Parliament that he did not respond to the points that were made in the debate. I will therefore try to make them again, because there are serious questions that I hope that the minister will use his summing up in this debate to answer.

If the Government first knew about the flaws in its legislation in August, why are we only now, at the end of November, looking at emergency legislation? Which ministers—

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I thought that the member was speaking against the business motion. I am not quite clear what he is addressing. I ask for clarification, please.

The Presiding Officer: I believe that the member intends speaking against the motion.

Douglas Ross: I do, and I have five minutes. I say to Christine Grahame that all will become very clear at the end of my five minutes. However, it will take longer to get there if we have such spurious points of order. [Interruption.]

The point is that there are serious questions about this—now-emergency—legislation that the Parliament has agreed to consider. I voted against that, but I respect the Parliament, which wants to rush it through. We need answers to those serious questions ahead of stages 2 and 3, and ahead of stage 1 tomorrow.

Given that we are looking at the timetabling of stages 1, 2 and 3, I am making the point, in opposing the timetabling motion, that we should have more time, because, if the minister cannot answer basic questions today, will he be able to answer them tomorrow, at stage 1? Will we get answers when we are voting at stage 2 or stage 3? That is why it is important to oppose the timetabling motion.

I go back to the point that I was making before Christine Grahame tried her point of order: what did the Government know in that period between August and November? Let us be very clear, because Scottish National Party members have been trying to shut us down when we make those points from these benches. The minister would not even respond to the debate.

Members should imagine the shoe being on the other foot. They should just picture that. If the United Kingdom Government at Westminster made an error that cost hundreds of millions of pounds, what would the members on the middle benches be saying about that? They would be up in arms and demanding answers. They would be calling on the minister to give those answers.

John Mason [Made a request to intervene.]

Douglas Ross: They would not be sitting there meekly telling us on the Opposition benches to stop raising those issues—I will give way to John Mason in a moment—and they certainly would not accept a minister's doing what Graeme Dey did, which was to refuse to engage on any points that were made during the debate that he called for to allow the bill to be subject to the process for emergency legislation.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I think that I heard Douglas Ross say that the error had cost millions of pounds, but does he accept that it has not cost anything, that correcting it will not cost anything, and that his opposition would cost millions of pounds? [Interruption.]

Douglas Ross: No, I would not accept that. Oh, gosh, they are even clapping. That is how silly some of those SNP MSPs are. If members are

applauding that, they do not understand what it means.

Another point that Graeme Dey refused to engage on is how the bill will work retrospectively. We do not yet know whether the emergency legislation will stand up in a court of law. We could meet over the next three days to put through emergency legislation to try to fix the mess that has been made by the SNP, but we still will not know whether that can be legally challenged. Therefore, it will cost hundreds of millions of pounds.

Christine Grahame: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am listening carefully to the member. I say to him with all due respect that he seems to be talking about the legislation that we just voted on rather than the business motion. I am still waiting to hear his opposition to the business motion.

The Presiding Officer: Yes; the business motion regards the timetable and the procedures for consideration of the non-domestic rates bill.

Douglas Ross: There was nothing respectful about that point of order; it was just to try to interrupt.

Christine Grahame: It was respectful.

Douglas Ross: Well, you can make another point of order if you think that it was.

The Presiding Officer: Please always speak through the chair.

Douglas Ross: She was just trying to interrupt my speech. This is what we have got, and it is what we will get for the next couple of days: SNP members telling Opposition politicians, "Shut up, sit down, and don't speak about it. We have made a mess of it. Just clear it up for us so that we get no attention."

Hundreds of millions of pounds will potentially be withdrawn from local government and will need to be paid for by the Scottish Government because of an error that was made by the Scottish Government. I repeat what I said earlier: if the shoe were on the other foot and if this was a different Parliament with a different party in Government, SNP members would be kicking up a stink.

When I intervened on him earlier, Graeme Dey said that I am thinking up conspiracy theories. Members will think up conspiracy theories if the Government tries to shut down the debate, if the minister does not even respond to genuine points that have been made and if SNP members try to interrupt Opposition members who are putting things on the record, which is an important part of our role as legislators who are trying to pass good legislation.

In speaking against the motion—I will vote against it—I once again urge the Government to consider being wholly honest and transparent. The Government should release all the details so that, if we are to clear up its mess, we will at least do so with the full information.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:16

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Government will give consideration to the point about releasing the information that Mr Ross asked for, but I resent the suggestion that—

Douglas Ross: Will the minister give way?

Graeme Dey: No, I will not give way, Mr Ross—we have heard more than enough from you.

On the point about disrespecting the—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ross.

