



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 20 February 2024

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Tuesday 20 February 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
BUSINESS MOTION	3
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam]—and agreed to.</i>	
OATH	4
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	5
National Health Service (Capital Projects)	5
A96 Dualling (Inverness to Aberdeen)	10
SCOTTISH MINISTERS	14
<i>Motions moved—[First Minister]—and agreed to.</i>	
The First Minister (Humza Yousaf)	14
Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con)	17
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	18
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green)	20
The First Minister	21
SOCIAL SECURITY	26
<i>Motion moved—[Shirley—Anne Somerville].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Jeremy Balfour].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Paul O’Kane].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	26
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	32
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	36
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	40
Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)	43
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)	45
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)	48
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)	49
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	51
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)	54
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	56
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	58
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)	62
The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn)	65
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	71
<i>Motions moved—[George Adam].</i>	
MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE	72
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam].</i>	
DECISION TIME	73
GAS AND ELECTRICITY STANDING CHARGES	81
<i>Motion debated—[Gordon MacDonald].</i>	
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)	81
Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)	84
Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)	87
Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)	88
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)	90
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	91
The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin)	93

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 20 February 2024

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Professor Michael Brown, who has the chair in Irish, Scottish and enlightenment history at the University of Aberdeen.

Professor Michael Brown (University of Aberdeen): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you very much indeed for inviting me here today.

In times of controversy, we often look to our collective past with a nostalgic glow. Times were better and less polarised then, and challenges were met with profound wisdom. An age of enlightenment is seen as one of reason and civility.

The 18th century was a golden age of Scottish intellectual life—a high-water mark when David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson shaped political science, economics and sociology and inspired the literature of Robert Burns, James Macpherson and Susan Ferrier. Edinburgh—the Athens of the north—was the centrepiece, but the enlightenment reached into Glasgow and Aberdeen, and it influenced thinkers in Europe and America.

Yet the enlightenment was also an age of disagreement. Hume fell out with his guest Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lord Monboddo and Lord Kames conducted a long-term academic feud, and Dugald Stewart and John Robison argued over the French revolution. The so-called rude enlightenment could be personal and unpleasant.

However, the Scottish enlighteners did not simplify things. They rejected models of human psychology that said that people are motivated only by greed, power or status. They understood that human life is complicated, contradictory and confusing. Humans like security and freedom. They collaborate with some people and conflict with others. They can act selfishly, but they can also be remarkably altruistic.

The Scottish enlightenment proposed that we are better people when we engage with others. We are improved by listening and reflecting. We are our best selves when we test our ideas and attitudes in conversation. Virtue is found in the

dialogue between people. It is a characteristic not of a person but of an encounter. Virtue is action.

It was Francis Hutcheson who first suggested that virtue involves pursuing

“the greatest good for the greatest number”.

That phrase, which was made famous by Jeremy Bentham, makes a claim on our moral imagination. Hutcheson sought not to circumscribe our moral calculus but to expand it by including what he termed “universal benevolence”—the good of all.

Such an approach to moral life—acknowledging that people have mixed motives, that we are improved by those with whom we disagree and that all of humanity has a claim to our attention—suggests a way past the polemical divisions of the enlighteners’ age and ours. In thinking of the Scottish enlightenment, we can set aside nostalgia for a golden age and learn to manage our own disputes, with all our faults, by collaborating in pursuit of a common flourishing.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-12229, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Tuesday 20 February 2024—

after

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

insert

followed by Oaths and Affirmations

delete

followed by Ministerial Statement: Working Towards a Tobacco Free Scotland by 2034 and Tackling Youth Vaping

and insert

followed by Appointment of Scottish Minister and Junior Scottish Ministers

(b) Thursday 22 February 2024—

after

followed by Financial Resolution: Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill - UK Legislation

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill - UK Legislation—[George Adam.]

Motion agreed to.

Oath

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is the taking of an oath by our new member. Tim Eagle is the new member for the Highlands and Islands. I invite him to take the oath.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, Tim Eagle, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King Charles, his heirs and successors, according to law, so help me God. [*Applause.*]

Topical Question Time

14:05

National Health Service (Capital Projects)

1. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the reported decision to delay the progress of all new NHS capital projects for up to two years, including the Ayr national treatment centre. (S6T-01801)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The twin challenge of a United Kingdom Government cut to our capital grant over the next five years and unprecedented levels of inflation caused by Brexit, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the handling of the UK economy has impacted on our ability to fund capital projects. The 10 per cent real-terms cut to our capital budget is the equivalent to a reduction of around £540 million a year by 2027-28 and a cumulative reduction of £1.6 billion over the period.

Unfortunately, that has meant that all NHS capital projects, including the national treatment centre in Ayr, will be paused. Our emphasis now has to be on addressing backlog maintenance and essential equipment replacement. All capital projects are now under review, and I expect the Deputy First Minister to set out the results of that review in the coming weeks. The Deputy First Minister will be writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer ahead of the budget, asking him to reverse the cuts to our capital investment budget.

Carol Mochan: The cabinet secretary knows that I am no fan of the Tory Government at Westminster, but it is fair to say that, after 17 years of the Scottish National Party Government being in power, patients and staff alike are starting to get fed up with it deflecting blame and responsibility.

NHS Ayrshire and Arran has already purchased the Carrick Glen site, which will now lie unused. All the while, patients in that health board area are suffering on long waiting lists and have less provision close to home because of long-term underfunding. Will the cabinet secretary set out a timescale for Parliament to get the critical delivery of Ayr national treatment centre back on track, or will the people of Ayrshire just have to record this as yet another example of the SNP saying one thing and doing another? They need a timeframe.

Neil Gray: Obviously, I would rather have those projects going ahead, for reasons including those that Carol Mochan has set out. I want there to be an increased capacity and ability to address the needs of the people of Scotland through our NHS.

However, the financial reality is that we are facing increased costs due to spiralling inflation that has been driven, to a large extent, by the disastrous mini-budget from Truss and Kwarteng, and a budget that is diminishing by £1.6 billion over the coming years. Those are the consequences that we are discussing today.

As I have set out, the Deputy First Minister will be returning to the Parliament with a response to the review of all capital projects, and I would expect to be able to give the member information off the back of that.

Carol Mochan: The impact of the delays will be felt not just in Ayrshire. Across Scotland, important promises have been broken. Neil Gray's constituents will have similar feelings to my own, as the SNP Government cannot even deliver a new Monklands hospital in the cabinet secretary's own back yard. Those promises were made by the SNP Government. Patients wait for years on waiting lists, and staff are working in buildings that are literally crumbling. In response, rather than delivering the local health provision that it has promised, the SNP has put the brakes on developments that are critical for the future. If the Government cannot be trusted to deliver the project in the cabinet secretary's own back yard, the Parliament has to be updated on the timescale for the projects to be undertaken.

Neil Gray: I should set out that, in order to avoid a conflict of interest, I have recused myself from any Government decision making in relation to the Monklands replacement project, as Carol Mochan would expect, as it is in my constituency. However, it is clear from a briefing that I received in my constituency capacity from NHS Lanarkshire at the start of the month that its work continues towards a full business case for the much-needed new hospital by 2031.

The Deputy First Minister will write to the UK chancellor, asking for a reversal of the cut to the capital budget, which has a material impact on our ability to invest in capital projects. Having £1.6 billion less over the coming years is a material factor in the decisions that we are having to take.

I would be keen to work with Carol Mochan on ensuring that an incoming UK Labour Government would seek to invest in our public sector services and our economy by reversing the cuts to capital projects. At the minute, Labour's position is unsustainable, because it wants to follow the Tories' spending plans.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We have much interest from members, so I insist on concise questions and responses.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): In addition to the letter that he mentioned, will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the

Scottish Government's latest engagement with the UK Government on the capital budget, bearing in mind, as the cabinet secretary touched on, that the UK Government's disastrous autumn statement slashed the Scottish Government's capital budget and the UK Government's reckless spending decisions have a substantial impact on capital investment? It is clear that the chancellor needs to rectify the funding situation in the spring budget.

Neil Gray: Absolutely. Stuart McMillan sets out very well the context of the situation that we are in. There was a lack of investment in public services in the autumn statement. We decided to ensure that all the consequentials that we have available to us continue to be invested in public services, including a real-terms increase for our NHS and social care services. However, a reversal of the capital cuts that are coming forward would have a major impact on our ability to invest in what we need to in our NHS estate, as has been pointed out.

The Deputy First Minister met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury last month and made it clear that the UK Government must prioritise investment in public services and infrastructure over tax cuts in the forthcoming UK spring budget.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The delay to treatment centres in Ayr and across Scotland is unacceptable, especially given that Carrick Glen was already a working private hospital. The former health secretary, now the First Minister, announced the treatment centre at Carrick Glen just before the local elections, but, yet again, we have a broken promise from the Scottish National Party that will have serious consequences for people who are in agony and waiting for treatment from our NHS.

Some people in Ayrshire think that it was just another election gimmick. Can the cabinet secretary promise that the treatment centre in Ayrshire will not be scrapped altogether, and what does he have to say to people waiting for treatment, such as my constituent who urgently needs surgery, without which he will be unable to continue caring for his wife?

Neil Gray: I obviously have great sympathy for anyone in the situation that the member sets out. Two new national treatment centres have just come on track, and we have two to come on track this year at the Golden Jubilee hospital and the Forth Valley royal hospital, which will mean an increased capacity of 20,000 in those national treatment centres. I obviously would have wanted us to go further than that. That was our plan, but the financial reality of increased costs due to spiralling UK inflation and a cut to our budget of £1.6 billion over the coming years means that we have to review our capital projects.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Although I fully appreciate that the capital settlement for the Scottish Government from the UK Government is dire, the news could not have come at a worse point, because progress is finally being made on planning for a new Belford hospital in Fort William after years of being promised one. NHS Highland has been asked to suspend that work. Even if there is no capital yet to build the hospital, which we accept because of the settlement, will the Scottish Government at least allow the planning process—RIBA stage 3—to progress so that the work to date on planning is not wasted?

Neil Gray: I thank Kate Forbes for a very sensible approach. We are absolutely engaged with that issue at the moment, and we will certainly seek to take forward her suggestion.

It is essential that NHS boards continue to plan for how they will improve and reform services, and we will remain committed to supporting them in that process.

I go back to the point that many capital projects across the country are under threat not because of anything that the Scottish Government has done, but because of the UK Government's disastrous management of the economy—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Neil Gray: —as well as the 10 per cent cut to our budget. The £1.6 billion cut over the coming years will impact not just on health projects but on capital projects across the country. Once again, we appeal to the UK Government to use the spring budget next month to reverse that devastating cut to allow us to see important health capital projects going ahead.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To solve the Moray maternity issue, the Scottish Government promised £5 million of investment in Raigmore hospital's maternity unit. That is now on hold. I do not see what the Government is going to say to people in Caithness and others who might have to travel four hours in labour to get to a maternity hospital in Aberdeen or Perth. Will the cabinet secretary work with me to see whether there is a way of resolving that issue and ensuring that the long-overdue investment in Raigmore hospital is continued?

Neil Gray: I appreciate the question from Edward Mountain, and I well appreciate that the situation that he has described is incredibly challenging. I cannot give a direct commitment in respect of the Raigmore hospital investment, but I can commit to his suggestion of working with him to see whether anything more can be done to ameliorate some of the difficulties that women in his region face. I would be more than happy to follow up on that point with him in due course.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): We have heard about Belford hospital in Lochaber and the re-provisioning of Caithness general hospital and the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion in Edinburgh. All of those projects are much needed, and all of them are already delayed. There is nothing more than a hard stop by the Government on those much-needed projects, and the public are having none of the excuses that are being offered.

The cabinet secretary will know that the Government pledged that the national treatment centres would conduct 40,000 in-patient procedures a year from next year. With the hard stop put on those treatment centres, what does he have to say about the impact that that will have on his Government's efforts to drive down waiting times?

Neil Gray: I do not disagree with the assessment that those projects are much needed. As I set out in reply to Carol Mochan's question, if we had the finance available, we would be deploying it. That is absolutely clear. However, Alex Cole-Hamilton and others across the chamber cannot ignore the financial reality that we have increasing costs and a diminished budget because of decisions that have been taken elsewhere. I would be keen to work with Alex Cole-Hamilton to persuade UK ministers to reverse the capital cuts rather than trying to lay the blame on the Scottish Government, which is doing all that it can to invest in those projects.

The national treatment centres will deliver an increased capacity of 20,000 elective surgery cases. We are not where we wanted to be. We want to have all those national treatment centres up and running, which is why we need a reversal to the cuts to our budget.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary to his new post, and I wish him well.

In the light of the current financial challenges that the cabinet secretary has outlined, it seems to me that it is, sadly, inevitable that a prioritisation of current capital projects in the health sector will now be required. Given that the Scottish Government first promised a new medical centre for Lochgelly in 2011, surely it must be Lochgelly's turn now.

Neil Gray: I thank Annabelle Ewing for her kind wishes, which I appreciate. I also appreciate the situation that she faces in her constituency, with regard to the project in Lochgelly that she has described. I have no doubt that she will, as a strong constituency advocate, continue to make that case, and I would be more than happy to have a discussion about what might be possible—I have offered such discussions to others.

Annabelle Ewing is aware that all Government capital projects are under review at the moment. The Deputy First Minister will return with the results of that review, which will set out the trajectory for our capital investments.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): We are told that the full business case for the replacement Monklands hospital will be ready next year. That is a year late. Can the cabinet secretary promise that we will have a new hospital open in 2031, as we were promised?

Neil Gray: As I have already set out in response to a question from Carol Mochan, I have—as Graham Simpson would expect—recused myself from a Government decision-making perspective in relation to the Monklands replacement project, because it rests in my constituency. He was on the same call with NHS Lanarkshire at the start of the month as I was in my constituency capacity, in which the board set out that progress continues to be made towards the full business case for that much-needed hospital by 2031.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I appreciate that the cabinet secretary has just answered Graham Simpson's question on the new Monklands hospital. Nevertheless, he will be aware, as I am, that there is great concern among constituents, given the news yesterday. He will also be aware of the urgent need for a new Monklands hospital. I, too, was on the call with NHS Lanarkshire, which seems to be confident that the project will go ahead. What discussions has the Government had in relation to the new hospital?

Neil Gray: I thank Fulton MacGregor for that question and for reiterating that the project is much needed. I have a constituency interest in the matter, so I have had to recuse myself from a Government decision-making perspective, but I will make sure that Fulton MacGregor gets a written update from a Government perspective from one of my ministerial colleagues, to ensure that he is kept up to date. In addition, I share Fulton MacGregor's understanding of our call with NHS Lanarkshire.

A96 Dualling (Inverness to Aberdeen)

2. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on whether the A96 will be dualled from Inverness to Aberdeen. (S6T-01797)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We remain committed to improving the A96, including dualling the road from Inverness to Nairn and the Nairn bypass, despite a worst-case scenario for Scotland following the United Kingdom autumn statement. I am acutely aware of the importance of the route to those who live along

the corridor, and our current plans are to fully dual the route.

As part of that process, we are undertaking the corridor review, which, through initial consultation, generated 11,000 improvement options. It is only right that those are fully appraised, and I expect that draft outcomes from the review will be ready for final public consultation in the coming months, before a final decision is reached.

Liam Kerr: In 2011, the Scottish National Party promised that the A96 would be dualled in full by 2030—no ifs, no buts and no climate corridor review.

In the past four years, 11 people have been killed and 69 have been seriously injured on the A96, and two more lives were tragically lost just last week. It turns out that this Government has spent just £800,000 on road safety improvements in that time but £5 million on its climate review. Does the cabinet secretary have any concerns that spending more than five times as much on a climate review as on saving people's lives might suggest that this central belt-focused Government has its priorities wrong?

Fiona Hyslop: I express my condolences to the families following the two fatalities in the accident on 12 February at Redhill, near Inverness. I can relay that, only last year, £610,000 was spent on road maintenance and safety and that, in total, £31 million has been spent on the development and planning, and all the necessary design work, for the dualling aspect in particular of the Inverness to Nairn part of the road.

However, as we have already heard in answers today, if we have a UK Government that has not invested in infrastructure and has cut the infrastructure budget not just for Scotland but for the rest of the UK—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear the minister.

Fiona Hyslop: —and if we also have a Labour Party that would want to continue that financial position, it puts capital infrastructure, whether it is in the central belt, the north of Scotland, the Highlands or the north-east, in a very difficult position. I will continue the job of ensuring that the review develops and that the important work on the A96 Inverness to Nairn bypass continues.

Liam Kerr: The question was not about how much has been spent but about the £800,000 that has been spent on road safety improvements. That is pitiful.

Over the weekend, *The Northern Scot* reported that the promise to dual the A96 by 2030 was “abandoned” more than three years ago. Responses to freedom of information requests suggest that the disgraced former cabinet

secretary for transport, Michael Matheson, ensured that the public was not told of that. Will the minister say, clearly and concisely, whether the Scottish National Party will dual the A96 in full by 2030, as was promised? Yes or no?

Fiona Hyslop: The SNP Government will respect the review that is taking place and all the thousands of people who have had input into that. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Fiona Hyslop: Our current plans are to dual the A96, and the dualling between Inverness and Nairn is a particular priority, as the member well knows.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): On 19 February 2021, the then cabinet secretary for transport, Michael Matheson, announced that the made orders for the Nairn bypass and the dualled section of the A96 from Inverness would be issued that summer. Three years on, that still has not happened. Has the three-year delay been deliberate, as a means of ensuring that the Scottish Government does not have to spend the money on delivering on its promise of a Nairn bypass, which my constituents have waited more than 15 years for? If the minister refutes that proposition, will she now publish a detailed plan setting out when construction will begin and when it will be completed?

