



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

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**Session 6**



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# Scottish Parliament

*Tuesday 21 January 2025*

*[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:15]*

## Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**  
Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader is Chris Hellawell, director of the Edinburgh Tool Library.

**Chris Hellawell (Edinburgh Tool Library):**  
Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

I am the parent of a one-year-old and a four-year-old, so sharing is a hot topic in our household. It is one of the most fundamental things that we instil in children, and the mantra “sharing is caring” is repeated in every home, so why is it so much harder for adults to follow?

The Edinburgh Tool Library shares tools with our community. Cordless drills are used on average for only 13 minutes in their lifetime, yet they have a carbon footprint of 26kg and cost at least £50. One of the Edinburgh Tool Library drills has been shared by more than 250 different people. They did not actually need a drill—they needed a hole in their wall.

Our members have now borrowed items more than 60,000 times, saving money, reducing their environmental impact and avoiding the need to store, maintain and repair items.

Sharing promotes access over excess, or as Edgar Cahn, the father of the Timebanking movement, said:

“We have what we need, if we use what we have.”

Every time we share something, that tool helps to create a little shared history. Sometimes it is as simple as helping to cut the grass. Sometimes it is installing a wider cat flap when the cat puts on a little weight. At other times, it is about making something and being proud of yourself, taking the first step towards a new career or painting the first flat that you have lived in without your abusive partner. Sharing gives people access. Access creates opportunity. Opportunity changes lives.

Sharing objects is only the starting point. Access enables behaviour change and a change in culture. It is leading to a shift away from linear consumption to a more circular way of use and reuse. We share tools to fix, maintain and create,

to decarbonise homes, to improve communal spaces and to learn new skills.

To go back to my children, we have recently introduced a new policy to stop the squabbling—if they cannot share something nicely, it gets taken away. Perhaps we need to reflect on our behaviour as a species and realise that, if we are to successfully share this planet with everything else that calls it home, we need to share nicely and show that we care, otherwise it may also get taken away. Thank you.

## Topical Question Time

### Flu Vaccine

**1. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will update the Parliament on the supply and availability of the flu vaccine. (S6T-02290)

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** The Scottish Government has procured ample vaccines for the free national programme, which allows us to vaccinate the groups that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has advised on—notably, those who are aged 65 and over and those who are clinically at risk. I encourage those who are eligible and who have not been vaccinated to come forward before the programme ends, on 31 March.

The Scottish Government is not responsible for private flu vaccination services for groups who are outside the national programme, but our national supplier has confirmed that it has supplies of vaccine for the under-65 age group available for purchase. That has been communicated to Community Pharmacy Scotland.

**Stephen Kerr:** I welcome some of the things that the minister said in reply to my question. The pertinence of my question was borne out by last week's First Minister's question time, when the First Minister repeated—quite often—that there was an exceptionally high level of flu, and we were being told that our hospitals are at breaking point.

We are also being told—as I think has been borne out by anecdotal evidence supplied by my constituents—that vaccine demand is high and is outstripping the available supply in pharmacies across Scotland. People cannot get hold of a vaccine anywhere, no matter how hard they search. If, as the minister says, there is no shortage of vaccines in the national health service and no restriction in supply, will she follow the example of the Northern Ireland Executive and the strong advice of Joseph Carter, the head of Asthma and Lung UK Scotland, and release the surplus stock of vaccine to the wider public immediately?

**Jenni Minto:** I appreciate Stephen Kerr's recognition that, as I noted, there are no shortages of stocks in Scotland. We asked NHS National Services Scotland to check and ensure that stocks were there.

I have had discussions with my officials about the decision in Northern Ireland, but the clear advice that I have had is to continue following the advice from the JCVI. From a clinical perspective, the best results come to those who are most in need, who are the cohorts I spoke about earlier, and particularly the over-65s.

**Stephen Kerr:** I will continue to focus on the wider public interest. A lot of members of the public are getting the message that they should seek a flu vaccine. Adam Osprey from Community Pharmacy Scotland reported that demand was outstripping supply in community pharmacies.

It is little wonder that that is the case, because it is a fact that, this year, the criteria for qualifying for the flu vaccine were changed. Community pharmacies could not have known that there were new eligibility criteria when they ordered their annual stock of jags, because the Government never told them about it.

Why, without any joined-up co-ordination with pharmacies, were the eligibility criteria for the NHS vaccine changed, making it inevitable that there would be additional demand on pharmacies? Is that not just another example of why people cannot trust the Scottish National Party with the NHS? Is that not simply a continuation of the SNP's pattern of incompetence when it comes to health?

**Jenni Minto:** I refute entirely what Stephen Kerr just said. We have been listening to the experts—the JCVI—with regard to the appropriate cohorts to be vaccinated in Scotland. The information on eligibility criteria is routinely published on the Government website. The Scottish chief medical officer writes a letter, which is also published. The information is also published on NHS Inform, which is incredibly important.

My chief pharmaceutical officer and I meet Community Pharmacy Scotland regularly. From my recollections of the meetings that we have had, this has never been raised as an issue. However, at our next meeting, I am content to have a conversation about the issue.

As I referenced in response to a question last week, community pharmacies and pharmacists are absolutely key and integral to ensuring that Scotland gets through any winter crisis. The role that they carry out is incredibly important, and I am very thankful for what they do.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** It is clear that there has been increased concern in recent weeks, not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom, about the rising level of flu infections in all age groups. It is not too late to take a vaccine. Will the minister outline what work the Scottish Government and stakeholders are conducting to encourage an increased uptake of the flu vaccination?

**Jenni Minto:** I agree with Emma Harper that we should be promoting vaccinations. Over December and January, our partners have been heavily promoting flu vaccination to eligible groups. Health boards are offering a mixture of drop-in clinics, where there is no need to book, and bookable

appointments, so that people have maximum ease of access.

Many citizens accessed flu vaccinations over the festive period, as boards expanded their clinic offerings to meet increased demand. Last week, boards delivered more than 16,000 flu vaccinations, compared with 7,400 in the equivalent week in January 2024.

Since 26 December, the First Minister has chaired a series of meetings with senior leaders across NHS Scotland to ensure not only that action was taken to make sure that people could easily access flu vaccines but that the system as a whole was working together in the face of significant pressures.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** The First Minister has pointed to the flu outbreak as the reason for the crisis in our hospitals this winter, but that is little wonder when one considers that this year's flu programme is operating at least a month later than the programme in either of the past two years. Vaccinations are later, uptake is much lower and, consequently, thousands fewer people have been vaccinated.

Some general practitioners, particularly in NHS Highland, have called for vaccinations to return to being delivered by GPs. Does the minister support such a move?

**Jenni Minto:** I thank Jackie Baillie for her question and recognise, as I think I said in answer to her almost two years ago, that we perhaps need different solutions for different areas. I live in Argyll and Bute and, in my area of NHS Highland, there is such flexibility. I am pleased to say that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has written to NHS Highland today and, if Jackie Baillie has any further questions about vaccine availability and location, officials would be happy to speak to her.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** For nigh on three years, I have campaigned with three health secretaries and three First Ministers to restore vaccination services to GPs, which would provide a safer system at much lower cost and a local service for the Highlands, not a metropolitan centralised model. I am pleased that it sounds as though there is good news on the issue at long last, and I thank the health secretary for that. That will help to avoid further loss of life.

First, if there is to be that transfer of vaccination services, will it be swift? Secondly, is the cabinet secretary willing to meet me in person with NHS Highland GPs, perhaps in Inverness, and is he willing to have a virtual meeting so that GPs who are spread around the Highlands can contribute their views about how best to make the system work?

**Jenni Minto:** I hope that Mr Ewing will allow me to answer the question on the cabinet secretary's behalf. I recognise the work that Mr Ewing has been doing to find solutions to the situation.

As I indicated to Ms Baillie, the cabinet secretary wrote to NHS Highland today. I know that he would be happy to engage with Mr Ewing, and he will write to Mr Ewing to ensure that that engagement happens.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes topical question time.

## Points of Order

14:27

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance on what I think you will agree is a serious matter. On 14 November, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care whether contemporaneous notes existed for all his ministerial engagements, which involved watching Aberdeen Football Club. He said:

“There are and will be summaries of the discussions that have taken place, which is in accordance with the ministerial code.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 57.]

However, the *Sunday Post* is in possession of a freedom of information response that makes it clear that that is not true. It is clear that the cabinet secretary has provided information to Parliament that is inaccurate, whether intentionally or otherwise. Have you been approached by the cabinet secretary to make a correction to the *Official Report*, or has he asked for time to make a statement to Parliament? What powers do you have as Presiding Officer to sanction a member who has evidently made a false statement in this chamber?

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Thank you, Mr Kerr. Members are aware that the content of contributions is not normally a matter for the chair to rule on. It is a matter of paramount importance that members, including ministers, give accurate and truthful information to the Parliament and correct any inadvertent errors at the earliest opportunity. If a member has a question about the factual accuracy of another member’s contribution, they can, of course, raise it directly with that member. Members are aware that the Parliament has a corrections procedure and of how that mechanism operates.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Further to that point of order, I raise a point of order concerning standing order rules 13.1 and 13.2. On 14 November, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray, to publish minutes showing what issues were discussed for all and not just the majority of the matches that he used the Scottish Government car service to attend.

In response to my question, Mr Gray said:

“there will be a note available on what was discussed”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 53.]

and, in answer to Mr Kerr, he said:

“summaries will be available for all the engagements that I have been participating in.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 57.]

However, as we have heard, subsequent freedom of information responses from the Scottish Government have not included summary notes for all the events in question.

Attendance by ministers at sports events, where appropriate, should be supported by the Government. I have never questioned that, but the question that I asked in November was about whether the cabinet secretary had followed the correct rules and protocols. My question today is about the apparent inconsistency between what Mr Gray told Parliament and what the Government has published. There is the significant risk of a perception that the cabinet secretary might have misled Parliament, and that situation cannot be allowed to stand.

More than two months have passed, but the *Official Report* has not been updated. Given the amount of time that has passed, it is my view that Mr Gray should therefore give a further statement to explain that glaring inconsistency. Presiding Officer, can you confirm that, under rule 13.1, a member can request a personal statement and that, under rule 13.2, a ministerial statement can be requested? Can you also confirm that both of those avenues are available to Mr Gray, either to clarify his own remarks or to confirm whether the Government is deliberately withholding information that he stated would be available?

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr Bibby is correct with regard to rules 13.1 and 13.2. If such a request were to be received, I would certainly consider it.



## Women's State Pensions (Compensation)

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16160, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on Women Against State Pension Inequality. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I do not think that those buttons are working to allow us to indicate that we want to speak.

**The Presiding Officer:** I can certainly see those buttons on my screen. I thank Mr Balfour for raising that issue and we will keep an eye on it.

I call the cabinet secretary.

14:32

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** The Scottish Government has consistently called on the United Kingdom Government to right the historic wrongs suffered by the WASPI women. The First Minister and I were pleased to meet WASPI campaigners on 19 December 2024, during a rally here at the Scottish Parliament. That meeting allowed us to emphasise the Scottish Government's continued support for the women's cause and to reiterate that we stand with them and always will.

I welcome those campaigners who have joined us once again and are in the public gallery today, but I share their deep frustration—indeed, anger—that this debate has to take place at all. However, it is once again necessary to come together to show, and to vote on, our support for the WASPI women. I hope that we can come together today to show solidarity with their campaign and to send a clear message to the UK Government that its handling of the issue has been unacceptable and that compensation should be paid at the earliest opportunity to all the affected women.

When the report by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman was published last year, the Scottish Parliament held two debates. During both of them, we heard widespread support for paying compensation. In fact, when the former First Minister, Humza Yousaf, asked specifically whether a future UK Labour Government would pay compensation, Paul O' Kane confirmed:

"Labour is very clear that we support the principles contained in the PHSO report, which includes the principle that we must compensate those women."—[*Official Report*, 1 May 2024; c 45.]

It would therefore be helpful to know what exactly has changed since the election of a UK

Labour Government. The report in question clearly identified maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions because of its failure to act promptly by writing to all the women who would be impacted by changes to the state pension age. The Scottish Government is absolutely clear that it is vital that the UK Government take responsibility for those failings, including, importantly, delivering a full compensation package, as was recommended by the ombudsman.

I also call on the UK Government to listen to the WASPI women's call for a comprehensive compensation package, given the financial hardship that they have suffered, coupled with the UK having one of the worst gender pension gaps among countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Age Scotland analysis has identified a UK gender pension gap of 39 per cent, which increases gradually over the course of the average woman's working life. Research by the Pensions Policy Institute found that, for women to retire with the same pension savings as men, they would need to work for an extra 19 years. By the time the average woman reaches her late 50s, her pension wealth is equivalent to less than two thirds of a man's. It is time to stop letting women down.

The PHSO report criticises the DWP's "maladministration" when communicating the equalisation of the state pension ages for men and women and it recommends that the DWP compensate women who were born in the 1950s by between £1,000 and £2,950. The ombudsman investigated complaints that, since 1995, the DWP has failed to provide adequate and timely information about the state pension age and the number of qualifying years that are needed to claim the full rate of state pension.

The report found that, although some timely and accurate information was available, too many women did not understand how they were personally affected by the changes to the state pension. That was highlighted to the DWP, but it chose not to adequately use the research from the Work and Pensions Committee and the National Audit Office to improve its service and performance. The PHSO report states:

"In this respect, DWP did not demonstrate principles of good administration. That was maladministration."

Despite the publication of the report in March and the ombudsman taking the very unusual step of asking the UK Parliament to intervene on behalf of both the women and the ombudsman, the previous UK Conservative Government failed to make any clear commitment last year on delivering the compensation that was recommended and instead only pledged to consider the report.

Despite the words of support from numerous Labour politicians who have stood with the WASPI women on marches and appeared in photos and newsletters the length and breadth of the country, and who promised a lot more than just an apology, the WASPI women are feeling let down once again. That is why so many women feel betrayed by the new Labour Government.

When the previous Conservative Government was pushed to deliver the compensation on the back of the report, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer's assertion was that any compensation had to be "fair" to other taxpayers. We now have a Prime Minister stating that to compensate the affected WASPI women would be a "burden on the taxpayer". As I have said in the chamber before, the only fair approach to the issue is to ensure that compensation is paid to the women at the earliest possible time. I also point out to the Prime Minister and the UK Government that the only "burden" here is the burden of responsibility that is now on them to fairly compensate those who have been affected by the maladministration of previous UK Governments.

The UK Government's official response was quite remarkable. It was astonishing. It accepts the PHSO's findings and apologises for the DWP's maladministration, but it refuses to financially compensate the WASPI women as that "would not represent good value for taxpayers."

Surely we can all agree that, if the UK Government is willing to accept responsibility for its actions, it should also face the consequences as laid out in the ombudsman's report. The PHSO had already highlighted the following:

"DWP indicated it would not comply with our recommendations and that is why, nine months ago, we asked Parliament to intervene."

In response to the UK Government's decision, the chair of WASPI, Angela Madden, expertly pointed out:

"This is a bizarre and totally unjustified move which will leave everyone asking what the point of an ombudsman is if ministers can simply ignore their decisions."

Indeed—what is the point?

In the debate on the WASPI women that my colleague Kenny Gibson led last week, we heard many speakers from across the chamber telling their constituents' stories and discussing not just their reactions to the UK Government's decision, but the impact that it has had.

When we heard those statements, I was struck by the clear themes of betrayal, disappointment and anger that came through. All those feelings are exceptionally valid, considering that those women had heard plenty of lines of support and promises of better times under a new UK Labour

Government; however, when that Government was elected, it seems that those were nothing more than empty promises.

The Scottish Government and Scottish National Party MPs have been consistent in their support of WASPI women, and that support has never wavered. Prior to the UK elections last year, SNP MP Alan Brown introduced a bill, with cross-party support, calling on the UK Government to publish a compensation framework for WASPI women, to be set at £3,000 to £10,000 or more. The WASPI campaigners feel that that would be a fairer outcome, given the wider financial hardships that the devastating maladministration has caused.

The awarding of such compensation, which would include reference to the wider hardship point, remains the position of the Scottish Government. However, in order to allow the Parliament to speak with one voice, our motion today is simple—a call to deliver justice for the WASPI women by implementing the ombudsman's recommendations on the compensation payment. It is as simple as that.

As my colleague Maggie Chapman mentioned in a previous debate in the Parliament:

"Every 13 minutes, a WASPI woman—a woman who might have lost several years-worth of her pension; maybe as much as £42,000—dies without justice."—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2024; c 90.]

The issue has affected around 336,000 women in Scotland—women who deserve acknowledgement for the wrongs that they have faced and who deserve to be fairly compensated for the mistakes of previous UK Governments. Sadly, because of the UK Government's inactions, some will never see justice delivered. Across the UK, the number of WASPI women who have passed away since 2015 without seeing justice sits at around 308,000. That is a staggering figure, which should cause anyone who has not supported the campaign to hang their heads in shame.

It cannot be enough to describe today the difficulties that those women have gone through—and, because of that, how extraordinary they are. Despite setback after setback and broken promise after broken promise, a group of women has continued to seek justice, campaign with the utmost dignity and hold to account those in power, regardless of the financial and emotional toll that, no doubt, that has had on them and their families. Their tenacity should be an inspiration to us all.