Graeme Dey: On the point about allegedly disrespecting the chamber, I took four interventions in my opening speech and I answered each and every one of them, including the point about the timetable that has been followed from August until now. If Mr Ross does not understand the process that was followed, I am afraid that I cannot fix that for him. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Graeme Dey: On the point about the opportunity to interrogate the bill, what is proposed in the motion, and what was approved unanimously by the Parliamentary Bureau earlier today—

Members: Oh!

Graeme Dey: Indeed—oh! The motion proposes a full parliamentary process, with stage 1 taking place tomorrow evening and then a stage 2 and a stage 3. There will be every opportunity for the Parliament to interrogate what is proposed.

However, I say again that, given the circumstances that we are in, it is perfectly justified to pursue an emergency timetable. I am grateful for the support of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens in doing so.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-19916, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the timetable and procedures for consideration of the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied

Properties) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no; I thought that my app had frozen but it is now reflecting my intention to vote no.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote has been recorded, Mr Hoy.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted no.

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

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): rose—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Beattie, I can confirm that your vote has been recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)

Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Máiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 88, Against 26, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That, subject to the Parliament's agreement that the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill be treated as an Emergency Bill, the Parliament agrees to consider the Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill as follows—

Stage 1 on Wednesday 26 November 2025;

and, subject to the Parliament's agreement of the general principles of the Bill, Stages 2 and 3 on Thursday 27 November 2025.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19920, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Wednesday 26 November 2025—

after

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Debate: Growing Scotland's Economy

insert

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time
and insert

6.10 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 27 November 2025—
delete

2.15 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.15 pm Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice and Housing

followed by Scottish Government Business
and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Committee of the Whole Parliament:
Stage 2 Proceedings: Non-Domestic
Rates (Liability for Unoccupied
Properties) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice and Housing

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Non-Domestic
Rates (Liability for Unoccupied
Properties) (Scotland) Bill

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time
and insert

7.00 pm Decision Time—[Graeme Dey]

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-19920, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted no.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
Lauderdale) (SNP)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast
by Ross Greer]
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
(SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by
Michael Marra]
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast
by Fulton MacGregor]
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)

Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)	delete	
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)	2.15 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)		
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)	2.15 pm	Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)		
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)	<i>followed by</i>	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)	<i>followed by</i>	
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)	and insert	Scottish Government Business
Against		
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)	2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)		
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)	2.00 pm	Committee of the Whole Parliament: Stage 2 Proceedings: Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)	<i>followed by</i>	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	<i>followed by</i>	
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)	delete	
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)	5.00 pm	Decision Time
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	and insert	
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)	7.00 pm	Decision Time
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)		
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)		
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)		
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)		
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)		
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)		
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)		
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)		
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)		
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)		
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)		
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)		
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)		
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)		
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)		
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)		

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 89, Against 26, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Wednesday 26 November 2025—

after

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Debate: Growing Scotland's Economy

insert

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Non-Domestic Rates (Liability for Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.10 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 27 November 2025—

Decision Time

17:22

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-19866, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)

McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19866, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, is: For 66, Against 29, Abstentions 21.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Point of Order

17:24

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek clarity of understanding. When we had the short debate on the timetabling of the so-called emergency bill, you called for members who wished to speak in the debate, but, in fact, we had only one speaker, Douglas Ross. He made an eloquent contribution, but is it normal practice to have only one speaker when other people wanted to speak in the debate?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Yes, that is the normal practice, Mr Kerr. There is one speaker for the motion and one against, with any other members intervening as they wish.

St Andrew's Day 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business this evening is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18802, in the name of Michelle Thomson, on St Andrew's day 2025.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that St Andrew's Day is marked each year on 30 November; notes what it considers is the importance of these annual celebrations at a local, national and global level; highlights what it sees as the opportunities that celebrating St Andrew's Day brings to the people of Scotland; believes that these include recognising national identity and cultural diversity, and cementing the country as one of the oldest nations in the international community; thanks the former MSP, Dennis Canavan, who, it considers, worked hard to gain cross-party agreement to make St Andrew's Day a national holiday in Scotland through introducing a Member's Bill, which, on 15 January 2007, became the St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Act 2007; acknowledges what it sees as the economic benefits that global recognition brings to Scotland through the culture, business, education, tourism and retail sectors, supported by the use of the Saltire as both the national flag and the "Brand Scotland" identifier of Scottish produce and marketing; understands that St Andrew is an internationally recognisable figure across faith communities and that, while he has been the patron saint of Scotland since the 14th century, Andrew is also a patron of many other countries, bringing together different nationalities, faiths and cultures; acknowledges the events hosted by the countries that identify St Andrew as their patron or that have a significant Scottish diaspora; commends all in Scotland who will celebrate St Andrew's Day 2025 and recognises the importance of the national day, and notes the plans for future events being held across Scotland and other countries to strengthen cultural, trade and tourism connections with Scotland.