Fiona Hyslop: As I advised Mr Ewing during our recent meeting, Transport Scotland is pressing forward with the significant work—and it is significant work—that is required to publish the made orders for dualling the A96 from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. I look forward to that happening in the first quarter of 2024. That also includes provision for the compulsory purchase orders, with a view to our completing the statutory process for the scheme.

As the member well knows, delivery of the scheme can commence only if approved under the relevant statutory authorisation process. Thereafter, a timetable for progress can be set in line with available budgets.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister has again given a commitment to dual the A96 from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. However, I was surprised to discover through an FOI request that, thus far, only one piece of land, at Milton of Culloden, has been bought and that no other compulsory purchase orders have been made. How much land will the minister require to be purchased for that work, and when will that be completed?

Fiona Hyslop: As I have said in previous answers, there is a statutory, staged process in relation to the work that is required, and the made

orders will enable the compulsory purchase orders for that section to be delivered. We expect to announce that in the first quarter of 2024, which is very soon indeed.

Scottish Ministers

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motions S6M-12210 and S6M-12211, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the appointment of Scottish ministers and junior Scottish ministers. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

I call the First Minister to speak to and move the motions.

14:28

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Before I speak to my motions, I welcome Tim Eagle to the Scottish Parliament. There is simply no doubt that we will have lots of political differences, but I genuinely wish him well. There is no greater honour than representing one's community in this nation's Parliament. I wish him all the best in the role that he is taking up. [*Applause.*]

In addition, I pay tribute to Donald Cameron, who—again, for all our political differences—I always thought of as very considered, thoughtful and quite often non-partisan. I suggest that those traits are needed very much in the Scotland Office. I pay tribute to him for often working constructively with the Scottish Government. I wish him well and look forward to engaging with him in due course.

I turn to the motions in my name. I hope that Parliament will agree that Fiona Hyslop be appointed as cabinet secretary and that Kaukab Stewart and Jim Fairlie be appointed as ministers in the Scottish Government.

However, let me start by paying tribute to Elena Whitham, who has been a valued member of my ministerial team since 2022. As she has said publicly, she has stepped down for health reasons from her role as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy. It is important to note that the people who are working collectively to address the harm that Scotland is experiencing due to drugs and alcohol—particularly people with lived experience—have greatly appreciated Elena's open, honest and compassionate manner, and her work in taking forward proposals for reviewing drug laws. I sincerely hope that we will see Elena back in ministerial office in the future. I commend her for speaking courageously about her health, and I wish her all the best for the future.

I also thank Michael Matheson for his work in the Government over the past 13 years. As Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Cabinet Secretary for Justice and, most recently, Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, he had many notable achievements to his name. In those roles, he

undoubtedly improved the lives of many people across the country. Most recently, as health secretary, he secured a fair deal with our NHS Scotland junior doctors and ensured that Scotland continues to be the only nation in the United Kingdom that has not lost a single day to doctors' strike action.

I turn to members who are joining the Government for the first time. Kaukab Stewart and Jim Fairlie bring to their roles a wealth of significant professional experience, which will translate well into ministerial office.

The appointment of Kaukab Stewart as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development is a historic moment for the Government and the Parliament. As many members will know, Kaukab was a primary school teacher in Glasgow and Edinburgh for three decades before becoming, in 2021, the first woman of colour to be elected to the Scottish Parliament. She is now the first woman of colour to hold ministerial office in the Scottish Government. I am really proud to lead a party that has worked hard over many years to ensure much greater diversity in our national Parliament. Whether it is about the late, great Bashir Ahmad becoming the first person of colour to be elected to the Parliament or, as I have mentioned, Kaukab now becoming the first woman of colour to serve in our Government, we should all be proud of the progress that we are making to ensure that the Parliament better reflects the communities that we all seek to serve. Equally, we all recognise that there is still much work to do in that regard. I am sure that Kaukab will bring her experience as convener of the Parliament's Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee to her new role.

Kaukab Stewart takes over from Christina McKelvie, who, as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, will now report directly to me. I know that she is looking forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that Christina will take on the role with the empathy and compassion that she has brought to every role that she has had in the Government.

Jim Fairlie will become Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity. As a former sheep farmer and the man who founded Scotland's first farmers market in Perth more than two decades ago, he is well versed in the needs of the agriculture and farming sector. I am pleased to say that he is already using his extensive experience in rural affairs, business and food and drink to drive forward the Government's priorities and to stand up for rural Scotland. He is an excellent addition to the Government's ministerial team.

I am also seeking the Parliament's approval for the appointment of Fiona Hyslop as Cabinet

Secretary for Transport. I am deeply proud of the fact that her introduction to the Cabinet means that the Scottish Government has, we believe, the highest proportion of women of any Government in the world. We should all take great pride in that. Fiona Hyslop is one of the most formidable, experienced and accomplished ministers in the Government. She has had significant achievements throughout her life in Government—not least as the minister who was responsible for abolishing the back-door tuition fees that were foisted on Scotland by Labour and the Liberal Democrats back in the early days of devolution. Since her appointment as Minister for Transport last year, she has overseen progress on the Levenmouth rail link, removed peak fares across all ScotRail services and brought Caledonian Sleeper's service into public ownership.

Two other cabinet secretaries take up new and expanded roles that reflect the Government's priorities. Neil Gray, who has become Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, has proved himself to be a highly capable cabinet secretary since his appointment to the Cabinet. He is well respected across the business community, and he engages well with stakeholders. I know that he will bring the same energy and drive to his new brief. He will be charged with supporting the most important and most precious institution in our country: the national health service. He will support its recovery from Covid, work on bringing down waiting times and reform the service to improve outcomes for patients.

Màiri McAllan is taking on the new expanded brief of Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy. It is right to combine those portfolios, given the massive economic opportunity of the green economy. That combination is more important now, given the attempts by Westminster-based parties to derail Scotland's green revolution.

Scotland has formidable strengths in the energy sector and will, in building on those strengths, be at the very forefront of the global race to net zero, and be home to more green investments, jobs and a wellbeing economy. Màiri McAllan will also, in the coming months, be responsible for driving forward our green industrial strategy and the refresh of the national strategy for economic transformation.

The new appointments mean that we have a strong and diverse team across Government, and with our Green partners and the wider Scottish National Party parliamentary group. It is a team that is focused on the Government's priorities and the missions that drive them—namely, equality, opportunity and community. That is the team that will continue to deliver and stand up for the people

of Scotland and which will, of course, advocate that the best future for our country is one in which all decisions about Scotland are made by the people of Scotland.

I ask Parliament to support the appointments. I am delighted to move the motions in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that Fiona Hyslop be appointed as a Scottish Minister.

That the Parliament agrees that Jim Fairlie and Kaukab Stewart be appointed as junior Scottish Ministers.

14:35

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I echo the First Minister's welcome to my newest colleague in Parliament, Tim Eagle. I also pay tribute to Donald Cameron. He was a fine parliamentarian, and I am sure that he will be a fine minister in the Scotland Office.

This is a reshuffle that the First Minister did not want to make and one that was brought about by the actions of Michael Matheson, whom Humza Yousaf believed to be a man of integrity—a man who had to sack himself because the First Minister was too weak to do so. This winter, Michael Matheson should have been saving our national health service, but instead he spent it trying to save his own career. Whether they have been misleading the media or mismanaging our health service, SNP ministers have repeatedly failed the accountability test. Mr Matheson leaves Government without a shred of integrity but, having failed to dismiss him, Humza Yousaf is left without a shred of credibility.

For the First Minister, this reshuffle was a missed opportunity to reset his failing leadership, to regain control of the agenda and to kick the Greens into touch. He ducked it, because the Green tail continues to wag the SNP dog. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: Regardless of how far and how fast Nicola Sturgeon falls, the Government still cannot escape the long shadow that she cast.

I welcome Fiona Hyslop's appointment, and I recognise that the First Minister is blazing a trail in bringing more women into his Cabinet. It is good to see Fiona Hyslop in her role as Cabinet Secretary for Transport. However, such is the influence of the Greens that the Government is now recycling its Cabinet ministers. We wish her well and, to refer to the words of Kate Forbes, we hope that she has more success in making the trains run on time than her predecessors have had.

Neil Gray takes over where others, including Humza Yousaf, have failed. His is a crucial role, and we wish Mr Gray well in it. We look forward to working with him but, as he takes on this new role, he must see that doing more of the same will not deliver the change that patients clearly need. Two years after Humza Yousaf announced an NHS recovery plan, our NHS is still in crisis. Surely the First Minister can now see what every patient in Scotland sees: that his recovery plan has failed and should be scrapped.

Although there is no place in Humza Yousaf's Government for Kate Forbes, her close ally Jim Fairlie takes up a rural post. The First Minister is reworking an old proverb: he is keeping his friends close but is keeping the friends of his enemies even closer.

I welcome Kaukab Stewart to the Government. As the First Minister said, it is inspiring to see the first woman of colour join a Scottish Administration. I wish her well as the new Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. Given how frequently her boss, Angus Robertson, is out of the country, topping up his air miles—it is nice to see him in the chamber today—I am sure that she will be kept very busy deputising for him. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: For the sake of the country and for the sake of our farmers, our hospitals, our roads and our railways, I would have hoped that the new ministers would tackle the problems that the SNP has created and neglected over the past 17 years. Sadly, I do not live in hope.

As the new ministers climb aboard Humza Yousaf's sinking ship, they can take comfort from one fact: as long as the First Minister remains in Bute house, their jobs are secure. The real lesson from the Michael Matheson scandal is that Humza Yousaf would prefer to burn what is left of his own credibility than to take action against one of his ministers.

The new Cabinet is just the latest example of an SNP Government that is distracted by division and is pursuing the wrong priorities. Scotland surely deserves better than that.

14:40

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I, too, pay tribute to Donald Cameron and welcome Tim Eagle to the Parliament. I say to Mr Eagle that he has big shoes to fill.

On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I welcome Jim Fairlie and Kaukab Stewart to their first appointments as ministers and welcome Fiona Hyslop, who is the SNP's comeback queen.

Before I turn to each of those members, I will make a few general observations.

The new ministers have a hard task ahead of them. They have to wrestle with poor budget decisions in their portfolios and with keeping their Green Party colleagues on side—which I know Jim Fairlie has views about. They also have to wrestle with ensuring that their devices have the correct data packages applied when they go on holiday, because roaming charges—or, more accurately, their cover-up—are why we are in this position.

We have an SNP Government with 30 cabinet secretaries and ministers—the largest-ever Government in Scotland—at a cost of more than £3 million in salaries alone. I keep asking myself whether they are worth it. With ferries not sailing, the A9 not being dualled, new hospitals and general practitioner surgeries being cancelled and 830,000 Scots on waiting lists, I fear that the answer is no.

The Government is failing, and I am not convinced that the addition of more ministers will stop the ship from sinking. If the SNP Government continues to grow, as it has done since 2007, I am sure that there will still be plenty of opportunities for those who did not get picked this time to get a turn before 2026.

In particular, I welcome Jim Fairlie to his post as Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity. Mr Fairlie is well liked by all across the chamber, and his knowledge of the agriculture sector will, no doubt, be invaluable to Parliament. However, Mr Fairlie comes from one of the SNP's factions that advocates change rather than the status quo. It is recognised that he is a fig leaf for the First Minister, who did not want to recruit the actual change agenda candidate, Kate Forbes, to his team. I am sure that Mr Fairlie will be more than up to the job in her absence.

I also welcome Kaukab Stewart to her new position as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. I recognise that she is the first woman of colour to become a minister in Scotland, and I congratulate her on that achievement. However, the brief brings with it a lot of travel. In fact, many positions in the Scottish Government seem to include a fair bit of globetrotting, but I will leave it to Ms Stewart to decide whether charging the taxpayer £11,000 to deliver a 15-minute speech in Los Angeles is better value than popping in via Zoom.

I also welcome Fiona Hyslop back to the Scottish Government in her role as Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity. She was doing the same job as a minister and is clearly being promoted because she knows where the bodies are buried for the

ferry fiasco and the lack of dualling of the A9. Members who have been in the Parliament as long as I have will know that Ms Hyslop has worn many hats under each of the SNP's First Ministers, so she will doubtless bring a wealth of knowledge to the brief.

Having been in the Cabinet of, and then demoted by, both former SNP First Ministers, Fiona Hyslop has survived them all. I am reminded of Persephone, who, in Greek mythology, leaves the underworld for six months of the year and goes back for the remaining six. For Fiona Hyslop's sake, I hope that she at least occasionally makes it out of the underworld that she is about to enter.

I offer the Scottish Labour Party's good wishes to the three members who are going into the Government today, but the Government is tired, out of ideas and out of road. Scotland has got worse under the SNP and, no matter how gifted those individuals may be, the die is cast. Change is coming.

14:44

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I welcome Tim Eagle to the chamber. I sincerely hope that his jokes are better than Craig Hoy's.

I thank those who are leaving their positions in Government for all their work. I have found Elena Whitham and Michael Matheson to be constructive; they engaged well with me on a variety of issues. I am looking forward to working with Neil Gray in his new role as Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, and Christina McKelvie as the new Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy. I know how fierce they both are in their approach to their portfolios. There are many challenges to deal with, and I am sure that they will take the opportunity to be open and collaborative, as their predecessors were.

My party is pleased to see the return of transport to a Cabinet position and we congratulate Fiona Hyslop on her return to Cabinet. My colleagues are looking forward to continuing to work with her on cutting car miles, improving rail and bus services and improving connectivity across the country.

I also congratulate Màiri McAllan on her expanded portfolio. Joining up the economy and net zero will, we hope, open up all the opportunities of a green economy.

Finally, I congratulate the two new ministers, Jim Fairlie and Kaukab Stewart, on their first appointments to the Government. I know that my colleagues are looking forward to working with both of them. It is worth noting the significance of Kaukab Stewart's appointment, making her the

first woman of colour to enter Government. That will make not just the Parliament but the Government better reflect Scotland as a whole.

We hope that the recess has given the new ministers some time to get to grips with their new portfolios, even if it has not given them a rest. I am sure that their friends and families are proud of them, and we look forward to working with them on what comes next to bring Scotland a bright future.

14:46

The First Minister: I will start with what I thought was the best contribution—Gillian Mackay's. It was thoughtful and considered and she rose to the occasion. I have sat through many of these contributions over the years and I have always found it genuinely sad that politicians are unable to rise to the occasion, no matter what the occasion is. This is an important day, particularly for those who are entering Government for the first time. For literally five minutes, all that members had to do was rise to the occasion, but Craig Hoy singularly failed to do that. No wonder we heard cries to bring back Jackson—I fully endorse those cries. I get that Craig Hoy has no hope of ministerial office unless he donates to the Tory party, when he might well become a lord and then be brought back into the Scotland Office. Who knows? That might well happen to him.

On Jackie Baillie's contribution, I tend to believe that it is better to let the Scottish people give their verdict on whether we have done a good job. That is why we were elected in 2007, re-elected in 2011, re-elected in 2016 and re-elected in 2021. Jackie Baillie shouts that we are on our way out, that her time has come and that the die is cast. The one thing that I say to her is that she is short of policy ideas, and any constructive ideas, but she is full of hubris. People will see through that time and again. It is a unique Scottish Labour trait to take the people of this country for granted. Jackie Baillie asks whether it is worth it to have an SNP Government. I suggest asking the 93,000 children who are no longer in poverty because of the action that we have taken whether it is worth it. What about the record number of young people from areas of deprivation who are now going to university? Was it worth it? What about the under-22s with free bus travel and so on?

I can see the Presiding Officer indicating that my time is up. I will end exactly where I started. I hope that the Parliament will agree to the changes that I have made. In particular, I welcome Jim Fairlie and Kaukab Stewart to the Government. I have no doubt that they will serve the Government and the country well.

The Presiding Officer: There are two questions to be put. The first question is, that motion S6M-12210, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the appointment of a Scottish minister, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: The Parliament is not agreed, so we will move to the vote. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

14:49

Meeting suspended.

14:52

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-12210, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the appointment of a Scottish minister, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer—I am not sure whether this is a point of order, or even material. I understand from colleagues who are not in the chamber that the division bell did not ring. I seek your guidance on whether it should have done.

The Presiding Officer: As it was a scheduled vote, there was no division bell.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am uncertain whether my vote went through.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)

Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)

Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-12210, in the name of Humza Yousaf, is: For 58, Against 8, Abstentions 21.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Fiona Hyslop be appointed as a Scottish Minister.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-12211, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the appointment of junior Scottish ministers, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Paul McLennan: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I still cannot connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded, Mr McLennan.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)

McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 9, Abstentions 21.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Jim Fairlie and Kaukab Stewart be appointed as junior Scottish Ministers.

Social Security

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-12203, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the paper "Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland". I ask members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

14:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have the cabinet secretary's mic on?

Your card does not seem to be registering, cabinet secretary. Do you want to take it out and put it back in again? There we go.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Third time lucky, Presiding Officer.

I am pleased to open today's debate to highlight the Scottish Government's proposals for a fairer and more dignified social security system in an independent Scotland.

Social security is one of the most important responsibilities of any Government. It demonstrates where that Government's priorities lie and how it values its people. It should protect us all through life's ups and downs, and it is vital for the wellbeing of any society.

For too long, the Westminster approach to social security has been to provide inadequate levels of financial support, using arbitrary caps and limits to reduce the support that is available to children and families, and to unfairly stigmatise the most vulnerable people. The reckless and cruel decision making at Westminster can be summed up by the choice to scrap the universal credit £20 uplift just as the cost of living crisis was gripping households. That was a Westminster decision to rip away support when the Scottish Government was introducing the Scottish child payment. It is a tale of two Governments with different values and radically different prospectuses.