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I support the cabinet secretary's remarks so far. I hope that she is right that the Parliament will speak with one voice today. Will she give an update on discussions between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on the matter?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Certainly. There have been numerous letters and debating points that we have discussed with the UK Government. I stand ready to send yet another letter to the UK Government after today's debate. I hope to be able to say that we have voted unanimously to support the WASPI women. However, it is up to Ms Lennon's party and others to come to that conclusion at decision time.

The women have already fought an uphill battle on pension savings equality. That injustice mirrors other pension injustices such as the wider pension gap that I mentioned. What women did not expect was for a Labour UK Government to make the situation more difficult for them. Surely the first new UK Government in 14 years should aim to learn from the mistakes of the past—and, in the case of the WASPI women, ensure that the mistakes are rectified as soon as possible, with any future changes to state pension age being clearly and thoroughly communicated—yet we have more of the same excuses, a failure to take responsibility for the harm that has been caused and a failure to act. The WASPI women deserve so much better than that.

While the UK Government continues to fail the WASPI women and our older people, the Scottish Government is continuing to ensure that they are being provided with the support that they are entitled to. Here, in Scotland, we understand that our older people are a diversely experienced and highly valued part of our society.

Over the past few years, energy prices have been one of the highest drivers when it comes to fuel poverty, with increases in fuel prices having the largest impact on the change in fuel poverty rates in Scotland between 2019 and 2022. However, one of the first policy announcements of the new Labour Government was the scrapping of the universal winter fuel payment, many recipients of which were probably WASPI women. It is becoming increasingly clear just how little the UK Government regards the issues faced by the older generation as something to take action and deliver on.

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** The cabinet secretary's remarks completely fail to acknowledge the UK Labour Government's commitment to the pension triple lock—a commitment that I hope she shares and that we have debated before in the chamber. Does she share my concern that the Conservative party seems no longer to support the triple lock, which is protecting people's pensions?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I share any concern about the triple lock being diminished. Quite frankly, however, Mr O'Kane's party is in Government now and he needs to take

responsibility for the winter fuel payment and for the WASPI women.

The Scottish Government has already set out our plans to deliver universal support to pensioners from next winter through the pension age winter heating payment. That is the right thing to do, but let us be clear that the key powers that make a real difference to energy costs remain with the UK Government—it should act.

The WASPI campaigners have repeatedly handled themselves with the highest levels of dignity, as they face setback after setback. When the report was published by the ombudsman, there was finally a tangible positive outcome, and the Parliament came together to recognise that. We rightly called on the UK Government to act on the report, to acknowledge the maladministration and, importantly, to act to deliver and provide a fair compensation package. The election of a new Government brought some optimism, but unfortunately that optimism has faded away along with the promises.

I said at the beginning of this speech, in front of the brave WASPI campaigners who are in the gallery today—and the many who, I am sure, are waiting to see what happens in our votes—that this Parliament can send a clear and united message to the UK Government. I hope that all members can reach agreement on this topic, as we have done in the past. I also hope that the new UK Government stops and listens and finally does the right thing by standing up and acknowledging that it owes those women so much more than just an apology. Surely it is time that they are provided with a fair compensation package at the earliest possible opportunity, so that those women who have been affected finally see their compensation being paid and amends starting to be made for the mistakes of the UK Governments of the past.

I move,

That the Parliament calls on the UK Government to compensate Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) women as recommended by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

**The Presiding Officer:** I call Paul O'Kane to speak to and move amendment S6M-16160.1.

14:47

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** I will begin, as I have done in debates in which I have spoken on this topic in this chamber in my four years in Parliament, by acknowledging all the WASPI women, including those who are in the gallery today and those we represent in our regions and constituencies. In doing so, I offer them my respect for the work that they have done over many years of campaigning. Indeed, like colleagues across the chamber, I have had the

opportunity to speak to many impacted constituents and WASPI campaigners over the years. I have listened to their views and experiences of what has happened to them, the impact that those issues and decisions have had on their life, and to what they feel is an appropriate remedy for them in terms of their circumstances.

I have heard, as members across the chamber will have, a variety of experiences that I believe deserve to be accounted for and heard today, as well as a variety of views on what is required to achieve the redress that I think that everyone would want to see. I have also heard a variety of views on the report that we are debating and the subsequent issues.

In the time that I have available to me, I will focus my comments particularly on the PHSO report. When I last spoke on this matter in the chamber, the PHSO report had been received by the previous UK Government but had not been responded to. I outlined in that debate that it would fall to any incoming Government to deal with the detail in the report and to respond. I also highlighted my desire for a response to be made and, indeed, my support for that response to include a redress scheme. That had to be fully considered in line with the different recommendations that the ombudsman outlined in their report. Therefore, I recognise the disappointment at the fact that the UK Government has not taken to the UK Parliament the PHSO's recommendations on compensation.

Along with Labour colleagues, I have been clear that, although steps have been taken to recognise maladministration, the UK Government could go further. However, it would be remiss not to recognise that the UK Government has finally acknowledged that maladministration occurred—something that the previous UK Government refused to do—and has offered an apology on behalf of the state for that maladministration.

In addition, the UK Government has made commitments to taking clear action to ensure that maladministration of that kind cannot happen again. Those actions include working with the ombudsman to develop a detailed action plan for the report, setting clear and sufficient notice of any future changes to pension age—*[Interruption.]*

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Paul O’Kane:** Presiding Officer, I am afraid that I am finding it very difficult to hear. I do not know whether that is due to the gallery clearing or as a result of noise at the back of the chamber.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr O’Kane. I appreciate that. We will just allow a moment for the gallery to clear.

**Paul O’Kane:** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I was about to make the point that there has been an undertaking to learn from the experience, to understand what the issues are and to ensure that it cannot happen again.

I give way to Jeremy Balfour.

**Jeremy Balfour:** Does the member think that it was wrong for the Prime Minister to stand up and say that he would compensate the WASPI women? Should he fully apologise for not doing what he promised to do over a number of years?

**Paul O’Kane:** I think that it was wrong of Mr Balfour’s party not to engage with the PHSO report in any meaningful way in the previous UK parliamentary session and, indeed, to kick the issue into the long grass and not even offer an apology or take any learning at all from the process. I do not think that Mr Balfour can stand here and lecture us on what should or should not have been done. I will come to the point about where I think the UK Government could and should go further; I will, of course, address that wider point. However, I think that Conservative members must consider the inaction of their own Government during its long 14 years in power and, in the recent past, its inaction following receipt of the PHSO’s report.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has tasked officials to develop a strategy for effective and timely modern communications on state pensions to ensure that nobody falls through the cracks in the future.

On the issue of an apology, it is important and worth putting on the record that the ombudsman described the apology as “very significant” and welcomed

“the Government’s recognition that mistakes were made, and the commitment from the Secretary of State to make sure this never happens again.”

The ombudsman went on to recognise the disappointment that not all the recommendations on redress have been taken forward.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** On the point about the Labour apology, will Mr O’Kane tell me how much, in cash terms, in the open market, a Labour apology is worth to those WASPI women who still have to pay their electricity bills and their pension contributions? How much is it actually worth to them? *[Applause.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Mr O’Kane, before you respond, I gently remind our visitors, who are very welcome to their Parliament, that applause or any other contributions from the public gallery are not permitted.

**Paul O’Kane:** I am coming on to that point about that disappointment and what else I feel could be done.

An apology is important, and I have outlined why. I gently say to Mr Adam that, very often, his Government comes to this chamber and makes apologies on a range of issues and does not follow up with compensation. [*Interruption.*] He asks about the value of apologies. What is the value of apologies that this Scottish Government has given to many women across Scotland, on many other issues, who have not been fully compensated? [*Interruption.*] He needs to reflect on that as I progress.

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear Mr O’Kane.

**Paul O’Kane:** Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** Will Mr O’Kane give way?

**Paul O’Kane:** Not at this stage. I have much to get through, as Mr Stewart will appreciate.

I recognise the importance of what the ombudsman has said about the apology and those other actions, and I recognise that, for many WASPI women, including those in the gallery and those who will be watching today, that action does not go far enough. That is the point that I am coming on to, which members are highlighting. That action does not go far enough. That is why we, in Scottish Labour, have been clear that the UK Government should not close the door on this issue and should think again about the whole issue of compensation following the apology.

I also have to accept and acknowledge what has been said about the economic circumstances. The current UK Government has inherited a horrendous financial situation from the previous Government, and the new Government has had to deal with a long legacy of unresolved issues—not just WASPI women, but the infected blood scandal, the Horizon Post Office scandal, Windrush and others. I am saying that to set the context, and I think that that is important to consider in terms of any future decisions. I think that all of us in the chamber would recognise that Governments have to make decisions and that the previous UK Government left behind a huge in-tray of issues for the current UK Government to deal with.

That said, and as I am coming on to outline the position of members on the Labour benches, it is clear that more could be done to look at fair and flexible compensation, to be provided in particular to those who have been the most adversely impacted by the maladministration that was outlined by the ombudsman in her report. I think

that we will hear examples of that in the course of the debate.

I recognise that arguments have been made that many WASPI women were not adversely impacted by pension age changes and that, if the maladministration had not occurred, it may not have made a difference, but we need to drill into that in terms of what the ombudsman has said.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** On Paul O’Kane’s point about paying a fair level of compensation, surely the UK Government should be paying the full level of money that has been taken away from these WASPI women, not a bit now and a bit at some point further down the line?

**Paul O’Kane:** I have to say to the member that, in a spirit of consensus, I am trying to make points relating to the PHSO report, and the PHSO has outlined a number of recommendations. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice is shaking her head, but this is what is in the report. There are a number of options—either looking at a flat rate of compensation, which I will come on to, or looking at individual circumstances. The PHSO report deals solely with maladministration and is not looking at the wider issues of detriment. That is something that we debated under the previous First Minister, when we had debates and discussions on this topic and on trying to design a system—crucially, in conjunction with WASPI women—that can seek to give the redress that is required to a person because of their individual circumstances.

As I have said, and as I am trying to outline to members, I have spoken with many different WASPI women who have had different experiences. Their experience of maladministration and the injustice towards them has been different, and they often have different views of how recompense should be made. Therefore, it is important that we look at all of the ombudsman’s recommendations and try to arrive at a system that will, in particular, allow us to address those who have had the most detriment to them in terms of that maladministration.

I recognise that many women, often from lower-income backgrounds, were at greater risk of being adversely affected by that maladministration, and I believe that they were put at a disadvantage because of the late notice that they received. Indeed, that position is explicitly recognised in the report, in paragraphs 495 to 498, which set out that

“Not all women born in the 1950s will have suffered an injustice because of DWP’s maladministration in communicating”

the pension age but that it is likely that there will be

“a significant number of women born in the 1950s who have ... suffered injustice because of maladministration in DWP’s communication about the 1995 Pensions Act.”

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Just to be clear, in the statement by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions setting out the UK Government position, she did not say, “I don’t agree with the ombudsman’s suggestion and recommendation for compensation, but we will go away and have a look at it.” Instead, the UK Government has closed the door to the WASPI women at this point. The point that we need to get to is action. Surely, the best way—the quickest way—to do that is to support the ombudsman’s recommendation. Let us get past the debate and get on to delivery.

**Paul O’Kane:** As I have said previously, in this speech and in my other contributions on this matter, the door should not be closed and there is a process that should be explored. I have been clear that that is my position and the position of the Scottish Labour Party. We have been clear about that.

I have also noted, however, that the PHSO report highlighted a number of different ways in which women could be compensated. I think that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions should look again at that and at all the issues within that with regard to how redress may be made to those women. That is why Scottish Labour will support the Government’s motion tonight, and it is why I have lodged an amendment saying that we have to look at redress in full and understand what people are asking of us. I give that assurance on the record.

I am conscious of the number of interventions that I have taken and that I am rapidly running out of time. We will hear contributions from members on all sides of the chamber today about the experience across Scotland and more widely. I am clear that we support the principle, as I have outlined, and I look forward to this important debate and to continuing to move the issues forward on behalf of the WASPI women.

I move amendment S6M-16160.1, to insert at end:

“; acknowledges that the UK Government has apologised to women who have been impacted as a result of maladministration, and agrees that the UK Government should look at all options for remedy, particularly for those most adversely impacted.”

15:00

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Like the two previous speakers, I welcome the WASPI women to Parliament today, as I did last Wednesday, when Kenny Gibson led an excellent debate in which we heard testimony from MSPs on all sides of the chamber, across the parties,

about the work that they have been doing on behalf of their constituents for many years.

I have mentioned in previous WASPI debates the efforts of Sheila Forbes in Moray, who was the first person to contact me about the issue, long before I was elected, when I was a candidate. She brought together a group of affected people in Moray who have been fighting for justice and continue to do so to this day, because they certainly do not feel that they have received it from the UK Labour Government. I accept that they also have major criticisms of previous Conservative and Labour Governments and of the Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition Government.

At the heart of what we are debating today is the PHSO’s report and the role of the PHSO. I looked at the PHSO’s website this week. It states:

“We independently investigate complaints about UK government departments ... We believe complaints have the power to reveal the truth, create lasting change and inspire a better relationship between people and public services.”

That is crucial, and it goes to the heart of what we are debating today. Taking the politics out of the issue and looking at it independently, the PHSO has said that there was “maladministration”—not, perhaps, for everyone, but for a significant cohort of women who did not receive the notification that they deserved and who should, as a result, be compensated.

Back in May last year, when we debated the issue, I agreed that the PHSO’s recommendations, which at that time had just gone to the UK Conservative Government, should be considered in full, including the question of compensation. We then went into the general election campaign, in which probably every single Labour candidate in Scotland and across the United Kingdom was urging people to vote for them to deliver on the PHSO recommendations, to address the injustice, to change things in the Department for Work and Pensions and across the UK Government, and to deliver that compensation.

In the Labour Administration’s first six months, however, it dealt the WASPI campaigners a very bitter blow. It said, “Well, we do think that you have suffered maladministration and we will say sorry, but we will not pay you for that.” I think that that is indefensible. I say in all fairness to Paul O’Kane—whom I like, and who is a very experienced parliamentarian—that that is why he has struggled in the debate today. I cannot listen to what he, on one hand, is saying about the Scottish Labour position and what its members are doing to fight for their constituents and for the cause when, on the other hand, his Secretary of State for Work and Pensions at the UK level, Liz Kendall, said this—

**Paul O’Kane:** [*Made a request to intervene.*]

**Douglas Ross:** I will give way to Paul O’Kane when I have read out Liz Kendall’s response, and I would like him to either agree or disagree with what she said. In her statement to the House of Commons, she said that

“the great majority of women knew the state pension age was increasing”,

and she went on to say that it would not represent

“value for ... money”—[*Official Report, House of Commons, 17 December 2024; Vol 759, c 169.*]

for the taxpayer if compensation were to be paid. Is Paul O’Kane correct in saying that those women deserve compensation, or is his Labour Secretary of State for Work and Pensions correct in saying that enough of them knew about it and that paying compensation would not be value for money for UK taxpayers?

**Paul O’Kane:** I have outlined my position, and the Scottish Labour Party’s position, quite clearly, which is that the Government should look again at the issue of compensation.

However, I gently say to Mr Ross, for whom I also have respect, and who has spoken well on the issue, that he was a Conservative member of the House of Commons and a member of the Government—a minister of state—who did nothing when the report was delivered to that previous Government, which did not consider an apology or any lessons learned but instead long-grassed the issue. He served a longer term in the House of Commons than any other MSP who is present in the chamber, so what has he done? Mr Ross comes to the chamber and levels his accusations at me, when I am trying to make a case about what more we need to do, but what did he do?

**Douglas Ross:** That was a lengthy answer that did not address the point that I made. I simply wanted to know whether Paul O’Kane agrees with Liz Kendall, the UK Labour secretary of state, who believes that the great majority of women knew that the state pension age was increasing and that changing the policy would not be fair or represent value for money for the taxpayer. It is not a difficult question to ask, but it sounds as though it is a difficult question for Paul O’Kane to answer.

In answer to his question about what I did, I voted against my Government and was the first of my intake to do so.

In his response to Jeremy Balfour’s intervention, Paul O’Kane also made the point that the UK Government had plenty of time to look at the issue. The UK Government got the report in March and the election was called in May, so there were two or three months to look at it. If Paul O’Kane believes that the Conservatives should have responded to it in that timeframe, why did it take

six months for the UK Labour Government to respond to it just before Christmas? For the WASPI women, having that taken away from them at that point was possibly the worst Christmas present they could have received.

As I have said, we have debated the issue a number of times, and it is right that we continue to bring the testimony of WASPI women to the chamber. That was done expertly by Carol Mochan, Katy Clark and Mercedes Villalba on behalf of their constituents, and by the Labour representatives who spoke in Kenny Gibson’s debate last week.

I also think that we had an opportunity, which I made a point about. I am not saying that the Government did it because I said it; in fact, it was more likely that the Government would not have done it because I said it. I made the suggestion that, if the Government lodged a simple and straightforward motion today, we could get unanimous support for it around the chamber. That is why my colleagues and I decided not to try to amend the motion today. It is very clear that if we vote for the Government motion today, that will send the strongest possible signal to the UK Government that it should reconsider the matter and deliver compensation.

I understand and accept that that compensation would not be at the level that every WASPI campaigner would want or expect, but it would be a start, because the PHSO looked at the matter not just for weeks or months but for years. The PHSO went into significant detail about the complaints and the response from the DWP and it came up with its conclusions. It produced a thorough report, and it sends out the most worrying and concerning message that parliamentarians—whether here or at Westminster—can cherry pick and take some parts of the report and say, “We agree with this” but need not agree with the parts that are more difficult to deliver, such as compensation.