17:26

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Since at least the ninth century AD, St Andrew has been revered in Scotland. His formal status was enshrined in an official act by the Scottish nation through the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. The document, which was written to the Pope, formally declared St Andrew as the patron saint, and he has remained so ever since. The date of 30 November is traditionally considered his day of execution, which was held to be on a saltire cross.

Of course, Scotland is not the only nation whose patron saint is St Andrew. Other places, from Ukraine to Barbados, have also adopted him, and he is patron saint of many other groups, from fishermen to singers and farm workers, as well as many others. His values can be said to embrace humility—perhaps reflecting the fact that he was a fisherman before becoming a disciple. Courage, faith, generosity and solidarity are also considered to be his values.

The former member of the Scottish Parliament Dennis Canavan introduced his St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Bill in 2005, and it became law in January 2007. Dennis Canavan is a well-known figure in Falkirk district and has used his legendary powers of persuasion to convince me to convene the cross-party group on St Andrew's day. I acknowledge his contribution.

We now have a recognised patron saint, a recognised patron saint day, a recognised symbol in the form of a saltire and a formal bank holiday. However, I feel that we still have more work to do to ensure that we use those values and our Scottish assets to their best advantage. I note the activities of the Scottish Government and its supporting partners, as were set out in a recent letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture to the cross-party group, as well as his planned visit to speak with us on 21 January 2026. I would like to hear more about what, specifically, is planned for this year.

Compared with St Patrick's day celebrations and the promotion of Ireland, for example, Scotland still lags behind in utilising the opportunity of St Andrew's day. I see clear examples of cultural diplomacy encouraged by the Scottish Government, but it is not yet at the scale that we need. I anticipate that the problem is one of both funding and capacity, and of having to deliver through people, partners and organisations, but a well-thought-out strategy is essential.

The year before becoming an MSP, I co-authored research into the Scottish business diaspora, with around 1,200 participants from 74 different countries taking part in the study. The results were very clear: there is a high regard for Scotland, from its cultural richness to its business acumen—for once, perhaps we can add its footballing prowess—but our diaspora were of the opinion that we could do much more to promote the richness of what Scotland has to offer and engage with them for both economic and cultural benefits.

Before looking further of Scotland, let me reflect on the importance of the culture sector for those living in Scotland. According to the Scottish household survey, 88 per cent of adults in Scotland are culturally engaged, either having attended or visited a cultural event or place or having participated in a cultural activity annually. Findings from the survey indicate that, in 2023, 47 per cent of adults agreed that culture and the arts made a positive difference to their life, and 51 per cent agreed that culture and the arts made a positive difference to their local community.

Yet there is still comparatively little celebration of St Andrew's day, which should be an

opportunity to bring the entire Scottish community together in cultural celebration.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In 2032 it will be the 1,200th anniversary of the battle of Athelstaneford, when the Picts and the Scots famously saw the saltire in the sky, inspiring them to defeat the invading Anglo-Saxons. Given what you have talked about regarding the diaspora and culture, do you think that the Scottish Government should work towards 2032 as a major celebration of St Andrew and what is the world's oldest flag?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Michelle Thomson: I am delighted to agree with my colleague Kenneth Gibson on that suggestion.

The approach thus far has been to encourage, rather than mandate. I do not disagree with that approach, but I think that the encouragement should be more encouraging. There are pockets of activity in some local councils, but there is no wholesale and unified approach encouraged by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, for instance. Some schools teach about St Andrew and the fact that his is our national day, but too many still do not.

This Scottish Parliament should do more, too. Each year that I have been here I have encouraged that, but I have never managed to get to the point where activities here, let alone a celebration, are the norm. The international strategy report, which was published two weeks ago, outlined Scotland's considerable international trading footprint, including the fact that Scotland has had 135 inward investment projects secured. That maintains Scotland's position as the United Kingdom's top destination for foreign direct investment outside London. There has been £2.5 billion in export sales and £1.89 billion in capital investment, supported by international trade missions and ministerial visits.

Scotland is building many relationships to promote Scotland's renewables potential, which includes offshore wind deployment and the supply of hydrogen to new industries across Europe, supporting the green energy transition and our climate goals. The beauty of Scotland is of course an important factor in attracting international tourism. I feel that the sector should be commended for the strides that it has made in supporting high-quality tourism in recent years. Modest though it may be, we have contributed £1 million towards humanitarian assistance in 10 countries. Other initiatives, such as the GlobalScot network and a number of international education programmes, are continuing to develop—so, there is good news.