In its "UK Poverty 2024" report, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation clearly states that six successive United Kingdom Prime Ministers have overseen deepening poverty over the past 20 years. It comments:

"This is social failure at scale ... This is a story of moral and fiscal irresponsibility"

It is an affront to the dignity of people who are living in hardship. The report goes on to say that poverty levels in Scotland, when compared to

those in England and Wales, remain much lower, which is

“likely to be due, at least in part, to the Scottish Child Payment.”

I will say more about that later.

When it compares Britain to Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is clear: poverty levels and inequality are higher in the UK than they are in other independent European countries and are the highest in north-west Europe. The rate of unemployment benefits is also substantially lower in the UK than it is in other countries in north-west Europe.

It is clear that the UK social security system under Conservative, coalition and Labour Governments has not protected, and will not protect, people as it should. In just two weeks, the UK Government’s budget is expected to fail, once again, to deliver any investment in our public services, our people or our future.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary accept an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am happy to take an intervention from Paul O’Kane, who I am sure will tell us how UK Labour will stand up and ensure that we will have capital and revenue to protect the people of Scotland.

Paul O’Kane: The cabinet secretary referred to the collective failure of past Tory and Labour Governments. She has heard me talk in the chamber about the callous approach that has been taken by the Conservatives, but will she acknowledge that, in the time of the previous Labour Government, 1 million children were lifted out of poverty because of the action that was taken by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in reforming the social contract?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I refer Paul O’Kane to my earlier quotation from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. I also point to the fact that the change that Labour claims to be bringing to social security is not a change, but a review, which is not exactly inspiring. I also note that Mr O’Kane did not agree that the Scottish Government budget should be increased to allow for no cuts to be made to our capital budget. That is on the record.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that Labour’s “No change” attitude is immensely detrimental to the people of Scotland, especially when that party will not commit to getting rid of the rape clause and the two-child cap?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is very disappointing. Kevin Stewart is quite correct to point to the fact that, when it comes to both of the

main UK parties vying for number 10, there would be no change. That is exactly why this debate will include discussion not only of devolution but of the fact that we can get change only through independence.

I will move on to Westminster’s hostile approach to social security, which punishes the most marginalised people. The Scottish people deserve better. By using the powers that we have, the Scottish Government has developed a different approach to social security and is treating people with dignity, fairness and respect. Although the UK Government stands by its harmful policies, we have delivered 14 new benefits, seven of which are available only in Scotland. Our programme for government made it clear that we are committed to reducing child poverty: we estimate that this Government’s policies will keep 90,000 children out of relative and absolute poverty this year, with poverty levels being 9 percentage points lower than they would otherwise have been.

One key way in which we are using our powers to reduce child poverty is the introduction of the Scottish child payment. It is forecast that that benefit alone will lift 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2023-24. It has been described by Professor Danny Dorling from the University of Oxford as having

“an effect on changing the inequality level in Scotland, which I don’t see in any country for which there has been data for the last 40 years.”

Not only have we been introducing new benefits for the people of Scotland, but we are mitigating the worst impacts of the UK Government’s welfare reforms. We are already spending around £130 million per year to directly mitigate some of the UK Government’s benefit cuts, including the bedroom tax and the benefit cap—policies that have been described by many people as being deeply damaging to the most vulnerable people in our society.

Over the past six years, we have invested £733 million to directly mitigate UK Government policies, which we would have to continue to do under a Labour Government. That money could be better spent, I suggest, on health, education, transport and further ambitious anti-poverty measures; for example, it could pay for up to 2,000 band 5 nurses each year. However, this Government continues to have to mitigate the worst excesses of Westminster.

With independence, the Scottish Government would deliver a new approach across the whole social security system, with a system that sees high-quality social security as a human right and a safety net for us all, whenever we need it; a system that is free from corrosive and harmful policies—such as the benefit cap and the two-child limit—that push families into further hardship; and

a system that has no more punitive sanctions that are designed to punish those who already have the least.

Only with independence can we have full control over the necessary levers that would allow us to create an integrated system of support that would work for everyone. It is an approach that would lift people out of poverty and support those who can access paid work and support from the labour market, thereby underpinning a flourishing economy.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In an independent Scotland, what will the waits be for adult disability payment? Will they be shorter than they currently are, or will they be even longer?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Mr Rennie well knows, we have made progress in cutting the processing times for child and adult disability payments. It is important to note that he also knows that we cannot compare that to what happens under Westminster, which forces and obligates people who are going for a benefit to collect all the supporting information themselves. We take that burden off people. That sometimes takes time, but we relieve people of that burden, which is part of treating them with dignity, fairness and respect. However, as we have discussed before, Mr Rennie is right that we need to do more on that.

We cannot guarantee social justice unless we are in control of delivery. Although the complexity of social security means that building a new system will take time, we have strong foundations in place with what is already being delivered in Scotland. We have transformed social security provision by establishing a radically different system, despite the fixed budgets and limited powers of devolution.

While we build on that system, we have, in the paper, identified key early changes to improve the current system, which could be put in place from day 1 of independence. Our early priorities would include removal of policies such as the two-child limit, the subsequent rape clause and the benefit cap; replacement of universal credit advance loans with grants; ending of the punitive sanctions regimes; and removal of the young parent penalty.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Will the member give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am happy to give way to Jeremy Balfour if he would like to defend any of those policies, as he usually does.

Jeremy Balfour: In the fantasy world of politics that we are living in for the next couple of hours, how long would it take, once independence happens, for everything to be devolved to the new independent Scotland? What would be the

timescale? Would it be months, weeks or centuries?

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

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I struggled to hear Mr Balfour because of the chuntering from Stephen Kerr behind him, but I am happy to go with what I think I heard.

The challenge around the programme for devolution of benefits, which we are undertaking with the Department for Work and Pensions—it is a joint programme, and I make no criticism of the DWP in what I am about to say, because it is just a statement of fact—is that we sometimes need to work with the DWP, which can be difficult because its systems require updating and we need to work to build our systems. Under independence, we would, of course, work with the DWP on the transfer in order to ensure that we would look after the safe and secure transition of people in Scotland, just as we have done under devolution.

The early changes that we have talked about in the paper would prioritise, among other things, direct improvement of the lives of people who are in receipt of benefits. It is very important that that is done, because those people are not receiving the right support and security at this time. Our proposed reforms to universal credit would total around £250 million in 2023-24, which equates to just over 1 per cent of total benefits expenditure.

In the longer term, the paper sets out how independence could offer the opportunity to use innovative approaches to delivering a universal guarantee of financial security through a minimum income guarantee, thereby giving people the right to a decent income that would be set at a level that would ensure that everyone could have a dignified quality of life.

A minimum income guarantee is an ambition that would enable all households to live with financial security. It would sit at the heart of a strong wellbeing economy. The aim is that it would be simple and accessible. It also has the potential to bring all current Scottish income replacement benefits into a single integrated system. The paper also refers to a universal basic income as a potential longer-term model of social security.

The first Government of an independent Scotland would have an opportunity to deliver better outcomes for everyone, including families and households on low incomes, unpaid carers and disabled people. With independence, Scotland would have the choice to explore new, better and more forward-looking approaches to social security, without the limits that are placed on us by our being part of the UK's outdated system.

We cannot guarantee social justice unless we control delivery. With independence, therefore, we have the potential to deliver transformational change by building on our successes to date, and to build a fairer and more equal society, in which everyone has enough money to live a decent, dignified and healthy life. With independence, Scotland would deliver a social security system that would be a vast improvement on what we have already been offered, and which would move far beyond the inadequacies of the current approach.

Earlier this month, the Scottish Labour leader told the *New Statesman* that this Parliament is too focused on social policy and not focused enough, in his opinion, on the economy. That failure to recognise how critical the common weal is—the combining of a wellbeing economy with a social security net that would be there for all of us in our time of need—is a failure to recognise the kind of society that we can be. A fairer future for all will not be built on a binary choice between a strong economy and a social security system. It is disappointing to see the lack of ambition on that from the Westminster parties.

I have highlighted the fact that that we, in the Scottish Government, believe that social security is a human right. It is an investment in our people and our society that delivers better outcomes and supports a stronger and more prosperous economy. If members agree with that, they should also agree that benefits should be set at a level at which people can afford the essentials. That is why this Government has called on the UK Government—which the other Westminster parties have yet to do—to introduce to the current system an essentials guarantee. How can those parties genuinely claim to have that as the basis of their social security policies when they will not even call for those changes now?

I have no doubt that, over time, Scotland can match the performance of other independent European countries that have low levels of poverty and inequality and high levels of economic success. Our paper details how that success could be achieved. The first steps towards that would be independence and a step away from UK Governments—of whatever colour—that seem to be determined to make it harder for people to get the support that they need. It is time that Scotland had the opportunity to make a real change in people's lives: the Government's paper outlines exactly how it can do that.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's paper, *Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland*; agrees that the people of Scotland would be best served by a social security system that embeds dignity, fairness and respect and provides a safety net for all as part of a strong wellbeing

economy; notes progress made with Scotland's unique social security benefits, including five family payments, with modelling estimating that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty in 2023-24 as a result of Scottish Government policies, with poverty levels 9 per cent lower than they would have otherwise been, but recognises that only independence provides the full range of powers that would enable Scotland to provide the social security that the people of Scotland deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a bit of time in hand, so members will certainly get time back for any interventions.

I call Jeremy Balfour to speak to and move amendment S6M-12203.1. You have around nine minutes, Mr Balfour.

15:13

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): This must be a record, because I cannot think of a time—certainly not during my tenure in the Parliament—when so many nonsense debates have been brought forward in such a short period. At breakfast this morning, my 12-year-old daughter asked what we would debate in the chamber today, and I outlined what the debate was about. Her immediate response was, “Why are you talking about something that doesn't affect people's lives today? Why are you not talking about homelessness or hospital waiting lists?” It is interesting that a 12-year-old has more insight than the Scottish Government.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will Jeremy Balfour give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I will in a moment.

In the past couple of weeks, we have spent valuable chamber time debating Scotland's plan on the European Union—an organisation that we are not part of—and immigration policy, which is in no way devolved to this Parliament. Now, we are talking about a hypothetical social security system that has not existed and will not exist, because the people of Scotland do not want it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I presume that Jeremy Balfour does not think that people in Scotland have not been impacted by the poverty that they have been pushed into by the Westminster Government, by the two-child cap and by the rape clause. He knows that people in all our constituencies are being impacted by those factors every single day and that there will be no change under either the Tories or Labour. That is why the Scottish Parliament has the right to debate how we could achieve such change, which we suggest would be under independence.

Jeremy Balfour: The cabinet secretary misses the point. The people of Scotland voted to stay part of the union. Let us have debates about the type of social security that we want. The cabinet

secretary is talking about fantasy politics to which the people of Scotland have already said no. I imagine that some of her more reasonable colleagues on the Scottish National Party benches—

Kevin Stewart: Will Jeremy Balfour give way?

Jeremy Balfour: No.

Some of the cabinet secretary's colleagues must be feeling a bit embarrassed that the Government has run out of ideas to this extent.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way now?

Jeremy Balfour: No.

I know for a fact that many SNP members are committed to making the lives of the Scottish people better in practical and tangible ways. For them, the party's position cannot be anything short of a slap in the face.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: Hang on.

The truth is that things have got really bad for the SNP. It has been in government for 17 years with nothing positive to show for it. Now, its facade is coming down to reveal a party that is tearing itself apart through scandal and secrecy.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: No.

In a desperate act of deflection, the Government has decided to hold a series of debates based on its taxpayer-funded vanity projects that postulate what life would be like had it not failed to convince the Scottish people to break up one of the oldest and most successful political alliances in the world. I suggest that the cabinet secretary would have a bright future in fantasy writing, because the paper that has been put before us is about as serious a policy prospect as "The Lord of the Rings".

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Balfour give way?

Jeremy Balfour: For the final time, no.

The paper provides a long wish list of everything that the SNP would implement in an imaginary situation, including increasing universal credit and removing any system of sanctions. That is all well and good, but nowhere does the paper explain how on earth the SNP would pay for it. It claims that all its changes would cost the taxpayer a mere £0.25 billion on top of what is already being spent in Scotland. However, that comes from the same people who are running a devolved system that, as it stands, will require more than £1.3 billion by 2027-28 just to keep the status quo. We are still to

hear an answer from the SNP on its plan for plugging that gap.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: In two seconds.

Why should we trust the SNP on what it will do in that situation when it has proven its inability to deal with the very real mess that it has made?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to the member for giving way again. I ask him to gently remind himself that we are going through a budget process in which the Government produces a balanced budget, demonstrating exactly how it will fund its policies. The choice that we have made is to spend £1.1 billion more on social security, because we are investing in the people of Scotland rather than pushing them into poverty as his party is doing.

Jeremy Balfour: The reality is that, whatever the SNP says, it will need to do one of three things: abandon its promise to cut benefits, cut another budget and reappropriate it to social security, or raise taxes. I will happily give way to either Mr Stewart or the cabinet secretary again, or to anyone else, if they are willing to tell the Scottish people what promises the SNP will abandon, which budget portfolio it will cut to make more room for social security, or how much it will pay to raise taxes.

Kevin Stewart: Will Jeremy Balfour give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I will be very happy if Mr Stewart can give me the answer to my question.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Balfour has talked about fantasy. The people of Scotland are fed up of the nightmare of Tory Government and of Tory cuts to social security spending that have meant withdrawing their safety net. Is Mr Balfour happy that the two-child cap and the rape clause remain in place? Is he happy about the social security cuts that have impacted on disabled people in our country?

Jeremy Balfour: I allowed Mr Stewart to intervene because he was going to answer my question, but he has simply failed to do so. If there is a secret fourth way that the Scottish Government has left out of its paper for some reason, I would be happy to listen. It can do one of three things: cut benefits, raise taxes or take funding from another budget. I ask the cabinet secretary, which of the three is it?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Jeremy Balfour for giving me an opportunity, once again, to say that we are providing a balanced budget to the Parliament, which demonstrates—as we have done every year since devolution—how we will

fund our policy commitments to the people of Scotland.

Jeremy Balfour: So, the Scottish Government will simply raise taxes or raise money from another budget next year.

As with previous debates of this type, this is not a serious subject matter. Even if we indulge the nationalists, simple facts get in the way of their delusions. The biggest insult in the paper is the single page on the transfer of social security following a referendum result. That transfer would be an incredibly complex and time-consuming process, which would have a direct impact on the day-to-day lives of the most vulnerable people. The cabinet secretary would not give a timescale for it. The lack of thought behind the process shows exactly why the SNP should not be trusted. There is no timeline for the handover, no detail of how the data would be transferred securely and no detail of how resources would be split if the DWP were to leave Scotland.

The reason that ministers are so light on detail in that regard is that the answer shames them. We can see a microcosm of the process in how the Government has handled the transfer of a small number of devolved benefits and in the setting up of Social Security Scotland. That has been years overdue, there have been constant issues with implementation and the Scottish Government has even had to hand benefits back to the DWP because it could not handle them. Can we imagine an independent Scotland handing power back to a foreign Government, saying, "Please could you do it for a few more years, because we are not capable of doing it?" It is a fantasy. Rest assured that there will be no handing anything back or asking anyone to help unless the UK Government is willing to step up and protect the Scottish Government.

The debate shows us two things. First, the SNP has totally run out of ideas and is desperate to deflect attention from its woeful record after 17 years in government. Secondly, its plans for independence are flimsy and ill thought through—and, ultimately, they will have a negative effect on the people of Scotland. We could do it all better if the Scottish Government simply got on with the day job and accepted our amendment, which makes it clear that the Parliament wants Social Security Scotland to work but within the confines of the United Kingdom.

I move amendment S6M-12203.1, to leave out from "welcomes" to end and insert:

"regrets that the Scottish Government continues to miss its targets for delivering the transfer of benefits to Social Security Scotland, and calls on the Scottish Government to focus on the real priorities of the people of Scotland rather than obsessing over the constitution."

15:23

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): This is now the fourth debate that we have had on social security in Government time in 12 months, but it differs from the previous debates because this latest debate from the Government is the clearest demonstration that ministers have their heads in the sand—or, perhaps more accurately, in the clouds. Instead of having a debate about the context of the social security system that the Scottish Government is responsible for, we are debating a fantasy plan for social security in a future independent Scotland.

I will begin by speaking about the social security system in Scotland and the challenges in that system, which is wholly devolved to the SNP Government. The cabinet secretary speaks about fairness, dignity and respect—and she did so in our debate prior to the recess—but it is clear that that is not the experience of everyone in the system. For many people, the Government is falling short of delivering the system that people need.

I always like to bring a degree of consensus. There have been welcome interventions such as the Scottish child payment, which is broadly supported across this place and has been supported by this side. We have to use all the tools in our arsenal to tackle child poverty. It is clear to me, however, that we need bold action. We have to tackle the root causes of poverty, and we have to do so with a strong economy that can prioritise growth and redistribute the money from that growth across our country, investing it in public services.

We need bolder action to tackle the fact that one in 10 Scots is locked in persistent low pay and to tackle insecure and inadequate housing, ensuring that people have access to affordable roofs over their heads. It does not help when the Scottish Government makes decisions in its budget that adversely impact that aim. I will give two examples of that. Parental employability funds, which serve to lift people out of poverty and get them into work, have been cut by £20 million a year, and the affordable housing supply budget has been slashed by 27 per cent in real terms.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member confirm whether, if Labour were to win the next election, it would reverse the cuts to the Scottish Government’s capital budget? Unless it would—the cuts have resulted in a nearly 10 per cent real-terms cut to our capital funding between 2023-24 and 2027-28—talk is cheap. He can come to the chamber and demand that money be spent wherever he wants, but if no UK Government takes any action, it is just talk in this chamber.

Paul O’Kane: I will come on to talk about the changes that a UK Labour Government would make. As I have said, it is clear that economic growth is an absolute priority, because without that growth we cannot spend more money on public services. There was no hint in the cabinet secretary’s contribution about economic growth or about how the economy in an independent Scotland would contribute to all the asks that are in her motion.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will make some progress, if the member does not mind.