The Labour amendment is trying to get some kind of praise for saying that it has acknowledged the maladministration and has apologised for it. That is not enough. It is almost as if Labour wants to be patted on the back for going two thirds of the way, but not the final and ultimate whole way, to deliver that compensation. I do not think that the amendment was necessary, but as it would only add to the motion that we have in front of us today and would not remove anything, we are perhaps using it as a debating point.

However, the cleanest and clearest message from this Parliament tonight will come if we unite behind the Scottish Government motion, because it simply suggests a response to the PHSO report, including the point on compensation.

**Paul O’Kane:** The add-on amendment was about a statement of fact in relation to the apology. It also sets in context exactly what Douglas Ross said about the varying asks in terms of compensation and tries to reflect that. The amendment is certainly not about trying to defend our position. It is about enhancing what this Parliament is saying with one voice. [*Interruption.*]

The member clearly does not agree with that—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** Thank you, Mr O’Kane. I think that you have made your point.

**Douglas Ross:** It is a statement of fact that Labour wants to be congratulated for apologising and accepting that there was maladministration. It might be congratulated if it did what the PHSO said it should do and paid that compensation.

In my final moments, I will mention the excellent Age Scotland briefing for Kenneth Gibson’s debate. As the cabinet secretary did in her opening remarks, the briefing says that 336,000 women in Scotland are affected by the issue. I looked at the local council areas in my Highlands and Islands region. In the Western Isles, 1,890 women are affected; in Orkney, 1,520 are affected; in Shetland, 1,380 are affected; in Argyll and Bute, 6,670 are affected. Across the Highland Council region, 16,430 are affected. In my home area of Moray, 6,240 are affected.

That situation is replicated in every local authority across Scotland and in every one of our constituencies and regions. That is why the issue is important and why we have determined campaigners in our public gallery today who are continuing to take the fight to the UK Government so that it will deliver.

Another point that I took from the Age Scotland briefing was that it suggests that the PHSO report offered a glimmer of hope that a resolution would finally be delivered. Sadly, the UK Labour Government has, so far, extinguished that glimmer of hope. We can reignite that hope tonight if Parliament unites behind the motion to send the strongest possible message to UK Labour Government ministers in Westminster that they need to reconsider and offer compensation—and quickly.

15:10

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** I welcome all the WASPI women campaigners who are in the public gallery, although I share the cabinet secretary’s anger and frustration, which I am sure pale into insignificance in comparison with what the 1950s-born women feel. Although it is always good to have a catch-up

with Linda Carmichael from Aberdeen, none of us should have to be here again.

Many of us were here just last week, discussing the same issue in Kenneth Gibson’s members’ business debate, but we make no apology for returning to it so soon. This scandal—and it is a scandal—represents a major injustice to women across the United Kingdom. According to Scottish Parliament information centre estimates, the women affected include more than 11,000 women in Aberdeen city, more than 16,500 in Aberdeenshire and nearly 8,000 each in Angus and Dundee. Across the North East Scotland region, the total number of women affected—WASPI women—is estimated at 43,730.

Each of those women has been affected in a different way, with different impacts and challenges depending on their individual circumstances, but all of them have two things in common: their gender and their age. Those two factors have made successive Governments relaxed and comfortable with decisions, and failures to make decisions, that have caused immense hardship, heartache and loss.

Baroness Ros Altmann saw at first hand how the interests of the WASPI women were dismissed and disregarded, with information absent or misleading. In 2018, she said:

“As Pensions Minister, I kept trying to find a way to alleviate the unfairness of these short-notice changes. Unfortunately, there was no sympathy for these women. Iain Duncan Smith, as Secretary of State, refused to engage with the 1950s women adversely affected and I was instructed not to speak to them. I was told the women would go away sooner or later.”

She spoke, too, of the lifelong inequalities that the WASPI women have faced and how they had been given a particularly raw deal in pensions across their lives. She went on to say:

“Even in 2015, when women’s pension age had already risen to 62, some pages on the Government’s website said women would start their state pension at ... 60.

Yet the (mostly male) ministers did not appreciate many women’s lives are not the same as men. Without private pensions to fall back on, these short-notice changes to state pension age are likely to cause hardship for many.”

Of course, they have caused hardship for many.

As the WASPI campaigners, including those in the public gallery this afternoon, have reiterated, the issue is not with the equalisation of pension age but with the lack of notice given and the failure to consider or to care about the effect on lives, livelihoods, relationships and futures. That lack of notice has, of course, affected partners, families and communities—all those who rely on the availability of retired women to give care, to carry out voluntary work and to give emotional and practical support and energy. Most of all, however, it has affected the lives of the women themselves.



As Linda Carmichael and others have pointed out, many of the WASPI women began work before equalities legislation, when marriage alone could end a career and maternity leave was a thing of the future.

As Close the Gap explained in its excellent briefing, the pension systems that we have were designed to reflect men's traditional working patterns and to meet their needs. That fact and the pension gap that it creates are still the reality for young as well as older women. Women still have fewer opportunities for earning, for advancing their careers and for paying into their pensions. At the same time, with longer periods of retirement and more likelihood of needing care, their smaller pensions need to stretch further, which leads to longer and deeper times of poverty.

Linda Carmichael has spoken of the financial and emotional difficulties that are experienced by many, including those who go into debt and those who lose their homes. Close the Gap has cited research that shows that postponement of the pension age causes

“a detrimental impact on women from lower socioeconomic groups, including widening health disparities, poorer physical health and an increase in self-reported depression.”

That is why we should be especially concerned about the WASPI women in areas of multiple deprivation across our country.

Women in our communities have borne heavy burdens and continue to do so. They have supported families and neighbours through the pandemic, the housing emergency and extreme inflation. It is the height of injustice to add this further weight to what they already carry.

Differing environments affect the chances that WASPI women have to make up some of their loss. I am thinking, in particular, of women in rural areas of Aberdeenshire and Angus, where there are fewer employment opportunities as well as fewer transport options. As Close the Gap has highlighted, the situation is also especially unjust for many

“Disabled women, racially minoritised women, divorced women, self-employed women and women who have been lone parents”.

That is why I have stood in solidarity with the WASPI women outside the Parliament, and it is why I speak for them here once again, calling for the justice that is long overdue. As George Adam said in last week's debate,

“Those women did everything that we asked of them”.—  
[*Official Report*, 15 January 2025; c 111.]

Can the Government at Westminster do the one thing that we ask of it?

15:16

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I, too, pay tribute to the WASPI campaigners across the country and welcome those who are in the gallery today.

Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the motion. I hope that the Scottish Government's motion is concise enough to garner support from across the chamber, in order to send a strong message to the UK Labour Government that its decision not to pay compensation to the 1950s women who were affected by the DWP's maladministration is wrong.

Liberal Democrats have long supported a just outcome, in line with the ombudsman's findings, for the group that has become known as WASPI. Last week, I spoke in Kenneth Gibson's similar members' business debate supporting the call for compensation to be paid. Liberal Democrat MP colleagues also took part in last week's Westminster Hall debate supporting the call for compensation. Liberal Democrats at Westminster requested data from the House of Commons library, which, through the use of population estimates, indicates that around 3.5 million women across the UK could be impacted by the UK Government's decision. It is estimated that more than 300,000 women in Scotland, and more than 1,300 in my constituency, could be affected.

I thank Age Scotland for its briefing, which highlights the shocking figures that just under a quarter of single women pensioners live in relative poverty, that two thirds of pension credit claimants are women and that, by their late 50s, women's pension wealth is equivalent to less than two thirds of men's.

The Labour Party should be ashamed to even contemplate ignoring these women, who all their lives have faced adversity as they lived through a different time—a man's world. They have taken everyday, rational decisions about their lives to look after children, parents and loved ones at the expense of earning. They are a generation of women who were without maternity leave or free childcare, who have contributed to the economy, often in multiple low-paid jobs, and who have taken on caring roles for parents and relatives. They thought that they could retire at an agreed age, only to find that the goalposts had been moved. This is the generation who have done so much to fight for women's rights.

What is indisputable is that the UK Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's independent report recommended that the UK Parliament should urgently identify a mechanism for providing an appropriate remedy and that financial compensation should be paid to the women affected.

The PHSO has described the UK Government's decision not to act on its recommendation as "extremely rare". My MP colleague Wendy Chamberlain stated in a Westminster Hall debate that

"it is really important for the Government to help us to have trust in institutions such as the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman by adhering to decisions made by it".—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 15 January 2025; Vol 760, c 135WH]

Wendy Chamberlain followed that up with a question to the leader of the House of Commons, Lucy Powell. In response, the Commons leader stated that

"an apology was issued, but we did not feel that the compensation being proposed was proportionate or would be a fair use of public funds at this time."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 16 January 2025; Vol 760, c 495.]

What does

"a fair use of public funds at this time"

actually mean? It means that not delivering compensation is the Labour Party's choice, which it can reverse to rectify the injustice that it has already accepted warrants an apology. The Labour Government's decision, which threatens to allow millions of women across the UK to face poverty and undermines an independent institution that helps the state to function, is not only cruel and unusual; it is a betrayal of women who thought that voting Labour would lead to justice for the WASPI campaign.

Before the 2024 general election, the Prime Minister was happy to be photographed with WASPI campaigners. The Labour Party has always declared itself to be a party of equality—the party of Harriet Harman and Diane Abbott, who, for decades, have championed women's rights and challenged misogyny. I pay tribute to the Scottish Labour colleagues who spoke in the WASPI debate last week. That may not have been easy, but it is often hard to stand up for what is right. I call on the UK Labour Government to do what is right and compensate those affected.

The Conservatives left our economy in a shambles, but pensioners should not be asked to pay the price. The Liberal Democrats will continue to support the WASPI campaign. The UK Labour Government must urgently change course and rethink its shameful decision.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate. I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, should members wish to make or take interventions.

15:21

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I normally start by saying that I am pleased to

speak on a subject, but that is not really the case today. That is for many reasons, but none more than the complete injustice faced by WASPI women in Scotland and the rest of the UK at the hands of successive UK Tory and Labour Governments.

I have met many WASPI women across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, and many of them have been scammed out of the pension that they ought to have by right and that they were led to believe that they would receive. I thank all of the WASPI women, including those in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders, for their tenacity in standing up to the UK Government and continuing to campaign for justice. Like others, I welcome the WASPI women to the gallery today.

Following the UK Government's shocking decision to ignore the ombudsman's recommendations and refuse compensation, WASPI campaigners have simply redoubled their efforts. WASPI women are spreading information through their local networks, appearing in local and national media, staging protests and events and lobbying politicians. They are certainly not taking the decision lying down, as they should not. The message written on the placards outside the Parliament was clear: "No notice, no letter, no pension." My colleagues and I will do all that we can to support those women's efforts in the face of a two-faced Labour Government.

It has now been 30 years since the Pensions Act 1995, when the events that we are discussing today were set in motion, which was before the Scottish Parliament even existed. Appallingly, WASPI women have been told by the Prime Minister, the chancellor and the media—not to mention by numerous shameful Labour MPs—that they will not be compensated because most 1950s-born women

"knew the state pension age was increasing".—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 17 December 2024; Vol 759, c 168.]

That is entirely inaccurate.

The statistic that is being bandied around is from a 2006 survey—that was 18 years ago—and refers to general awareness across the population about changes to the state pension age in the future. The survey did not ask whether people knew about the specific impact of changes to the state pension age on them, as individuals. To add further insult, only about 5 per cent of the survey respondents were 1950s-born WASPI women.

Let me be crystal clear: the Department for Work and Pensions knew that a huge cohort of 1950s-born women were unaware of changes to their pension, and it agreed internally that it should write to the women and that doing so would make a difference. Those were the conclusions of a

thorough independent review by the ombudsman, and that is exactly why it ruled that there had been a clear case of maladministration. To try to rewrite or deny history is appalling.

As many as 3.8 million women were given the news that their state pension age was going to increase from 60 to 66 just as they were about to retire, which was too late for them to do any proper financial planning. It is estimated that more than 300,000 women in Scotland were impacted by the WASPI pension scandal. Many were already in ill health or worse, and others had taken early retirement and were planning to get by until the age of 60, when they thought that they would receive their state pension.

While the UK Government delays in the hope that WASPI women will just go away, the campaign for justice continues, but as many as 40,000 women are dying each year without getting any form of compensation. That is absolutely shameful.

During the previous session of Parliament, I held several WASPI engagement events across Dumfries and Galloway. I was supported by the fantastic older persons champion from Scottish Borders Council, Councillor Elaine Thornton-Nicol, as well as by a local Dumfries resident and WASPI and pensions campaigner, Ann Ferguson MBE. Both should be thanked for their dedication to pension equality and their support of WASPI.

Many colleagues, including Clare Haughey and Christine Grahame, should also be thanked for their campaigning. I was in the chamber last week for the debate that Kenneth Gibson led, although I did not speak in it.

Following recent events, in the past few days, my office has been in contact with local WASPI women. The one thing that they say is how shocking it is that Labour MPs, who, when they were in opposition, stood with placards with the WASPI women, calling for justice, are now defending their Labour bosses and throwing WASPI women out in the cold. It is galling and shows the true heart of Labour members.

After so many public commitments, the Labour UK Government's position is utterly indefensible. The question for Scottish Labour MPs is this: will they do the right thing and stand up for older people in Scotland, or will they stand up for a pledge-breaking Prime Minister? My WASPI women constituents do not have much hope.

The UK Government must reverse its decision. It must accept the ombudsman's findings in full and provide compensation to WASPI women urgently.

15:27

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** Before I begin, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as my husband works for the Department for Work and Pensions.

Last year, I and others took part in a debate following the publication of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's inquiry into the changes to the state pension age for women. The findings could not have been clearer. The report called on the UK Parliament to identify a mechanism for providing appropriate remedies for those who had suffered injustice. The maladministration and the DWP's complaint handling undoubtedly caused women unnecessary stress and anxiety and left them unable to make informed decisions about their personal autonomy and financial control.

WASPI women have spent years campaigning for compensation. They have taken to the streets, contacted elected members in all chambers and raised their profile to force Parliament to act. They have been critical of my party and of Labour about what has happened in recent weeks, and we need to accept those criticisms. We need to move on and find a resolution for those who have been impacted.

The MSPs who stood up and spoke in the previous debate were all clear in their conviction that the recommendations contained in the report should be implemented. Why, therefore, are we here in another debate on the WASPI situation and the ombudsman's report? To put it bluntly, Labour is struggling in Government. We have already witnessed the increase in national insurance contributions, the introduction of the family farm tax and the cutting of winter fuel payments, and we are now seeing the betrayal of the WASPI women.

Labour politicians spent years promising the world to those who were impacted by the changes to the state pension age. They committed themselves to compensating women, only to reject the ombudsman's recommendations. Sadly, it is true that, no matter what Labour MSPs say today, their Labour Government has denied WASPI women financial compensation.

I get it—being in Government is a tough business—but, at the end of the day, when he was in opposition, Keir Starmer stood alongside WASPI women and promised them action. It has been mentioned again today that he was photographed with a pledge that read:

"I support fair and fast compensation for 1950s women".

He has broken that promise.

The statement made a few weeks ago was devastating to women who felt that they had won

their hard-fought campaign. As Douglas Ross mentioned in his speech, when Liz Kendall delivered the news, she said:

“Given that the vast majority of women knew the state pension age was increasing, the Government do not believe that paying a flat rate to all women ... would be a fair or proportionate use of taxpayers’ money”.—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 17 December 2024; Vol 759, c 168.]

However, that was the same Liz Kendall who was pictured just before the general election, holding a banner that stated:

“I will work with WASPI to identify and deliver a fair solution for all women affected”.

I guess it is clear that delivery is not Liz Kendall’s strong point, but this recent episode outlines what is wrong with politics: broken promises.

I mentioned winter fuel payments earlier, and this is a similar story. Labour cut the winter fuel payment right before we entered our winter months, and pensioners who were already worried about heating and energy costs were dealt a devastating blow. Some 900,000 older Scots are going to lose their benefits. In the time since, we have witnessed freezing cold temperatures, particularly in our most rural areas.

**Paul O’Kane:** I appreciate that Meghan Gallacher is broadening out her speech to talk about policies that affect and impact pensioners across the country. Will she confirm whether she supports her leader’s comments on the pension triple lock or whether she is committed to protecting the triple lock for pensioners across the country?

**Meghan Gallacher:** Kemi Badenoch has already clarified what she said.

I am talking about broken promises. Looking at the WASPI campaign and the winter fuel payment, we see that it is broken promise after broken promise from the Labour Government. Again, when we look at the situation in Scotland in relation to the winter fuel payment, we see that it will be reinstated next year in some form, but that will not do any good to an older person who has had to turn their heating off and sit in a freezing cold house this year because not just one but two Governments have not reinstated it. We simply cannot continue to let our older generations down.

We can talk all day about the disastrous decisions that the new Labour Government has made. We can watch Scottish Labour try to set itself apart from Keir Starmer and Liz Kendall. However, that will not wash, because, no matter what Anas Sarwar says or what any of his colleagues say in the chamber today, WASPI women will not be compensated.

The Scottish Conservatives will vote for the Scottish Government motion today and for the Labour amendment, because the recommendations are clear. I supported them last year, and I support them today.