Our arts organisations do superb work to promote Scotland culturally, and the cabinet secretary will be aware of the standing ovations that the Royal Scottish National Orchestra achieved on tour in Salzburg—but how much do all those organisations do, even when performing at home, to take St Andrew to the world and to bring him home? Again, my message is that so much more could be done.

Why, then, should we promote St Andrew's day more effectively? It would represent an occasion for bringing domestic and international audiences together. It could and should celebrate the best of Scotland, bringing people together in a world filled with division. We can and should do more.

17:34

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Michelle Thomson on her motion and on her speech. I completely agree with her about the importance of us coming together and celebrating, with some patriotic fervour, what it means to be Scottish—bringing us all together, as we saw last Tuesday, and indeed in the chamber the next day, when there was much celebration of what had been achieved by Scotland's men's football team.

St Andrew's day needs to be better celebrated and embraced by us here at home, and inviting the rest of the world to join us in such a celebration is a first-class idea. It is one of the world's oldest national days—it is rooted deep in the story of Scotland. The 14th century was mentioned, I think—I could not quite catch the exact date, but it is very ancient, shall we say.

Reference was made to the declaration of Arbroath in 1320 and the famous address to Pope John XXII seeking recognition of Scotland. There, in black ink on parchment, St Andrew was named as the nation's patron saint and protector. That was no ornamentation—Scotland's cause was being presented as part of a divine story, placing Andrew at the heart of the Scottish identity: a symbol of faith, freedom and nation.

That symbolism endured into the union of 1707. Article 1 of the treaty of union required a new flag combining the crosses of St George and St Andrew. Discussions ensued to ensure that neither cross dominated, producing a union flag that visually represented a partnership of the two nations. Scotland's identity and Andrew's legacy were, therefore, woven directly into the fabric of the new United Kingdom.

In the centuries after the union, St Andrew's influence has only grown. His saltire has become a marker of pride and heritage, and St Andrew's societies have emerged across the Scottish diaspora, especially in north America, helping

communities abroad to maintain their culture, customs and traditions. Their celebrations helped to make St Andrew's day internationally recognised long before it was formally recognised even here at home.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): To follow up on what the member was saying, and the intervention from Kenny Gibson, the member might be aware that two years' time marks the 1,000th anniversary of the tale of when King David I was about to be gored by a stag in Holyrood park in 1028. A cross appeared in the stag's antlers, which gave this Parliament its name: the holy cross, or Holyrood. Does the member think that we should be looking to ensure that we commemorate that as well, as a part of Scotland's heritage?

Stephen Kerr: Oh, absolutely—we should miss no opportunity to come together and celebrate our Scottishness and Scotland, among ourselves and before the rest of the world.

However—if you will allow me, Deputy Presiding Officer—I want to raise a serious point as well, which relates to the issue that I raised in connection with the union. I have to say that my support for Scotland's place in the United Kingdom has often—in fact, I have lost count of the number of times—led some on the other side of the constitutional argument to question my love for my country. I am, first and foremost, patriotically Scottish—I love Scotland, the people and the history, and the way of life that we enjoy, which is worth defending. I wish to quote George Orwell, who once drew a clear line between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism, he wrote, is a

“devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life”,

whereas nationalism is about power.

Too often in Scotland, the Government seeks to fuse the two, insisting that loyalty to one party—the Scottish National Party—is loyalty to Scotland itself. If you question its policies or its performance in Government, you are often accused of talking Scotland down. That is just not true, because patriotism includes the duty to challenge a Government when it fails, and the Scottish Government has presided over decline—in education, in manufacturing and in the freedoms that have long defined Scottish life.

Burns captured the danger of elites acting in their own interests rather than the common good in “The Jolly Beggars”. He wrote:

“A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.”

Those lines remind us that power can serve itself if left unchecked—a lesson that resonates today.

However, I remain hopeful, because Scotland—the real Scotland—remains the best place in the world: hard-working, open, neighbourly and honest. We have a way of life that is worth preserving. Above the doors of the Parliament are the words of Alasdair Gray:

“Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation”.

That is a call to hope, not partisanship.

17:39

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Michelle Thomson for bringing the debate to the chamber. St Andrew is, of course, our patron saint, and—as she mentioned—we share that honour with Russia, Ukraine, Barbados and others.