We focused on the cuts to the housing budget, which will have a hugely detrimental impact on poverty reduction in Scotland, but it is not just that. The social security system in the devolved context is creaking. The average processing time for child disability payment is more than five months, and almost one fifth of applications take more than seven months, leaving young disabled people without the payments that they need. The transfer of important devolved benefits such as employment injury assistance has repeatedly been delayed, with a lack of clear timelines leaving those benefit provisions in the hands of the DWP, which the Scottish Government has rightly critiqued.

The cost of social security spending in Scotland is spiralling and is now forecast to rise to almost £8 billion in 2029, which is £1.5 billion more than the block grant adjustment, according to the Scottish Fiscal Commission’s latest analysis of the budget. As I have said, failures to tackle the root causes of poverty, failures to process claims in good time and failures to bring about payments into the devolved Administration are all contributing to the continuing persistent challenges of poverty in Scotland.

The conclusion that I draw is that the SNP Government cannot run a functioning system now and there is no evidence in the latest paper to suggest that Scotland being an independent country would make it more capable of that. Indeed, although the paper sets out a swathe of plans from the SNP Government, it does not need to worry about delivering on them. I see no indication in the paper of how they would be paid for—indeed, there is no indication of the currency that we would use to pay those benefits.

Do not get me started on the fact that the paper does not say anything about pensions. Mr Hepburn is the man who is preparing the prospectus on the currency and pensions, so I would love to hear from him about the plans for those.

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): Mr O’Kane should pay attention. We

set out our position on currency in the third paper, and we have a paper on pensions forthcoming. I have a simple question for Mr O’Kane. Would he prefer that the powers over social security in their entirety were vested in the Scottish Parliament, where we could collectively have control over the matter, or would he rather that they remained in the hands of the Conservatives in the UK Government?

Paul O’Kane: Mr Hepburn suggests that powers should be either in the hands of the Conservative Government or here. I disagree—I think that, within the devolved settlement, it is right that we control the elements of social security that we are making progress on. It is clear to me that the Tories will not be around forever, because change is coming with a Labour Government that will fundamentally reform social security in this country, invest in the economic growth that we need to fund public services and make the changes that we need.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Paul O’Kane: In a moment.

Forty per cent of claimants who are in receipt of universal credit are in work, so we know that we need to make fundamental changes to work in this country in order to support people. That is what a Labour Government offers. We offer a real living wage, an end to fire and rehire, an end to zero-hours contracts and investment in workers’ rights from day 1. That will be a substantial change to the prospects of many people in this country, and it will put money in their pockets and lift them out of poverty, just as we did when we were last in government. *[Interruption.]* Mr Hepburn from a sedentary position says that that is the past, as though it were a small moment, but a million children were lifted out of poverty, which has fundamentally changed the lives of people in this country, and that is what is important.

Jamie Hepburn: With an eye to the future, we have heard from the Scottish Labour Party that it supposedly opposed the two-child cap, but we know that it does not have its hands on the power to change that and that its UK party leader has said that it will not reverse that position. What does Mr O’Kane say about that in relation to the prospects of young people not just in Scotland but across the UK under a Keir Starmer-led Government?

Paul O’Kane: Mr Hepburn knows my position on the two-child cap. It is a heinous policy that needs to be changed. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you resume your seat, Mr O’Kane?

As the cabinet secretary advised us earlier, chuntering from a sedentary position should be discouraged at all times. There should be less of the running commentary, please, Mr Hepburn and Mr Stephen Kerr.

Paul O’Kane: I am very clear that a fundamental reform of universal credit means reform of all parts of the system. That includes the heinous and challenging policies that we see across the piece. However, on the point about economic growth, we need to ensure that we have the money to reform our public services fundamentally and that they work better for everyone.

Clare Haughey rose—

Paul O’Kane: I will take an intervention from Clare Haughey, as she has been patient.

Clare Haughey: I hear what Mr O’Kane says about the Labour Party’s supposed plans to review universal credit, but I have not heard anything about what would be done about pensions. I know that the Labour Party has supported the Women Against State Pension Inequality—WASPI—campaign. Can Mr O’Kane tell me what will be done to compensate the WASPI women if his party forms the next Westminster Government?

Paul O’Kane: It is interesting that Ms Haughey has brought up the matter of pensions. We do not have any detail from the Scottish Government on pensions in an independent Scotland. She wants to have a debate about pensions right now, but the SNP does not have a paper on pensions, it does not know how it is going to pay for them, and it does not know about the currency. What a Labour Government will quite clearly do is fundamentally reform the social contract—as we did when we were last in government, to take a million pensioners out of poverty—to make things fairer and better. That is what Labour Governments do.

I am conscious that I have been generous with interventions and that time is getting on, so I will draw my contribution to a close.

The change that Scotland needs is not another self-indulgent fantasy paper to make SNP ministers and back benchers feel good—I am sure that it feels great to be in the Parliament, talking about that. The reality is that people need help right now. We have been clear throughout that a UK Labour Government will provide change in the form of the fundamental reform of the social contract that is required.

More than that, it is about supporting people into work as a route out of poverty; ensuring that people have good, high-quality jobs, a living wage and trade union rights; and ending zero-hours contracts and insecure work. That is the change that a Labour Government offers. We did not see

anything in the paper about routes into work and about jobs, and we did not hear anything about them in the cabinet secretary’s contribution. All that we heard was more of the same.

The reality is that we need to see change, and we can have change faster with a Labour Government. That is what we need, not more debates about a fantasy independence prospectus that may never come to pass.

I move amendment S6M-12203.2, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“acknowledges that the people of Scotland would be best served by a social security system that embeds dignity, fairness and respect and provides a safety net for all in a strong and growing economy; notes Scotland’s devolved social security benefits; acknowledges that delays in processing adult and child disability assessments have left disabled people stuck in limbo and out of pocket during the worst cost of living crisis in decades; notes that the Scottish Government’s decision to cut affordable housing budgets by 27 per cent in the face of a housing emergency has been labelled as baffling by organisations like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; acknowledges that cutting vital funding for affordable housing and employability schemes harms the eradication of the causes of poverty; notes that between 2017 and 2021, 12 per cent of people have remained in persistent poverty after housing costs, and recognises that the paper, *Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland*, is the latest in a series of theoretical future plans by the Scottish Government, which has already been too distracted to focus on the here and now and make the devolution of social security work for the people of Scotland.”

15:32

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am finding it difficult to curb my excitement. The chamber is packed, there is absolutely soaring rhetoric like I have never heard before, and there are cheering SNP back benchers. Actually, we are having a rather dull debate about a paper, which nobody has really read and nobody really cares about, for a referendum that SNP members know is not going to happen.

Jamie Hepburn chided Paul O’Kane for not paying attention. The truth is that nobody in the country is paying attention to Jamie Hepburn’s papers. I am a big fan of Jamie Hepburn. I have ambitions for him to go right to the top of Government, and I think that he could use his time far better than by producing papers that nobody reads. He will probably have noticed that nationalists are getting more frothed up by the Redcoat Café than by any of his independence papers, which should be a sobering lesson for him. We need to focus on the real challenges that the country faces.

Like Paul O’Kane, I have welcomed the reduction in child poverty that has come with the child payment—I think that that is a good thing. Compared with the previous time that we debated

social security, when I perhaps criticised her for celebrating a big and growing social security budget, the cabinet secretary today talked a little bit more about the economy and the balance between the social and the economic. However, if we are having to use so many payments to prop up an economy that is not delivering proper, good wages, on which people can earn their own living, that, in itself, is perhaps a sign of a failure of the system rather than a reason for celebration.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Willie Rennie is quite right to point out that there are different drivers of poverty. One of those drivers is the inadequacy of the social security system, over which we have limited powers. Would he agree, therefore, that if we want real change in employability and wage levels, we need the devolution of employability and employment law to this Parliament, so that we can make those changes in order to make the differences that he talks about?

Willie Rennie: The cabinet secretary understates the powers that this Parliament has, which this Government refuses to use effectively.

As the cabinet secretary knows, I am in favour of the United Kingdom single market, and I do not favour breaking that up by devolving employment law. It is important to ensure that we have the automatic economic stabilisers with social security at a UK level so that, where there is a unique shock that affects one part of the country, the rest of the country is there to support it. I do not favour breaking up that single market, because that is effectively the prelude to independence, which—as the cabinet secretary knows—I do not favour.

It is important that the cabinet secretary understands and accepts—I do not think that she has yet—that the growing social security budget is not a point for celebration, but a sign of failure in the system. We need to improve productivity levels in Scotland, which are lagging behind those in the UK, while the UK lags even further behind other competitor countries. We need to improve our low wages, as there are far too many people in Scotland on them, and we need to drive up performance. In addition, in a time of very low unemployment, we still have large numbers of people who are not working.

That brings me to my second point, which is about the NHS and education. I have met far too many people who have been waiting to get an appointment and, during that period, have been unable to work because they have been in so much pain. The NHS and the education system are critically linked to the performance of our economy, and therefore affect the social security system. As long as we keep pumping money into the wrong end of the system, we will not be able to deal with the problems at the other end in a way that will deliver a sustainable economy.

Jamie Hepburn: I am sure that if we were investing less in social security, Mr Rennie would be the first to welcome that fact.

Mr Rennie has implicitly answered this question in making his point about a single market with regard to employment law, but I ask him to be explicit. This question also goes back to his point about low wages. Would he prefer that the Conservatives, rather than the Scottish Parliament, had control over the minimum wage?

Willie Rennie: I have to say that that is beneath Jamie Hepburn, because it is a pathetic, narrow choice. That is not the choice that we face—

Jamie Hepburn: That is the choice.

Willie Rennie: No, it is not the choice. We can have change across the United Kingdom that delivers a progressive future for our country and that does not fall into his false choice. I am sure that the member is better than that, although I might have to revise my opinion about his ambition for high office.

The interventions that we need include looking at the long waits for the adult disability payment; I intervened on the cabinet secretary about that. It is, to be frank, embarrassing that the DWP gets money into the pockets of disabled people more quickly than does the Scottish Government. I know the answer, and I have heard—

Shirley-Anne Somerville *rose*—

Willie Rennie: I will not take an intervention, as I have heard the answer before. I understand that the system here is more sympathetic—I get that. It is more understanding and it assists the individual. However, the truth is that people are waiting longer for the money—longer than the wait for money from the DWP. Surely that should be an embarrassment. The DWP is more generous than the Social Security Scotland system in getting money to people. We must drive that time down if we are to make any claim about our system being dignified.

This is an important lesson—I will conclude in a minute. We should remember that we were promised by Alex Salmond that we would have independence delivered in 16 months. It has taken years for just a small number of powers to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament; one can just imagine how long it would take to deliver all the other powers that would come with independence. Surely that, in itself, is a lesson for this Government: nobody is really enthusiastic about any of this debate, because we know that independence is never going to happen.

15:39

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):

From the game-changing Scottish child payment to the carers allowance supplement, devolution has shown how Scotland can begin to deliver a fairer social security system. However, the UK Government still holds most of our welfare powers.

Families across the country are seeing the benefits of having an SNP Government that recognises that social security is a human right and that the delivery of social security is a public service. When we look at Social Security Scotland's record, we see that it has a remarkable satisfaction rate, with 97 per cent of people saying that they had received their benefit payments on time and 90 per cent saying that their experience was good or very good. Indeed, Social Security Scotland's strong record has been recognised and it has won a number of prestigious national prizes, most recently at the Holyrood Communications Scottish public service awards.

At the heart of the First Minister's vision is tackling the scourge of child poverty. In fact, as a result of Scottish Government policy choices, an estimated 90,000 fewer children are expected to be in poverty this year. In my constituency of East Kilbride, around 4,500 children have been in receipt of the Scottish child payment this year. The Scottish child payment of £25 per child per week for eligible families alone is keeping 50,000 kids out of poverty.

Save the Children welcomes the Scottish Government's efforts to drive down child poverty rates over the long term and to help families with children during the cost of living crisis. Equally, the *Financial Times* recognises that Scotland has the potential to be a

"European pioneer in reducing child deprivation".

Of course, the Scottish budget for next year will ensure that benefits increase in line with inflation, putting into action our Government's commitment to build a social security system that has dignity, fairness and respect at its heart.

However, while the Scottish Government uses its limited powers to put money in people's pockets, Westminster takes it away. It is undeniable that the current UK welfare system is flawed. It punishes the most vulnerable in our society, placing the burden of austerity on those who are least able to bear it.

The Scottish Government's vision for social security in an independent Scotland is of a fairer, more dignified and more respectful approach. Independence would reset the social security system, and we could undo the damage of the union by removing the two-child cap, scrapping the rape clause and ending the current benefit

sanctions regime, while ensuring that we support people who can work into sustainable employment, remove the benefit cap and bedroom tax and end the young parent penalty.

The Scottish Government is having to soften the blow of the cost of the union to households across Scotland, but it cannot possibly mitigate every bad decision that comes from Westminster with our limited powers. However, in the past five years, the Scottish Government has spent more than £711 million mitigating some of the worst excesses of cruel Westminster policies. With the full powers of independence, we would also be able to eliminate poverty through a minimum income guarantee, with the right to a decent income, which could be achieved through paid work, affordable services and, when needed, targeted social security support, and we could ensure that everyone could have a dignified quality of life.

The most important thing for Scotland, though, is to escape broken Brexit Britain. We need independence to reset the social security system and to build a country with the powers and economy to tackle inequality and eradicate poverty.

What is the alternative? Let us look at the cost of Westminster in social security terms. The Tories, with their two-child cap, the rape clause and cuts to universal credit, are making active political choices to push children into poverty. Of course, if we are to believe the Scottish Labour Party, a UK Labour Government will come in and magically make everything better. What is it offering? On the two-child cap, Sir Keir will keep it. On progressive income tax, Labour is against it. On investment in the future of our economy with the transition to net zero, Labour has broken its promise before it has even got into office.

Paul O'Kane: Will Collette Stevenson take an intervention?

Collette Stevenson: I am sorry, but I am just about to conclude.

However, the House of Lords, £9,000 a year tuition fees and uncapped bankers' bonuses are the kind of stuff that Labour will keep. To me, that sounds like more of the same old Westminster broken record. Regardless of who is in government down there—Labour, the Tories or the Tories propped up by the Lib Dems—it is clear that Westminster does not work for Scotland.

It is clear to me that independence offers the best future for people in Scotland. When we look across Europe, we see many small independent countries proving that a strong social security system, backed up by a fairer and stronger economy, means a socially just and more equal nation. If they can do it, why not Scotland?

15:46

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): This debate is about creating and having a much better social security system. Of course, the UK could have such a system if it wanted, and that is perhaps a particular challenge for the Labour Party, which does not even appear to want a better system at a UK level. It remains to be seen how much Scottish Labour wants it.

The debate is not just about social security in an independent Scotland; it is about the kind of social security system that we want, either in Scotland or in the UK. Mr O'Kane will now tell us how Labour can cut tax and get a better social security system.

Paul O'Kane: I ask Mr Mason to reflect on my speech, in which I spoke about the need for fundamental reform of universal credit. Surely he agrees that the 40 per cent of people on universal credit who are in work deserve a real living wage and an end to precarious in-work poverty. Surely he agrees that the Labour Party's policies on that are worth supporting.

John Mason: I certainly agree that we should have a higher legal minimum wage, but I am not convinced that we will get that from London. Mr O'Kane's leader has said that he will cut tax in Scotland and, as I understand it, the Labour Party is not planning to raise tax in the UK either. With that approach, we cannot have a better system of redistribution. That was the word that Mr O'Kane used, but he did not tell us how that would be done.

We need to be realistic that, when Scotland achieves independence, some of the changes that we want to make will take time and cost money. We have seen that taking on responsibility for adult disability payments has required legislation, the transfer of many records and other work that takes time. There are also one-off costs of setting up new information technology systems and other such systems.

Jeremy Balfour: How long will it take to introduce the legislation and set up those new systems, including those for pensions and social security? Will that happen in John Mason's lifetime?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the interventions, Mr Mason.

John Mason: As I am sure Mr Balfour knows, because his theological position is similar to mine, I do not know for how long I am going to live, but that is another question.

We are talking about generalities. We know that, when we have taken on responsibility for an individual benefit, it has often—but not always—taken longer for things to be set up in the Scottish system. Of course, the same will happen when we

become independent. It will take time, and those issues will have to be worked through as part of the negotiations. However, all that will be worth while if we end up with something better at the end of the day.

I will give a parallel picture. When I left home at roughly the age of 21, there were costs, time and effort involved in setting up a new home. I did not know how long it would take me to get sorted out and settle down but, looking back, I have no regrets that I did that. I could then go on and make my life better in the way that I wanted to. The same will be true if Scotland becomes free.

We need to be realistic that, if we want a fairer social security system, it is likely to be more expensive, at least in the short term—we will probably need to pay more in tax in order to pay for that. We would hope that, over time, the costs of social security would reduce as the population became healthier on the whole and more suitable jobs became available for more people, including those with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities.

I do not accept that the whole social security system is a failure. There are some needy people in our society who will always need support. However, I am happy to accept that a social security system that treats people with more dignity, fairness and respect will cost more money. We have already seen that to an extent, with our adult disability payment costing more than its UK equivalent, the personal independence payment. Currently, we are looking at spending some £1 billion more than we are receiving from the UK through the block grant, with the total rising from something like £5.3 billion to £6.3 billion in the current budget.

Let us remember, however, that the UK is a low-tax country compared to our neighbours such as France or the Nordic countries. We pay only 38 per cent of gross domestic product in tax, whereas some of them pay 50 per cent. That is why UK public services, including pensions, are so often poorer than those of our neighbours. I gather that the UK is currently 16th out of 30 European countries when it comes to pensions.