15:32

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Last week, I spoke in my colleague Kenneth Gibson’s members’ business debate on a motion that called for compensation for the WASPI women. It was important to speak in firm support of the WASPI women and to have WASPI women in the chamber, including some of my constituents. I welcome them here again today.

I said last week, and I will say again today, that,

“Despite the ombudsman’s report being clear on the failures of the UK Government ... and being crystal clear that compensation is owed.”—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2025; c 102.]

Labour’s policy is to ignore that. That position contradicts what Labour said to get elected in 2024. A conscious choice was made to use these women to get elected, only to abandon them straight after the election.

Labour promised change, but all the WASPI women got was betrayal and deception. When the Labour Government can promise tax breaks to the wealthy but not compensation for WASPI women, it is clear how much it values pensioners. It is a question not of money but of Labour’s priorities.

In its amendment, so-called Scottish Labour attempts to wipe away any notion that it wants full compensation for women. In his speech, Paul O’Kane spoke about options. What options? A handshake? A medal? A “New Labour” mug? Some Marks and Spencer vouchers? It is complete and utter nonsense.

**Paul O’Kane:** The options that I referred to were outlined in the PHSO report and are about the levels of compensation. It does a disservice to the debate to stand in the chamber shouting about medals and mugs. We are trying to have a serious debate about the levels of compensation that were outlined by the PHSO. I do not know whether Marie McNair has read the report, but there are clearly options within it.

**Marie McNair:** I certainly have read the report. I thought that Paul O’Kane was standing up to apologise to our WASPI women and explain why your party is refusing to pay compensation to them. He absolutely did not do that; in effect, all I got was political spin and an aggressive, shouty man.

To move on, I call on colleagues opposite to get off your knees and honestly push for full and fair compensation for these women.

Recent figures show that the change to pension age affected more than 13,000 women in my constituency. Liz Daly, a co-ordinator of WASPI Scotland, is one of the women who were affected. Liz was expecting to retire at 60 in December 2015. In the summer of 2014, her husband took ill and was hospitalised for months. When he was discharged with a walking frame and a feeding tube, Liz took compassionate leave and later reduced her working hours to care for her husband. During a work meeting, she found out that she would not be able to retire at 60 after all, but by that point she had already reduced her hours and the other half of her post had been filled. All that had happened without her knowing that the pension age had changed. Liz was faced with an impossible situation and undue stress while taking care of her sick husband, and when her husband died, in 2018, she was only earning half pay.

Choices were removed for Liz and many other women. Had they known about the change, they could have prepared and made different choices and decisions. Liz's story is heartbreaking, but it is important to hear. These real women have faced a terrible injustice while already being at a disadvantage. Historically, they have earned lower pay on average during their working lives or experienced interrupted careers because of caring for children or acting as unpaid carers. They have also had less state pension entitlement than men, due to earning less than the national insurance lower earning limit and spending less time in the labour market. As is noted in a policy briefing from Age Scotland, a 2024 report by the Pensions Policy Institute found that, by their late 50s, women's pension wealth is equivalent to less than two thirds of men's.

Those women were robbed of their pension and there is simply no justification for the Labour Party to deny them compensation. Unfortunately, time is not on their side. Sadly many WASPI women have passed away without receiving compensation. Since the decision on 19 December—I am sure that this is the figure—3,500 women have sadly passed away. That is absolutely shocking.

WASPI women have shown determination and courage, but Labour has absolutely forgotten about them. WASPI women have spent considerable time advocating for change and raising awareness of their plight, and they do not deserve to be betrayed in this way by the Labour Party. They must be compensated. The SNP is on the WASPI women's side, and we will remain so.

Labour has called for a change of direction, but it is, unfortunately, already giving the people of Scotland one. This is one of the most right-wing Labour Governments in history, and that is saying something. The current Government makes

Gordon Brown look like Fidel Castro. I understand why a former Labour MSP has said this about Keir Starmer:

“There's something deeply wrong and sinister about someone who takes apparent delight in making children, pensioners and the low paid poorer and their lives more difficult—it is immoral, shameful and disgusting.”

That is from one of your Labour guys. I do not get that one, but there we go.

What reasonable person could disagree that Labour's treatment of WASPI women has been and continues to be disgusting? Pre-election, Labour members called for WASPI women to be compensated and posed for photos with them, but post-election, they say that compensating WASPI women is an unreasonable burden on the taxpayer.

Only one Government in the UK stands with WASPI women, and that is the SNP Government. Despite Labour's student politics shenanigans, the WASPI women know that. They know that Labour has betrayed them, and they will never forget it.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms McNair. I remind all members to speak through the chair.

15:39

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** I speak in support of the calls of WASPI women across the country for fair compensation and for the recommendations of the Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman to be implemented. We should consider all options for financial compensation, particularly given the financial circumstances of many of the women who are affected.

I welcome the contributions made by members from across the chamber and hope that this Parliament will speak with a unified voice today. I very much hope that the UK Government will reconsider its decision not to award any compensation to WASPI women.

I also join others from across the chamber who have welcomed WASPI women to Parliament today—I have worked with many of them for a number of years in the cross-party group. They have campaigned on behalf of women who were born in the 1950s and were affected by the decision to raise the state pension age for women from 60 to 65 and then to 66.

The ombudsman found that the Department for Work and Pensions was guilty of maladministration in the handling of those changes to women's state pension age and of miscommunication following decisions about the equalisation of the state pension age. The implementation of those changes was found to be

inadequate due to maladministration, confusing advertising campaigns and a lack of timely communication with those affected. The ombudsman's recommendations followed an independent process that looked at all the issues and should be honoured. The recommendations dealt only with the maladministration issue and do not relate to full compensation. However, it is important for the integrity of the ombudsman system that the Government honour the recommendations of that independent process. For that reason, it is also important that WASPI women receive compensation. Douglas Ross made those points earlier in the debate.

As the ombudsman's report outlined, only 43 per cent of the affected women were made aware of the changes to their state pension age. As a result of the changes, many women suffered significant shortfalls in their expected retirement income, to the detriment of their financial confidence, their health and their wellbeing, and they had to wait many years for their pensions.

The changes have impacted more than 3.6 million women—

**Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):** I commend Katy Clark for her work with Beatrice Wishart on the WASPI women CPG. Has she strongly raised the issue with Keir Starmer, Liz Kendall, Angela Rayner and Rachel Reeves? What have they said to her in reply?

**Katy Clark:** I have raised the issue with UK colleagues and have also had discussions with many of those involved in Labour's 2019 general election manifesto, which included a costed compensation package for women. I believe that we must look at all options for compensation for WASPI women, but we must be honest about the fact that full compensation would be very expensive, costing many tens of billions of pounds. The 2019 general election manifesto did not call for full compensation but for a tapered scheme, which would still have cost £56 billion.

The changes have impacted 3.6 million women across the UK, which is why full compensation would be so expensive. More than 336,000 women in Scotland have been affected. As Maggie Chapman said in her speech, many of those women had limited opportunities when they were girls and young women and, indeed, throughout their lives. The world has changed in many ways. At that time, women did not have the same pay opportunities as men. We still do not, but when many of the women began work, the equalities legislation was not even in place.

I welcome the UK Government's acknowledgement of the injustice and losses suffered by WASPI women and of the failures by the Department for Work and Pensions. However,

I believe that the decision not to compensate this group of women, particularly after the ombudsman had considered the issues, was a mistake.

Women who were born in the 1950s and entered the workforce in the late 1960s or early 1970s were expected and sometimes required to leave work if they married or had children, and many women paid the small stamp. That group of women was affected by decades of systematic inequality in the workplace. As Age Scotland's briefing for last week's members' business debate on the subject made clear, the pension wealth of many women in their late 50s is considerably lower than men's. Overall, it is equivalent to less than two thirds—62 per cent—of men's pensions, which explains why so many women claim pension credit.

I am pleased that this Parliament is discussing the issue today and I hope that a unified message comes from this Parliament. Many politicians have campaigned with the WASPI women, who were given hope that there would be a successful outcome. I therefore support the motion and the amendment, and I call on the UK Government to reconsider its decision.

15:45

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** I, too, welcome the WASPI women to the chamber, and particularly my constituent Linda Carmichael. We probably see each other far too often, and I hope that, at some point, we will be able to meet after the resolution of the issue.

Paul O'Kane talked about others kicking the ball into the long grass. Liz Kendall has burst the ball and run away with it, but she did say sorry. What annoys me most is the weasel words in the Labour amendment, which says that

“the UK Government should look at all options for remedy”.

The ombudsman has already come up with a remedy. It is on page 88 of the report. It is impossible to miss it. It is right there under the title “Financial remedy”. As Mr O'Kane, who is not in his place in the chamber at the moment, has not read it, I will read it out for him and others in the chamber. Paragraph 489 states:

“We have explained our thinking about where on our severity of injustice scale the sample complainants' injustice sits. We would have recommended they are paid compensation at level 4 of the scale.”

There we go—we have a remedy from the ombudsman that is absolutely crystal clear. Labour needs to get its finger out and pay it. It is as simple as that.

I want to look at some of the other detail of the scandal—and it is a scandal. It is important to look at the detail of what the ombudsman said about

UK Governments and where they have gone wrong. In 2004, six years out, Westminster had research showing that information about pension age changes had not reached the women who needed it most. What did the UK Government do with that research? Did it tell the women? No—it ignored it and buried it. Downing Street knew that it had to do more in 2004, but it did not bother. A cynic could point out that a general election was just around the corner and that a letter arriving on every doorstep in the UK telling women that they needed to work for five more years would hardly have been a vote winner.

Two years later, in 2006, the UK Government had another chance to do something when yet another survey found that too many women still thought that their pension age was 60. What did the UK Government do? It dithered and delayed. It could have written to the women in 2006 but, no, it started a feasibility study to report back in 2008. It was so bad that, by 2007, with only three years to go, the DWP considered telling the ombudsman that it should prepare for complaints but decided not to do that because the ombudsman might ask it to actually do something. Finally, in April 2009, just months before the first WASPI women turned 60, the first letters went out.

This is not just a story about a Westminster establishment that does not care about women; it is a story of political ineptitude from start to finish. From the first report in 2004, under Tony Blair, until 2009, there were six different cabinet secretaries for work and pensions in the Labour Government, and not one lifted a finger for the WASPI women.

Many in the Labour Party today still think that Tony Blair can do no wrong, so it is not surprising that one of his acolytes, Keir Starmer, has blocked compensation to WASPI women—maybe to protect the tattered legacy of his mentor, Mr Blair. However, that cover-up and denial cannot continue. The UK Government must accept that the independent ombudsman has ruled that Westminster failed the WASPI women and that the UK Government should pay WASPI women compensation.

We should not be having this debate. We should not have to call on the UK Government to do the right thing by WASPI women. There should be no debate. The entire point of an ombudsman is that it has the final and impartial say on the matter. The ombudsman has had its say. What it said is absolutely crystal clear:

“the women affected are owed compensation.”

Those are not my words but the words of Rebecca Hilsenrath, the chief executive of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

What is the point of an independent ombudsman if the Prime Minister and a Government and a party simply ignore it when they do not like the answer? It is time to do the right thing. It is time to compensate the WASPI women.

15:51

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** If we are honest with ourselves, a lot of people across the United Kingdom are totally disillusioned with politics. They are sick and tired of politicians promising them one thing only to turn round and pull the rug out from under voters.

At the election in July last year, the Labour Party made a slate of promises on a number of policy issues. The British public took it at its word and decided to give it a chance to form a government. They voted for a specific set of policy propositions. As it turns out, the now Prime Minister has no intention of honouring his word. He was willing to say whatever he needed to say to get into power and then walk back all the promises that he had made.

He promised that he would not raise taxes on farmers, who work hard to put food on tables up and down the country; then he introduced the family farm tax. He promised that tuition fees for universities would not rise, only to raise them in the budget. He said that he would not punish pensioners, before ripping money from their pockets by axing the winter heating payment—sentencing many of them to a long, cold winter.

Finally—well, finally for now—to add insult to injury, he walked back his promise to compensate the WASPI women. He made the issue a huge talking point during his time in opposition. Either he did not understand the financial impact of what he was asking for in opposition and figured out only when he got into Government that there are hard choices to be made about expensive policies or he was simply dishonest with the people he stood beside when he had his photos taken. He made unequivocal promises to the WASPI women. He and his Labour shadow cabinet went around the country promising them that they would be compensated if he was Prime Minister. He simply misled them, and he has misled the British public. Either he did not understand the financial impacts or he was, simply, willing to lie to get votes. Either way, it does not paint a good picture of the people who are supposed to be running our country.

At this point, the individual policy of WASPI compensation is not the core issue, as important as it is today. Of course it is disappointing, even devastating, for many, but this episode of politicians behaving badly shines a light on a much

deeper issue: how can we trust anything that the Prime Minister or his allies do or say? They are willing to say anything but not follow it through. If they are willing to pull the rug out from under vulnerable pensioners, who else is in danger of losing vital support that the Labour Government promised would remain in place?

We are in a situation in which we see, over and over again, that people do not trust us. With this decision of the UK Government, we can see why that is the case. People want honesty, but the UK Government has not given it to us. People thought that they could trust this Labour Government, but already, seven months in, they have been deeply let down.

We all need to learn from this lesson that, if we say something, we must deliver it. That is why we are calling on the Labour Government to do that immediately—to honour the promise, to honour the WASPI women, and to pay the compensation that they are not only entitled to but due, and which should be given immediately.

15:56

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** What a privilege it is to speak in support of the WASPI women in this debate—to speak for them and to tell their story of how they have been robbed by the British Government.

The great pension robbery is not over yet. The people of Scotland must sit up and be aware of what is happening or they will pay a heavy price. Surely the measure of a great country is not how much it can rob from its own citizens to bail itself out, but that is what is happening here. Great Britain is up to its eyes in debt, to the tune of £3,000 billion, and is frantically looking around to see what it has left to sell off and from whom it can grab money. The answer? The pensioners. They are easy targets, as ever, for the British Government.

Let us glimpse into recent pensions history to help us understand why we are where we are today. Gordon Brown started the ball rolling in 1997 when he abolished the dividend tax credit that the pension funds benefited from, resulting in a direct £5 billion grab for the then Labour Government, which basically cost pensioners £250 billion over the following 20 years. What an achievement that was by the worst chancellor in history—until Kwasi Kwarteng took that coveted title during his spectacularly short month in office in 2022.

Not to be outdone by Gordon Brown, the Tories made sure that an extra 8 million pensioners were dragged into the tax net during their 14 years in office, meaning that the number of pensioners who

are now paying tax has risen by 42 per cent, courtesy of the Tories.

That leads us neatly to the current situation that we are debating, whereby a British Tory Government sets up an investigation into the WASPI pension scandal, which finds that maladministration has impacted millions of women and recommends compensation, but then the UK Government does nothing about it except say, “Sorry, it’s unaffordable.”

The UK Government must surely have known the price of compensation when it supported its own calls for it. Not once has Labour said that, if it were not for the £22 billion black hole that was left by the Tories, it would gladly pay the WASPI women their compensation; it has just decided that it is not paying it—ever—and that is that. No wonder the Ayrshire WASPI women called Labour “lying, untrustworthy hypocrites”—for an Ayrshire woman, that is probably putting it mildly.

Promises and pledges have been dumped now that Labour is in power. As I said at the outset, the British Government has always treated pensioners as the easiest targets to take money from.

I, too, remember all the pictures of Labour MSPs and would-be MPs with WASPI women campaigners. They were all desperate to get their pictures taken with them. Some of them think that they can delete history by deleting those pictures from their social media feeds, but they are still there and they will haunt those Labour politicians for years to come.

For most people, apart from the wealthiest, the pension that they have at the end of their working life is all that they have to see them through the rest of their life. It is an investment that people make from their own earnings while working—which is required by the Government—so that they can have some level of comfort in later life. It is their money, which Labour seems to have forgotten. It is not the British Government’s to keep, to repurpose or to blatantly steal. We are seeing state robbery. There are no other words for it. Hand it back!

Are we finished there? We had better not think so, because dear old Labour is planning another pension grab from the rest of us. At the moment, unused pension savings are typically paid, tax free, to sons and daughters after a parent passes away. However, from April 2027, Labour is planning to grab 40 per cent of people’s unused pension savings over a certain threshold in those circumstances. That is another pension grab, which, this time, is via inheritance tax. To people listening to the debate who think that they are safe, I say: think again. Labour is coming for your pension savings now.



As I said at the start of my speech, no great country should do such a thing to its citizens. Targeting the most vulnerable and the weakest in society is not a sign of greatness; it is a sign of duplicity and greed. The quicker that Scotland frees itself from this bleak future, the better. I am delighted to support the Government's motion.

16:01

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I say without hesitation that the WASPI women deserve compensation and that, where an injustice such as this has occurred, it is the job of Government to rectify it. I thought that many years ago, when the problem first arose, and I continue to think it now.

I value the work of the WASPI women in my region and across Scotland, and I thank them for their determination in the fight for compensation. I am glad that the UK Government has apologised for this injustice. I recognise that as an important step towards a resolution that reflects the scale of the damage done. However, that is simply not enough. As my colleagues have stated, we will continue to urge our party in Westminster to look again at the ombudsman's report. I am pleased that we will vote for the Government's motion tonight.

When I have met the WASPI women, I have heard their stories and their fears about the serious impact that the process has had and will continue to have on their lives. Their stories have moved us all, and it would not be right for me to hide from comments that I have made in the past. Therefore, I have chosen to speak in this debate, as I have done in previous debates on this subject in the Parliament.