St Andrew has been celebrated in Scotland for more than 1,000 years, with feasts being held in his honour as far back as 1000 AD. It was not until 1320, when Scotland's independence was declared with the signing of the declaration of Arbroath, that he officially became Scotland's patron saint. Since then, St Andrew has become an important part of Scottish society, as Michelle Thomson mentioned, and of course the flag of Scotland is the saltire.

St Andrew has so many different connections to our country that it is worth considering how he came to be so important to Scotland. Who was St Andrew? It is important to remember his Christian background, but I will talk about inclusive messages, too, further on in my speech. St Andrew preached the gospel in the land around the Black Sea and in Greece, and was eventually crucified on an X-shaped cross in Patras.

During his visit in 1969, Pope Paul VI gave relics of St Andrew to Scotland with the words, “St Peter gives you his brother”. Those are now displayed in St Mary's Catholic church in Edinburgh.

Athelstaneford—many people would pronounce it as “Athel-stan-ford”, but it is pronounced locally as “All-shin-ford”—in East Lothian is the birthplace of Scotland's national flag: St Andrew's cross, or the saltire. As Kenny Gibson mentioned, legend has it that the flag originated at the battle that was fought close to the village in 832. An army of Picts and Scots, under King Angus, had been on a raid into Northumbrian territory, but they were pursued and caught by a larger force of Angles and Saxons at Athelstaneford. Fearing the outcome, Angus prayed for deliverance and was rewarded by the appearance overhead of a white saltire against the blue sky. The king vowed that if he gained the victory, Andrew would thereafter be the patron saint of Scotland. The Scots won, and in due course the saltire became the flag of Scotland.

This Sunday, the First Minister will be present at the annual St Andrew's day event in Athelstaneford. I have been attending the event for many years, with an immense sense of pride. Four years ago, when I was elected, I was asked to chair the Parliament's cross-party group on St Andrew's day. The group includes two fantastic people, along with many others. One is Dennis Canavan, who, in previous sessions of Parliament, ensured that St Andrew's day was marked as a public holiday. The other, whom many of us will know, is Joe Goldblatt, who contributes from the culture angle. It is my pleasure to work with them both.

One key ask for me is that we mark St Andrew's day formally in our Parliament. When I arranged an event in 2022, I could not believe that the Parliament did not mark the day formally. Michelle Thomson and I have discussed that, and I would like to take it forward with the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture. I know that it is an issue for the Parliament, but we should be marking St Andrew's day formally in the Parliament.

For me, St Andrew's day is all about who we are as a nation, what our values are and how inclusive we are, whether we believe in the union or in Scotland as an independent nation. It is all about love, compassion and respect for all—the values of St Andrew.

Michelle Thomson: Will the member give way quickly?

Paul McLennan: Yes, of course.

Michelle Thomson: I will be as quick as I can, because I am respectful of the member's time.

I have absolute respect for the fact that the member's office set up and managed the inaugural St Andrew's night in this place. My office then took it over, but that meant that, for two years, our local offices had to give up our resource to do that. We were unable to persuade the Parliament to carry on, leaving one of us to do that, which does not seem right.

Paul McLennan: Yes—I reiterate that point, and it is really important as we go forward.

Last week at Hampden, in what was a magnificent result, we saw the saltire at its best. I have been at Hampden many times when there have been 10,000 people there and the saltire has been flying away, and it was proudly waved as we qualified for the world cup for the first time in 28 years. That lifted the mood of the nation—there is no doubt about that.

At a time when we see the rise of the far right, we must redouble our efforts to promote the values of inclusivity, respect, love and compassion, and we must push back against

those who promote fear and misinformation. Every single one of us has a responsibility to do that. We have to work hard to address inequalities by empowering our communities and ensuring that they are fully recognised and supported as a valued part of our society. The saltire and St Andrew's day can play a major part in that. Kindness plays a leading role in the purpose of St Andrew's day, and it offers a timely moment to reflect on that purpose and come together in our communities.

17:44

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Michelle Thomson for bringing the debate to the chamber; I am pleased to speak in it. I acknowledge the work of the cross-party group on St Andrew's day and the people who continue to run that group, as others have mentioned.

The motion highlights the on-going work of the former MP and MSP Dennis Canavan to ensure that St Andrew's day continues to be an important day that recognises our patron saint. He took forward the campaign to make it a bank holiday to be enjoyed by everyone.

As a proud Scot, I believe that it is really nice, and important, that we—like many countries around the world—celebrate our patron saint as part of celebrating our history, our culture and our country. When I was young, I had family who lived abroad for many years, and they enjoyed St Andrew's day and saw it as a great opportunity to invite international friends over to enjoy and celebrate Scotland. The real wonder was in people from cultures from around the world enjoying one another's culture; that was so important to them.