When we get our independence at last, we will still face the choices that every other country faces. Do we want to pay a bit more tax for better social security and other public services, or do we want to be more like the UK, with low tax and poorer services? Whatever happens, we cannot have quality social security coupled with low taxes—that is just not possible. I understand that Labour is considering lowering income tax and other taxes. That is up to Labour, but it will mean cuts to public services.

The paper mentions a minimum income guarantee several times, and I personally feel strongly and positively about that proposal. For starters, it is more realistic and achievable than a universal basic income, which several members have been sympathetic to in the past. Even with independence, a UBI could be expensive and difficult to implement in practice, but there is something fundamentally right about the concept of having a minimum income guarantee so that every individual and family has enough to live on with no strings attached.

After all, prisoners in our jails, who are allegedly some of the worst people in our society, are guaranteed a certain minimum standard of living. They get clothing, reasonable food, a roof over their heads, heating and lighting. If all our prisoners can expect that, surely everyone in our society should expect it. That is basically what a minimum income guarantee is about—it is about having enough income for decent accommodation, heat and light, food and clothing.

Of course, where we are now is very different from that ideal. We could and should make changes to the present UK system even before we get as far as a much better system in a free and independent Scotland. Some of the obvious faults at present include the two-child limit. We have a lack of population in Scotland as a whole, and even more so in rural areas, yet we discourage larger families. It should be the other way round, with more encouragement and support for families to help them to have more children.

On page 38, the paper makes the point that we should do more to ensure that people apply for their entitlements. However, I wonder whether we can go further than that. For example, I understand that about one third of those who are entitled to pension credit do not apply. Universal credit is a problem, too. According to one study at the start of the pandemic, around half a million people in the UK were eligible for universal credit but did not claim it. Of those, 220,000 thought that they were eligible for universal credit, and 41 per cent of them did not think that it would be worth the hassle. I wonder whether we should do more proactively to pay people what they need and are entitled to without their having to go through lengthy application processes.

All in all, there is a lot of room for improvement in social security, whether we are in the UK or once Scotland becomes free. We could all hit hard times, and our income could take a hit. Some might even lose their job at the next election. Let us at least aim for social security that gives people security, and let us not be satisfied with a harsh Westminster system that blames people when they get into trouble.

15:53

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Parliament is, yet again, discussing social security. John Mason was correct to point to the importance to the debate of our taxation policy, and Paul O’Kane was absolutely correct to say that our attitude towards growth and the drive for growth are central to the debate.

We most recently debated social security on 7 February, which was the week before we went into recess. I yet again question the framing of this debate and the focus on independence—it seems to be the focus of much of the Scottish Government’s work—particularly given the significant issues that we see in Social Security Scotland, which seem similar to those in the Department for Work and Pensions.

Scottish Labour supported the devolution of social security benefits and the mitigatory action that the Scottish Government has taken to address certain aspects of Westminster policy. We are strongly supportive of measures such as the Scottish child payment, which we believe to be effective. However, we are very concerned about the length of time that it has taken to transfer some of the benefits and about the waiting times for benefits such as the child disability payment, for which the median waiting time was 106 days in the most recent statistics, and the adult disability payment, for which the median processing time was 83 days. Yet again, it would be better if the Scottish Government and, indeed, SNP MSPs could devote their energy to taking action to reduce those waiting times and making it very clear that such waiting times are unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

As has been said, the outcomes of applications are often similar to or, on occasion, worse than those under the Department for Work and Pensions. We supported the devolution of social security benefits to improve outcomes and the service for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Scottish Labour will not tolerate outcomes and waiting times that are similar to or, indeed, worse than those of the Department for Work and Pensions, which has been under considerable political pressure from the UK Tory Government to reduce payments and provide an unsympathetic environment for people who seek benefits.

Jamie Hepburn: Katy Clark talks about what the Scottish Labour Party will tolerate. Will it tolerate Keir Starmer’s position on the continuation of the two-child cap? Will it reflect on the fact that, even if it says that it will not do that, it will have no influence whatever on that position?

Katy Clark: The minister and his colleagues have made that point on numerous occasions and on numerous occasions it has been made clear that the Scottish Labour Party is opposed to the two-child cap and that there will be a review of the entire universal credit system under the next Labour Government. I make it clear to the minister that the Scottish Labour Party and Labour representatives will fight for a system that supports the most vulnerable.

Despite five years of a devolved social security system that was meant to be fairer than its predecessor, the reality is that, in many circumstances, claimants are not receiving a better service. The costs of our social security system have increased, but in-work poverty and deprivation levels remain stubbornly high, and the Scottish Government does not seem to have a plan to deal with the spiralling social security costs.

There has been a 38 per cent increase in social protection spending in Scotland, and it is right that we evaluate how well that money is being spent. As I said, the Scottish child payment seems to be an effective new benefit. However, many of the other benefits simply mirror those that existed previously. It is not acceptable that more than 50,000 Scots are being asked to wait more than three months for disability benefits. That is what we should debate. The increase in working-age poverty in Scotland over the past decade has been the highest anywhere in the UK. That is what we should debate.

Members around the chamber have high expectations for the social security system in Scotland. We expect far better than what Westminster has delivered in recent years.

There is no doubt that Scotland needs change. That will be the focus of the next general election campaign. In this chamber, week after week, our focus needs to be on making sure that the powers that we have are used effectively and that we maximise the benefits, particularly for the most vulnerable and poorest in our society. That will be Scottish Labour's focus.

16:00

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate about the type of social security system that we could have in an independent Scotland—a social security system with fairness, dignity and respect at its heart, that is humane and compassionate and that recognises that decent levels of support and assistance are essential to help our citizens to thrive.

Today's debate is important and necessary because the two political parties that aspire to

govern at Westminster have failed Scotland. While in office, they have presided over a welfare system that is big on stigma but devoid of compassion. We have seen that in how, for decades, they treated unpaid carers with contempt by not aligning carers allowance with other earnings-replacement benefits—an injustice that was put right by the SNP Government.

We have seen so many other examples: entitlements of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds being erased; private sector assessments that have caused so much pain and suffering; the young person's penalty, which means less entitlement for under-25s; an obsession with a sanctions regime that entrenches stigma and promotes poverty; the benefit cap that denies families with children basic levels of subsistence; the bedroom tax that erodes support for paying rent and risks homelessness; and industrial injuries benefits being left unreformed for decades, so that women who are injured in the workplace are denied compensation.

We also see the Westminster Government's future plans for a controlled Westminster social security system, its refusal to commit to scrapping the two-child policy with its abhorrent rape clause, and its proposed changes to work capability assessments that target many people who are sick and disabled. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that hundreds of thousands of people could be impacted, potentially losing more than £4,000 per year.

There is no essentials guarantee that would see universal credit being set at a decent amount that would allow families to afford the basics. There is no vision that sees social security as an investment in helping our country to thrive.

Scotland needs real change, which will be secured only with independence. With the Tories or Labour, we will have continuation of a system that sets people up to fail and does not help them to thrive. It is no wonder that the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty condemned the Westminster Government's shameful record on poverty, saying that the UK's "grossly insufficient" welfare system is simply not acceptable and might be in violation of international law.

Willie Rennie: Will the member take an intervention?

Marie McNair: I will not, at the moment. In an independent Scotland, our social security system would be fundamentally different to that of the UK.

For too long, people in my constituency and across Scotland have been penalised by the Westminster Government, which does not value people who are living in poverty or who are on low incomes. The austerity policies of 2010, which

were put in place by our Tory and Lib Dem colleagues, have led to severe suffering in the Scottish community, particularly among people who are on low incomes. They have been described by economists and economic historians as “disastrous” and “reckless”.

We will not forget how silent Labour in Opposition was when that was happening. Those reckless policies have resulted in the Scottish Government spending a large proportion of its budget on counteracting the damaging policies that affect the Scottish people.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

Marie McNair: I will not, at the moment. In 2022, the Scottish Government spent more than £1 billion on mitigating Tory cuts. Just think what we could do with that money in an independent Scotland. We could change universal credit, further improve carer and disability benefits, remove the rape clause and the two-child policy, scrap the bedroom tax and end other punitive welfare benefit policies. Those are noble and ambitious goals, but they are also morally the right thing to do.

We should also consider a minimum income guarantee to ensure that everyone in Scotland secures a minimum acceptable standard of living, thereby giving families enough money for housing, food and essentials, so that they can live a dignified, healthy and financially secure life.

With one hand tied behind our back, we are already making significant progress with the social security system by delivering 14 benefits, seven of which, including the Scottish child payment, are available only in Scotland and tackle poverty and reduce inequality. In the end, social security is a human right.

The Westminster Government continues to strip residents of their human rights, but an independent Scotland would have human rights at the core of its policy decisions. That is not something that Labour or the Tories see as a priority. We heard that loud and clear when they refused to scrap the benefit cap but would not cap bankers’ bonuses.

People deserve to be treated with dignity, so a Scottish social security system would be designed with the people of Scotland on the basis of evidence. Social security is an investment in the people of Scotland. With independence, we will deliver a social security system that will transform lives.

16:05

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. There have been inevitable comments

about the debate being irrelevant fantasy, given that we are not yet an independent country. However, it is important for us sometimes to lift our sights to outline the better world that we want to have the opportunity to create—a better world that we will not get from Westminster.

I will begin—as did Peter Kelly of the Poverty Alliance at a Fairer Aberdeen event recently—by quoting Raymond Williams, who said:

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.”

My goodness, do we need hope. Our social security system in the United Kingdom is commonly depicted as a safety net—although many experts describe it as more of a perilous tightrope over the abyss of poverty—but it is one that now has huge and gaping holes.

For the first three decades of the modern welfare state, from 1949 to the eve of the Thatcher Government in 1979, the equivalent of today’s universal credit standard allowance was usually between 25 and 30 per cent of average earnings. Since then, it has plummeted, falling below 15 per cent in the early 2000s and dropping again over the past eight years until, as the Government paper highlights, it is now at its lowest level ever in relation to average earnings.

That erosion really matters. It means that families who are reliant on those payments—very many of whom are in work—are experiencing shocking hardship. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that 90 per cent of low-income households on universal credit are currently going without essentials. That is not just a few of those people having difficulty in managing their budgets; it is almost every one of them. As others have pointed out, that is destitution by design. That design incorporates not only the plunging levels of universal credit itself, but the many ways in which the toxic sanctions system works to reduce actual payments yet further. Punitive to an extraordinary degree, it offers pitifully little with one hand and then takes away even that pittance with the other.

So, our first task, as responsible and compassionate—or even if we were barely humane—legislators is to patch up the worst of the vast and gaping holes. Some of that work, as the paper outlines, is already happening. It is happening in the different approach that we are taking in Scotland, as set out in our Scottish social security principles, which include an understanding that social security is not a work of charity or grudging generosity, but a basic human right.

The work is happening in the new benefits, including the five family payments, most importantly the Scottish child payment, and in new

ways of supporting disabled people and carers. It is also happening in mitigations of the bedroom tax and of the benefit cap and in work towards facilitating split payments that would respect and empower people and, ultimately, save lives.

However, there is much more that could be done only with further powers of independence. I am thinking of measures such as abolition of the brutal two-child limit and the prurient rape clause. I warmly welcome the 10 key actions that are set out in the paper, including scrapping of the vicious sanctions policy and the malicious young parent penalty, but, vital, urgent and essential as those actions are, they are not enough.

The report speaks of a desire to move from a liberal to a social democratic approach. That is movement in the right direction, but as a Green and an eco-socialist, I would go much further.

In my vision of social security, social security would not merely be a safety net. In the image that “safety net” suggests, what matters is what happens on the high trapeze above—it suggests that social security is what happens to those who fall. Instead, I see social security as a seed bed—as the essential nurturing foundation for all the ways in which human beings care, and create for and with, one another, and not just through paid work, but in every aspect of our lives.

I long for a Scotland where people are seen primarily not as employees or consumers, but as citizens and neighbours. Our social security system can help to make that Scotland a reality. I want our social security system to have parity of esteem with our health service. The two must go hand in hand.

I particularly welcome the Scottish Government’s exploration of a minimum income guarantee and look forward to the final report from the expert group later this year. Action on that would see a positive step change in the support that is provided to our citizens.

I am encouraged, too, to see that the paper raises the possibility of a universal basic income being developed by future Scottish Governments. A universal basic income—paid to all, with extra support for those who need it—opens opportunities for a fairer, safer and happier future. It trusts each of us to follow our best path—to work, care and create, to develop ideas, to develop enterprises and to develop and build communities. Along with other policies—including on fair work and pensions and on a radical just transition—a universal basic income could be the cornerstone of the wellbeing economy that we long to create.

In an independent Scotland, we could do things differently; indeed, that is why we want it at all. How we see social security and how we work

towards its transformation shows the world the kind of Scotland that we want to be. That time cannot come soon enough.

16:11

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): This afternoon’s debate on the Scottish Government’s paper “Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland” should have been a constructive opportunity for all MSPs in the chamber, irrespective of our constitutional position on an independent Scotland, to explore the kind of social security system that we want and the principles that underpin that system.

For those of us in the SNP, who believe in independence, it is an opportunity to point to the Government’s achievements to date—within the constraints of devolution—in delivering a social security system that embeds dignity, fairness and respect. There is much more that we could do in an independent Scotland—but more on that later.

However, for Conservative Party and the Labour Party members who still believe that huge chunks of our social security system, and much besides across many other areas, should still be controlled by Westminster, the debate also presents a constructive opportunity to say what they would do differently within the confines of devolution, in which Westminster and the UK Government hold much sway, in relation to not just powers but the purse strings. Unfortunately, we have not heard any of that in the debate.

I want to highlight the very first section of the Scottish Government’s paper, because that is at the heart of the debate. It states:

“With independence, Scotland would have the opportunity to design a social security system as an integral part of a fairer more equal society. A new approach would be designed in line with the current social security principles—a human rights-based system, delivered with dignity, fairness and respect.”

I think that we should look at any social security system through the prism of those underlying principles. That gives us a guide to just how different social security could be in an independent Scotland.

Let us look at the current situation in the UK. We have a Conservative UK Government—as with the next one, which is likely to be Labour—that simply does not believe that families who are on benefits should get enough money to live on, and certainly not if they have more than two children. Let us be clear: when the Conservatives and Labour defend the two-child cap, as they do, that is what they are saying. They will not provide many families in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK with enough money to live on. That is what they are saying.

When Labour says that it will make the rape clause fairer, what it is really doing is defending a UK social security system that does not believe in giving families enough money to live on.

Let us look at that policy choice by Westminster parties through the prism of the kind of social security system that could be delivered in an independent Scotland. It is a system that would be based on human rights and delivered with dignity, fairness and respect. It is a system that would never deliberately impoverish families in the way that the current UK system does. The Scottish Government paper on social security in an independent Scotland identifies various aspects of the current UK system that could never be considered in an independent Scotland because of our underlying principles, which are based on human rights.

The paper identifies 10 initial actions that the SNP would seek to take in an independent Scotland. Those include the removal of the two-child limit, which I mentioned, and the scrapping of its rape clause. They include the removal of the benefits cap, which primarily affects families with children, and the scrapping of the bedroom tax that reduces benefits for people who are considered to have too many bedrooms in their homes. That last measure has been mitigated by the SNP, but at a cash cost to Scotland's budget.

We would also replace universal credit budgeting loans with grants to help individuals and families during their first weeks of claiming the new benefit, which would ease the five-week wait and mean that universal credit would be paid at the full rate, without the deductions and debt that people face now.

There would be an end to the current benefits sanctions regime to ensure that people are supported into sustainable employment and have better long-term outcomes. I will not list the other actions, because of time constraints.

The question for the UK parties is this: why do they continue to wed themselves to a Westminster social security system that has no underlying principles at its core? That system is not based on human rights and does not embed dignity, fairness and respect.

I will say a little about housing support, including housing benefit, the housing element of universal credit and the cost of temporary furnished accommodation in hotels. The money that is in the system already could be far better spent and could better support the lives of the most vulnerable people in society. That would be far more likely to happen in an independent Scotland that placed principles based on human rights at the heart of social security. The then Social Security Committee looked at that during the previous

session of Parliament; we would return to that in an independent Scotland.

I will also speak about supporting people who are on universal credit to get into work. I welcome the fact that universal credit is a passport benefit to securing the Scottish child payment. That payment, combined with other SNP policies, means that 90,000 fewer children are living in poverty in Scotland, that child poverty is 9 per cent lower than it otherwise would have been and that 323,000 children now benefit, including 52,000 in Glasgow—the city that I am proud to represent. My constituents in Maryhill and Springburn see the very real benefit of that. The poverty level is now significantly lower than it is in England or Wales.

I have spoken before about how that groundbreaking and welcome payment can interact unhelpfully with universal credit. For example, families who move off universal credit lose the Scottish child payment, which has an impact on making work pay—or not pay, as the case may be. Tapering universal credit seems eminently sensible and would be another example of using the core principles that would lie at the heart of social security in an independent Scotland to do something meaningful.

I simply have no faith in Westminster to do any of that. What I have not heard today from any of those who represent UK-based parties is an underlying core guiding principle. I have just heard soundbites and hubris; I have not heard about any actions that would be different from those of the defunct and discredited UK Tory Government. That is why we need Scottish independence.

16:18

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in this debate, particularly because it is about the Scottish Government's success in creating a social security system with dignity and respect at its heart. I know that we have heard that phrase before and that we have heard it a lot here today, but that is the founding principle of our system and it is worth repeating. Of those who have had contact with Social Security Scotland, 90 per cent have said that their experience of staff was good or very good and 93 per cent felt that they were treated with kindness.