Having spoken in the debate last week, I might be repeating some of the points that I made then, but I believe it is important to set the scene for this generation. It is impossible to argue that women born between 1950 and 1960 have not had to fight their whole lives for equality. Many of those women started their working lives at a time when workplaces were not structured to support or welcome them. Now, at the end of their working lives, they are told that their efforts have not been recognised in the way that they would have been for a man of the same age.

As other members have said, it is likely that those women started their careers prior to the Equal Pay Act 1970. That was a time when they would have had to leave work when they got married or had children. Those women have now been disadvantaged further through serious mismanagement by the state when communicating how they would receive their pension. The ombudsman determined that the DWP's decision making between 2005 and 2007

led to a 28-month delay in its starting to send letters about state pension age changes to women who were born in the 1950s, and that those delays were maladministration and led to injustice.

Scottish Labour recognises that WASPI women will be disappointed that no compensation will be offered and that an apology from the Government is not enough.

The pension changes that were introduced by the Pensions Act 1995 and the Pensions Act 2011 were not only poorly communicated but handled with no respect for the women affected. Women who were just years away from retirement suddenly found that they had to work longer, which caused financial and emotional distress.

As we know, over 300,000 women in Scotland have been impacted by this scandal. We have a responsibility to those women, including, where possible, a responsibility to speak for them, and I hope that we can do so tonight.

The decision to bring forward the age change across the UK in the 2011 act brought financial and emotional distress to women across Scotland. Those affected have had to adapt rapidly and, in many cases, to completely change their plans for the future to make up for that financial loss in anticipating what their retirement will look like.

As the motion states, in March 2024, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman revealed the Tory Government's failings and said that these women deserve compensation. Therefore, the refusal that we have seen thus far from the UK Government to provide any compensation is unacceptable, as we have heard from members across the chamber.

Without the ability to properly plan for their future, the emotional impact has taken a concerning toll on these women, as many have said in telling their stories. For some, that has become insurmountable. This situation has serious mental health implications, which the WASPI women have fought repeatedly to expose in their campaign. It has led to serious struggles for these women to afford the necessities of life while also experiencing anger and disappointment—quite rightly—in a system that does not seem to value their contribution and does not work for them.

Although appropriate, the acknowledgment and apology from the UK Government does not do enough for these women, who have been left short and turned away throughout their lives. It is important that the apology was made but, in the case of those most adversely affected, the lack of any compensation is ultimately life changing. We must recognise that.

We can all recognise the economic disaster that the UK Government has to deal with, but, given the decades-long fight that these women have had to wage in order to expose Government failings, an apology is not going to suffice in rectifying the situation.

In a country where the gender pension gap is sitting at 39 per cent, we need to do more to heal the deep wounds of the past. The current decision by the UK Government is simply not acceptable to WASPI women and their families, who have provided so much to our communities and to the wider economy.

From the Age Scotland briefing, we know that women are far less likely to feel confident about being comfortable in retirement. That is deeply worrying. Much more needs to be done, so I am pleased that my party will support the motion tonight. I hope that the motion will be supported across the Parliament and that we can work together to get these women the compensation that they deserve.

16:08

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** Presiding Officer, it was just last week that I spoke in my friend and colleague Kenny Gibson's members' business debate on the issue. I opened my speech by saying that I am "sick of this". I remain sick of having to listen to the Westminster Government after the Westminster Government made excuses about why it cannot support the WASPI women. I end up almost in a rage and will have to watch that I remain within my written text and do not tell you, Presiding Officer, what I really think about the UK Government and its duplicity on this issue.

It is with deep conviction and a heavy heart that I speak about women who were born in the 1950s—our WASPI campaigners—who have been so shamefully let down by successive Westminster Governments. Many of those WASPI women are here today, and quite a few of them are from the great town of Paisley, which is well known for its strong female role models—so much so that that was the basis of my very first speech in Parliament, in 2011. Growing up, it was my mum who taught me what was right and wrong and who gave me the power to dream and to hope for a better future. My gran, Marion Adam, worked in Ferguslie mill all her life and, being a mill lassie, was never shy about putting her point across and having a debate or an argument. She was the woman who taught me to never start a fight but to "Make sure you finish it, son."

There is my wife Stacey, who breezes through life with a smile on her face despite living with four chronic health conditions, never giving up and

always strong. When Jessica was born, I vowed—as any man does when his daughter is born—to be a better man. But the WASPI women are the mothers of all our families and our communities. They are the wives, aunts and grandmothers—they are the role models for their families. They have spent their lives contributing to our society and paying into a system that they believed they could trust; yet that trust has been betrayed.

The ombudsman's report, which was published last year, condemned the Department for Work and Pensions for its "maladministration" of the state pension age changes. The UK Government's response was a shrug and a broken promise. Now, under the new Labour Government, led by a Prime Minister who once condemned what has happened as a "historic injustice", we hear excuses, empty rhetoric and a refusal to deliver the compensation that the women deserve. This is betrayal, pure and simple, and it knows no party lines—neither red nor blue.

Once again, I will tell members why the fight means so much to me personally. In Paisley, when I was growing up, I was surrounded by strong and resilient women—women like my mother and like Stacey. Those role models shaped my values and my determination to fight for justice, so how could I look them in the eye and stay silent on such a blatant and cruel injustice from the UK Government?

Our SNP Government has stood firmly with the WASPI women from the very beginning. From the moment when the ombudsman's final report landed, we demanded that the UK Government act swiftly. We made it clear that the women deserve compensation and that it needs to be an amount that acknowledges not just the maladministration but the financial and emotional toll that the injustice has wrought.

In Scotland alone, 300,000 women were affected by the scandal. Women who were on the cusp of retirement were blindsided with the news that their pension age had been raised from 60 to 66. The news was delivered far too late to enable them to prepare financially. The reality of that betrayal is that almost 40,000 WASPI women die every year while waiting for justice. Many of the WASPI women are struggling—half of them report difficulties in paying essential bills, and a quarter cannot afford food.

However, it is not just about pounds, shillings and pence; it is also about dignity and fairness. That is why I asked Paul O'Kane how much a Labour apology is worth on the open market.

The women do not want a sanctimonious apology, they want the money. They want the Labour Party in the UK Government to show them the money.

We should make no mistake about it—this is a Westminster problem. The PHSO is clear that at the heart of the maladministration lies the UK Government's failure to communicate changes effectively. It was an error that the UK Government must fix, yet instead of action we have seen delay, and instead of leadership we have seen indifference.

I address my Labour colleagues directly and say this: do the right thing—stand with us and do not prop up a pledge-breaking Prime Minister. When Keir Starmer campaigned in 2019, he called out this “historic injustice”. Where is that conviction now? I say to Labour members: do not let the WASPI women become a footnote in your history of betrayal of them.

This Parliament has spoken before on the issue, demonstrating unity and urgency in calling for justice. Let us do the same again today and send a clear message to the UK Government that the Government in Scotland stands with these women—the heroes of our families and our communities—while they are being cast aside by the UK Government. We should remember that trust is the cornerstone of any democracy. People pay into the system with the promise of security later in life. When that trust is broken, it is our duty—our moral duty—to rebuild it.

WASPI women are not going away—we can see that from their presence in the public gallery today. Their campaign and their resilience should inspire us all. They have faced down Tory indifference; now they are facing down Labour duplicity. They will not be silenced, and neither will we. I urge this Parliament to unite once more and demand justice for these women. Together, let us hold Westminster accountable and deliver the dignity and fairness that our WASPI women so rightly deserve.

16:14

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Presiding Officer, I am grateful to you for calling me to speak. I did not know that I was going to get six minutes, so I might not take up all of that time.

It was important for me to put on the record my support for the WASPI women, because it really matters to my constituents in central Scotland, to WASPI women across Scotland and the UK, and to the people in all our constituencies and regions.

I will add my words of welcome to the WASPI campaigners who are in the public gallery. I am sorry that they have to continue the battle.

It is an understatement to say that it is disappointing that the debate is necessary, but here we are. We are here because women who

are affected by state pension inequality deserve justice, and no one today has argued against that.

There can be no justice without fair compensation. Although an apology from the UK Labour Government is really welcome, it is not enough and it is not good enough. It is undeniable that the Labour Government has been handed a tough inheritance after 14 years of Tory chaos, but 1950s-born women are not to blame for the constraints on public finances, and the UK Government is not powerless to act.

The purpose of today's debate is not to explain or justify why the WASPI women should be compensated. Those arguments have been won, but this is a moment for the Scottish Parliament to unite, and that is what we are doing today. Everything that I have heard today tells me that we are united. After decision time today, when, I hope, we will speak with one voice, UK ministers must play their part. They must listen, reconsider and work with us towards a just outcome for the women.

We have heard some really good contributions from colleagues in the chamber today. We heard a frank but fair speech from my colleague, Beatrice Wishart, who spoke in the recent members' business debate in support of the WASPI women. To Beatrice Wishart and other colleagues who are wondering, it is not just Labour women who are furious and frustrated. Labour men are, too, among our members and supporters. We are not here to get a pat on the back for speaking with our colleagues today, but to show that party democracy is as important as the democracy of the country. It is good that we have space in our Parliament today to come together to debate the issues. No one is saying that it is easy to find a way to get the compensation in place, but we have to act fairly and act fast.

I follow the contributions of Labour colleagues including Katy Clark, who, as colleagues know, is heavily involved in the cross-party group on WASPI and can speak from experience about development of Labour policy in the past. We have knowledge and insight that we can lean into. In the debate last week, my colleagues Carol Mochan and Mercedes Villalba made excellent comments.

I hope that I am putting across the fact that this is very much a live debate and discussion within the Labour Party. That is why my local Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse Labour Party organised an emergency meeting on 6 January—the day when most people were returning to work after the Christmas and new year break. At that meeting, an emergency motion was agreed to. It is very clear that the decision that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced on 17 December is not the right decision. The motion is clear that the women should be “suitably

compensated". The text of the motion also references a motion that our local authority, South Lanarkshire Council, passed in November. I make those points to show that there is widespread support for the WASPI campaigners.

We have to step aside. There is much that we can debate in the chamber about what the UK Government is getting wrong, what the Scottish Government is getting wrong and what we would all like to see all parties do better on. However, on this one issue we can come together.

Today, on behalf of my constituents and my local Labour Party members who have asked me to speak up on the matter, I say that although no Government gets everything right, the UK Government is in entirely the wrong position on WASPI.

My plea today is not to think again about what the women deserve but to recognise that the Government is getting it wrong and that it is not too late to act. Today, I will vote for the motion and for the Scottish Labour amendment. I hope that we will continue to use every opportunity to speak out and to call for action, because the UK Government must do the right thing.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The final speaker in the open debate will be Christine Grahame.

16:20

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I, too, welcome the WASPI women who are in the public gallery. I also welcome the opportunity to contribute, as I did in the members' business debate last week. I declare an interest, as a pensioner, although I am fortunate in that I missed the change in pension age, being born in the mid-1940s, although my three younger sisters were affected.

Back then, it was expected that women would aim to get married, leave work to have children and perhaps return later. Broadly speaking, they were not expected to have a career or, if they did, they were expected to interrupt it for the children. That is what I did—I left my then profession of teaching for six years, as there was no formal childcare then. There was an assumption that the married woman would have her husband's pension to rely on, as well as her own smaller pension through paying what was known as the small stamp, as I did. Any woman's employment pension was also reduced because of those years out. That is how I recall those years, anyway.

However, although life has its ups and downs, there was that constant of the retirement age of 60 for women. It was a contract between women and

Government that was founded in trust—it was secure. With changes in life expectancy and work patterns, change was on the cards, and I do not think that there is any argument about that. I think that WASPI women do not dispute the move towards equalisation; the issue is the way that it was done. There was not only a lack of proper information but a brutal loss of pensionable years, which has left many women in penury.

As a divorced older woman, and in common with many single women, including widows and divorcees, I had to plan and calculate how I could pay off my mortgage in line with my retirement. The extension of the state pension age by up to six years sabotaged financial plans, and we already had a smaller state pension—it is only by chance that I am still working. The financial penalties for women are high. For example, 23 per cent of single female Scottish pensioners live in relative poverty, and 66 per cent of pension credit claimants are women. To relate it to my constituency, in cold numbers, as many as 5,630 WASPI women in Midlothian and 8,740 across the Borders have lost out, many of whom have tirelessly campaigned for decades to right this wrong.

As I said, WASPI women have no argument with the equalisation of the pension age; the issue is the way that it was done, with immediate financial change compounded by the failure to publicise and inform of the changes. That is what the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found in its report, which was confined to the question of maladministration by the DWP. The report found that the women affected were not properly informed and that they deserved and should be awarded compensation. In other words, it would not be compensation for lost pension, which is another injustice; it would be compensation only for the failure to inform women, to enable them to adequately adjust matters for their financial future. The suggested figures are in the lower thousands of pounds, not tens of thousands.

The report states:

"Complainants have ... told us the Government Gateway website incorrectly stated State Pension age for women was 60 as late as 2016."

It also states:

"Complainants have told us they did not see any of the publicly available information because, for example, they did not read magazines, did not see leaflets, or had no reason to visit Benefits Agency offices. And they say that because they had no reason to question their State Pension age, they did not request information."

The PHSO has also stated:

"Given the scale of the impact of DWP's maladministration, and the urgent need for a remedy, we

are taking the rare but necessary step of asking Parliament to intervene.”

I emphasise the phrase “rare but necessary”. That brings me to Labour. The DWP has now said that introducing such a compensation scheme for women who were born in the 1950s would be “neither fair nor feasible”—contrast that with the phrase “rare but necessary”.

Now that their party is in Government, Labour MPs have erased many of their online comments in support of the WASPI women just as quickly as they stood for photo ops with the campaigners. Now—as is evidenced by the amendment, frankly—the Labour UK branch office is alive and well.

Today, Labour has nowhere to hide—not even in that amendment. Each of those 14,000-plus women across my constituency is an individual, so I will end with the words of Clare Ramage, who had to take early retirement at 58 and who established the Borders WASPI group.

“I was told that to get my state pension I would have to apply for it so at 58 I contacted the DWP to better understand how I go about this. I was then told that I would not get my state pension until I was 66 years old. I was shocked and said, But you never told me. To which they replied, ‘WE DIDN’T NEED TO’.

I felt powerless for the first time in my life. Who was going to fight for me as there was no union to help?”

That is when she set up WASPI Scottish Borders. She continues:

“Obviously we now have the Ombudsman’s findings that indeed the DWP did not inform these women about the changes to their pension age to give them time to set up alternative pensions.

Finally it angers me to see how we have been used by the Labour Party who fully supported us, signed petitions, got their pictures taken—for what, just votes?”

Those are Clare’s words. I could not say it better myself.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to closing speeches. There is a little time in hand.

16:26

**Maggie Chapman:** The strength of feeling here this afternoon is palpable—from MSPs across the chamber, of course, but also, as is to be expected, from the public gallery. There is anger, frustration, a sense of betrayal and grief. As we have heard from across the chamber, this is an issue of justice—of social justice—because what WASPI women have experienced for far too long is a scandalous injustice.

This afternoon, and on previous occasions when we have debated this issue, we have heard the sometimes harrowing stories of women

struggling—for food, for warmth, for their families, for dignity and for hope.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s report last year offered WASPI women a little bit of hope. The ombudsman made it clear that compensation is the right and proper course for the Westminster Government to take. As Kevin Stewart said earlier, the UK Government should listen to that independent view—that is what it is for.

The amount of compensation that the ombudsman recommended was, in my view and in the view of many WASPI campaigners, much too low, but I hope we will have the opportunity to explore that issue further at a later date. Meanwhile, the essential principle stands that compensation is properly payable. That was the bit of hope that was sorely needed in what has been felt by many to be pretty bleak times.

That hope was dashed cruelly by the UK Labour Government just before Christmas. After its multiple photo opportunities with WASPI women, the UK Labour Government has given them what? An apology? That might be welcomed by some, as far as it goes. Some find it insulting, and, as Linda Carmichael eloquently put it,

“an apology doesn’t pay the bills.”

So, what is the Government doing? The decision not to pay compensation to the WASPI women stands alongside Labour’s continuation of the cruel, punitive and widely condemned two-child limit and its ending of the universal winter fuel allowance for older people. Last Christmas was bleak indeed.

What do those policies have in common? They all target women and other marginalised people. As Karen Adam suggested in last week’s members debate, there is more than a hint of misogyny in the way that the original policy was implemented and in successive Government responses. Hoping that WASPI women will just give up and go away is a disgraceful way for any Government to behave, but for a Labour Government to dismiss calls for compensation for gender injustice is utterly shocking.

To be generous, we might suggest that the Government needs to do a bit of work—or a lot of work—to understand how its decisions affect women. Gender and human rights budgeting are practical tools that it would do well to learn to use.

There is more to the issue than just ignorance. Such policies look like a deliberate attempt to set generations against one another, and it suggests that “the taxpayer”, as Sir Keir Starmer calls them, does not care about the wellbeing of either children or older people. It is nonsense, of course,

but it is dangerous nonsense. That is a game that we refuse to play.

Child poverty, pensioner poverty and migrant poverty are all connected. Four hundred years ago, John Donne penned the words:

“No man is an island.”

No woman, especially a WASPI woman, is an island, either. We share common needs—for sufficient income, yes, but also shared services, clean environments, cohesive communities, loving families and friends, and we share hopes and fears for the future. All of those things involve other people.

The fight of WASPI women is not for them alone, whether it be the tens of thousands in the north-east or beyond. It is for all of us who care for one another, about justice and about keeping faith with the promises that we imply as well as those that we make explicit. It is for the benefit of good relationships and trust between people and public services. It is for the good of children who need their grannies and the communities that need their volunteers. It is for the integrity of our politics and the recognition of right.

The WASPI women’s fight encapsulates all of that, and an end to it is long overdue. Too many WASPI women in the north-east have already passed away without getting justice, and many more will be leaving us as we speak. They cannot and should not wait for justice, and neither should we.

16:31

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I start by recognising the wrong that was done to so many women born in the 1950s, which was laid out by the independent ombudsman. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found that, by failing to alert the women to the changes, there was “maladministration” by successive UK Governments. The result is that many women were let down by the state that they fund and are constituent parts of, and in which faith has generally diminished over recent decades. In that context, it is absolutely right that the UK Government has, on behalf of the state, apologised to those women who were affected. As Paul O’Kane MSP stated at the outset of the debate today on behalf of Scottish Labour, it is also right that we recognise the grave disappointment of so many women at the lack of accompanying compensation.

**Douglas Ross:** Michael Marra has just reiterated that Paul O’Kane was speaking on behalf of Scottish Labour. Does that include Scottish Labour MPs at Westminster? Do they agree with that position? Do they—including the

Secretary of State for Scotland, the Under Secretary of State for Scotland and other ministers—believe that compensation should be paid?

**Michael Marra:** The member knows fine well how Government works, as he has been a member of the UK Government. Members of the UK Government who are members of Scottish Labour will vote with the Government position. Labour MPs across the back benches overwhelmingly support the position that Paul O’Kane and other members have laid out today.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Michael Marra:** I want to make some progress first.

Part of today’s debate has rightly turned on the value of apologies. The SNP Government has apologised on many occasions and for many things, including historic injustices by the state, such as forced adoption, institutional abuse and more. Successive SNP First Ministers have set great store by the proper conduct of the state in recognising its responsibilities and by those apologies.

Every week, the First Minister comes to the chamber to apologise for the disastrous mess that his Government has made of Scotland’s national health service, but that—

**Kevin Stewart:** Will Mr Marra give way?

**Michael Marra:** No—I will finish this point. That does not change the experience of a patient who has waited hour after hour in an accident and emergency department or has been treated in a hospital corridor. The point that I am making is that what matters is what people do as a result of their apology and recognition of past mistakes.

**Kevin Stewart:** [*Made a request to intervene.*]

**Michael Marra:** No, thank you, sir.

It is vital that we recognise the lessons on maladministration to ensure that it does not happen again. That is what the UK Government has said that it will do. Indeed, the PHSO has said that it is “very significant” and “welcome” that the Government has recognised that “mistakes were made” and that the secretary of state has committed to ensuring that it never happens again.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I am grateful to the member for developing his point, but, once again, he has not made clear the position of Scottish Labour MPs—the back benchers who stood beside WASPI women during the election campaign. If the same type of motion was presented in Westminster, how would Scottish Labour MPs vote?

**Michael Marra:** Many of the members that the minister talks about were at the all-party parliamentary group last week, setting out exactly the position that we have laid out today. I fully anticipate that that is exactly how they will pursue the issue in the UK Parliament if a vote is brought in the future.

Kevin Stewart outlined one option that was set out in section 489 of the report, but he would do well to go on and read sections 501, 502 and 503, which set out other options. Those offer the more nuanced approach that we think should be taken, and that is what Labour's amendment, which Kevin Stewart was so critical of, calls for. I hope that members across the chamber can unite in supporting the Government's motion—as we will do—and the Labour amendment.

Shirley-Anne Somerville started out by stating that the only burden that exists here is a moral one.

**Christine Grahame:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Michael Marra:** No, thank you.

Of course, we must recognise the moral burden, but the idea that it exists in the absence of the burden of the economic circumstances that the country faces does not stand up to scrutiny. There is no escaping the immensely difficult economic and fiscal situation left to the UK Labour Government by the Conservatives. They crashed the economy, sent interest rates soaring and left working people to pick up the tab in higher mortgages and higher bills. They made promises that they knew they could not keep. They announced policies that they knew the country could not afford and ran down the clock to the election so that they could leave a new Government to pick up the pieces. They left behind an unholy mess. The cognitive dissonance that is on display from the Opposition today beggars belief.

**Kevin Stewart:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Michael Marra:** No, thank you, sir.

The UK Labour Government is getting on with cleaning up the mess left by those reckless Tories, but that does not mean that there are not difficult choices. Of course there are.

**Christine Grahame:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry to interrupt the member. All my buttons have come on now. It is as if it is playing tunes. I pressed the intervention button and it would not light up, but now they are all on.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** What is your point of order, Ms Grahame?

**Christine Grahame:** My point of order is that I am being denied the right to intervene because of electronic faults that are none of my doing.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Ms Grahame, that is not a point of order. You pressed your button to request an intervention. The request was declined by the member. As you well know, that is within the rights of the member who is speaking.

**Christine Grahame:** I am sorry, but the light is not coming on, despite me pressing the button. My request-to-speak button has come on, and I have not touched it.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Christine Grahame, I ask you to resume your seat, please. It is coming up on my monitor that you have pressed the button to request to intervene, but you have not had that request granted. Mr Marra, please continue.

**Michael Marra:** There have been some technical difficulties today, and I am sure that Christine Grahame recognises that. For the sake of clarity, I will decline the intervention at this point.

**Christine Grahame:** Thank you, Mr Marra.

**Michael Marra:** It is, frankly, disingenuous and irresponsible for any member of the SNP or the Government to suggest anything other than that there are significant financial challenges. None of that diminishes the reality for the WASPI women, but when the cabinet secretary states that the only burden is a moral one, that is not realistic or even true.

In October, ahead of the UK Labour budget, the SNP called for an additional £70 billion of spending. Those were outlandish and unrealistic spending demands that would have bankrupted the country and crashed the economy all over again. Part of the question that members have to answer today is where the money would come from. The SNP has opposed every revenue-raising measure that the UK Labour Government has proposed, such as a windfall tax on oil and gas giants, ending VAT exemption on private schools, and increasing employers' national insurance contributions. The First Minister's suggestion that income tax should be raised elsewhere in the UK would have reduced Scotland's block grant by at least £636 million. I presume that the First Minister hopes that people will see the headline but not ask too many questions.

I commend members for the many heartfelt speeches that have been made today, and I particularly commend the campaigners who have come to seek justice. I hope that Parliament speaks with one voice today.

16:39

**Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):** I, too, pay tribute to the WASPI campaigners in the north-east and across Scotland, including those who are in the public gallery today. For many long years, they have fought with dignity and determination for their voices to be heard.

The UK Labour Government has betrayed those women after spending years promising to provide compensation, only to U-turn once Labour got into power.

This has been a passionate debate, and rightly so. WASPI women—3.6 million of them—have had the rug pulled out from under them by Keir Starmer. They have been angered by Labour’s hypocrisy and its persistent attacks on pensioners.

Today we heard from Paul O’Kane. I think that it is insulting to use the word “disappointment”, but he says that he recognises the women’s disappointment. All he can say is that his colleagues might think again. As I was listening to that, I was wondering where Richard Leonard was today, banging on the table, fighting for the WASPI women. There he is now.

**Christine Grahame:** He is here.

**Tess White:** Yes—he is here now. Monica Lennon stepped in and said that she was furious and frustrated. That is very important.

Megan Gallacher described the stress and anxiety that have been created. The WASPI women had hope and promises from Labour. They are not just disappointed; they feel betrayed. Beatrice Wishart called it as it is: Labour’s “betrayal”.

Leading the debate for Labour today, Paul O’Kane could not answer the key question on the U-turn of his Labour colleague Liz Kendall, given her promises when in opposition. As my colleague Douglas Ross has pointed out, no one is going to pat Labour on the back today.

I asked Katy Clark whether she has raised the broken promises with her colleagues Rachel Reeves, Keir Starmer, Liz Kendall and Angela Rayner. She said that she had, which I am sure gives some comfort, but, sadly, she has not been able to persuade them to honour the promises that they made.

Jeremy Balfour talked about many people being “disillusioned” with politicians. He said that either Keir Starmer was “dishonest” and that it was a betrayal, or he just got it wrong and did not do his homework.

It is not often that I agree with Christine Grahame, but I agreed with her today when she said, “Labour has nowhere to hide—not even in that amendment.”

Michael Marra, in trying to answer the questions from Shirley-Anne Somerville and Douglas Ross, highlighted that his Scottish Labour MP colleagues have betrayed the WASPI women.

Those women have done their best to make their way in the world of unequal pay and the persistent gender pension gap. Over the past few weeks, there has been a shocking betrayal of trust from Labour that has, understandably, left WASPI women reeling. It is not just “disappointment”, Mr O’Kane; it is a massive frustration.

**Monica Lennon rose—**

**Paul O’Kane:** Will Tess White take an intervention?

**Tess White:** I will give way to Monica Lennon.

**Monica Lennon:** To prove Christine Grahame right, there is an issue with the request-to-speak buttons.

Does Tess White agree that, to best help the WASPI women, we should try to focus on what we agree on? In the Parliament today, we agree on justice and fair compensation for the women. Rather than pick out individuals who could say or do more, we have given examples of where our Labour colleagues are doing their very best. We know that we have a long way to go, but does she agree that we should focus on what we agree on and unite to speak with one voice for the WASPI women?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will give you your time back, Tess White.

**Tess White:** I wonder whether Keir Starmer is going to give you a vote on this—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Speak through the chair, Ms White.

**Tess White:** —and listen to his colleagues in the chamber today. I hope—I have had it confirmed today—that you are shocked—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Speak through the chair please, Ms White.

**Tess White:** You are shocked and angry, and not just because Liz Kendall has rejected the PHSO recommendation for compensation entirely, without even considering a more targeted scheme that could help the most vulnerable. Yes, Monica Lennon, if you could work with your colleagues and agree a way forward, that would be a good track ahead.

Where is the compassion, care and understanding that was promised when Labour sat on the Opposition benches? During the general election, as Labour candidates chapped on doors up and down the country, where was the honesty?

**Paul O’Kane:** Will the member give way?



**Tess White:** Presiding Officer, will I get the time back?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You will get the time back.

I advise the chamber that it appears that requests for interventions are working, but there is a delay, so patience is, again, a virtue. We are looking into it.

**Paul O’Kane:** I was going to defend Christine Grahame by referring to the sticky buttons, which is probably the best way to put it.

Tess White makes a number of points. We have clearly outlined the Scottish Labour Party’s position, but during the 14 years that the Conservative Party was in power, what action did she take on WASPI women, and what did she raise with secretaries of state and ministers? What did she say when the PHSO report came to Mel Stride? He made many points in the Westminster chamber not accepting parts of the report. What would her plan for compensation be if her party was still in government?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Tess White, I can give you time back for those interventions.

**Tess White:** Thank you.

There were multiple investigations, but what we are talking about in the debate is the betrayal of promises and the ombudsman’s recommendations.

The PHSO’s final report—Labour colleagues might need to look at it, because that is what we are talking about—was published in March 2024. Keir Starmer and his team knew about the ombudsman’s findings and the recommendation for compensation long before Liz Kendall’s dispassionate announcement in December.

At its heart, the issue is about honesty, transparency and trust. It is about the pledges that politicians make and the promises that they must fulfil. That is not always easy for policy makers. It is right that we are careful with the public purse, but the cack-handed way that Keir Starmer’s Government has approached the question of compensation for WASPI women is not just a disappointment, Mr O’Kane—it is an absolute outrage.

To give false hope and to lead women up the garden path is just not right. The party claiming to stand for fairness and justice has not only turned its back on millions of women but has started pointing the finger at them. Let us not forget that Labour supported the SNP’s Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, with little regard for the rights of women and girls. Let us not forget Labour’s cut to the winter fuel payment, impacting

millions of pensioners across the UK and putting lives at risk during the winter months.

My Scottish Labour colleagues can shake their heads and try to spin their way out of this, but Labour does not have pensioners’ or women’s best interests at heart.

**Paul O’Kane:** Will the member give way?

**Tess White:** I am closing.

From farmers to pensioners, businesses and WASPI women, Labour’s mask has well and truly slipped. It has played politics with serious policy decisions and has left good and decent people to pick up the pieces.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before I call the cabinet secretary to close the debate, and with apologies to Christine Grahame, I note that there did appear to be an issue with a delay to requests to intervene coming through. The lights were working but there was a delay. That delay appears no longer to be in place, but when members want to request an intervention, I encourage them to go old school and make a request to intervene as well as press the button.

**Christine Grahame:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I take your word, but I pressed the intervention button and a delayed request to speak came up instead. This is not an age matter.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** In denying that it was a point of order, I never for a moment suggested that it was an age matter, Ms Grahame. The issue appears to be resolved, but those who wish to make an intervention—we have a bit of time in hand, as I say—should seek to make that known in the customary fashion.

I call the cabinet secretary for a generous 10 minutes.

16:48

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** In 2019, Keir Starmer called for an end to “the real injustice” that was faced by WASPI women. What a disappointment it is to all of us who have been involved in the campaign, but to the WASPI women in particular, when the most recent quotes from Keir Starmer have gone along the lines of:

“I am afraid to say that the taxpayer simply cannot afford the tens of billions of pounds in compensation when the evidence shows that 90% of those impacted knew about the changes. That is because of the state of our economy.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 18 December 2024; Vol 759, c 308.]

So, the fault somehow lies with the WASPI women as well as with the Tories. During this debate, we have heard attempts by Labour to challenge the mere premise of what has happened to WASPI women.

Paul O’Kane said that the UK Government has offered an apology. Many Labour members pointed to that and were right to do so, just as the UK Government was right to make that apology. Paul O’Kane was also right to say that it is good that ministers have said that mistakes will not happen in the future. However, neither of those points helps the WASPI women one little bit.

Labour members have also pointed to the financial mess that Labour was left. Once again, that is a perfectly reasonable point to make, but it is not the fault of the WASPI women either. Although context is important, justice is also important, and delivering justice is the most important issue that we have spoken about today.

Labour members have said that there will be some action and that they support having something happen. I respectfully say to them that the WASPI women do not have the luxury of having time to wait. They do not need another review; they need action. They deserve and are entitled to action. We simply cannot kick the issue into the long grass any more.

Douglas Ross made a number of important points in his speech. He spoke about the role of the ombudsman, which was an exceptionally important point to make, because Governments ignore recommendations by ombudsmen at their peril. Many members, including Jeremy Balfour, George Adam and Douglas Ross, spoke about trust and said that trust in our institutions and politicians is important. So it is, and it is further diminished if a Government ignores recommendations from an ombudsman in the way that we have seen. That does a disservice to all of us. Most importantly, it does a disservice to the WASPI women.

Douglas Ross made another point that he was right to make and that has not regularly been brought up, which was about the tone of the statement by the secretary of state. I was astonished when I first read that statement, because the secretary of state said that she had ruled out all the options presented by the ombudsman. She went on to say that the Government had not

“taken this decision lightly, but we believe it is the right decision because the great majority of women knew the state pension age was increasing, because sending letters earlier would not have made a difference for most, and because the proposed compensation scheme is not fair or value for taxpayers’ money.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 17 December 2024; Vol 759, c 169.]

The UK Government is casting doubt on the basis of the ombudsman’s report and on the basis of the WASPI women’s campaign. That is why I am sorry that, despite the fact that many Scottish Labour members wish that it was not true, the UK Government has utterly closed the door on

compensation for WASPI women. I am afraid that Scottish Labour members who think anything different are kidding themselves.

That is why I have a problem with today’s Labour amendment. I have already said that WASPI women do not have the time to wait for the best way for them to receive compensation to be figured out. I have spoken about the tone of the secretary of state’s statement, which shows that the door has been firmly closed, and about the fact that an apology, although welcome, is not enough. I am afraid that today’s Labour amendment gives the UK Government an opportunity to deflect, to delay, to dither and to disappoint, and that is not enough. WASPI women deserve better than deflection, but I am afraid that that is what today’s amendment from Scottish Labour actually offers.

**Paul O’Kane:** That is certainly not the intention of my amendment, which I lodged in good faith. I like to find consensus, which I think is important. Many members have mentioned the importance of the Parliament speaking with one voice.

It is clear that there are variations in the detriment caused by maladministration. We are seeking to recognise that and the fact that a system could be put in place to do so. Does the cabinet secretary not agree?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** The member makes a fair point, but Kevin Stewart pointed out that the very first report on the issue came out in 2004. WASPI women do not have the time to figure out another way. The ombudsman has looked at the issue for years.

People may have different views on the subject, and they may have alternatives. The Scottish Government certainly has an alternative, because it does not believe that the ombudsman has gone far enough. For goodness’ sake—the last thing that the WASPI women need is for more time to be wasted on more reports.

In the debate, many members talked about what the situation has meant for the women. I and others spoke about the hundreds of thousands of women who have been affected, and we are quite right to talk about the scale of the problem. However, we must never forget that every single one of them has a devastating story to tell, and they and their families must be heard. The UK Government must act, and the ombudsman has laid out how it can do that.

Maggie Chapman and others rightly pointed out that the women’s hopes were dashed when the new Labour Government came in and nothing changed. In fact, the situation got a whole lot worse. Beatrice Wishart was right to point to the many Labour MSPs who spoke in last week’s debate and today who hold a principled stance. I pay tribute to them, because it is not easy to do

that, particularly when they have long fought for a Labour Government to come in at Westminster and they have had to listen to a secretary of state and a Prime Minister from their own party making the contributions that they have made. I pay tribute to Monica Lennon, Carol Mochan, Katy Clark and others for the principled stand that they have taken over many years and will continue to take. I give them credit once again for their contributions today.

It appears, from what has been said, that Scottish Labour will vote for the Government's motion, and I welcome that. Douglas Ross and I both challenged Michael Marra on how Labour MPs would vote on such a motion. It is not often—in fact, I think that this is unique in my time in Government—that I have spent so much time in a speech talking about Douglas Ross and I being in agreement. However, he was quite right to point out the difficulties with Michael Marra's reply. I know how SNP MPs will vote on the matter and I know how Liberal Democrat MPs will vote on it. Beatrice Wishart was quite right to point out the work that they have done to seek a vote on the matter down at Westminster. I still do not know how Scottish Labour MPs, who were so quick to stand beside the WASPI women just last year, before the election campaign, will vote. However, the public will not forget the decisions that they make.

Regardless of that point, because time will tell on that, we have the opportunity to speak with one voice tonight. That does not happen very often on a policy matter in the Scottish Parliament. It will be a good thing if we get to that position at decision time.

As I mentioned in a comment to Monica Lennon, a letter will be sent to the UK Government following the vote tonight, and I invite all parties to sign up to it. Let us truly speak with one voice. This Government will not walk away after we have pressed our buttons at decision time and said once again that we are absolutely devastated and disappointed by the UK Government. We will not just walk away and move on to the next issue. The letter is another step and another opportunity for all of us to come together to support our WASPI women. I will be pleased to send a draft of the letter to the Opposition spokespeople after decision time tonight, asking for their parties to support the Government on the issue.

We need to move forward and take as much action as we can on the issue. The ombudsman has had her say and the UK Government must now act. It is time to do the right thing and compensate the WASPI women without delay.

## Business Motion

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16184, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business. Any member who wishes to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now. I invite Jamie Hepburn to move the motion.

16:59

### **The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn):**

Members will note that the motion will allow time for consideration of the stage 3 amendments that have been lodged to Christine Grahame's Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill and for two parliamentary statements relating to matters of significance and importance. I am sure that members will welcome the opportunity to ask the Government questions on those.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Thursday 23 January 2025—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Social Justice

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Social Justice

*followed by*

Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government Response to Fatal Accident Inquiries into the Deaths of Katie Allan and William Brown

*followed by*

Ministerial Statement: Future of the National Care Service

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.10 pm Decision Time

*Motion agreed to.*

## Point of Order

17:00

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I make my point of order under rule 16.2.3. I have today written to you in light of the points of order that were raised today by Stephen Kerr and Neil Bibby. I did so after reviewing the *Official Report* of my statement on 14 November last year. In it, I was explicitly clear that not all meetings required to be minuted but that summary notes are often available and that notes would be available for the majority of the engagements that had been reported on.

I have also reviewed my answer that day to Mr Bibby. In it, I said that I believed that there was a note available for “all” meetings, but I was explicitly clear in saying that

“I will need to double check”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 53.]

I believe that both my formal statement to the chamber and my answer to Mr Bibby are unambiguous and accurate.

However, I have also reviewed my answer to Stephen Kerr. In it, in relation to the summaries of the meeting, I stated that

“those summaries will be available for all the engagements that I have been participating in.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 57.]

Despite being clear earlier in the session that I would need to check, I recognise that I asserted that there would be summaries available for all the engagements. It has since come to light that that is incorrect, and I am sorry for that inadvertent error.

Under rule 16.2 and the provisions of the guidance on correcting the record, members have 20 days to make any correction to the *Official Report*. Unfortunately, that time has passed, so I seek your guidance on how I can best make members aware of the position that I have set out today.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Thank you, cabinet secretary. As you have noted, a member can seek to correct any inaccuracy on their part within 20 days of the publication of the *Official Report* of the relevant proceedings. Clearly, that time has passed.

I have not yet had an opportunity to read the letter that the cabinet secretary has sent. However, the cabinet secretary has now put the matter on the record. In order to ensure that the correction is as widely known as possible, I encourage him and welcome his intention to write to me, and I ask that he also write to the business

managers and to any members who are not represented on the Parliamentary Bureau and ensure that a copy rests with the Scottish Parliament information centre.

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Further to the apology that we have now had from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, this is the second time, I think, that he has had to come to the chamber to apologise for his conduct on this matter.

As Stephen Kerr pointed out earlier today, the matter was the subject of a freedom of information request, which information the Government would have released to a Sunday newspaper, which was published last week. It is now Tuesday. Our standing orders are very clear that a member must correct the official record as quickly as possible. What discussion was there at the Parliamentary Bureau earlier today with the Minister for Parliamentary Business? Clearly, Scottish Government ministers knew about this when they released the FOI or, at the very latest, on Sunday, when the article appeared. Was there any notification to you that the health secretary would seek to apologise and correct the record not after two members made points of order but when the matter became very clear in the media at the weekend?

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Ross. I confirm that there was no discussion of the matter at the Parliamentary Bureau today.

## Decision Time

17:03

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** We move on to the two questions that are to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-16160.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16160, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on compensation for WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—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.

17:04

*Meeting suspended.*

17:07

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** We come to the vote on amendment S6M-16160.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane.

Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

### 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)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 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)  
 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)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (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)

### 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, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Gillian Mackay]  
 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)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by

Jamie Hepburn]  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]  
 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)  
 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)  
 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)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-16160.1, in the name of Paul O’Kane, is: For 52, Against 72, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-16160, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on compensation for WASPI women, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament calls on the UK Government to compensate Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) women as recommended by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

## European Showmen’s Union Congress 2025

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-16016, in the name of David Torrance, on the European Showmen’s Union congress 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes the European Showmen’s Union (ESU) to Edinburgh for its 43rd national congress from 21 to 23 January 2025; understands the event will bring together delegates from 17 countries to celebrate the ties between The Showmen’s Guild of Great Britain and its European counterparts to discuss current topics, such as safeguarding the industry and the preservation and promotion of European fairgrounds, and to promote friendly cooperation and international understanding; notes that the international industry meeting, which takes place every two years, is being held in Britain for the first time; further notes that the ESU was founded to promote cooperation between the member countries and to create a common voice for the fairground industry and the future of the fairgrounds as a cultural asset; understands that it is one of the oldest European professional organisations, with over 70,000 members; believes that hosting the Congress in Edinburgh will provide an excellent opportunity to showcase Scotland’s rich heritage and the history of Scotland’s showpeople communities, highlighting their contributions to European and international cultural exchanges, and commends the ESU for what it sees as its continued commitment to supporting the livelihoods of showmen and showwomen and ensuring that their voices are represented in policy discussions at all levels.

17:12

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I thank my colleagues for supporting the motion to allow the debate to take place, and I thank everyone who is contributing to the debate this evening.

Before I begin, I welcome to the Scottish Parliament our distinguished guests: the newly elected president of the Showmen’s Guild of Great Britain, Keith Carroll; the European Showmen’s Union president, Albert Ritter; the junior vice-president of the Showmen’s Guild and vice-president of the European Showmen’s Union, Alex James Colquhoun; the general secretary of the ESU, Steve Severeys; and the general secretary of the Showmen’s Guild, Joe Mercer. I offer a very warm welcome to you all, and to all the national representatives of the European countries who are attending tonight. I am delighted to welcome you to Scotland as you gather here for the European Showmen’s Union congress 2025.

The congress is an important event for those in the fairground and amusement park industry, offering a space for learning, discussing issues

and strengthening connections across Europe. It brings together some of the most talented, hard-working and creative people and gives a voice to showmen at a European level.

Scotland is a country that understands the power of entertainment and community. From the ancient gatherings around fires to our music and our cultural celebration, the Scots have always cherished the shared experiences that bring people together. Showpeople are the custodians of that rich cultural tradition, innovators who have adapted to changing times and contributors to Scotland's vibrant social fabric. The travelling fairs and shows that they represent are woven into the fabric of Scottish and European culture. Their work carries forward centuries-old traditions while adapting to the modern era and the changing tastes of audiences.

In Scotland, as in the rest of Europe, the shows have brought joy to villages, towns and cities, which have embraced them as part of a collective heritage. As a proud Langtonian, I have a strong affinity with the shows and the showpeople. The links market in my home town of Kirkcaldy is not only Europe's longest street fair but the oldest in Scotland, with a history that dates back over 700 years. Originally a farmers and traders market, the links market has evolved over the centuries from amusements such as bare-knuckle fighting and rollercoasters built on platforms of old beer and lemonade crates, with showmen running cables directly into local residents' homes and paying £1 a week for the privilege, to the wide range of fairground rides, food stalls and games that we see today. One thing has remained constant throughout this time: the market's attraction and appeal to both locals and tourists.

When I was a boy, there was no more exciting time for me than when the trucks rolled into town, pulled on to the esplanade and started to get ready for the opening. The atmosphere and the sounds and smells instilled in me an immediate excitement and filled me with anticipation for the fun that lay ahead. Every year, for that one week in April, the esplanade became the most magical place on earth. The school bell could not ring soon enough for us. Every single day, my friends and I would race home and then race straight back out the door to soak it all in and experience the thrills once again. A fair bit of skipping school may also have taken place, but obviously I did not do that. For me, the links market perfectly showcases the enduring popularity of fairs and the unique skills and dedication of our showpeople. As I got older and had a family of my own, I saw the exact same magic and excitement reflected in my family's eyes.

In the Kirkcaldy constituency, we also have the Burntisland shows, which arrive in May and stay

until mid-August every year. Dating back to the 1500s, the shows are another much-anticipated and much-loved fixture in Fife's calendar. They are held on Burntisland links, just yards away from the town's award-winning beach, making them the perfect destination for a family fun day out.

The history of the European Showmen's Union is a story of dedication, unity and pride. For centuries, travelling showmen have captivated audiences, young and old alike, with feats of daring, mechanical marvels and the joy of performance. From the medieval fairs that dotted Europe's countryside to the grand exhibitions of the 19th and 20th centuries, showmen have long been innovators and pioneers. In the late 19th century, as industrialisation transformed Europe, travelling showmen began to organise themselves to protect their way of life and ensure the endurance of their art. It was at that time that the European Showmen's Union was born out of a shared commitment to preserving the traditions of travelling entertainment while adapting to the demands of a rapidly changing world. It became a voice for showmen across borders, offering support, representation and advocacy.

The union's history is filled with inspiring examples of resilience. Through wars, economic hardships and technological revolutions, showmen have remained steadfast in their mission to bring joy to people of all ages and backgrounds. When times have been tough, the community has stood together, demonstrating remarkable solidarity. The most recent example of that was during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the fairground industries faced unprecedented challenges and showmen from across Europe had to find innovative ways to sustain their businesses and communities in the toughest of times and circumstances. In 2020 alone, at least 522 established fairs and around 150 other events in Scotland were cancelled. That unprecedented halt not only affected the livelihoods of showmen but disrupted cultural traditions and community cohesion.

In 2011, the Scottish Showmen's Guild cross-party group was established in Parliament to address the challenges faced by showpeople. Since then, it has worked hard to provide a forum for opinion and information sharing about the guild, and it has facilitated discussions on many issues with Government officials, ministers and other agencies. I currently convene the group, and I am very proud to do so.

In Scotland, our fairgrounds and travelling shows have created countless opportunities for employment and have become an integral part of our tourism sector. Their presence enriches not only our cultural life but our economic vitality. Unfortunately, however, a great number of challenges still exist for travelling showpeople. On

a personal level, that can include limited access to appropriate places in which to live, limited access to services and facilities, poorer health outcomes, poorer educational achievement, and even abuse and discrimination.

At an industry level, issues include low-emission zone exemptions and regulatory and licensing challenges. The work of the cross-party group highlights the often inconsistent approach and practices of local authorities. As a consequence, work is now under way between the Showmen's Guild, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government to showcase best practice, aiming to achieve a fairer and more consistent approach to funfair licensing. I mention that not only because it is a valuable piece of work that I believe will make a considerable difference to the lives of showpeople, but because the approach in Fife has been hailed as best practice. The regulatory team in Fife Council, which is headed by the fabulous Gillian Love, has long been recognised by the Showmen's Guild as a team of people who just get it and are always a pleasure to work alongside. I was delighted for Gillian and her team when that hard work was recognised with an award from the guild at its annual luncheon.

At present, we have 32 local authorities charging various amounts for licences. A freedom of information request that was submitted by the cross-party group in 2023 found that the cost of licences ranged from £21 to quite literally thousands of pounds. The length of time to process applications also varies, which often leaves showpeople very anxious and in a frustrating position. That simply cannot continue, and I, along with my fellow CPG members, will continue to do everything in our power to bring about positive change.

I say to members that the next time they hear the music of a carousel or see the twinkling lights of a fairground, they should take a moment to think about the history behind it—the creativity, determination and hard work that have gone on for centuries, and which continue to go on, to create that magic. The story of showpeople is one of creativity, perseverance and passion—it is a story that deserves our admiration and respect.

Before I finish, I express my deepest gratitude to all the showpeople for the work that they do. Their dedication, creativity and passion enrich our lives in ways that words cannot fully capture. They remind us of the joy that can be found in simple pleasures, the wonder that comes from shared experiences and the importance of preserving tradition while embracing change.

To the European Showmen's Union, I say thank you for choosing Scotland as the host for your 2025 congress. We are honoured to have the

opportunity to celebrate your achievements, learn from your experiences and work together to ensure a bright future for your industry. I hope that, during your time here, you will feel the warmth of Scottish hospitality, enjoy our rich culture and history and leave with lasting memories of your visit. [*Applause.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I say to our guests in the public gallery that you are all most welcome in the Parliament, but our rules do not permit participation in our proceedings from the gallery, be it by way of applause or any other form of participation. I thank you in advance for your co-operation.

We move to the open debate.

17:21

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** I thank my friend David Torrance, as convener of the Scottish Showmen's Guild cross-party group, for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I associate myself with his comments regarding his sentiments towards, and recognition of, the Showmen's Guild.

I am a very proud member of the Scottish Showmen's Guild CPG. I say hello to my friends in the gallery and to the representatives from across Europe from the European Showmen's Union. I offer my sincere apologies and, indeed, regret that I cannot join you this evening due to unforeseen circumstances. Having attended a reception for the 130th anniversary of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under the leadership of my colleague Richard Lyle, I know what a great celebration and party I am missing, but I will be with you all in spirit.

On that evening in 2020, I was honoured to receive honorary membership of the Scottish Showmen's Guild—Deputy Presiding Officer, I declare that interest for the record. It has been my pleasure to work with the Showmen's Guild and with Alex James Colquhoun on heritage funding and his ambitions to support the mental health of the guild's members, particularly following the effects and impact of Covid, which David Torrance outlined.

Members on all sides of the chamber are, no doubt, familiar with my interest in culture and tradition and my love of our Scots language and music. I am able to embrace that love through my role as convener of the Parliament's Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We know that Brexit has impacted on Scotland's long-standing links with Europe, and that is why it is so important that we embrace every opportunity to reach out in friendship, trade and exchange to our counterparts across Europe. We know that



tradition and heritage can be fragile and need our active protection.

The European Showmen's Union is a European organisation that advocates for the fairground industry and its workers. It is a member of the European federation for the education of children of boatmen, showmen, circus families and professional travellers. It supports many calls to reduce bureaucracy and support fairground businesses. It advocates in the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of Europe. It looks for financial support for small and medium-sized fairground businesses, and it promotes co-operation between member countries and creates a common voice for the fairground industry. It promotes friendly co-operation and international understanding, and it safeguards the industry in promoting all European fairgrounds. We know how seriously the European Union takes culture and intangible cultural heritage.

What celebration of a town's heritage—holidays, dance, music and language—is not supported by the showmen and showwomen of Europe? They are key to our traditional local fairs and celebrations, and they bring colour and joy to children and adults alike. Their heritage is our heritage—the heritage of Europe—and we must continue to value, support and celebrate their contributions.

To our guests in the public gallery, I say that I am so sorry that I cannot be with you today, but in two years we might join you for your next congress. For now, welcome, enjoy our hospitality and Edinburgh, and haste ye back.

17:25

**Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** I congratulate my good friend David Torrance on securing tonight's debate. I, too, welcome all the showpeople representatives who are in the public gallery. It is fantastic to see the weight and glitter of their sparkling chains. I love the showpeople for all sorts of reasons, not least because they run family businesses—second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh or eighth-generation family businesses in many instances. They have contributed so much to public life and the entertainment of so many over a great many years.

Who does not remember, as a child, experiencing the thrill and excitement of the fair or the carnival that they went to, wherever it was? In Glasgow, it was the Kelvin hall carnival when I was young. Whether it was the big dipper, the ghost train, the waltzer or any other rides, scooping up rubber ducks or shooting at unpopular people, it was a thrill. I remember one

particular occasion on the dodgems, when my mother was wearing a wig. We crashed into her and her wig went flying off her head and landed somewhere on the concourse. Nobody was very helpful in retrieving it. In fact, every time I got near it, somebody flung it further away. It was a very sad-looking wig by the end of the occasion.

We are all full of memories, are we not? Even as adults, when we pass by a funfair or carnival, nostalgia enthuses us. As David Torrance said, it is not just the sights; it is the sounds, the smells and everything that went with the occasion that we very much enjoyed.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am very much enthused by the member's energetic anecdotes about his experiences of attending carnivals in Glasgow. Does he agree that, in this year, which marks the 850th anniversary of Glasgow's burgh charter, and given the heritage of the Glasgow fair, which dates back to 1190, when Bishop Jocelin first got permission from the King to host the fair, we should be putting the showmen's traditions of Glasgow, which date back to the 12th century, at the heart of the Glasgow 850 celebrations?

**Jackson Carlaw:** I absolutely agree with that. I thought that I was old, but I did not realise that Mr Sweeney had been around in 1190—it is encouraging to know that he was there.

It is a great pleasure to see Richard Lyle, our former parliamentary colleague, sitting in the public gallery. Richard, who had a voice like a fairground attendant and was known to bark "Yes" or "No" from his party's benches, was fundamental to ensuring that the work of the Showmen's Guild was properly represented.

Let me sound a slightly discordant note. I think that the Parliament betrayed Scottish showpeople. Richard Lyle had a member's bill that unfortunately fell because of Covid. That bill sought to correct the huge injustice in Scotland whereby local authorities charge variable rates, as David Torrance said, from £21 up to thousands of pounds for these family businesses to operate in our communities. Those charges are not applied in England and do not exist there—they are a purely Scottish phenomenon. In this, the week when Donald Trump has returned to the White House and signed so many executive orders, I say to the cabinet secretary that he should sign an executive order to correct that injustice. If he cannot do that, he should explain why, given that Richard Lyle's bill fell because of a lack of time as a result of Covid, the Scottish Government has not picked up the matter to correct that injustice.

I want that injustice to be corrected and, using the vernacular of the time, I want to make showmen great again. Let us make the showmen

great again and let us back them—not just by welcoming them to Scotland today, but by doing something that will help generations to come to enjoy fabulous funfairs and support a community that does so much for Scotland, such as paying taxes that send our kids to schools and all those things. Given the tradition of Scottish family businesses going back generations, let us get behind those people and correct that injustice once and for all.

17:29

**Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** I congratulate David Torrance on securing this members' business debate, and I recognise his long-standing interest in the subject as the convener of the Scottish Showmen's Guild cross-party group. I join members in welcoming the delegates from the European Showmen's Union who are attending the debate and the reception today.

The European Showmen's Union was formed in 1954 and recently celebrated its 70th anniversary, but fairgrounds and showpeople have been part of European history for far longer. In December, Belgian and French fairground culture was designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as intangible cultural heritage, in recognition of the enduring tradition of funfairs and the important role that they play in our culture and economy. I welcome the European Showmen's Union choosing to hold its congress in the United Kingdom for the first time—specifically in Edinburgh, a city that has enjoyed fairgrounds for generations. Members may share memories of going to fairgrounds in the Meadows or Leith Links and enjoying rides and games with friends or family. More recently, they may have seen the star flyer at Edinburgh's winter wonderland, which has become a fixture of the skyline at Christmas and scares thousands of tourists.

Scotland's love of fairgrounds and the work of showpeople will be showcased in an upcoming BBC Scotland programme, "Showpeople: Licensed to Thrill", which will document the unique lifestyle of showpeople and the challenges that they face to entertain the public. Many of those challenges will, I am sure, be discussed during the upcoming congress; they include repairing rides, safety and the impact of bad weather.

The culture of showpeople has endured for generations, and some families are able to trace their heritage in the industry back over hundreds of years. In recent years, showpeople across Europe have shown great resilience, whether during Covid, when restrictions either closed or greatly limited fairgrounds, or more recently, in the face of rising costs and inflation. Council licensing

in Scotland also remains a challenge, as charges are inconsistent and vary hugely, which means that fairs are not as viable in certain areas. I understand that David Torrance has raised that issue previously. Nevertheless, regardless of those challenges, showpeople have continued to entertain us and to bring joy to children and families.

I again welcome the European Showmen's Union congress to Edinburgh. The debate underlines the history of showpeople and fairgrounds and the cultural value that we place on them. I understand that the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain is seeking UNESCO recognition as representing intangible cultural heritage. I hope that it is successful in its campaign, and I wish everyone who is attending the congress a productive and pleasant time.

17:34

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, and I thank David Torrance for securing the debate. First, I give a huge welcome to the showpeople from across Europe who have gathered in Edinburgh this week for their 43rd national congress. I am looking forward to meeting more folk individually at the reception this evening.

In previous debates on the topic, many of us have recounted—as David Torrance has done, once again, tonight—how going to the shows near our homes was an annual highlight. In my case, it was the shows at Overtoun park in Rutherglen, which sadly ended when land was taken from the park and built on. That highlights one of the problems that I know showpeople are facing in Scotland—namely, finding alternative sites both for living and for the fairs when traditional locations are lost.

I represent Glasgow Shettleston, which I understand is one of the constituencies in Scotland with the most showpeople living there.

As David Torrance mentioned, he chairs the Scottish Showmen's Guild cross-party group, which was previously headed by Richard Lyle, the former MSP and some people's friend—*[Laughter.]*—and mine. Like a lot of cross-party groups, our group does not have huge attendance by MSPs. However, I believe that the group is very important, and I attend as many meetings as I can.

For anyone who may be less familiar with cross-party groups, I note that they are forums on particular subjects in which MSPs and interested individuals and organisations from outside Parliament can meet and talk through relevant issues. At our Showmen's Guild CPG, for example, we often discuss issues such as licences for fairs and how the cost, the amount of

paperwork and the level of inflexibility can vary substantially from one local authority area to another.

We have to accept that there can also be prejudice and discrimination against showpeople. In Scotland, we believe that we are a reasonably welcoming society, both for existing minority groups and for incomers. However, we need to accept that we have not got it all right and that there is still prejudice and discrimination, which we should not accept but must challenge.

If a planning application goes in with a surname that is clearly that of a showman, we can expect a reaction in the local community. Sometimes, it is just people being thoughtless and not taking into account that different groups of people live their lives in different ways. For example, during Covid, it was decided that grants would be given to the landlord of each site, with it apparently having been forgotten that multiple families could live on the site. More recently, my office has dealt with issues that have been raised by showpeople who are finding it difficult to access the warm homes Scotland scheme.

However, there are positives along the way, too. When we attend the annual Showmen's Guild lunch each year, one table is always filled with pupils from Thorntree primary school. The school is in Greenfield, in Ivan McKee's constituency, which is the neighbouring constituency to mine, and pupils from the showpeople community in his constituency and mine attend that school. Over the years, the school has made a real effort to build a strong relationship with the community, and I know that that is appreciated by both sides. At this point, I will mention Maureen McKenna, who was previously the director of education in Glasgow and had a particularly strong commitment to the education of children of showpeople. In this day and age, with so much advanced technology being available, it should be perfectly possible for a child to spend part of the year in one school and other parts of the year in other schools.

In conclusion, I very much welcome the congress to Scotland. As visitors from the rest of Europe might know, there is a certain rivalry between Glasgow and Edinburgh. I accept that Edinburgh is possibly the prettier city if you just want to have your photo taken. However, Glasgow is definitely the friendlier city and is the home of many showpeople, so I hope that at least some of those who are attending the congress will be able to come and visit us, just about 70km along the road.

17:38

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I am glad that I do not have to choose between Glasgow and Edinburgh in that debate. I am thankful that I represent Central Scotland, which means that I am bang in the middle and get to go to both cities with ease.

I congratulate David Torrance on securing cross-party support for the debate, and I give a huge welcome to our showpeople in the public gallery, who are here not only to listen to our debate but to attend the event that will take place thereafter.

It has been said in many contributions this evening that the funfair culture is important in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and members have shared stories of their childhood memories of visiting funfairs. For me, the memories are of the Bellshill street fair, which took place every year on the last weekend in May. It was amazing. I have a brief memory, from when I was seven or eight years old, of the dodgems, the waltzers, the helter-skelter and the Ferris wheel. All those things were contained in one big street in Bellshill, and it was amazing to be there and take part in all the different attractions.

John Mason made an important point just moments ago. Like many funfairs, including the one in his constituency, the annual Bellshill street fair was cancelled back in 2018. That was a result of various issues, one of which was that the funfair itself did not have sufficient means to carry on, and the committee was falling apart. There were also issues in relation to licensing laws. There was talk at one point of a rethink about bringing back the Bellshill street fair—about how to modernise it and about all the issues that meant that it might not take place. However, to my knowledge, there has been no real discussion since. That is a real shame, because I know many people from the Bellshill area who think fondly of their time visiting the Bellshill street fair.

We seem to be seeing an unnecessary decline in street fairs and travelling fairs—there is a risk of their disappearing entirely, which is why I was pleased to find out that the European Showmen's Union congress was coming to Edinburgh. It is an opportunity for showmen and showwomen to discuss matters relating to the industry and the importance of preserving its culture. Their resilience and perseverance are important and are integral to the continuation of funfairs and attractions in Scotland.

One of the options to save the many events, funfairs and attractions that we see throughout the year has already been explored this evening, with Jackson Carlaw and others mentioning the bill that was introduced in Parliament by former MSP

Richard Lyle—who, I believe, is in the gallery this evening. He rightly stated that travelling entertainers are given very little in the way of licensing leeway. They face overly burdensome and inconsistent application processes that differ from council to council. To put it simply, there is a complete imbalance between councils and those businesses.

Licensing systems appear to work against showpeople at every turn. They are overly complex, tedious and unreliable. Because showpeople spend a lot of time moving around the country, it is difficult for them to pin down local elected members to raise issues with councils to get them rectified. Had Mr Lyle's bill been successful, councils would have had to grant a licence within 21 days if an operator met certain application requirements. If the council did not respond within those 21 days, the licence would be granted automatically. Crucially, the application fee across the board would have been a grand total of £50. That would have been a fairer way of allowing fairs and attractions to take place across the country.

I appreciate that time is running out in the current parliamentary session—as is my time to speak this evening. However, the question needs to be asked whether, come the next parliamentary session, an MSP will pick up such a bill to try to make the system fairer. I think that it would get cross-party support, as it did the last time around.

There is more to do to support our showpeople in Scotland, but I am delighted to have been able to speak in this debate. I genuinely hope that the problems that we have raised can be rectified and that we can get a response from the cabinet secretary.

17:43

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I congratulate the member on securing the debate and I welcome members of the congress. I had better mention Richard Lyle or I will never live it down.

I want to make a brief contribution. Fairgrounds and shows are an important part of our agricultural shows, with their shiny new tractors, the powder-puffed sheep, the geese that have been marching against each other, the food stalls, the charity stalls and even the political stalls. Above all that, there is the noise and music and the familiar tunes of the fairgrounds—the happy homes of shows at the Border union in Kelso, at Peebles and at Penicuik, in the park. There is the timeless scream of the children who cannot make up their minds whether they are frightened or having a good time on some of the very scary rides and the dodgems.

I wish them all well because of the atmosphere that they bring to agricultural shows, which nobody else has mentioned. I do not pitch Edinburgh against Glasgow; that is a waste of time—it is the Borders first.

Getting back to the issue, I have two confessions to make about the fairgrounds. First, I just cannae eat candy floss. It does not matter how it comes, I just cannae eat it, try as I will. Secondly, fairgrounds have given me, as a granny, the opportunity to indulge in things that I find very scary—although sometimes I am commanded to do so by my grandchildren. They do not find them scary, but they put the fear of God into this politician, and not many people can do that.

I thank the showpeople again for the great atmosphere that they bring to agricultural shows. I apologise for not being able to come to the reception later. Strangely enough, I am chairing something to do with salmon farming, which shows the diversity in the Parliament. I cannot see how I can put the two things together.

I say to the showpeople, “Keep it up”, because without fairgrounds our agricultural shows would be very dull places indeed.

17:45

**The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson):** I thank David Torrance for providing the opportunity to welcome the European Showmen's Union to Scotland for this year's congress and to thank it personally for choosing to meet in my Edinburgh Central constituency—it is very welcome.

As we have heard, we all have fond memories of going to the fair, or the shows, with our families and friends when we were young—or, indeed, not so young. That is a testament to how travelling shows and fairs have consistently, throughout the years, brought people together to have fun and share enjoyable experiences.

We acknowledge the strong and valuable tradition of family and community—we have heard about the importance of family during the debate—that showpeople foster and the great contribution that they make to local economies and the wellbeing of people in the areas to which they travel. That has been echoed by members across the chamber. For the benefit of our visitors today, I say that it is not often that we agree across all the parties in the Parliament, and it is good that our visitors have been able to hear that today.

To start off, I have a confession to make to David Torrance. My first memory of attending a show was one in Burntisland, in his constituency,

and it remains with me to this day. I was able to experience that joy again over the Christmas break with my five-year-old and three-year-old daughters—I am a late father. They loved going to the funfair rides in central Edinburgh. I have to confess that it became quite expensive by the end of the visit, but that speaks to the impact that funfairs have on us all. I thank the showmen and their colleagues for all the events that we have attended over the years.

I commend David Torrance for his work on the cross-party group. As John Mason mentioned, the cross-party groups are very important. David Torrance has established, through his good offices, a working relationship among the guild, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government on a variety of issues. Points have been raised about local government charging, which I will come to in a second. No doubt, progress can be made there, and I would be very supportive of that.

We also heard from Clare Adamson, another member of the cross-party group as well as the convener of the parliamentary committee that covers culture and external affairs, which are in my area of governmental responsibility. Quite rightly, she stressed the connections with and traditions of European showmen. It is nice to see friends from across Europe coming to Scotland, a country that is, of course, also European.

When Jackson Carlaw spoke of his amusing memories, I was struck by the notion of him arriving here with a big red baseball cap saying “Make Showmen Great Again”. I look forward to seeing that. I am also interested in his notion that I should adopt the practices of the new President of the United States of America by simply signing executive orders. That is not the way that we do things here, but, having said that, there are ways to fix problems. We are often told by colleagues across the Parliament that we must respect local democracy, but maybe there is more that we can do in conjunction with local authority colleagues to ensure consistency across local authorities in Scotland.

Paul Sweeney could not miss the opportunity to underline Glasgow’s pedigree, reminding our friends from Europe that we might be a small country but, boy, do we have a rivalry between our two biggest cities. It was worth putting on the record Glasgow’s pedigree in this important year for the city.

Foysoil Choudhury, John Mason, Meghan Gallacher and Christine Grahame all underlined the main point that we are in agreement across the parties about the importance of what we have been discussing today. Richard Lyle did not take part in the debate, as he is no longer an MSP, but it is great to see him and to put on the record the

Scottish Government’s appreciation for all the work that he did as an MSP and that he continues to do today.

I will take this opportunity to briefly reflect on, celebrate and welcome the notion of different cultures, which ran through the debate. The Scottish Government is committed to improving circumstances for people who travel as part of their occupation, lifestyle and culture. Scotland should be welcoming and inclusive to all people who live, work and visit here, and we are determined to play our part in building a better and fairer world.

Looking further afield from Scotland, I will reflect on the work of the European Showmen’s Union. As members have been made aware, it has been built on solid traditions since it was founded, in 1954, and the fact that it is holding its 43rd national congress demonstrates the legacy and resilience of the showpeople community. The union is one of the oldest European professional organisations, and I recognise the rich cultural heritage that showpeople have brought to societies across Europe. That heritage is rooted in centuries of tradition, with showpeople having contributed significantly to the historical landscape of entertainment during that time.

That is why I am pleased to welcome the European Showmen’s Union to Edinburgh this year for its first international meeting in this country. That provides the opportunity not only to showcase some of our rich heritage but to spotlight the contribution that Scotland’s showpeople community has made locally and internationally. We must continue to support showpeople communities as they build on the cultural traditions of bringing entertainment and other services to rural, coastal and urban communities across Scotland.

Foysoil Choudhury underlined the point about intangible cultural heritage, and the Scottish Showmen’s Guild understandably has a strong interest in that issue, which I welcome. There is incredible potential from the inclusivity that intangible cultural heritage provides. By valuing one another’s traditions, cultures, stories and songs, we all have much to gain. We can also benefit from the international nature of intangible cultural heritage and the prospects that it highlights for Scotland on the world stage, so it is important that Scotland joins global networks to promote and safeguard local cultural practices. That is why the Government remains committed to supporting our communities in ensuring that intangible cultural heritage is accessible to everyone across Scotland.

Following the United Kingdom Government’s ratification, finally, of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural

Heritage, work is being undertaken to plan for a new Scottish inventory, which will sit alongside the new lists for Northern Ireland, Wales and England to form a wider UK database of intangible cultural heritage. I look forward to continuing work with the UK Government and other devolved nations to ensure that the importance of intangible cultural heritage is recognised, cherished and allowed to flourish.

Again, I thank David Torrance for securing the debate and other members for their support in ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future for showmanship. I thank the Scottish Showmen's Guild for its dedicated approach and commitment to supporting its members in ensuring that travelling shows continue to provide entertainment across Scotland and that they are run safely for workers and visitors alike. I also thank the members of the European Showmen's Union who are in the public gallery. I hope that they will continue to make significant contributions to their and our societies for generations to come, and I wish them all a successful congress and an enjoyable time in Edinburgh. Haste ye back.

*Meeting closed at 17:53.*

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