St Andrew is both Scotland's patron saint and our national symbol, officially recognised—as others have said—in the 1320 declaration of Arbroath. The relationship is represented by the saltire flag, with the blue-and-white X-shaped cross symbolising the way in which St Andrew was martyred. In addition, as the motion states, we need to acknowledge

“the economic benefits that global recognition brings to Scotland through the culture, business, education, tourism and retail sectors, supported by the use of the Saltire as both the national flag and the 'Brand Scotland' identifier of Scottish produce and marketing”.

We see that in Scotland, and I am sure that others will often see it when they are abroad. People will notice our flag in shops and retail outlets, wherever they go. We have great relationships around the world.

St Andrew's day is recognised and celebrated around the world by people who believe that they have a connection to Scotland. They are known as the Scottish diaspora. The diaspora consists of

Scottish people who emigrated—as we know, we were a great nation for emigrating around the world—and now their descendants, whose number is estimated to be anything between 30 million and 40 million people.

I know that, in my South Scotland region, there is plenty going on this week to celebrate St Andrew's day. That includes traditional events such as ceilidhs, and a mixture of others involving important history and institutions. In my area, the local Burns club is having an evening event to celebrate the day, and there is even karaoke. I am sure that those who are attending are very pleased that I will be dealing with amendments later tonight, so I will not be singing in Ayrshire.

In a world where there is such division as there is today, I hope, as we celebrate St Andrew's day, that—as others have said—we can look beyond the division to a message of hope and unity that we in this country and around the world so desperately need. We know that St Andrew would have hoped for that also.

I thank Michelle Thomson again for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank members for their contributions.

17:47

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate the member on bringing the debate to the chamber, just days before St Andrew's day itself.

I, too recognise the role of my former colleague Dennis Canavan, who, with tenacity, drove through the bill that became the St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Act 2007. It was passed unanimously on 29 November 2006—I ken, cos I was there.

As Dennis Canavan said in speaking to the bill,

“At one time, St Andrew's day was a popular day of festivities throughout Scotland, but unfortunately domestic celebrations have dwindled over the years.”—[Official Report, 29 November 2006; c 29861.]

That was 16 years ago and, despite the day being a bank holiday in Scotland, I think that that remains the case. I searched for St Andrew's celebrations in my constituency, but although I have no doubt that there will be some, they are not large-scale events.

I wondered why, but perhaps it is because Burns night on 25 January has captured the idea of a celebration of Scotland. After all, Burns was the man who wrote in Scots, internationally, and whose lyrics ring out as one year turns to another. However, I think that there is room for them both. For me, one celebrates the essence of our culture—of “We're aw Jock Tamson's bairns”,

expressed by Burns as “A Man's a Man for a' That”—while the other celebrates our affection for, and protection of, Scotland as a nation. It need not be either/or. St Andrew's day celebrates this most ancient of nations, said to have been founded in 843 AD by Kenneth MacAlpin when he united the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata with the Picts and established the kingdom of Alba, which is often considered to be the birth of modern Scotland.

Our boundary with our near neighbour has remained relatively fixed, apart from the to-ing and fro-ing of Berwick—a Scottish town, if ever I saw one—some 13 times, with it eventually landing on the English side in 1482, where it has remained ever since.

To coin a phrase, what did the Romans ever do for us? Well, they failed to conquer Scotland in their successful invasion of Britain in 43 AD. In less than 40 years, they had reached and subdued what we now know as northern England and Wales. Before them lay the wilds of Caledonia, and by 79 AD they were pushing northwards into southern Scotland. Here, at the place of the three hills—or Trimontium, in Latin—near Melrose, in my constituency, they began to construct a fort that was to be used as a complex in Scotland. Some 17,000 people were occupied there at one time, and the same site was used several times over the next 100 years or more. However, Scotland was to remain defiantly intact to this day—perhaps that is what the Romans did for us.

It took the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, then her son, with the union of the crowns, acceding to the English throne, and later the treaty of union, for Scotland to be united with England, but it was, and remains, an uneasy union. Unlike the English, for whom Parliament is sovereign, we, the Scottish people, are sovereign. That is embedded in the declaration of Arbroath, and it is why any UK monarch is king or queen of Scots, not Scotland.

In the past, attempts were made to kill our culture—bagpipes were banned after the 1745 rebellion, the Dress Act 1746 banned the wearing of the kilt and Scots were demeaned for speaking in our native tongue, not the Queen's English. “I went and seen” is not slang but Scots dialect. However, here we are, as a nation, wearing the kilt, with the skirl of the pipes all in fashion, from weddings and funerals to football and rugby—I was tempted to say “to infinity and beyond”, because the saltire is recognised worldwide as Scotland's flag. I ken, cos I seen it.

Let us celebrate St Andrew's day and demonstrate that—despite all those centuries during which there have been so many attempts to diminish, if not erase, our Scottishness—here we are, as Scottish as ever. I say that proudly as one born in England to an English mother.

17:52

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I thank Michelle Thomson for securing the debate.

I will focus on Andrew himself. To start with, we might consider what we mean by a saint. In Christian scriptures in the Bible, the word “saint” is used to mean every follower of Jesus Christ, not just a few. Those were not exceptionally good people but people who believed that Jesus had been punished in their place, so their sins had been forgiven and they had been gifted eternal life. However, over time, a tradition built up that some people were somehow extra special and were therefore called saints, although there was still disagreement in the Christian church about exactly what we meant by a saint.

Nevertheless, Andrew is categorised as a saint under both definitions, so I thought that I would look at what we know of Andrew in the Christian scriptures. John’s gospel tells us that Andrew was previously a disciple or follower of John the Baptist—no connection to me—and John told them that Jesus was the lamb of God. That was a reference back to the Jewish scriptures—we call them the Old Testament—when God had led the Jews out of captivity in Egypt. They had to sacrifice a Passover lamb and were protected from the final plague by the lamb’s blood.

Andrew becomes the first follower of Jesus, but he immediately finds his brother Peter and introduces him, too. Andrew says to Peter, “We have found the Messiah,” and thus he becomes the first person to recognise who Jesus really was: the son of God—that is, he was God—and the new leader of the Jews whom they had been looking forward to for so long.

Another time that we read about Andrew is at what is called the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus had been teaching a large crowd out in the countryside, and the people were getting hungry. How to feed them? It is Andrew who finds a boy with five loaves of bread and two fish and brings them all to Jesus, admitting that they are not much. However, Jesus performs a miracle and feeds everyone. For the second time, we see Andrew bringing someone to Jesus, and it shows that Andrew was a practical kind of person. He could see that there was a big problem. He did not know what the complete answer was, but he threw in his tuppenceworth, and God used it and blessed it.

That is a good example for us. We can at least try to contribute a little to solving problems, even if we cannot fully tackle or maybe even understand the whole thing.

Our third picture of Andrew comes when some Greeks went to see Jesus. It is worth remembering that Jesus and all his disciples were

Jewish and that there was quite a cultural divide between Jews and Greeks. These Greeks first spoke to another disciple—Philip. It is worth noting that Philip and Andrew were both Jews but had Greek names and so might have been more approachable. Philip might have been unsure of what to do, so he turned to Andrew, and it was Andrew who went to Jesus with the issue. So, for the third time, we see Andrew bringing someone to Jesus, which is very much a theme in what we know about him. Philip obviously felt that Andrew was somebody with whom he could share a problem.

We have a picture of Andrew as someone very solid and dependable and someone whom others came to for help or with questions. Overall, it seems to me that Andrew is something of an unsung hero. He is mentioned 12 times in the gospels, and four of those are part of a list of the disciples’ names. After that, in the book of Acts, which tells the story of the early church, he is mentioned just once. However, from what we know of him, Andrew is someone whom we can look up to and take as an example.

Andrew’s brother Peter is much better known and was the first leader of the early church after Jesus had left to go to heaven. Like Andrew, we may not be in the limelight all the time, and many of our constituents are in the same situation—they are people who serve faithfully as volunteers or as carers or parents of disabled children, or people who are conscientiously working in a poorly paid job. Such folk may never be recognised, paid high salaries or given awards but, like Andrew, they serve faithfully and we should be grateful for all of them, just as I believe that we should be grateful for Andrew.

17:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I thank Michelle Thomson for the opportunity to debate St Andrew’s day and, as I close the debate, for us to reflect on what St Andrew’s day truly represents, not only for Scotland but for Scots everywhere and for people everywhere who love Scotland. It is more than a date in the calendar; it is a celebration of who we are—a nation with deep roots and global reach, as we have heard, that is proud of our heritage and confident in our future.

Michelle Thomson began her introductory speech by saying that St Andrew’s day provides a huge opportunity to promote Scotland, and I agree. She made a comparison with Ireland, and it is worth having a look at what Ireland does every year. This year, 38 representatives of the Irish state took part in St Patrick’s day events in more than 90 cities in 40 countries. We can learn much

from our Celtic cousins for the promotion of Scotland on our national day. Michelle Thomson also mentioned the opportunity to co-operate better with the culture sector, at home and abroad, as part of St Andrew's day celebrations. I would be pleased to take that away and raise it with culture sector colleagues.

Kenneth Gibson made an intervention about the anniversary of the battle of Athelstaneford. Paul McLennan, as the member for East Lothian, is well placed to remind us about the origins of St Andrew and Scotland's national flag. He called for support from across the chamber for a formal event to mark St Andrew's day in the Scottish Parliament, and I join him in that.

I was delighted to hear Stephen Kerr call for the promotion of Scotland at home and abroad. He was absolutely right that we should miss no opportunity to do that, so I look forward to him talking up the international promotion of Scotland and the diaspora in future.

Carol Mochan paid tribute to the cross-party group on St Andrew's day, and I take this opportunity to join her in doing so. Like other members, she talked about the opportunities for the promotion of Scotland. For colleagues who are not aware of it, I mention the brand Scotland strategic partnership that the Scottish Government chairs, which brings together public bodies such as VisitScotland and Scottish Enterprise, Scottish universities and many others. If colleagues have not yet been to www.scotland.org and made use of the free-to-use promotional materials to promote Scotland, they should please do so. I look forward to colleagues from across the chamber making the most of that.

Carol Mochan drew attention to diaspora Scots who have left the country. She was right to do so, but it is important to say that, in 2025, diaspora means more than that—it includes those who want to be associated with Scotland and people who have studied here, lived here or travelled here. I commend to members the "Scottish Connections Framework". Members should have a look at that to see what we are trying to do in reaching out to Scotland's historical, current and—no doubt—future diasporas. There is an opportunity to do that not just on St Andrew's day but throughout the year.

Christine Grahame brought wonderful historical context for St Andrew's day, and John Mason brought us the religious context. The latest public insight monitor shows that more than a quarter of people in Scotland mark the day, which is a clear sign of its growing importance in our national life. St Andrew's day reminds us that Scotland is one of the oldest nations in the international community, but one that continues to innovate and inspire. It is a day that unites us across

communities, faiths and continents. From Edinburgh to Eindhoven and from Glasgow to Guelph, Scots and friends of Scotland will gather to celebrate our shared identity and values.

However, it is not just about tradition; it is about opportunity, and the Scottish Government's "Scottish Connections Framework" sets out a clear ambition to strengthen ties with our diaspora and to build cultural, educational and economic links that benefit Scotland and our global partners. Today's debate has shown that St Andrew's day is a powerful platform for that ambition.

I recently had the privilege of hosting the Argentine ambassador along with esteemed guests from Buenos Aires to celebrate our shared passion for rugby and mark 200 years of cultural connection. The historical ties between Scotland and Argentina run deep, and reminders of the enduring relationship can be seen throughout Buenos Aires, where references to St Andrew—San Andrés—are woven into the city's identity. Members have mentioned the diaspora in North America, but it is often forgotten that Argentina has the fifth largest Scottish diaspora in the world.

Every celebration abroad, whether in countries that share St Andrew as a patron saint or where our diaspora thrives, tells Scotland's story and opens doors for trade, tourism and cultural exchange. This week, I will join friends in Switzerland and Germany to showcase Scotland's strengths in innovation in energy, life sciences and the creative industries while exploring new opportunities for collaboration.

Many of my ministerial colleagues will also champion Scotland internationally, in Ireland, Belgium and London, alongside our global network of offices, which will host activities to mark the day. I pay tribute to our international network of Scottish Government offices, our Scottish Development International staff in a further 30 locations, and the more than 1,200 GlobalScots.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Dennis Canavan, whose determination ensured that St Andrew's day became a national holiday. His work reminds us that, when we act together across parties and sectors, we achieve lasting change. That spirit of collaboration is exactly what we need now as we deepen Scotland's international connections.

Finally, let us remember that St Andrew himself is a figure who transcends borders—a patron saint shared by many nations and a symbol of unity and diversity. In that spirit, I commend all those who will celebrate St Andrew's day, here and around the world. Together we can ensure that this national day continues to bring people closer, forging new pathways and telling Scotland's story with pride. Scotland is a global nation, Scotland is

connected and, on St Andrew's day, Scotland shines.

Meeting closed at 18:03.

Correction

Graeme Dey has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey):

At col 62, para 10, line 1—

Original text—

As I said, in August of this year, a query was raised with the Scottish Government. That was investigated and, in mid-September, it was identified that there was indeed an issue.

Corrected text—

As I said, in August of this year, an error was identified following a query raised with the Scottish Government. That was investigated and, in mid-September, it was identified that there was indeed an issue.

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here: www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/what-was-said-and-official-reports/official-reports

Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

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