Of course, things are not perfect and there are wrinkles to iron out. No one is saying that the system is perfect, but I know from constituent feedback that people see it as a breath of fresh air compared to the shambles and frequent trauma of dealing with the UK Government's DWP.

It is fair to say that my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden is not the most deprived in Scotland, but there are disadvantaged

areas, as there are in every constituency, and, as in every constituency, food banks are a necessary evil for people who are pushed into poverty, not least by the crushing, Tory-made cost of living crisis.

In a relatively small local authority area of East Dunbartonshire, 3,780 children are benefiting from the game-changing and unique Scottish child payment, which is not available anywhere else in the UK, 1,835 people receive adult disability payment and 1,235 children receive child disability payment. I could go on with statistics, but it is clear that those benefits are helping the most vulnerable in society, which is their human right.

Ninety thousand children are being lifted out of poverty with the child payment. Devolution has shown how Scotland can begin to deliver a fairer social security system, but sadly, as we know, the UK Government still holds most of our welfare powers. Just think what more we could do with the full powers of an independent country. Despite mitigating the worst of the UK Government cuts and the horrendous policies that we have heard about today, such as the two-child cap, the rape clause, the bedroom tax and more, to the tune of more than £711 million, we have managed to lift 90,000 children out of poverty this year. However, at a time when the Scottish Government uses its limited powers to put money in people's pockets, Westminster takes it away.

Small independent European states prove that a strong social security system means a fairer, more equal nation. If they can do it, why not Scotland? There simply is no logical reason. An independent Scotland could undo the damage of the union by removing the two-child limit and scrapping the rape clause. We would remove the benefit cap and bedroom tax, and replace universal credit budgeting loans with grants, so that families would not have to wait five weeks for the first payments.

We would end the current benefit sanctions regime and support people into sustainable employment, and we would end the unfair young parent penalty. We could provide more support for those who are starting work, such as up-front childcare and travel costs, and we could improve support for unpaid carers. We would halt changes to the delivery of existing reserved health and disability benefits.

The list of progressive interventions makes it clear that Scotland could do better with independence, as it would not have to mitigate the disastrous UK Government policies. With the full powers of an independent state, the Scottish Government would have greater freedom to eliminate poverty in our communities. With independence, people in Scotland could be guaranteed the right to a decent income that is set at a level to ensure that everyone could have a

dignified quality of life. That could be achieved through paid work, affordable services and, when needed, targeted social security support.

The minimum income guarantee, which was well articulated by my colleague John Mason, would lay the foundations for future progressive Governments in Scotland to consider developing a universal basic income. We are a small nation and we can be progressive to bring about change and create wellbeing for the people who live here.

As has been mentioned, unclaimed benefits such as pension credit are a problem that should and could be resolved. I agree that we should be more proactive to encourage people to claim what they are entitled to.

It is clear that the UK Government does not see the value of social security—and neither does Jeremy Balfour, it seems, from his speech. The Conservatives are blind to the misery that their policies and cuts have created throughout Scotland.

Many folk who are struggling to get by see an independent Scotland as a light at the end of the tunnel. That is why we choose to follow that light, and we will not be held back by the Tories or Labour, who would keep us tied to Westminster. We deserve better. The people of Scotland know that having a decent standard of living, a warm home and the ability to put food on the table is their human right. With independence, we can give them that basic human right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to closing speeches. I call Neil Bibby to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:24

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): It has been challenging at times, but I have been listening closely to the debate this afternoon and, frankly, I have found it somewhat repetitive. I have a strong feeling of déjà vu. That is little wonder—here we are yet again. I apologise to all members if I sound like a broken record, but I feel like a broken record and, with the greatest of respect to Mr Hepburn, I have a strong sense that, when he gets to his feet, he may sound and feel like a broken record, too. He might even say that we are two sides of a broken record. I will leave it to others to decide who is the A side and who is the B side.

Rona Mackay: Will Neil Bibby take an intervention?

Neil Bibby: I would like to make some progress, if that is okay.

Here we are, debating the latest of the SNP's white papers. The last was published on 2 February—literally on groundhog day. How

appropriate that was. Almost £2 million of public money has been spent on the production of those white-elephant papers. They are a waste of money, and these debates are a waste of time.

The Government fights on this territory not only in a bid to keep at bay the discontent from its flagging base but because it is increasingly clear that it has nothing left to offer contemporary Scotland. It has nothing to offer the families in work poverty and fuel poverty, who are forced to make the devastating choices between heating and eating in an on-going cost of living crisis. It has nothing to offer adults with learning disabilities in Renfrewshire who are in receipt of social security benefits but who face the closure or merger of their day centre facilities due to the Government's cuts to our local councils. It has nothing to offer adults with disabilities who wait, on average, for 104 days—more than three months—to get their adult disability payments. Those are just three of the many topics that we could and should be discussing.

Clare Haughey: Will Neil Bibby take an intervention?

Neil Bibby: Paul O'Kane and Katy Clark spoke for Labour this afternoon. All three of us represent the West Scotland region, and I want to talk about jobs—a word that I did not hear from the cabinet secretary earlier. In Inverclyde, where many people already have to resort to social security because of job losses at Amazon, Berry bpi and Wilko, almost 450 jobs look set to leave the area as a consequence of BT Group's wrong-headed decision to relocate to Glasgow. Many workers will simply not be able to move with it and will face unemployment.

People from an area with above-average levels of unemployment want and deserve leadership from their Government. As the council leader, Stephen McCabe, has said, we need ministers to persuade the company to reconsider its decision—not this dereliction of duty. However, here we are again, lacking answers on real matters of substance—even on that issue.

Bob Doris: Will Neil Bibby give way?

Neil Bibby: I will take an intervention. *[Interruption.]*

Bob Doris: The Scottish Government paper, which I assume Neil Bibby has read, has 10 key actions—including on the benefits cap, the rape clause and the two-child limit—that the SNP would take speedily in an independent Scotland. I know that Neil Bibby does not want an independent Scotland, but would the Labour Party take those actions speedily if it came to power at Westminster? If not, it will be judged on that.

Neil Bibby: As Paul O'Kane said, the previous Labour Government lifted out of poverty 1 million children and 1 million pensioners. We want to ensure that we have an economic growth plan and a social security system—and that we make work pay—to help people out of poverty and into positive employment. We heard a lot of proposals from the SNP and Mr Doris, but we did not hear whether there was a plan to pay for any of it.

As others have pointed out in the past, the papers set out plans on a range of subjects, from the finer points of marine regulation, to the colour of independent Scottish passports, to the latest intriguing one, on how Scotland could compete in the Eurovision song contest. The latest paper, which we are debating, is about social security in an independent Scotland. As Paul O'Kane challenged, surely the Minister for Independence or the cabinet secretary can tell us in what currency those Scottish social security payments will be paid. As Willie Rennie said, I am sorry if, like the whole country, we missed it, but that is not clear to many of us.

Jamie Hepburn: Will Neil Bibby take an intervention?

Neil Bibby: I happily give way.

Jamie Hepburn: I am happy to confirm, very simply, that, in the immediate period after independence, as is laid out in the third paper, people will be paid in pounds sterling. We have laid that out—that should be understood. It is a very simple and straightforward proposition. I am happy to get that on the record and will be happy to hear Neil Bibby engage with some of the subject matter instead of sounding like a broken record.

Neil Bibby: It takes one to know one.

Jamie Hepburn has omitted to mention what we discussed, in the last debate on European Union membership, about the Government's plans to join the European Union and having to join the euro. The Government has failed to give us details of a credible plan for the currency, because it does not have one.

The Government's motion states that

“only independence provides the full range of powers that would enable Scotland to provide the social security that the people of Scotland deserve.”

However, that is a red herring. What people need is a Government that will make work pay and will lift people out of poverty.

As Paul O'Kane and Katy Clark said, Scottish Labour welcomes the various measures on the Scottish child payment. The previous Labour Government introduced positive measures to lift

more people out of poverty, and we will do so again. However, if we carry on—

Clare Haughey: Will the member give way?

Neil Bibby: I will take Ms Haughey's intervention.

Clare Haughey: I thank Mr Bibby for finally taking an intervention from a female MSP. I asked his colleague Paul O'Kane what a future Labour Government would do for the WASPI women, given how vocal the campaign's supporters have been, including his colleague Katy Clark, who is sitting behind him. Perhaps he can tell us how a future Labour Government would compensate those women for the travesty of taking their pensions off them and not informing many of them about that.

Neil Bibby: I agree that the WASPI women have faced a great injustice, and I hope that we will consider how best to support them in the future. Both the Scottish and UK Governments currently have to deal with a challenging financial situation. However, I hope that, as part of our review of universal credit and other matters, we will properly support our pensioners, and particularly our women pensioners.

It is clear that, if we continue on the same path as the Tories and the SNP, the social security budget will have to increase. As Willie Rennie mentioned, because of appalling economic mismanagement by both Governments, Scotland's economy is not growing or performing as it should. We will need to have economic growth if we are to share our prosperity and support people properly. Without such growth, we will not be able to do that.

Therefore, the answer is not independence or being plunged into years of economic insecurity as we compound the errors made during Brexit by tearing ourselves out of our union, which is exponentially more vital to the Scottish economy than the EU. That would make Brexit look like a cakewalk.

Jeremy Balfour and Paul O'Kane challenged the Scottish Government to tell us how it would balance the books and to say what it would cut to fund all the generous gestures that it has promised on a range of issues. Again, there have been no clear answers. From the cabinet secretary's earlier response, it appeared that we could just do those things because we are able to balance the books at the moment. From that, are we to infer that the Scottish Government will increase taxes to fund all its promises, when people on £28,500 per year are already paying more tax than they would elsewhere in the UK?

Bob Doris: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Neil Bibby: The Scottish Government's latest paper is about social security. People want security. They value economic and political security, security for themselves and their families, and security for their pensions. The last thing that would serve such a feeling of security, after so many tumultuous years, would be to rip Scotland away from our only land neighbour and by far our biggest economic partner. The people of Scotland deserve a Government that is focused not on its own pet projects and constitutional obsessions but on its people's needs and priorities.

16:33

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I feel that the nature of the debate, and the substance of the subject that we are debating, merits that I practise some energy conservation. I will therefore make a short set of remarks.

I have often wondered what it is like to be in attendance at an SNP conference. Now I know what it is like: it is dead boring and sleep inducing. It is like a competition to see how often we can repeat the words "independent Scotland", which is not very inspiring.

I was grateful to Neil Bibby for reminding me that the cost of the proposals in the minister's papers would be more than £2 million. What an extraordinary waste of taxpayers' money. If the SNP wants to indulge its fantasies by producing white papers, it should do so at the expense of the SNP and not of the Scottish taxpayer.

Jamie Hepburn: Will Stephen Kerr give way? Is he feart?

Stephen Kerr: It is about time that the SNP was stopped in its tracks from using government as a means of furthering its cause which, frankly, is very much in the area of reserved powers.

Jamie Hepburn: Feart!

Stephen Kerr: The minister can stand and holler and gibe all he likes. That is pretty childish behaviour—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Stephen Kerr: It is pretty childish behaviour from someone who purports to be a minister—even if he is one of 30, none of whom seems to have any meaningful responsibilities to attend to this afternoon.

Considering the members who are here, my goodness me—this entire debate represents, to borrow a phrase from Neil Bibby, a gross dereliction of duty by the governing party of Scotland. Instead of debating Scotland's welfare

system as it is today or how to genuinely abolish poverty, which I am in favour of, we are instead relegated to listening to a bunch of half-baked bletherings by people who seem to spend most of their time fantasising about independence.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: It is a sad spectacle, especially watching Kevin Stewart—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way, given that he has mentioned me?

Stephen Kerr: It is a sad spectacle, because SNP members all know in their heart of hearts that it is not happening and will never happen.

The people of Scotland have given their judgment. Ten years ago this year we had a full-on debate, and the people voted decisively to remain part of the United Kingdom. We respect the result of that referendum, as we do those of all the referendums that have been held in this country.

The truth of the matter, in my view, is that the way out of poverty is through productive employment. That is not only my view: any time the Scottish Government produces any documentation about poverty, there is at least one line or paragraph in that document that relates to the fundamental truth that the way we will get rid of poverty in this country is through good work.

However, the SNP and the Scottish Greens represent a threat to the prosperity that we need in Scotland and to Scotland's businesses. That is not me saying that; it is what Scotland's businesses are saying very loudly and clearly. Here is a fundamental economic fact of life: we cannot tax and spend our way to economic growth and the creation of new jobs; that just does not work. The SNP refuses to acknowledge the lessons of basic economics when it comes to economic growth.

John Mason: Would the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will give way to John Mason. I quite like John Mason, and I am going to give way to him.

John Mason: I thank the member for giving way, but he talks about economic lessons—would he be talking about the UK Government that has low tax and has led us into recession? There is no growth. Where is the lesson in that?

Stephen Kerr: I am afraid that the whole lesson is exactly the lesson that I am giving John Mason. It is an economic fact of life that we cannot tax our way to economic growth, and we cannot borrow and spend our way to economic growth. There are some hard facts of economic life that all Governments eventually have to face up to, regardless of their party colour. By helping people to get the skills, healthcare and transport that they

need, allowing them to access employment, we help them to get out of poverty.

I was therefore very pleased to hear Willie Rennie say what he did. I concur with his fundamental observation that boasting about the size of a welfare budget is not much of a boast. Where the boasting comes in is when that budget comes down, because more and more people do not need to use the safety net that we all believe in on every side of the Parliament. It has always been my view that there should be a robust and sensible safety net that helps and supports people who need that support to get into work. Indeed, it should support that small number of people for whom we have a special responsibility: those who will never be able to access employment.

The proposed budget for next year's social security bill is £6.3 billion, which is £3.8 billion more than for 2017-18. I repeat the point that the welfare budget does not tackle poverty; it actually leaves people sitting in a trap, which they can get out of only by accessing healthcare and skills training to get into productive, good jobs that are created by Scotland's businesses.

Is it not ironic that skills, training, further education and higher education—the very things that become the golden ticket to getting out of the poverty trap—are the very things that the SNP chooses, as a political priority, to cut? Where is the genuine and sincere interest of SNP members? We have sat all afternoon listening to Jamie Hepburn accusing us all of not caring—"not caring" is all that I have heard him say. Well, we care. We care enough to deliver sustainable and workable solutions to the issues connected with poverty that leave people in need of social security.

I conclude by saying very firmly that this whole debate has been bogus—it has been bogus on the basis that it has been about as relatable to the subject as fantasy football is to football. This has been a fantasy political debate about something that does not exist and will never exist. The ministers on the front bench know that they are wasting the public's time, the Parliament's time and taxpayers' money by indulging these fantasies at their expense.

All that those ministers care about is independence. They may feign a passing interest in the alleviation of poverty, but the speeches that we have heard in the debate show that independence is undeniably more important to them than anything else—it trumps any other concern. It is not about delivering real opportunities for the people of Scotland, because that is the furthest thing from their concern and the furthest thing from any priority that they have. The only thing that unites them is the desire to break

up the United Kingdom and impoverish Scotland outside the United Kingdom.

We will focus instead on delivering real opportunities for the people of Scotland. Let us not waste any more of our precious time on this pointless debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the minister to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Government, I remind all members that all comments made in the chamber, including comments made from a sedentary position, which are not to be encouraged in the first place, must conform with the requirement to treat each other with courtesy and respect. With that, I call the minister.

16:41

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): I thank most members who contributed to the debate for their participation. I genuinely believe that this is an important debate and an important subject matter, which I will return to in a few moments, but I first want to mention someone who is not here, because, ordinarily, he would have contributed to the debate. Although I did not always agree with Donald Cameron, he would certainly have made a better contribution than the one we just heard from Stephen Kerr.

In one of my last exchanges with Mr Cameron, I pointed out that the Scottish Government has no plans for an unelected chamber in an independent Scotland. He has seen the writing on the wall and has had to seek to be a member of an unelected chamber elsewhere. I wish him well for his retirement at the Scotland Office.

I will start with Mr Kerr, lest I run out of time. In some ways, his contribution should not merit a response, but there are a few things that I have to respond to. I would have intervened on the self-proclaimed great debater if he had felt inclined to take my intervention but, of course, he did not. I wanted to point out that the papers that we have published thus far have not cost £2 million to publish but £150,000, which is some 0.00025 per cent of the Scottish Government budget.

Neil Bibby: The independence white papers are produced by the constitution unit, whose salary bill is nearly £2 million. Therefore, the Scottish Government has spent nearly £2 million on the production of these white papers—money that could be much better spent on other matters.

Jamie Hepburn: The constitution unit does much more than just publish these papers, but if the member wants it on the record, that amount represents 0.0035 per cent of—

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I feel that this is very important, because I

may not be able to intervene on the minister when he gets into full flow. It is important for the clarity of the record, and I hope that you will guide me on whether this is possible. I have never proclaimed myself to be anything other than a member of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party and a member of the Scottish Parliament. I am afraid that I feel that I need to correct the record—I do not proclaim myself to be anything other than those two things.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I know, Mr Kerr, that you will be well aware that that was not, in fact, a point of order. We continue with the debate, minister.

Jamie Hepburn: Let me say that it is heavily implied by the member's usual demeanour.

The member says that we are not concerned about getting rid of poverty. A good way to start getting rid of poverty in this country would be to get rid of his rotten party from Government and, through independence, ensure that an unelected Tory Government could never again be imposed on Scotland.

I turn to the Tory amendment. Jeremy Balfour said that this is not a serious subject. I say to him that he did not make a serious contribution on what is a serious subject. How we support the most vulnerable in our society is surely a serious subject. Bob Doris was quite correct to say that some people have not risen to the occasion today.

The Tory amendment says that we should "focus on the ... priorities of the people of Scotland".

Let us talk about what we are doing in relation to the priorities of the people of Scotland that relate to social security, which is the subject matter today.

We have introduced 14 Scottish Government benefits, seven of which are available only in Scotland. In November, we introduced the carer support payment, which was our 14th benefit. We have created a free and independent advocacy service that actively supports disabled people to access and apply for social security benefits on the basis of seeking to maximise their income rather than minimise it—we know that the DWP operates to that approach. We are committing a record £6.3 billion for benefits expenditure in 2024-25, to support more than 1.2 million people.

It is little wonder that Professor Stephen Sinclair of Glasgow Caledonian University, in talking about the principles that are embedded in our Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, said:

"It is founded on an idea of a commitment to human rights. When you think about it, it is extraordinary that the whole British social security system is not founded on that".

Marie McNair was quite right to talk about social security as a human right.

If we want any further proof that the approach that we are taking is satisfactory, 89 per cent of respondents to the annual client survey for Social Security Scotland rated their overall experience as very good or good. Collette Stevenson and Rona Mackay were right to point out the positive feedback that we have seen.

There has been some talk of processing times. Of course, we want to see processing times improve. However, in the last quarter, we processed the highest number of child disability payment applications since that benefit was launched. There was an 80 per cent increase on the same period in the previous year. The latest published figures show that average processing times for the adult disability payment reduced by seven working days. That is us responding to the priorities of the people of Scotland here and now in relation to social security.

This debate has been determined by the people of Scotland themselves to be a priority. Let us look at the last election result. We stood on the explicit basis of taking forward that work, and we won that election. That lot over there lost the election, and that lot over there lost the election. We not only have the right to take forward this work; we have a responsibility to do so.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. As you said to us earlier, respect should be shown to people across the chamber. I do not believe that pointing your finger and saying “that lot over there” shows the respect that the Scottish Parliament should be showing. Do you agree, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Mountain for his point of order.

I am sure that all members agree that it is extremely important that we treat one another with courtesy and respect at all times. We can debate robustly, but we can continue to do so in a respectful manner.

Jamie Hepburn: I am always happy to debate robustly and respectfully, Presiding Officer.

An issue has been raised by a number of members, including Mr Kerr, who said that all we care about is independence. This is where others do not get it. Independence is not some form of abstraction; it is the means by which we can achieve a better society for people in Scotland. Fundamentally, independence is about power and responsibility—where power and responsibility lie, who has them, and what they are doing with them. We know the answer to those questions. In regard to social security, power and responsibility lie at

Westminster. The Tories have the power. They are not elected by the people of Scotland, but they are implementing their policies on us nonetheless. We know that what they are doing with that power is pushing the most vulnerable further into poverty. We could do much more and much better with power and responsibility being vested in the Scottish Parliament.

I turn to the Labour Party’s amendment, in the name of Mr O’Kane. It talks about the plan as representing a “theoretical future”. I suppose that it is, in so much as it is not the here and now. It is not where we are now, so one could argue that it is a theoretical future. However, Maggie Chapman, in a useful turn of phrase, said that we should “lift our sights”—and, indeed, we should.

Let us look at where Labour stands on social security. On 6 February 2020, Keir Starmer, when he was running for leader of the Labour Party, said that it was

“time to ... create a social security system fit for the 21st century with compassion and justice as its founding principles.”

He went on to say:

“We must scrap the ... two-child limit and benefits cap.”

What does he say now? On 16 July 2023, he said that Labour was “not changing” the Tory policy on the two-child limit, and in August last year, he said that Labour was going to implement the rape clause “more fairly”. That is a shocking position for the Labour Party to be taking into the election.

Mr O’Kane told us of his personal position on the two-child cap, as did Ms Clark. I say to them, and to the Scottish Labour Party, with as much respect as I can muster, that their individual positions on the matter are devoid of meaning, because they will not be determining that policy should their party form the next UK Government. It will be Keir Starmer rules OK, and we know exactly what he intends to do and not do with powers over social security.

Paul O’Kane: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way if I have time.

Paul O’Kane: In the debate, when I explained in quite clear terms how a million children were lifted out of poverty by the previous Labour Government, the minister dismissed that as though it was not actually that important. He called it history, and he did not seem to care about the difference that Labour Governments make. A Labour Government will deliver a fundamental reform of universal credit in order to ensure that children are lifted out of poverty, because that is what Labour Governments do when they are in power.

Jamie Hepburn: I do not dismiss history, but I will tell you what: in the here and now, and in the future, that history will not do children much good. Actions such as those that this Government is taking, which have lifted 90,000 children out of poverty, will make the difference. Maintaining the two-child limit and the rape clause will not do children in the future any good.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: There is no chance that I will give way to the man who would not give way to me, with respect to Mr Kerr.

Our paper on social security in an independent Scotland sets out an ambitious vision for the future, in which the people of Scotland have access to a fair and adequate social security system. That is a principle that should surely underpin every social security system, yet it certainly does not look like that in Britain today. Social security should protect us all through life's ups and downs: when we are starting a family, looking for work or beginning our retirement. It should support us when we are caring for family members or friends, if we are unable to work or if we have extra costs because we are ill or disabled. It should reduce the harm that is caused by poverty and provide an income that allows people to live well and thrive, not just survive.

As I have mentioned, there has been much talk of what we have laid out as being theoretical, hypothetical or fanciful. However, let us look at reality today. What do we see when we look at the current UK Government's approach to social security? We can see—every one of us; it is plain to see—that the current UK social security system is broken. It does not provide enough for people to buy healthy food or warm clothes or to heat their houses. There is no link between the rates of payment and need.

We see from the latest child poverty statistics that child poverty in Scotland is too high, at 24 per cent, but it is 31 per cent in England and 28 per cent in Wales. That is what the UK social security system is delivering—

Stephen Kerr: What about jobs?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr.

Jamie Hepburn: Our social security proposals for independence would prioritise making immediate changes to the current system and would also, in the longer term, take a much more human rights-based approach that would sustain and fulfil people in a way that the UK social security system does not.

We have set out the immediate changes that we have made, and the possibility of creating a minimum income guarantee: a guarantee of financial security, with the right to a decent

income, regardless of life circumstances. That is what we should be aiming for, and that is the prize that can be won with independence.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on “Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland”.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:54

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask the Minister for Parliamentary Business, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-12230, on substitution on committees, and motion S6M-12231, on committee membership.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Emma Harper be removed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Elena Whitham be appointed to replace Jim Fairlie as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and Emma Harper be appointed to replace Karen Adam as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.—[*George Adam*]

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

Motion without Notice

16:54

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 16:55.—[*George Adam*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-12203.1, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12203, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on "Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland", 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.

16:55

Meeting suspended.

16:58

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-12203.1, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12203, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the platform. I would have voted no.

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

For

Balfour, Jeremy (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)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)

Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (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)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (ALBA)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-12203.1, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, is: For 30, Against 87, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-12203.2, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-12203, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on "Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)

Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)

Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-12203.2, in the name of Paul O’Kane, is: For 53, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-12203, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on “Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland”, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the voting system, but I would have voted no.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-12203, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, is: For 63, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's paper, *Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland*; agrees that the people of Scotland would be best served by a social security system that embeds dignity, fairness and respect and provides a safety net for all as part of a strong wellbeing economy; notes progress made with Scotland's unique social security benefits, including five family payments, with modelling estimating that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty in 2023-24 as a result of Scottish Government policies, with poverty levels 9 per cent lower than they would have otherwise been, but recognises that only independence provides the full range of powers that would enable Scotland to provide the social security that the people of Scotland deserve.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. Does any member object?

As no member objects, the final question is, that motion S6M-12230, on substitution on committees, and motion S6M-12231, on committee membership, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Emma Harper be removed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Elena Whitham be appointed to replace Jim Fairlie as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee; and Emma Harper be appointed to replace Karen Adam as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Gas and Electricity Standing Charges

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I invite members who are leaving the chamber to do so as quickly and quietly as possible. The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11927, in the name of Gordon MacDonald, on gas and electricity standing charges. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that standing charges are the fixed component of customers' energy bills, and that Ofgem, the energy regulator for Great Britain, has set the maximum standing charge that a supplier can charge a customer at 29.6 pence per day for gas, 62.08 pence per day for electricity in southern Scotland, and 59.38 pence per day for electricity in northern Scotland; further understands that Scottish consumers using both fuels, including those in the Edinburgh Pentlands constituency, could be paying up to £335 per year before they use any power to heat or light their home; believes that Scottish energy users could be paying 61% more in electricity standing charges than people in London, despite Scotland being what it sees as an energy-rich nation and reportedly generating far more electricity than is used domestically; further believes that Scottish customers are being penalised by a complex and unfair charging system, and notes the calls for the UK Government to scrap standing charges and institute a more equitable price structure.

17:06

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I thank the members who supported my motion so that the debate could take place. It is about an important subject that impacts on virtually every family in Scotland. After mortgage or rent payments and council tax, energy costs are among the highest items of household expenditure that my constituents in Edinburgh Pentlands face. It is therefore disappointing that no Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat MSP supported the motion.

In principle, electricity standing charges are there to cover the cost of the energy infrastructure, which is divided among consumers equally. However, that policy does not work in practice for those who pay the bills, as the standing charge also covers network investment, maintenance, supplier failure support and net zero targets.

In its recent consultation document, which is dated October last year, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets highlighted that the electricity standing charge for Edinburgh residents is £221 per annum, which is higher than the United Kingdom national average and 60 per cent higher than the London standing charge of £138. The result is that the 2.5 million households in Scotland are paying £212 million more than would be paid if

their standing charge was comparable to London's.

In comparison, the gas standing charge is—surprisingly—a fixed rate across the whole UK of £101 per annum. In total, my constituents have to pay £335 every year before they turn on a light, heat their home or cook a meal.

The higher electricity standing charge might have been acceptable if Scottish consumers, who live in a country that exports electricity to the rest of the UK, were compensated by a substantially lower unit charge—but they are not. The difference between the London and Edinburgh unit rates is an average of 1.5p.

Standing charges unfairly penalise households that are on low incomes. High standing charges mean that it is proportionately more difficult for low-volume users to make substantial savings by reducing their usage. Those who are on prepayment meters accrue the daily standing charge even if they have no credit on their meter. When they top up, they must pay back all the standing charges that are outstanding before they can use any electricity.

When I recently met Centrica, it highlighted that it would support the removal of the fixed standing charge and support national pricing. Back in April 2000, Centrica removed standing charges from its gas and electricity tariffs. Then, in 2013, Ofgem conducted its retail market review, when it proposed to have tariffs with a simple two-part structure—a standing charge and a unit rate. The UK Government accepted the recommendations and standing charges were reintroduced.

In their briefings, Advice Direct Scotland and Centrica highlighted the need for a progressive social tariff so that those who most need additional support because of health issues, for example, can receive it. Three quarters of the public supported that proposal.

Another option that could be considered to replace standing charges is block pricing, whereby initial usage of energy is at a lower price per unit. The rate would step up incrementally as more units were used. That would encourage home owners to invest in insulation, save money in the long term and help to achieve our environmental targets.

Scotland is a net exporter of electricity, having exported 20.3 million megawatt hours and imported only 1.5 million megawatt hours in 2022. Normal rules of supply and demand should mean that the cost of electricity is lower, as there is an oversupply in Scotland, but that is not the case. We do not get that benefit, although we help to keep the lights on south of the border, to an estimated wholesale value of £4 billion.

Northern Ireland, which is not part of the UK energy market, has its own utility regulator. Because Northern Ireland is not part of the internal market, its average unit price for electricity is among the cheapest in Europe and is significantly below the median cost in Britain and Ireland. If only we could have our own utility regulator, as Northern Ireland does, we could all benefit from Scotland's energy surplus and have a lower electricity unit cost.

There are yet more stings in the tail for Scottish consumers in that, in the 2022 autumn statement, the UK Government introduced the 45 per cent electricity generator levy. That levy is a tax on the ordinary profits of electricity generators resulting from high wholesale prices caused by unique geopolitical events, and it will remain in force until 31 March 2028.

The levy became applicable from 1 January 2023 and is expected to raise an extra £14 billion for the UK Exchequer over the five years to March 2028. It is on top of the energy profits levy on oil and gas companies, which was introduced in May 2022 in response to exceptional profits. That brings the combined headline rate for taxing the sector to 75 per cent, and the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that that levy alone could raise more than £40 billion over the next five years. If those forecasts are right, the UK Treasury will benefit to the tune of £54 billion by March 2028.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Would the member like the energy profits levy to be increased so that companies would pay more into the Treasury?

Gordon MacDonald: I am happy that the levy has been introduced because of the exceptional profits, but my point is that we do not benefit from it. Much of the oil, gas and electricity that generates the additional taxation will have emanated from Scotland. On a population share alone, we would expect additional funding of £4.5 billion to provide additional targeted support to consumers and help to maintain services in Scotland.

Ofgem is consulting on energy standing charges at the same time as industry experts are indicating that standing charges might rise by 15 per cent from 1 April 2024. I hope that Ofgem identifies a way forward that provides a more equitable price structure and removes the high standing charges from Scottish consumers. However, given that Ofgem reintroduced standing charges in 2013 in a way that penalises Scottish consumers, the signs do not look promising. Only independence will give us the power to shape an electricity market that is fit for the 21st century and provide targeted support for those who need it.

17:15

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I thank Gordon MacDonald for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate. The topic is hugely important on a number of levels. Energy costs are a hugely significant component of household bills, and anything that can be done to address those costs during this cost of living crisis, particularly for those with more challenged budgets, would be greatly welcome.

Energy use is a significant driver of climate change, so that needs to be addressed in relation to Scotland's net zero ambitions. In addition, we should not forget that energy prices are a significant factor in economic activity and that higher energy prices constrain economic activity across the whole economy. It was useful to have the information highlighted, but it is unfortunate to hear that we have higher energy charges in Scotland although we are such a significant and increasing exporter of energy south of the border and beyond.

It is important to recognise that standing charges are regressive and that those who can least afford to pay end up paying proportionately more because so much of the cost is loaded on to standing charges before people even turn on the lights. I have long thought that that should be addressed to help with the cost of living and to make the energy market fairer and more equitable. I am delighted that the issue is on the agenda to the extent that it is, and I hope that we will start to see progress as the Ofgem consultation moves forward.

The cost of energy can have a positive impact on our move towards net zero, because, if the cost per unit is higher, that incentivises people to use less energy. At the moment, because people can afford that, they are not so focused on that aspect. I have no doubt that the new approach, if implemented correctly, will have an impact on reducing total energy usage by encouraging people to invest in energy-saving measures.

It is important to recognise the impact on small enterprises. I know that the Federation of Small Businesses has been concerned about energy costs, and it has issued information and analysis on that. Kevin Stewart has already lodged a motion to highlight the impact on small businesses. The same economic logic applies. When smaller businesses with lower energy usage are hit with high up-front standing charges, that is a drag on their economic activity. That issue needs to be addressed, as it has a disproportionate impact on them in comparison with larger businesses that can better afford such charges.

Prepayment meters have been mentioned. It is hugely unfair that customers who find themselves on prepayment meters pay more for their standing charges and their usage. It is good that standing charges have been levelled to some extent, but it is important that levelisation continues, as people who find themselves on prepayment meters should not be paying more for their standing charge or for their per-unit usage.

It is good that the issue of standing charges has been raised and that Ofgem is—I hope—taking it seriously. I am struggling to understand what some of its reasoning has been for not addressing the issue. If the argument is that individuals who use significant amounts of energy and are economically challenged would find meeting payments more difficult, removing the standing charge completely would put them in a much more advantageous position. I am sure that, if individuals and families who are in special circumstances found themselves in difficulty, exceptional support could be arranged through some mechanism to deal with that.

I welcome, as a mechanism to move forward, the progressive approach to how we charge for energy. I would really like Ofgem to conclude its consultation and move forward with the changes as quickly as possible. It is encouraging that electricity companies are not opposed in principle to making the changes and that some have already taken steps in that direction. I thank Gordon MacDonald for lodging the motion and I look forward to seeing progress in the market.

17:19

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): The motion is classic nationalism and is designed to pit one group of people against another. It is unhelpful, unwarranted and founded in ignorance.

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Maurice Golden: I would like to make some progress, but I will happily give way later.

At the heart of the SNP's policy is the removal of cost reflectivity from Ofgem's licence conditions, which—let me be clear—would increase costs. That is at least consistent with the outcome, if not the rhetoric, of SNP policy, which is, in fact, to increase consumer bills. I will give two examples of that before I move on to standing charges.

Gillian Martin: Maurice Golden accuses my colleague of pure nationalism and says some other unpleasant things about him, but he fails to realise that the motion is standing up for many people who are disproportionately affected by high standing charges, which are also a problem for

other parts of the UK—Scotland's standing charges are actually the third highest in the United Kingdom, given that those in Merseyside and north Wales are higher.

Maurice Golden: I did not refer to the member at all; I referred to the motion—that needs to be made clear.

I will give two examples of where the SNP policy is to increase charges. First, on transmission network use of system—TNUOS—the SNP has consistently argued that Scottish consumers should pay more in order to subsidise energy generators in Scotland, which are primarily multinational companies. Moreover, Ofgem's latest targeted charging review of the transmission demand residual charge means that every Scottish consumer will pay more. A floor approach to the forward-looking charge would result in an overall decrease in TNUOS charges for typical domestic customers, apart from those in Scotland. For north Scotland, in particular, Ofgem notes that charges will increase compared with current charges, given the policy of assistance for areas with high electricity distribution costs. Therefore, Scottish consumers pay more—that is SNP policy.

We see more of that in today's motion, with the call to scrap standing charges. Those standing charges help to cover the cost of the network and ensure cost reflectivity. Therefore, the revenue lost from scrapping them would need to be made up from elsewhere. However, the SNP's motion does not explain that part, probably because the costs would almost certainly be transferred to unit charges—that is, the charge for actually using electricity. In other words, those with high usage—for example, households in remote areas such as the Highlands, poorly insulated households, those reliant on medical equipment and so on—would pay more. Further, while the vulnerable were paying more, the SNP's policy would benefit affluent households.

Gordon MacDonald: In my speech, I highlighted that Advice Direct Scotland and Centrica are calling for a social tariff, so that individuals who have to use a lot of electricity for health reasons could be supported. Does the member accept that we have tried to address the issue of people using a lot of electricity because of their health conditions?

Maurice Golden: My position is clear: there is work to be done to develop specific measures for those who are most deprived or who are on prepayment meters. There is also a case to be made for a derogation in our remote areas, which is something that Ofgem has previously considered.

Citizens Advice points out that households that are able to afford solar and battery storage

systems can reduce their energy use and their overall unit cost. If there were no standing charges, which the SNP demands, those households could avoid paying their fair share of network upkeep.

The bottom line is that this is not the black-and-white issue that the SNP wants to portray it as. No doubt, the SNP thought that scrapping standing charges would be an easy way to pick a fight with the UK Government, but it is a simplistic policy that risks harming the very people in society who need the most help. If the SNP cares about lowering Scottish household bills, it should abandon its ill-considered policy and bring forward cogent, cohesive and researched motions.

17:25

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank Gordon MacDonald for bringing such an important debate to the chamber. It is a shocking statistic, but a third of households in Scotland are living in fuel poverty. It is a grim reality that many people are going without heating in order to save money and to eat. Meanwhile, British Gas has seen a profit explosion, raking in £751 million last year, which equates to £85,000 an hour. That profit is being made at the expense of our citizens.

Customers who use less energy see a greater proportionate impact of standing charges on their bills, and those charges are having a real detrimental effect on those who ration their energy use. Forth Housing Association, in my constituency, contacted me to highlight how that is affecting its tenants. Some of the households—like many others—did not use gas for most of the year, but, when sub-zero temperatures led them to turn on their heating, they found that they were already in debt. Standing charges that they had not known about had built up through the milder months.

Because of that accumulation of debt, the landlord was unable to carry out important gas safety inspections, which led to meters having to be capped. Let me show what that means in reality. Gas prepayment meter standing charges are around 40p a day. If the gas is not used for nine months of the year, that adds up to around £108. A payment of £45 is then required to uncap the meter, which means that the household needs to find £150 just to turn on the heating. The situation is ludicrous.

Forth Housing Association was fortunate enough to find funding through the fuel insecurity fund to uncap and top up meters. The Scottish Government home heating support fund was also used to pay off debts. However, that solution is not sustainable. Although the debt is now cleared, the tenants were left with no heating during the coldest period of the year, which is completely

unacceptable. It is even more worrying that Forth Housing Association has told me that we are going to find ourselves in exactly the same situation next winter.

We have already heard about the disproportionate sums that Scots are paying in standing charges. We also have a disproportionate number of households on prepayment meters compared with the rest of the UK. Described as the poverty premium, prepayment meters are one of the ways in which those who have the least end up paying the most for essential goods and services. That is wrong on so many levels, especially during a cost of living crisis, when so many people are struggling financially.

Historically, energy costs more when it is paid per unit than when it is paid by direct debit. The energy price guarantee is currently subsidising the cost of energy for those who are on prepayment meters, but that support will expire at the end of March, and bigger and longer-term changes are needed. However, careful thought must go into that. Although those who ration their energy use might benefit from a change to volumetric standing charges, Ofgem has said that vulnerable people with high energy use would see an enormous detrimental impact. That could include those who require medical equipment and those who live in poorly insulated houses.

Ofgem recently carried out a consultation on standing charges, and I eagerly await its results. I hope that Ofgem is taking the issue seriously. In the meantime, I ask the Government whether it can take any steps to support those households. We need an equitable solution that will avoid further harm to vulnerable people, especially during a cost of living crisis.

17:29

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I thank Mr MacDonald for bringing this debate to the chamber. Standing charges are a regressive tax on ordinary folk. The ability to pay does not matter. It does not matter if someone is as rich as Rishi Sunak, has as many jobs as Douglas Ross or has no money and no job—everyone pays the same. That sounds awfully like Thatcher's poll tax in my opinion. Indeed, they are birds of a feather: the standing charge is the modern community charge.

Just like the poll tax, the standing charge needs to be replaced by a system that charges on the basis of what people use. With that, there should, of course, be a social tariff and discounts for those who are in need. When establishing that social tariff, we should take into account other aspects, including rurality. That is the logical thing to do.

A progressive per-unit charging system not only would be fairer but would encourage folk to use less power. Right now, no matter how much energy people save, the standing charge does not change. Someone can be at their lowest ebb, having switched off both their gas and electricity, and be sitting in the cold and the dark, but the charge still ticks away day by day. That is not just a maybe; it is the lived experience of thousands trapped in the cold and dark, unable to escape the charge, no matter how little energy they use.

It is not just domestic customers who are hit by the standing charge, as small businesses get the same raw deal. Recently, the Federation of Small Businesses raised that exact problem, with some small businesses in Scotland having seen their standing charges go up twelvefold in a year. How are we supposed to create a modern, vibrant and innovation-based economy when small businesses are hammered at every turn?

Douglas Lumsden: Is it still the Scottish National Party's intention to create a state-owned utility company, and would that be able to address the charges that the member describes?

Kevin Stewart: I hope that, with independence, we will create our own energy company and the profits from it will be invested back into that energy company and in public services.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member give way on that point?

Kevin Stewart: I have taken the member's intervention.

I was talking about small businesses being hammered at every turn. Do not just take my word for it. Here are the UK Department for Energy Security and Net Zero's latest figures. All in, before VAT, the smallest businesses pay 24p a unit for electricity, which is similar to domestic customers, but a large company pays only 20p. It is the same situation in relation to gas: the smallest businesses pay 7.4p a unit and the bigger companies pay 5p a unit.

Two weeks ago, I wrote to the UK Government, and here is what it said in response:

"The standing charge is a commercial matter for suppliers, although Ofgem, the energy regulator, regulates it".

That is always the standard response—it is a typical pass-the-buck response. In my opinion, Ofgem is not fit for purpose either. Last month, it put up the domestic energy cap for a unit of gas by 7.7 per cent and kept the standing charge steady. That was despite the wholesale cost of natural gas having fallen by 740p per therm over the past 18 months. It is not as if the power companies are up against it and need a bail-out. British Gas just announced a bumper £799 million profit, which is

entirely from buying natural gas cheaply but charging customers through the nose for the exact same gas.

It is time for the UK Government to step up to the plate and intervene. It is time for Ofgem to do its job to protect consumers rather than shareholders. Beyond all that, it is time for Scotland, which has the energy but not the power, to become an independent nation so that we can create a fairer country.

17:34

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Gordon MacDonald for bringing the debate to the chamber. We cannot speak about gas, electricity, energy and power without acknowledging the enormous power imbalance between the provider and the consumer, which members—in particular, Ivan McKee—have mentioned. It is well documented and universally acknowledged that there is a power imbalance.

I think that we all agree that how we purchase energy is not easy to understand. The system is weighted against some of our most vulnerable citizens and does not have a fair deal for users at its heart. The tariffs across the UK are unacceptable. The motion speaks about the rates in Scotland, but members will know now, because the minister spoke about it, that the tariffs are enormously high and enormously variable across the UK. I had a quick look earlier, and Gillian Martin was absolutely right to say that north Wales and Liverpool have the highest tariffs in the UK.

This is an inequality issue across the UK. We need to find solutions for fellow citizens in Scotland and across the UK, wherever we can. Citizens Advice Scotland is deeply concerned about the current affordability challenges in the energy market. It feels that consumers who struggled with rising costs and accrued energy debt last year will continue to struggle, even as we go into the fairer months.

Members have mentioned the Citizens Advice Scotland data. From July to September 2023, the Citizens Advice Scotland network provided 18,546 pieces of advice related to regulated fuels, which relates to the point about how complicated it is for people who are in a vulnerable situation. Demand for energy debt advice increased by 34 per cent, and the average energy debt for people who sought complex debt advice from the network in Scotland was more than £2,000.

It is difficult to cover everything in a short debate, but, when we talk about energy, we need to talk about Scotland's energy potential in relation to both climate change and who should benefit from the development of our energy potential. Members have spoken about Scotland being

potentially a provider of very large amounts of energy.

An important element of the debate on energy for me, Scottish Labour and the trade union movement is the just transition. It is, of course, a transition that will help our planet, but it must have ordinary people, ordinary families and ordinary workers at its core. How do we make that transition fair?

The on-going cost of living crisis has shown how deeply the climate emergency and poverty are linked. Fuel costs, in particular, have spiralled, as we have heard from members across the chamber, and we have heard that things such as inefficient houses and expensive transport exacerbate poverty while causing carbon to be emitted into our atmosphere.

The brunt of the crisis has been felt disproportionately by people who are living on the lowest incomes—most members agree with that. Fuel poverty is a major concern, and we must address it whenever we can. We know that energy tariffs are a reserved matter, but I agree that the Scottish Parliament should discuss such matters to ensure that we have an understanding of the consequences for our constituents and to allow us to look at what we can do, within our devolved responsibilities, to help those who are most affected.

We need a clear plan that helps us to sprint towards clean power. That will reduce energy bills for all—including, of course, our most vulnerable people.

I am very aware of the time, but one other thing that I want to talk about is my wish to see us move to community-owned sources of energy. I hope that we might get another chance to discuss that in the chamber, because it is such an important matter.

I thank all the members who have contributed tonight.

17:39

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the debate, and I congratulate my colleague Gordon MacDonald on securing it. He rehearsed well the arguments that show the inequity in electricity standing charges across Scotland and many other parts of the UK.

In particular, Gordon MacDonald's motion shows how my South Scotland constituents in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders pay higher electricity standing charges than are paid by people in many other parts of the UK. At 5.20, when Gordon MacDonald was on his feet, I checked the Ofgem website, which shows that people in the north of Scotland pay a 59.36p

standing charge, whereas my constituents in the southern part of Scotland pay 62.06p, which is 23.56p more than is paid in London. So, the inequity is quite striking—and that is before folk even use electricity.

Given that Scotland is an energy-rich nation, that plainly obvious inequality simply serves to demonstrate why the UK energy system is outdated and, of course, how Scotland could do much better with the powers of independence, which would give us the control that we need.

Scotland has recorded the best figures so far for electricity that is generated by renewable sources—it has generated more than enough to power the entire country. For years, Dumfries and Galloway has, through renewables, generated amounts of electricity that are well beyond what is needed for its own use. In 2022, the region generated 2,127.4GW, which was 8 per cent of the total renewable energy that was generated in Scotland. However, my constituents in Dumfries and Galloway, many of whom have renewable energy sites—mainly wind farms—in their communities, see absolutely no benefit from such projects in terms of a reduction in the cost of their energy bills. Many people tell me that they object to wind farms and more turbines because they do not see the benefits in their own energy bills.

Maurice Golden: Does Emma Harper recognise that consumers in Scotland, including her constituents, pay less in transmission charges, to which she referred, as a result of the generation of electricity, because charges are based on location?

Emma Harper: I am coming to that. There are issues around generation, transmission and distribution, but that is only part of the inequity that is demonstrated. As other members have said, we need a fairer approach to people paying their bills, including social tariffs for people who have medical needs and might need, for example, sleep apnoea devices, electric beds or other electrical equipment. As part of Ofgem's energy review, we need to lobby it and recommend that the whole system be made fairer and more equitable for people all across these islands.

The cost to homes and businesses of ever-rising prices has meant that stark choices are being made: householders are choosing between eating and heating. That is the reality for many people and for businesses, some of which simply cannot afford to keep going.

I am conscious of the time. Short debates do not allow us to delve into the issues.

I am a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly's economy committee—Committee C—which is producing a report on energy and how the market works across these islands—or, in effect,

how it does not work. The work is highlighting what we are experiencing in Scotland compared with the experience in other places, including Ireland and Northern Ireland, as Gordon MacDonald described.

Citizens Advice Scotland has made statements about its concerns regarding the removal of, reduction in, or alteration of standing charges.

I support the calls for changes in the way in which consumers are charged for energy. We need to make the system fairer for people across Scotland and the rest of the UK.

17:44

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): I thank Gordon MacDonald not just for his excellent speech but for lodging his very important motion. Pretty much every contribution has included something with which I whole-heartedly agree, but I will single out some particular points that members have made.

I thank Carol Mochan for a considered speech in which she talked about the inequality—because it is inequality—that is associated with the issue. I am glad that she picked up on my point about other parts of the UK also suffering from that inequality. Since I became energy minister, the thing that I have heard most often, across the whole of Scotland, is that people out there in civic Scotland cannot understand why, when we are a large energy producer that plays host to a lot of energy infrastructure, as Emma Harper mentioned, they are in extreme fuel poverty. They cannot square that circle. It does not matter that it is a complex landscape; it is the unfairness of it that gets to people. Carol Mochan made some excellent points in her speech.

Ivan McKee mentioned how higher energy prices constrain economic activity. That is a very powerful point. Obviously, high users of energy have borne the brunt of high energy prices, but having the same standing charges for smaller users is not fair. Those small businesses are the fabric of our high streets and the economic engines of our towns, villages and cities. That very good point was well made.

Kevin Stewart mentioned that people are switching off their gas and electricity. I want to say one thing that I hope that anybody who is struggling with their bills will hear: there are agencies in Scotland that can help people in that situation. Gordon MacDonald mentioned Advice Direct Scotland. The Government gives Advice Direct Scotland funding so that it can give advice to people and help them to manage debt, as well as be a conduit to the utilities companies. No one should ever have to switch off their gas and electricity. There is always help.

Kevin Stewart: I am very pleased that the minister has given the message that nobody should have to switch off their gas and electricity, but the reality is that we all come across folks in our constituencies who have been forced, or who feel that they have been forced, to do so. One of the key messages that the likes of Ofgem could help to get across is that, in some parts of the country, particularly in Scotland, there is help out there. It does not do that to the degree that it should.

Gillian Martin: Kevin Stewart makes an excellent point. It is incumbent on all of us to advertise that fact on our social media outreach to our constituents, but perhaps the regulator has a part to play in that as well.

The past three winters have been far from easy for the vast majority of households and businesses in Scotland. I do not need to rehearse the price spikes, but the Scottish Government estimates that, under the current price cap, 840,000 Scottish households are in fuel poverty, which is a staggering 34 per cent of all households. We are expecting Ofgem's announcement on the April energy price cap later this week, and experts predict a slight decrease from the current level, although it will still be much higher than in the pre-crisis situation. The on-going energy crisis has driven home the urgent need for market reforms. It is painfully obvious that our energy system is not designed to absorb global price shocks and is not adequately protecting consumers. As members have said, it is about not just people living at home but the employers who are the lifeblood of our communities.

Last year, in reaction to the energy crisis, I chaired three energy consumers working groups, which focused on the challenges that vulnerable, rural and business consumers—three separate groups—are facing. The work of those groups informed my letter to the UK Government with a package of asks in relation to consumer protection. In that letter, I argued for the urgent introduction of a social tariff mechanism for vulnerable and low-income households—I am grateful to all the members who joined me in that call today—for support for off-grid consumers in rural and remote areas and for extra support for small businesses and high-using businesses. It is disappointing that, despite my many cordial meetings with UK Government counterparts, the UK Government has, so far, chosen not to deliver any support, either in the autumn statement or beyond, and there is no sign of a forthcoming plan of action.

I want to talk about standing charges.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the minister give way?

Gillian Martin: No, I will not give way to Douglas Lumsden—he did not contribute to the debate.

The crisis drew attention to the UK energy market, and one thing is obvious: the way in which the current system is designed and regulated creates significant disparities across the country. So many members mentioned that. The statistics mentioned in Gordon MacDonald's motion are absolutely correct. People in the south of Scotland pay £335 more a year even for just putting the kettle on. For many households, especially those that use pre-payment meters, that is simply unaffordable and it is inequitable.

I mentioned that I have regular engagement with my UK Government counterparts, and I have repeatedly highlighted the extremely high standing charges and their impact on Scottish consumers. Geography cannot be helped, but it feels as though people in Scotland are being penalised for living so far away from London, even though a great deal of energy production takes place here. Again, many members have mentioned that.

However, very recently, I engaged with Ofgem and received assurances—[*Interruption.*]. This is a very important point and I would like to make it. I received assurances that the regulator understands the inequities and is exploring ways to improve affordability and bring about whole-system changes. I will continue to make the case that members have also made.

I agree, to a certain extent, with Maurice Golden that it is a complex system. We do not want to have a situation in which removing standing charges has unintended consequences, so it will take time. However, surely we agree across the chamber that reform is needed, because there are people who are not using their heating but are still paying standing charges that are so much higher in the south of Scotland, for example, than they are in the south of England.

We have all suffered from the impacts of the energy crisis, but some people have been disproportionately hit. A sticking plaster will not fix the problem. The Scottish Government has repeatedly put funds in place to help people at their most vulnerable and precarious points, but those are not sustainable long-term solutions. We need a root-and-branch review of what is going on in the energy market.

Maurice Golden: Will the minister give way?

Gillian Martin: I am coming to a close.

I appreciate the contribution of anyone who has taken part in the debate. This is not about political point scoring, but about making sure that people have the right to a warm home, the right to be able to put the lights on and the right to have hot food

on the table for their children. We should not be point scoring on that, though that is what I have heard repeatedly from the Tory benches. We should all get together, stand shoulder to shoulder and ask the UK Government to consider introducing a social tariff—which, I have to say, I almost heard Maurice Golden making the case for. There are people out there who are vulnerable and who have medical equipment. Those people should not be subject to the same standing charges and costs as other people. I will leave it there, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:52.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba