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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 14 November 2023

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is Dr Muhammad Adrees, president of the Muslim Council of Scotland.

Dr Muhammad Adrees (Muslim Council of Scotland): Honourable MSPs, and ladies and gentlemen, I begin in the name of God, the kind and the caring.

I am delighted to be present in this wonderful Scottish Parliament. Scotland is a nation of great men and women, from William Wallace to Andy Murray, Sir Alex Ferguson to Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and, of course, Robert Burns, the man of words—the poet.

Words have power: words are read, and reading is a great way of leading an intelligent life that supports democracy and promotes respect of human rights. We read books for pleasure, sometimes we read them to pass the time and sometimes we read them to make ourselves smarter. We read religious books as a way of getting instructions that will help us to live a good life and to experience closeness and proximity to, and the love of, God.

As legislators, you make laws, and you know why that is important: it is the basis of a just society. Law appeals to reason; it makes sense. The Quran is also a book of law but, more important, it teaches us moral values—

“Rules that determine the way you think, a state of mind that leads to good actions, an attitude to be kind so that we can practise the moral values of kindness, patience, and forgiveness.”

The Quran, like the gospels, is full of such moral teachings.

Muslim families, like the majority of Scottish people, are deeply concerned about preserving and transmitting the traditional moral values, because we want to have kind and caring citizens in the future. Moral values are fundamental for a flourishing and healthy human society. The Quran uses various styles of teaching morality, including instructions and wise storytelling. It promotes those values by telling stories of the great masters: Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammed—peace be upon him.

In our smartphone times, society faces more challenges. Its fast-moving social media influence our mood and lives, creating fear and insecurity and an unrealistic sense of independence, yet interdependency is the reality of society. The moral and spiritual values of co-operation and working together are described on page after page of the Quran.

Psychologists are saying that people are suffering from moral confusion. Many people are lost, and they are hopeless; others lack a sense of meaning and purpose of life. They have trouble distinguishing right from wrong and they question whether such standards even exist.

The Quran is a manual—a guide for our worldly lives. Every Friday afternoon, before the congregational prayers, I read this verse from the pulpit, just like the Imams here in Scotland read it. People listen:

“God commands justice, generosity and giving to relatives or those who are needy. He forbids indecency, all kinds of evil and cruelty. He teaches you this so you will live a good life.”

That is verse 90 of Surah Al-Nahl of the holy Quran.

A complimentary copy of the Quran in plain English has been presented to you all; it was posted earlier. I hope that you have all received it. Please enjoy reading it and capture its gems, savour its pearls and spices. God bless you all. Thank you so much.

Topical Question Time

14:06

Storm Babet (Support for Communities)

1. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of it being three weeks since storm Babet, whether it will provide an update on the support that it is making available to the affected communities in Angus, Aberdeenshire and Dundee. (S6T-01635)

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): Local recovery partnerships have been working hard to support affected communities across the country. The Scottish Government has been fully supporting that work, particularly around maintaining access and restoring transport routes. The Government moved at pace to activate the Bellwin scheme and is working with local authorities on their claims. The Scottish welfare fund is available to help families and people in Scotland through crisis grants and community care grants.

Ministers have already met to discuss how the Scottish Government can further support the recovery process. With the first meeting of the ministerial task force taking place on Thursday, we will seek to encourage co-operation between local recovery groups and to co-ordinate Scottish Government actions where they may support locally led recovery efforts. More broadly, we are working with local groups to establish what exactly is required. We have already provided £150 million on top of our long-standing £42 million in annual funding support for flood risk management, in addition to £12 million for coastal change adaptation over the course of this parliamentary session.

Tess White: The Scottish National Party Government seems to find money at the drop of a hat for pet projects but not for the people of Brechin. In the town, 60 council houses and 20 housing association homes need major repairs. Some 45 static caravans and park homes have been damaged, while countless owner-occupiers in Brechin, Finavon and Tannadice are facing massive repair bills. Businesses such as Brechin Castle Centre are losing as much as £100,000. Meanwhile, Angus Council is scraping the barrel from its own reserves. Three weeks on from storm Babet, people simply want to know what financial support they will get from the Scottish Government, and when.

Tom Arthur: As I outlined in my original answer, we moved at pace to activate the Bellwin scheme, which is in place for exactly such types of circumstances. As the First Minister stated on his

visit to Brechin last month, we recognise the unprecedented nature of the events; the repair and recovery will be a long-haul endeavour and the Government will be there for the long haul to support those communities. We are engaging closely with our colleagues in local government to ensure that the support that is required is clearly identified, and we stand willing and ready to work in partnership with local government to ensure that the support is delivered.

Tess White: Over the past 48 hours, storm Debi brought another weather warning and more anxiety for residents and businesses. Shockingly, the ministerial task force that the minister mentioned is meeting only on Thursday—after four weeks. Time marches on.

That ministerial task force should have met weeks ago to look at recovery and assess ongoing flood risk. What urgent action is the Scottish Government taking with partners such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to reassess the flood risk and reassure residents that they are safe as more storms loom large on the horizon?

Tom Arthur: I reassure the member that the Deputy First Minister led engagement with ministerial colleagues last month and that the ministerial task force will meet on Thursday. That will supplement and complement the efforts that are already under way and have been under way since last month, and we will continue to engage with our local government partners on the ground.

More broadly, on the issues of mitigation and adaptation, the Government is taking a range of actions in recognition of the impact that climate change will have on the weather environment in which we operate. That is reflected in hard money through capital investment, support for local government and working in partnership to deliver resilience and flood improvements. It is also reflected in our regulatory environment, not least in what we took forward in national planning framework 4.

As I said previously, we recognise the unprecedented nature of such events and the scale of what is required to support recovery, and we are committed to working in partnership with our local government colleagues to deliver that.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Given the severity of the impact of storm Babet on Angus, Aberdeenshire and Dundee, and on my constituency in Perthshire, does the minister recognise the concern and alarm that members of the public feel about the extremity of the weather conditions that we are now experiencing? My constituency took very serious impacts from such conditions again yesterday.

Will the Government, as a consequence of that recognition, acknowledge the importance of taking speedy action in relation to climate mitigation measures? The hard choices that we have to make as a society cannot be avoided, as a consequence of the frequency of the incidents that we are experiencing. There have been many incidents since the events of early October that have had severe effects on our communities.

Will the Government prioritise that climate action to protect members of the public?

Tom Arthur: I can confirm that to the member. It is an extremely important point. We must recognise that, as well as there being a moral imperative for work on adaptation and mitigation of climate change for future generations, climate change is with us in the here and now. That not only requires us to take action across our regulatory environment in support of measures such as flood defences but underscores the need for us to develop the way in which we respond to crises, to ensure that we can provide rapid support.

That is why a ministerial task force is being convened and why the Government is making a significant investment to support flood defences across Scotland. I reiterate that we are absolutely committed to being there for the long haul for those communities that have been impacted by the events of storm Babet, to ensure that a full recovery is achieved.

Violence Against Public Sector Workers

2. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to a Unison survey that reportedly shows a 31 per cent increase in the number of violent incidents against public sector workers in the last year. (S6T-01631)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): All workers, including public sector workers, deserve protection from abuse and violence. The courts have extensive powers to deal robustly with assaults, and sentences all the way up to life imprisonment are available. We fully support the courts having those powers and would encourage reporting of incidents to Police Scotland.

The Unison survey that was referenced by Katy Clark highlights incidents in schools and nurseries in particular. At this stage, I declare an interest as my wife is a local authority teacher and equity officer. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has recently chaired two stages of a relationships and behaviour in schools summit to ensure that schools are safe for pupils, teachers and support staff. The third stage of that summit is due to take place later this month.

Katy Clark: The Unison research shows that nearly 55,000 violent incidents against public sector staff were recorded last year, which is a 31 per cent increase from the previous year. However, many parts of the public sector, such as some of the big health boards, did not provide data. Does the cabinet secretary agree that all parts of the public sector need to co-operate so that we can get the best information in order to address these serious problems?

Neil Gray: I appreciate Katy Clark's question. Yes, that is important. Responding to freedom of information requests is a matter for each public authority. However, understanding the extent of violent incidents is an important aspect of being able to respond to the issue. It is important that information in that area is made available so that everyone can understand the extent of the problems.

Katy Clark: The cabinet secretary specifically referred to problems in schools. The research showed that, of the 35,000 verbal and physical attacks on council staff, the majority occurred in schools, and mostly against support staff. Will he outline more fully what support is being put into schools and what resources can be made available to address the problem?

Neil Gray: My colleague Jenny Gilruth, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, is working on the issue and, as I said in my original response, the third stage of the summit is due to take place later this month. I suspect that the conclusions of that work will be set out thereafter.

An additional point of reference for Katy Clark is that the First Minister and I will be meeting the Scottish Trades Union Congress later this week—we meet it biannually—when I expect some of those issues to be discussed in more depth.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Recently, Fife Council appeared to vote through a policy under which bullies and those who assault our teachers in schools—I share the minister's concern on that issue—might not be punished. Is the minister supportive of that move? What impact does he think that that might have on public sector worker victims?

Neil Gray: Obviously, we cannot tolerate abusive behaviour towards staff, support staff and other pupils, including bullying. We will continue to provide targeted education programmes for our young people on the risks of violence and on its effects as a whole.

We and partners across the education sector advocate an approach for schools and local authorities to work with pupils on the underlying reasons behind such inappropriate behaviours. We want all pupils to respect their peers and staff, and we are supporting a number of programmes

to promote positive relationships and tackle indiscipline, abuse and violence. That includes good behaviour management, restorative approaches and programmes to help to develop social, emotional and behavioural skills. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is involved in on-going work on ensuring that behaviour in schools continues to be targeted and is appropriate.

Ferguson Marine

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on Ferguson Marine. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:17

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):

Today's statement maintains, once again, this Government's commitment to update Parliament on the progress in the building of two new ferries, the MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa—vessels 801 and 802—at the Ferguson Marine shipyard in Port Glasgow. It also gives me an opportunity to reassure Parliament that we remain committed to doing all that we can to ensure a sustainable future for the yard, and are working with it to find a way forward that will maintain shipbuilding and all the benefits that that provides to the community in and around Inverclyde.

MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa will provide lifeline connectivity for the community on Arran, ensuring access to healthcare and education services, supporting day-to-day commercial activity and providing a boost to the tourism industry, which contributes so much to the island's economy.

The delivery of the ferries matters, and I welcome the scrutiny provided by this Parliament and, in particular, by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and Public Audit Committee. This scrutiny is right and proper, and I want to take this opportunity to reiterate my commitment to being as open and transparent as possible as their work progresses and concludes.

In that regard, I note that the Public Audit Committee wrote to me recently requesting further information on a number of matters. I can give an assurance that that will be provided in a timely manner, wherever it is commercially appropriate to do so.

First, I will provide an update on the delivery of the two vessels. In doing so, I will address issues that have been raised in relation to the certification of the vessels and provide an update on the pathway to their handover to CalMac Ferries.

In his update to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee at the end of September, the chief executive officer of Ferguson Marine indicated that the delivery of the vessels had been complicated by issues related to certification by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and that, as a result, the estimated costs to deliver both vessels had increased.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is a United Kingdom-wide regulator that plays a vitally important role in providing certification to ships and seafarers. It is engaged very early in the delivery of new vessels, particularly those of a first-in-class design, such as the MV Glen Sannox. That is consistent with shipbuilding practice across the world and allows for both refinement and development of designs in response to certifier input. The MCA engagement involves both its Scotland office in Glasgow and its UK office in Southampton.

We understand that the process of engagement between the MCA and Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd around Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa began back in 2015, with the formal approval process commencing in 2016. I understand from talking to the management at Ferguson Marine that they enjoy good relationships with the organisation as a whole and have worked well together in addressing concerns about the original designs. As reported by the chief executive of Ferguson Marine, a number of modifications have been made to the original design in the past few months in order to secure final MCA approval, including the provision of additional stairways from the upper decks of the ships. Those changes have been made successfully. Although there have been delays and increases to the chief executive's original cost estimates as a result, it was the right thing to do to make those changes on Glen Sannox, and the modified designs will be adopted for Glen Rosa.

More recent design issues involving below-deck escape trunks were being considered by the MCA. I am pleased to note that the chief executive officer has informed me and the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee that that process has been completed, with approval of those design modifications. That means that the vessel will move to phase 1 of the dockside trials before her move to dry dock for the next phase of work on 18 December. Final outfitting will continue when she returns to quayside and before the sea trials that are planned for January. There is further positive news on MV Glen Rosa from the chief executive, who recently announced that the planned slipway launch and naming ceremony has been set for 12 March 2024. I look forward to being kept apprised of that planned milestone.

However, as I said earlier, those changes have consequences. It was with much regret and incredible disappointment that I noted the most recent update from the chief executive, which set out delays to his projections of the delivery dates and an increase of estimated costs around the build of both vessels. His letter puts the total cost of delivering Glen Sannox at £130 million since the point of public ownership and at £100 million for Glen Rosa. That represents an increase of £32

million for Glen Sannox and £4.8 million for Glen Rosa from the cost estimates that were provided in September 2022. Of that, he reported that uncommitted spend at the end of September was £10 million for Glen Sannox and £45 million for Glen Rosa. He made provision of up to an additional £30 million to cover contingency issues that may arise, particularly during the sea trials that need to take place before the final handover to CalMac. He projected the delivery dates as being 31 March 2024 for Glen Sannox and 31 May 2025 for Glen Rosa.

We are currently working with the yard and our external advisers to scrutinise those costs and to do all that we can to assist Ferguson Marine in minimising contingency costs and delays. I will update the Public Audit Committee on the timeline for that work as soon as possible. However, it is worth saying that, on the basis of the information that we have from the chief executive, we remain committed to the delivery of both vessels by Ferguson Marine, and the conclusions that I reached in issuing a written authority earlier this year to continue building Glen Rosa at the yard, with all the benefits that that will bring to the workforce and the community, remain valid.

We will, of course, continue to monitor and scrutinise the costs and progress associated with the delivery of Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa as part of our due diligence exercise. There is no doubt in my mind that considering a re-procurement would be highly detrimental to the island communities that we serve, because it would likely push the delivery date for Glen Rosa back to 2028. I do not believe that anyone in this Parliament would want me to do that, and I am not prepared to let our communities down in that way.

I am conscious that the Public Audit Committee has asked me to consider what, if any, information from the previous due diligence reports carried out on the forecast costs that were provided in September 2022 could now be made available. I am looking at whether the passage of time has reduced the commercial sensitivity of those reports and will respond to the committee formally by the required date, but some of the content of those reports remains the intellectual property of the commercial advisers. In reaching a decision, I must always be guided by the need to ensure that we do not harm the ability of the shipyard to compete for and secure future work.

I will move on to the future of the yard. In considering the next steps for Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd after delivery of Glen Rosa, we have been very clear that our priorities are to preserve skilled jobs and secure a sustainable future for the shipyard. Earlier this year, we received a business plan and accompanying request for investment from the yard, and we are

currently working with it to refine those plans and put together a proposal that will provide the kind of future that we all want to see.

Any such request must meet subsidy control rules, as I have set out previously, and needs to demonstrate value for money and be open to parliamentary scrutiny. Our independent due diligence on the initial capital investment request concluded that the initial business case would not meet the commercial market operator test, which is a key legal requirement if we are to demonstrate compliance with the subsidy control regime, and therefore, we continue to examine options that would be compliant.

At the same time, the markets in which Ferguson Marine operates continue to change, and a key component of the initial case for investment was contingent on winning a specific pipeline of work that the FMPG board and management recently concluded should not be pursued at this time.

We and the yard recognise that it is vital that any investment supports a business plan that reflects evolving circumstances, is genuinely deliverable and meets our legal requirements on subsidy control. We will leave no stone unturned in finding a way forward, and we will consider all options for securing a future based on a promising order book. That will be done at pace, and I expect to report back on progress as soon as possible.

I understand that this may be unsettling for the workforce, but it is important that we get this right, and I hope that I leave no one in any doubt about this Government's commitment to retaining shipbuilding on the Clyde and providing future opportunities for the new and the future workforce in the local community.

I am committed to ensuring that these vessels are delivered as soon as possible to our island communities. I am also committed to doing all that we can to support the shipyard to secure a route to a sustainable future, and to do so we have committed to provide assistance to the chief executive in the development of a revised business case for investment.

The two ferries, one of which is nearing completion at over 84 per cent cost to complete, will support the Clyde coast communities for future generations. They will increase capacity and provide a boost for the island economy, which will have benefits in ensuring a vibrant future for businesses located there.

The yard remains of vital significance to the local, regional and national economy of Scotland. The progress that I have outlined today delivers on those commitments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question were to press their request-to-speak button now.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Many people would have been hoping for good news about the future of the yard. Workers will be watching this and feeling a sense of despair.

A cross-party group of MSPs wrote to the cabinet secretary on 7 September saying that investment in a new plating line is essential if the yard is to become competitive. David Tydeman asked for tens of millions of pounds for that—perhaps the cabinet secretary can say what the exact figure is—and he has been clear that a decision is time critical, but the cabinet secretary has said today that he cannot proceed. He talks about securing a future based on a promising order book, but there will be no such order book without that investment.

The cabinet secretary also talks about needing to see a revised business plan. Will he tell us what is lacking from the one that is before him? Does he genuinely think that the yard has a future without the further time-critical investment that has been asked for? It certainly does not feel that way.

Neil Gray: Graham Simpson asks me for good news. There is good news in my statement about the declaration from the MCA this morning allowing the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa to proceed. That is good news, as is the fact that the chief executive has come forward with a launch date for the Glen Rosa. That demonstrates the progress that is being made by the yard and the workforce in delivering on the commitments and what our island communities need from the vessels.

On the funding request, I set out in my statement the issues around the initial business case. The request for funding is still undergoing development. Any investment that is provided to Ferguson Marine has to comply with regulatory propriety and value-for-money assessments, as well as subsidy control legislation. We will continue to work with the yard on having a finalised application come forward, because it is not clear or definitive as yet.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The people of Inverclyde and the people of Scotland want a competitive shipbuilding industry. International benchmarking agents have made recommendations, and cross-party and cross-sector representations have been made for infrastructure investment in the yard. There has

already been a catalogue of mistakes by management and the Scottish Government relating to Ferguson Marine. Does the Scottish Government accept that there can be no further delay and that it cannot stand back and sabotage the shipyard by preventing it from competing competitively?

Neil Gray: I agree with Katy Clark that we want to see competitive commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde. We agree on that. That is why we are doing all that we can to support the yard on the delivery of the vessels—which is critical for island communities, the workforce and the reputation of the yard—and on coming forward with a business plan on what the investment in the yard will look like and be prioritised towards. As I said, the market has moved and the investments that the yard would want to see in order to get access to contracts have changed. We will continue to support the yard as it comes forward with a revised business case.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I welcome the update from the cabinet secretary on the progress that has been made with the work taking place at Ferguson's and his recognition of the importance of securing a long-term future for the yard and the sector in Scotland. What work has the Scottish Government done to seek out industrial partners to bring investment, technology and expertise to help to secure the yard's long-term future?

Neil Gray: As I set out, my officials have worked closely with the board and the chief executive to identify possible areas for investment and upgrade. Shipbuilding is a highly specialised industrial area, so we have to contract with specialist advisers to assist in identifying a path to a sustainable future, and that work is on-going. As part of our work to support the yard and develop a revised business plan for the request for capex, we are considering all options, including potential partnership opportunities. Obviously, that work is on-going. We will do what we can to ensure that that is made public as soon as considerations have concluded.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): How much did Ferguson Marine request for a new plating line?

Neil Gray: The business case and the request for capital investment in the yard have been set out previously in correspondence and discussions that I have had with the committee. We are now in the situation in which that has been revised—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, cabinet secretary.

The cabinet secretary has been asked a question. The person who has the floor should be

able to provide an answer without there being any sedentary chuntering.

Neil Gray: I have set out very clearly that the application for capital investment is changing. We will support the yard in coming forward with a business case and we will do what we can within the subsidy control legislation to ensure that, whatever capital investment is required to help to make the yard competitive, it will remain competitive.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I pay tribute to the workers, who have often found themselves at the mercy of ever-changing leadership, ownership and political rhetoric. The only way to sustain the yard's future is by ensuring that it can compete for contracts on merit. Can the cabinet secretary advise whether the yard is, indeed, becoming more competitive and how we can complete that journey?

Neil Gray: On Kate Forbes's initial point, I absolutely and whole-heartedly agree. I enjoy a positive working relationship with the shop stewards who represent the workers at the yard. For the reasons that Kate Forbes set out, I pay tribute to the work of the workers and the unions that have been representing them.

Officials are working with the yard to develop and refine the business case to ensure that the yard can continue to be competitive. Any investment that is provided to Ferguson Marine must comply with regularity, propriety and value-for-money assessments, as well as subsidy control legislation. Failure to comply would leave any award of investment open to legal challenge. My team and I are working together with the yard to do everything that we can to ensure that the yard is competitive for future work and to target areas where that might be possible.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has said that he must be guided by the need to ensure that we do not harm the shipyard's ability to compete for and secure future work. On that, we certainly agree.

It is also agreed that, as verified by consultants, to be competitive, the shipyard needs capital investment, particularly in a new panel line supplied by Pemamek of Finland. Other shipyards in the UK, such as Harland & Wolff in Belfast, are investing in such technologies. It also fits well with the UK Government's national shipbuilding strategy refresh.

Will the Scottish Government consider creating a programme of investment, perhaps through the Scottish National Investment Bank and Scottish Enterprise, that is available to all shipbuilding activity in Scotland regardless of ownership, and which will allow for such capital investments to be made to achieve the national strategic objective of

growing a shipbuilding industry? That would get round the restrictions of the commercial market operator test, which the cabinet secretary identified. Will he consider that measure?

Neil Gray: We are considering all avenues for supporting the yard and maintaining commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde. That is the whole reason why we stepped in and brought forward public ownership—we did that so that we could do everything that we can, with the powers and resources that are available, to deliver the ferries and maintain a future for commercial shipbuilding as best we can. We will consider all potential options for investment in the yard to ensure that it maintains competitiveness.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The cabinet secretary said that the Scottish Government remains committed to doing all that it can to ensure a sustainable future for the yard. On 12 March 2024, when the Glen Rosa is launched, the building of new ships will become even more essential. When will the Scottish Government announce an update about the small-vessels programme? With or without any new investment, will a decision be made on direct award, which would safeguard the future of the yard and the jobs in my community?

Neil Gray: I thank Stuart McMillan for his ongoing stout advocacy for his constituents in the workforce and for the yard, which is in his constituency.

We will consider future vessel contracts from public agencies case by case, and we will consider whether it might be legally possible and appropriate to use direct awards. Under procurement rules, direct award is possible only in limited circumstances, and breaching those rules could lead to legal challenge, which would cost the taxpayer money and cause delay. We will give all the options serious consideration.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Parliament will be forgiven for not celebrating the Glen Rosa's launch date, because Nicola Sturgeon's pretend christening of the Glen Sannox six years ago came with painted-on windows, fake engines and the wrong bow. It was enough to make Kim Jong-un blush.

Still our island communities suffer. David Tydeman, who is Ferguson Marine's chief executive officer, believes that the boats will be worth just £70 million apiece when they are finally finished. That is a fraction of the £360 million of taxpayers' money that has been spent on their construction. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that that is also the Government's assessment of the ferries' market value? Why has no Scottish National Party minister ever resigned over a scandal that can be seen from space?

Neil Gray: Alex Cole-Hamilton misunderstands the process by which shipbuilding happens. A launch date is the first opportunity for a ship to reach the water for the next stage of its build. That is the next stage for the Glen Rosa and is a normal part of the process to make progress on the building works.

Assessment of the vessels' value and how that is reported in the accounts will be part of the work that is done. That will all be publicly available when the work is completed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Given recent cancellations on the Brodick ferry route due to the weather and technical problems, what discussions has the cabinet secretary had with Ferguson Marine about the increased reliability and resilience that the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa will deliver when they enter service? When is that expected to be? The latter is the question that islanders are asking.

Neil Gray: The issues on the Arran route have a material impact on the constituents whom Kenneth Gibson represents, which he does so doughtily in the chamber. The new vessels and the related port works have been designed to improve capacity, reliability and resilience on that route. Port works at Brodick are complete, temporary works at Troon are nearing completion, and work is continuing on the review of the business case and costs for upgrades at Ardrossan.

As was set out in the yard's latest update to the Parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, it is due to deliver MV Glen Sannox by 31 March 2024. The vessel's deployment on the Arran route is expected to be in the summer, subject to completion of the build and successful sea trials. The final date for its entry into service is for CalMac to decide. However, everything that we and Ferguson Marine are doing is working towards Glen Sannox being operational on the summer timetable.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): We know that ferries are vital for island communities and their economies. However, we also know that many ferry services require upgrading or replacing. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we need a long-term strategy for ferry procurement, manufacture, maintenance and replacement, as we learn the lessons from the Ferguson Marine issues? We need community engagement, secure jobs, the decarbonisation of fleets, and a rolling programme of build and refurbishment for all our island communities. If he does agree, will those elements form part of the forthcoming green industrial strategy?

Neil Gray: In my answer to earlier questions on direct award and procurement of vessels I set out that we need to work with procuring authorities in

that regard and to ensure that decisions are proportionate and subject to the subsidy control elements. We will do everything that we can to ensure that there is certainty for island communities in the future. I will be happy to set that out in more detail in my regular meetings and updates with Green colleagues.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Today sees the publication of Audit Scotland's report on Ferguson Marine's annual accounts, which says that it is uncertain whether the yard can continue as a going concern. It also says that bonuses had been paid without the approval of the Scottish Government. According to the cabinet secretary, the board does not believe that the business case is based on work that it can possibly win, so it has asked for £40 million—I think that that is the figure that the cabinet secretary is looking for—to do something that it believes is not worth investing in. What will the business case be based on? What amount of money will be needed to keep this vital yard in operation?

Neil Gray: I thank Edward Mountain, the convener of the NZET Committee, for his question. As I said in my statement, I also thank him and his committee for their work in scrutinising the matter and ensuring that ministers and Ferguson's are held accountable for delivering the vital ferries for the island communities that need them so badly.

As I set out, the business case is now subject to change. We are working with Ferguson's and supporting it in that to ensure that it is responsive to changing market conditions and the areas of work that it is attempting to win. We will continue to do so, because we are committed to ensuring, as far as we can, that there is a sustainable commercial shipbuilding operation on the Clyde.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): It is clear that inflationary and other significant pressures could increase the costs of completing the vessels. Will the cabinet secretary outline what on-going control and scrutiny there will be to ensure that remaining costs will be tightly controlled?

Neil Gray: Yes, I will, because such control will be critical. Ferguson Marine is required to submit monthly financial reports to the sponsor directorate of the Scottish Government. Those are scrutinised by our technical advisers, by CMAL and by our finance teams to ensure that they are necessary and represent good value

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

Migration to Scotland: Scottish Government Proposals

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11237, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on building a new Scotland—migration to Scotland after independence.

14:46

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): Migration has had a hugely positive impact on Scotland throughout our history. We have been enriched by the contribution of those who have chosen to make Scotland their home. The positive impact of migration to Scotland can be felt in our families, in our communities, in our workplaces and, indeed, in this very Parliament. Every day, we see the important role that people who have chosen to make their home in Scotland play in supporting the delivery of our public services, in all sectors of our economy, in the academic and student communities of our colleges and universities and in our rich shared culture.

We should rightly be proud of the history of migrants in this country, but we also know that migration is vital to Scotland's future. For the past two decades, migration has been the main driver of population growth in Scotland. In addition to international migrants choosing Scotland as their home, inward migration from the rest of the United Kingdom to Scotland has been greater than outward migration from Scotland in every year since 2001-02. Migration matters to Scotland. That is why it is essential to continue to stress that Scotland is a welcoming and attractive country for those seeking to make a contribution here.

However, Scotland's migration policy is decided not in this Parliament but at Westminster. Both the Tories and the Labour Party want to keep it that way. That means that we are at the mercy of right-wing UK Government Home Secretaries who are seemingly determined to adopt ever more extreme language and policy positions. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything more damaging to Scotland's interests than the disgraceful, shameful rhetoric warning of a "hurricane" of migrants coming our way. Suella Braverman might no longer be the Home Secretary, but there is no indication that James Cleverly will change direction. For the current UK Government, the hostile environment has not been hostile enough. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, no matter the cost to Scotland, that is a price worth paying to maintain Westminster control over this Parliament and this country.

The Scottish Government takes a very different position. The sixth paper in our "Building a New

Scotland” series—“Migration to Scotland after independence”—sets out very clearly the problems of the current UK approach to migration and why it does not work for Scotland’s economy or for our communities. The risk that is posed by a declining working-age population presents fundamental challenges to the resilience and sustainability of our communities, businesses and public services.

Migrants can make a real difference in key sectors of our economy by strengthening and supplementing local skills, as well as by taking up jobs in regional economies that would otherwise be hard to fill. In line with our ambitions for a more entrepreneurial Scotland, research by the Federation of Small Businesses found that one in 10 small to medium-sized enterprises in Scotland is migrant led. That is why a coherent and flexible immigration system is crucial to Scotland’s success.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the minister recognise that initiatives such as the ScotGrad scheme have been particularly effective not just in placing postgraduate students from an international background in Scottish businesses but in encouraging export growth by using indigenous foreign language skills to promote business development activity, which helps to grow the Scottish economy and creates a virtuous cycle?

Jamie Hepburn: I recognise that having specific schemes that are predicated on specific outcomes can make a difference, and I will come on to that in a few moments.

Although it is only with independence that we can create a migration system that truly matches Scotland’s needs, the Government is already taking the challenges of demographic change seriously, and we are doing all that we can within the devolution settlement to make a difference. In 2021, we published Scotland’s first population strategy, which set out our aim to make communities across Scotland attractive places to live, work and bring up families in and to move to, so that Scotland’s population profile provides a platform for sustainable and inclusive economic growth and wellbeing.

To support the delivery of that work, we established a ministerial population task force that works across Government to consider how best to address those important issues. With the population strategy as our foundation, we are engaging with colleagues in local government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and our enterprise agencies as we develop our addressing depopulation action plan.

The Scottish Government has made repeated attempts to influence and shape the current UK system.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): On the population strategy and the focus of that work, does the minister acknowledge that there is a broad cross-section of opinion in Scotland that supports the Government’s concerns about the strength of the working-age population in Scotland and accepts that positive and proactive measures are required to tackle that issue? Does the minister accept that that frustration has to be addressed by solutions—I acknowledge that the Government is offering solutions—because of the severe impact that that factor will have on our economy and society if we do not address it properly?

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

Jamie Hepburn: Yes, I recognise the point that Mr Swinney makes. Specific sectors and organisations make that point frequently. I know that Mr Swinney will encounter that in his constituency when he meets employers from a range of sectors such as hospitality, food processing and agriculture, that rely on people who come from other parts of the world to work in Scotland. We also see social attitudinal research that shows that there is a recognition among the wider population that we need people to come here and live in Scotland.

To return to the point that I was making, in 2020, we published “Migration: Helping Scotland Prosper”, which details how a tailored migration policy within a UK framework could operate to meet Scotland’s distinct needs. The paper was informed by the advice and insight of our independent expert advisory group, as well as extensive engagement with employers, elected representatives, communities and organisations across the country. Our proposals were rejected almost immediately by the UK Government.

Undeterred, we sought to evidence how a place-based approach to migration—one that allows vital migrants to come to our rural and island communities—could be tested under a rural visa pilot scheme. We published a detailed evidence-based policy paper on that more than a year ago, but the UK Government is yet to engage on the substance of the issue.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Conservatives published their paper “Grasping the thistle—Our plan for economic growth”, which I cited in last week’s debate on fair work and which I will cite again, where they—

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A fine paper.

Jamie Hepburn: I can see that Mr Fraser is excited by that prospect. He will know that, in that paper, the Conservatives describe the migration shifts to our urban centres and the negative impact on our rural communities. Their analysis only serves to underline why our proposal for a rural visa pilot is an approach that is worth considering, yet their fellow Conservatives in Westminster refuse to engage.

We are a Government that is working with partners to address the issues that Scotland faces through the delivery of our population strategy. We are a Government that is trying to constructively influence and shape the UK migration system to better meet Scotland's needs. We are a Government that is asking for engagement with Westminster so that we can work together in Scotland's interests. However, we are also a Government that is continually met with dismissal and disinterest from the UK Home Office. That is the limitation of devolution.

It is only through independence that we have an opportunity to make sure that Scotland's migration policy is set according to our distinct needs and the challenges that we face. The proposals in our newly published paper describe a welcoming immigration system with a framework that balances the needs of its users with Scotland's wider demographic and economic requirements. The Scottish Government's vision for migration is underpinned by values of dignity, fairness and respect—values that are increasingly missing from the UK system to which we are currently subject, and values that will allow us to sensitively respond to the world around us and to Scotland's needs over time.

When we launched our paper in Dundee, the week before last, Shirley-Anne Somerville, Emma Roddick and I had the opportunity to discuss our proposals with stakeholders. We heard from local government, the third sector, higher education research, representatives of the culture sector, people who work directly to support refugees and asylum seekers, and those focused on ensuring that migrant workers are supported. The values that we set out in our paper were hugely welcomed. We heard about the challenge of working to support people in the current hostile environment, the economic opportunity that migrants bring to Scotland, how important it is to take a place-based approach to help with some of the unique needs in Scotland and the challenges presented by the ending of freedom of movement following Brexit.

We know that many sectors of our economy and many parts of our country, particularly rural communities, are feeling the real-life consequences of Brexit and the ending of free movement. That is why our paper clearly sets out

the Government's ambition to rejoin the EU as soon as possible and regain the benefits of freedom of movement. We will shortly have more to say on that in our on-going "Building a new Scotland" series.

Our paper sets out a system of visas that would allow people to live, work and study in Scotland and visit Scotland, as well as support inward investment and job creation. Those visas would form the core pillars of a managed, discretionary immigration system that would help Scotland's economy to prosper and ensure that we have the right people with the right skills in the right places. That is vital in helping us to address skills shortages across the economy.

We have also recognised the crucial importance of non-UK citizens to the delivery of public services. Take, for example, our vital health and social care services. Scotland's health and social care sector must have the ability to recruit workers from outwith the UK to help meet the shortfall in workforce capacity. That provides employment opportunities for people who wish to make Scotland their home and ensures the protection of our most vulnerable citizens.

Ensuring that we have a migration system that meets our needs is important for every aspect of our lives, and there are a range of proposals in our paper that describe just what we mean by a system that meets our needs. We would establish a live in Scotland route to allow people and their families to come to Scotland without the need of prior sponsorship from an employer, and we would incorporate a place-based element to that route. Building on the proposals that we have seen, we have been urging the UK Government to endorse a rural visa pilot, providing much-needed support for our rural and island communities. We would retain a seasonal worker visa but extend it to support a broader range of seasonal industries in Scotland, ensuring that the migration system serves all parts of our economy. We would introduce a five-year Scottish connections visa, supporting the ambitions of the Government's population strategy by providing a visa route for people with a connection to Scotland to return or remain here. Alongside the work in Scotland visa, that will increase the pipeline of talent that our employers need to grow our economy across every part of Scotland.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

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

Paul Sweeney: I thank the minister for giving way. He has been very generous with his time.

The minister mentioned the need to recruit health and social care workers, which has been a particular area of concern. Does he recognise Unison's recent condemnation of the proposal to increase visa fees for workers? Perhaps there is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to create a patient loan scheme or a grant scheme to incentivise workers to move to Scotland without having to incur those huge visa fees. That would be very cost effective.

Jamie Hepburn: We will always consider what we can do within the powers that we have, but it would be far better if we had those powers in our hands in the first place, so that we did not have to see those large fees put in place.

I have laid out some of the important and vital policies that we propose, but our paper does more than describe the mechanics of a migration system; it also demonstrates that migration is fundamentally about valuing people—those who already live here and those who wish to make Scotland their home.

The words that we use to describe people who wish to come to Scotland are important. We see Scotland's future migrants—individuals and families—as having something positive to offer to society, our businesses and our communities. We want to welcome people who can contribute in that way, and we are proud to set out detailed proposals and extend a warm welcome to Scotland.

Part of that welcoming approach is about removing unnecessary barriers to migration, which is why our paper makes it clear that Scottish visa fees—this relates to Paul Sweeney's point—would be set at a fair level. It ensures full-cost recovery but does not seek to generate excessive revenue. That would reduce costs for individual migrants and for employers seeking to bring those migrants' talent to Scotland to support their businesses.

The warm Scottish welcome that we want to see will extend to asylum seekers and refugees. As we face the increasing global impacts of international conflicts and climate disruption, we will not ignore our wider responsibilities. Today, Scotland provides a welcome home to many asylum seekers and refugees. Each of us will see that in the communities that we represent in here.

The proposals in our paper demonstrate our commitment to continue to offer sanctuary to people in need. We set out an approach that is firmly rooted in respect for international law, human rights and social justice. It sets out humane, compassionate policies that are rooted in support for integration, in line with our existing policy set out in "New Scots: refugee integration strategy".

A hallmark of the cruel nature of the UK asylum system is that those who are seeking asylum are simultaneously denied recourse to public funds and not allowed to find employment. A crucial means of supporting integration and ensuring people's dignity is to make sure that asylum seekers have the right to work and that they have access to employability support and public assistance. That is vital to reducing the likelihood of destitution.

That approach stands in stark contrast to the current inhumane asylum policies that restrict people's rights and limit support while they wait, often for far too long, for a decision from the Home Office. Tomorrow, we will learn the Supreme Court's judgment in relation to the UK Government's plans to relocate people to Rwanda to have any asylum application considered there. The UK should be upholding the United Nations Refugee Convention and supporting people who are in need of protection, not undermining international protections.

The UK Government's memorandum of understanding with Rwanda is an abdication of the UK's moral and international responsibilities to recognise and support refugees. I find it impossible to believe that any Government in an independent Scotland would pursue such a shameful policy. We would not seek to outsource any part of our asylum system to another country. We cannot prejudge the Supreme Court's ruling, but we can say that, now that Suella Braverman has gone, that policy should go, too.

An independent Scotland would have the opportunity to create a new approach to migration and asylum. That would allow us to ensure the efficient and timely processing of asylum protections in order to end the appalling backlogs that we see in the current system. It would include no Dungavel and no detention by default.

We want all communities to be able to thrive, and we want our economy to prosper. People choosing to come to live, work or study in Scotland will be key to our future success. That is why we need Scottish migration policy to be decided here, in this Parliament, and that is why Scotland needs independence.

I move,

That the Parliament notes that Scotland's population growth has relied on migration into Scotland; welcomes the fact that there are currently more people choosing to move to Scotland from the rest of the UK than those moving in the opposite direction; recognises the benefits of EU freedom of movement, which was lost as a result of Brexit; agrees that a decline in the working population would damage Scotland's public services and economy; deplores the UK Government's hostile rhetoric towards migrants, and welcomes the proposals in the Scottish Government paper, "Migration to Scotland after independence", for a humane migration system tailored to Scotland's needs.

15:02

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I had a familiar sense of déjà vu while reading the Scottish Government's motion ahead of today's debate. Aside from the usual criticism of the UK Government, there is also some powerful spin on inward domestic migration, despite the fact that we know that, according to the recent census, Scotland's population has seen the least amount of growth across the UK.

We have yet another debate about a Scottish Government paper on separation that is full of hypotheticals and conjecture. We have debated migration and population four times during the current session of Parliament—to my mind, nothing has changed substantially since we discussed migration back in June. We could have used this time today to debate how we reverse the trend of rural depopulation, as highlighted in the recent census data that has been published, or to have a wider debate about delivering new ferries for island communities and why there are further delays and added costs for the vessels that are currently being built.

Instead, we are debating an issue that is simply not a top priority for the people of Scotland. The fact is that the constitution itself is not even one of people's top 10 priorities. This debate is yet another sign that the Scottish Government wants to avoid talking about the things that people actually care about. In the spirit of debate, I will try to address some of the issues that the paper raises, but I reiterate that we should not be debating an issue that not only is hypothetical but does not come within the remit of this Parliament.

Jamie Hepburn: The member suggests that this area is not a priority for the people of Scotland. Would he recognise that many of our public services, such as social care, and many areas of our economic life, such as hospitality, food processing and agriculture, have relied on people coming from other places to Scotland, and that those areas are a priority for the people of Scotland?

Donald Cameron: Net migration has doubled—I will come on to that—but the real issue for the minister is why his Government has failed to improve those public services, given that his party has been in power for the past 17 years. Immigration is plainly a matter that is reserved to the UK Parliament. It is up to any party here to determine how it uses its debating time, but people across Scotland will be unimpressed that this is what the Scottish Government chooses to focus on, not least because the independence papers, of which the paper under discussion is part, have already cost the taxpayer almost £80,000 and counting.

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Donald Cameron: I will continue.

That £80,000 is on top of the £1.5 million that the Scottish Government allocates to civil servants who are working on its independence prospectus.

This latest paper makes a series of bold claims of what the Scottish Government would do differently while simultaneously acknowledging that any attempts to change immigration policy would be complex. Buried away on page 51 of the paper, it notes that

“a review by the Law Commission to provide recommendations for simplification took over two years.”

It also lists a series of new visas that it would establish, including its so-called live in Scotland visa, which would incorporate a place-based element to tackle rural depopulation.

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

Donald Cameron: Not at the moment.

Although the sentiment might be welcome, the fact remains that Scotland's rural population has been in free fall for some time and the Government has failed to use the Parliament's existing powers to tackle the root causes of rural depopulation, which include a lack of available and affordable housing, poor infrastructure, unreliable ferries and a higher cost of living.

More widely, there is a desperate need for economic regeneration across Scotland. That is how we attract people to the country. From 2007, that is what should have been at the centre of the Government's policies.

At its heart, the paper fails to address the reasons for Scotland's population's stagnation. As I said at the beginning of my speech, Scotland has had the lowest rate of population growth of anywhere in the UK, and that is for a variety of reasons, namely mortality, fertility and migration. I want to reiterate a couple of points that I have made on those key factors in past debates.

On mortality, data published by the National Records of Scotland states that Scotland has the lowest life expectancy of all UK countries, and it declined for men and women between 2018 and 2021. Scotland also has the lowest fertility rate of all the UK nations, and it has been declining gradually since the mid-2000s. The Scottish Government's own national population strategy states that Scotland's total fertility rate has fallen from 2.5 in 1971 to a record low of 1.37 in 2019.

On migration, the Scottish Government might want to state that more people are moving to Scotland from the rest of the UK than are going in

the opposite direction, but it cannot ignore the fact that Scotland has consistently taken below its population share of international migrants.

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I agree with the member that we could take more migrants; that is exactly what the Scottish Government is offering to do here and through responses to humanitarian crises such as that in Gaza. It is the UK Tory Government that is refusing to give us the powers to accept more migrants or to open up clear routes to a life in Scotland. That is what we have laid out in our paper.

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

Donald Cameron: I say to the minister that, instead of debating a paper on a hypothetical migration policy in the event of independence, what the Parliament should be debating and what her Government should be doing is answering the question of why not enough migrants come to Scotland. The most recent data that is available from the NRS shows that, in the year up to June 2021, Scotland's net migration stood at 18,900 compared to a UK-wide net migration figure of 239,000. That is well below our population share.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Donald Cameron: No. I have already taken several.

The reasons for that are many. It might be because Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the UK, with anyone who earns more than £27,850 in Scotland paying more in income tax than someone earning the same elsewhere in the UK. It might be because the Scottish Government has failed to deliver its infrastructure pledges, such as its dismal failure to deliver the roll-out of superfast broadband to all homes and business on time. It might be because the Scottish Government is failing to build homes, especially in rural parts of Scotland, which is driving rural depopulation.

Instead of debating the reasons behind those existing challenges, we are here debating a hypothetical scenario. Rather than focusing on the immediate priorities of the people of Scotland, we find ourselves spending time debating a paper that has no grounding in reality. It is a wish list of ifs and maybes, and it fails to address any of the existing reasons that prevent people from choosing Scotland as their destination to call home.

We should be focusing on the real challenges of today rather than on the Scottish Government's obsession with independence. Members on the Conservative benches will continue to use our

time in the Parliament to debate those pressing issues and to stand up for Scotland's real priorities.

I move amendment S6M-11237.1, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"regrets that Scotland has consistently taken below its population share of migrants, compared to the rest of the UK; acknowledges that Scotland is the highest taxed nation in the UK; agrees that a decline in the working population would harm Scotland's public services and economy, and recognises that the Scottish Government must work with the UK Government to address these long-term population challenges."

15:10

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Today, we have the opportunity to discuss issues of migration, including migration to, and internally within, Scotland. I welcome the chance to discuss how we deal with population challenges and the consequences that they have on our economy, our public services and our communities. I also welcome the opportunity to shine a light on the failure of the current Conservative Government in Westminster to get to grips in a humane and dignified way with the challenges that we face in migration, refugee and asylum systems.

We cannot avoid the fact that today's debate is not set in the context of action that we could take right now in Scotland or in the context of how we might bolster our public services and invest in the skills of our people. Rather, we are having another debate in the context of independence. I question the value of spending time in the chamber debating the Scottish National Party Government's latest series of hypotheticals. Then again, if I were part of this Government, I, too, would not be keen on debating reality at the moment.

We have reached number 6 in the "Building a New Scotland" series of papers from the Scottish Government—another paper outlining the Scottish Government's vision for an independent Scotland. However, if it was not readily apparent, independence is not on the horizon, and this is just the latest in an ever-changing landscape of what independence is, will be or might not be, according to the SNP. Perhaps, like many similar documents, it will simply lie gathering dust while present needs remain unaddressed.

As I acknowledged in my opening comments, the Government motion lays out again in some detail the population challenges that Scotland faces. We have discussed that issue in the chamber before, and it has been well documented by Scottish Government papers and other bodies, including National Records of Scotland and the Office for National Statistics. Our debates in the chamber on the challenges have often been constructive and positive, and members from

across the chamber have spent time trying to find common solutions, without simply retreating into constitutional binaries.

The headline figures from the 2022 census on population growth compared with the rest of the UK and with the previous census period only just scratched the surface. We have heard much already about the challenges that persist. On population age, the registrar general's latest annual review of demographic trends showed that Scotland now has more people aged over 65 than aged under 15. We know that there are significant challenges due to an urban-rural divide. Most central belt local authority areas saw increases in population over the past decade, whereas a 2020 report from the Scottish Council for Development and Industry demonstrated that many of our rural and island communities are expected to experience a major decline in population by 2041.

There is no denying that those trends are posing challenges to our public services, not least to our national health service, and are affecting the national productivity rate and skill shortages, which we are currently experiencing and which will continue.

In that context, I ask the Scottish Government why we are not spending more time debating how to fix the issues in the here and now and why we are spending our time hypothesising about how the issues might be addressed in an independent Scotland. If the Government's answer is that—we have heard this already today—we can solve the problem only with the full powers of independence, I believe that that is an incredibly defeatist attitude and that the Government should vacate the front benches and get out of the way for people who are determined to work on solutions in the here and now.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): In the spirit of looking for solutions to the issues that Paul O'Kane has rightly outlined, I note that Labour is keen to get the keys to number 10, so how would Labour's policy on immigration differ from that of the Tories?

Paul O'Kane: I am grateful to Ms Forbes for her positive engagement and for sounding positive about the prospect of a Labour Government. I am about to come on to talk about Labour's approach to the variations in migration in nations and regions and how we might change the Migration Advisory Committee to work better. In my remarks, I will speak about Labour's approach to immigration, supporting much of the detail that is laid out in the Government's paper about how we support countries in the global south to ensure that they are more resilient and to ensure that safe routes exist for people coming to the United Kingdom.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Paul O'Kane: I have just said that I would go on to address the point that Ms Forbes raised. If the minister will allow me to make some progress, I will perhaps take an intervention from him later.

I was speaking of the challenges in rural Scotland. When I visited Tyndrum earlier this month, I was told repeatedly by the businesspeople to whom I spoke about the need for more adequate housing in rural and island areas. The Scottish Land Commission has called for a focus on new models of house building in rural areas. That will be one plank of helping to address the imbalances that exist in rural populations, as it will ensure that there is a pull factor to those areas.

Similarly, we know from the Withers report that there is a major skills gap in Scotland that is causing significant workforce problems for many sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, agriculture and tourism. Therefore, we do not need to think about hypotheticals in order to begin upskilling and reskilling large segments of the population to meet workforce shortages and to provide better outcomes. What we need is investment and the Government to follow through on the recommendations that are outlined in the Withers review and other documents.

I turn to the point about the hostile environment created by the Conservatives at Westminster. In his contribution, the minister said that the hostile environment was rightly opposed by the Scottish Government and that it was not the direction that it would take. However, I am surprised that, in the past week or so, organisations such as JustRight Scotland have called on the Scottish Government to heed the recommendations in the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's report on asylum seekers in Scotland to ensure that there are strong policies in place to mitigate the Illegal Migration Act 2023. It does not seem as though the Government is willing to bring forward an action plan to mitigate the effects of that act. The Government said over the summer that it would do so, but that no longer appears to be the case. When Emma Roddick gets to her feet, perhaps she might be able to explain why the Government is taking that approach, when it seems so keen to challenge the Conservatives on their rhetoric and policy.

Jamie Hepburn: This Government will, of course, always seek to do what it can, but I ask Mr O'Kane respectfully: is mitigation the highest hope that he has for this Government?

Paul O'Kane: I want the Government to use the powers that it has. In the current situation, we have a Conservative Government that does not seem to care and that is bringing in legislation that

is pernicious, as I have said previously, yet the Scottish Government does not seem to want to mitigate it. Why is that? *[Interruption.]* What is the point of the Scottish Parliament if not to mitigate the policies of the Conservative Government, which will then be replaced—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr O’Kane, will you resume your seat for a second? There have been plenty of interventions. The minister has just had an intervention. I do not think that it is appropriate for him to resume his seat only to heckle from a sedentary position.

Mr O’Kane, you may resume, but could you begin to conclude, please?

Paul O’Kane: I do not think that we will get an answer as to why no mitigation is forthcoming.

As I said in my answer to Kate Forbes, a UK Labour Government would reform and strengthen the Migration Advisory Committee so that it has input from across the nations and regions of the UK to ensure that a visa system can work for all nations and regions, not just Scotland. That is why a UK Labour Government would follow through on a plan to fix the asylum system, scrapping the unethical and unworkable Rwanda scheme and reforming the legal routes for refugees to ensure that people are no longer exploited by smuggling gangs. That is the height of my ambition for this country.

When the people of Scotland are thinking about a more realistic, more actionable plan to support Scotland’s population and reform migration in this country, there are two visions to compare: a Labour plan that can be enacted at speed from day 1 of a UK Labour Government next year, and the Scottish National Party’s proposal, which involves wishing on the never-never to set up a migration system the look of which we are not certain about, while failing to deal with the real issues that exist right now. The Scottish Government is choosing not to mitigate or to deal with those issues in the myriad of ways that are available to it. That is why I am pleased to move the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S6M-11237.2, to leave out from first “welcomes” to end and insert:

“deplores the UK Conservative administration’s hostile rhetoric towards migrants; notes the Scottish Government paper, Migration to Scotland after independence; agrees that a decline in the working population would damage Scotland’s public services and economy; expresses its concern that recent UK and Scottish governments have left Scotland lacking the skills that it needs for the future; welcomes, therefore, the commitment from the UK Labour Party to build an immigration system that works for all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, and agrees that, as well as ensuring that skills bodies in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK are frequently consulted, in order to inform the immigration system, there is more that the

Scottish Government should be doing now to plan for the skills needs in the Scottish economy.”

15:19

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am not even sure what we are doing here, frankly. I am profoundly reluctant to linger on this SNP—*[Interruption.]* If members could give me a moment of their time, I would be very grateful.

I am heartily sick of us spending any of our time on this SNP-Green Government’s latest delusional independence paper. I am sick and tired of indulging in discussing its dead-end fantasy in the precious time that has been given to us in this chamber. How much ink has been wasted? How many words have been spent? How many hours of civil servants’ time and of our time have been squandered on plans and proposals that it must surely know will never see the light of day?

The Scottish Government needs to cease production of its independence papers and reassign the civil servants working on them to areas that actually reflect the priorities of the people of Scotland—such as addressing the cost of living, ridding our rivers and lochs of sewage and fixing the crisis in our national health service. Those are the priorities for the Scottish people. They are what they sent us here to address, so they should be the priorities for the Scottish Government, too. However, here we are.

Jamie Hepburn: I wonder whether Mr Cole-Hamilton would reflect on the fact that it is somewhat galling to hear a man who leads a group of four telling the Government that was elected with a democratic mandate to take our work forward that it should not be doing so. We stood on a platform to take it forward and we have every right to take it forward. Why does he think that he knows better than the people of Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: For the past two and a half years—since the most recent Holyrood elections—waiting lists have increased, the educational attainment gap in our schools has widened, and the cost of living pressures felt by families and communities in this country have gotten worse, in large part because of ministerial disinterest, as ministers are instead focused on a constitutional white elephant.

We must debate immigration today. That is clearly what I must retain my remarks to, so I will do.

I am a Lib Dem and I care passionately about those people half a world away I may never meet. I also believe, fundamentally, that immigration makes our country stronger and more prosperous.

I will not talk about immigration in some unlikely independent Scotland; I will talk about how we can improve the situation in the here and now, in the United Kingdom.

At the foot of the statue of liberty on Ellis Island in New York, these words are inscribed:

“Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”.

Those words speak to a cornerstone of western liberal democratic world-view: a belief in diversity and in pluralism—that more unites us than divides us, and that immigration is a positive thing.

Until just yesterday, however, we had a Conservative Home Secretary who used the term “invasion” when speaking of those seeking refuge on these shores. Gary Lineker was exactly right when he referred to the language of Germany in the 1930s. I am deeply concerned at the hostile atmosphere and the rhetoric that has all too often been apparent in respect of refugees and asylum seekers. I cannot see that the Scottish Conservatives have made any effort in calling that out. It goes without saying that the end of the former Home Secretary’s tenure is very welcome and, indeed, long overdue.

It is incumbent on all of us, both at Westminster and here in this Parliament, to be clear and forthright in our defence of the virtues of immigration. Its benefits can be measured in growth of all kinds—cultural and economic to name just two. Indeed, people arriving on these shores to establish and build thriving businesses is part of our Scottish story, whether they were immigrants from Ireland in the 17th century, those arriving from the continent, including from Italy and Poland, at the height of the industrial revolution and following the second world war, or those who came in the 1960s and 70s, when many arrived here from India, Pakistan and Uganda. They were all welcome. They are all welcome. They have made a welcome contribution. Right up to this present day, thousands of Ukrainians have arrived in search of safe harbour here. They have been welcomed into Scottish homes and in communities.

Immigration has enriched this nation, bringing new cultures, languages and traditions, which have melded with and enhanced our own. It has created jobs and filled labour shortages in key industries, while bringing new perspectives and fresh ideas, which have driven innovation and growth. They are our friends. They are family. They are us.

It is not news to the Parliament that my party is proudly the most pro-European party in the United Kingdom. We believe in Europe for Europe’s sake. Brexit has been bad for this country, and we have

lost a lot because of it. I am pragmatic and I am remorseless about building bridges and re-establishing connections with our European friends and neighbours. We will never solve the problems caused by Brexit by creating yet further separation and chaos by separating the United Kingdom.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): The member makes a completely erroneous claim that his party is the most pro-European. Can he tell us what his position is on rejoining the European Union?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I fundamentally believe that our best place in this United Kingdom is as a full member of the European Union. I have always believed that. That is why my party’s approach is practical, remorseless and pragmatic, yet completely unrepenting.

John Swinney: But—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: There is no but. That is it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Swinney—enough of the sedentary interventions.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I make no apology for that. Any ardent remainder will see the fallacy and the lie of the Scottish National Party, which believes that independence is somehow a lifeboat to membership of the European Union.

John Swinney: Will the member give way on that point?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Cole-Hamilton for giving way. I would encourage him to think carefully about the language that he has just put on the parliamentary record. Would it not be a complete answer to Mr McKee’s intervention for Mr Cole-Hamilton to say that he might be all in favour of EU membership but he is going to do nothing about it?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I say again that my belief is absolute that we were fundamentally better off as full members of the European Union. The Liberal Democrats’ approach is realistic and pragmatic, but it is utterly remorseless towards that aim. The EU would not have us for years, but we are trying to build and re-establish those connections right now, whereas the SNP offers, for one, a pipe dream that is based on no relevance whatsoever to the Maastricht accession criteria and hopes that its belief that an independent Scotland can gain EU membership will convince ardent remainers to join the SNP in its separatist cause. My goodness, they will find the SNP out. They have already found the SNP out.

In 2016, the UK voted to leave a union that we had been part of for less than 50 years, and what

chaos that has caused. What chaos, then, might be wrought by dissolving a union that has lasted for 300 years and more? How fortunate it is that today's motion has sought to use such an important issue to further the SNP's narrow nationalist political ends.

That is a far cry from the sort of grown-up politics that we desperately need right now, which this Parliament was designed to foster and which our constituents want to see. Instead of stoking those further divisions, Liberal Democrats want to undo the damage that has been caused by the Conservative and SNP Governments, by building a fair and effective immigration system that treats everyone with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

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

15:26

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): A few years ago, out of curiosity and with a passion for genealogy, I sent off my DNA to find out my genetic make-up. My father and I are keen genealogists, and I really enjoy the shared passion that we have, so you can imagine the joy when my father also did his DNA and we were confirmed as matches. [*Laughter.*]

As I prepared for my speech today, I logged in to check the updates for my DNA profile, as profiles often change as the technology updates and improves. I am 88 per cent Scottish, 7 per cent Irish, 4 per cent Norwegian and 1 per cent Danish/Swedish. As I contemplate the complex mixes of human DNA, I am reminded of the vital role that migrants play in Scotland's history and future, and as I look through the many records with my dad and trace the steps of those gone before, it creates a connection between us and them and paints a picture of diverse and mobile people.

Those connections support an understanding of human existence. It is no different for us, as we are here today in Scotland; we sometimes desire to live where we can get work, where we are safe and where we are ultimately going to survive, like many people across the globe. It is human nature to want to create a better life for ourselves and our families.

Migrants' contributions are invaluable, from bolstering our economy to enriching our culture, particularly in rural and island areas. Our nation has been, and continues to be, shaped by migration. The influx of people from the European Union had transformed Scotland. It helped to reverse the trend of population decline and brought a surge of cultural diversity and global perspectives.

The progress that we have made is, however, under threat from UK Governments past and present. From dragging us out of the EU against our will to the Home Office's "hostile environment" approach to immigration, being shackled to the United Kingdom will do nothing but hinder us as we try to address Scotland's unique demographic challenges. We are bound by those UK policies and, as long as we are, our efforts to address those issues are severely constrained.

Those currently going through the UK Government's cruel asylum system are unable to work under UK employment law, and some of them are receiving just £9.58 a week. That is pitiful, leaving some of the most desperate people in desperate conditions. Without independence, we are able only to mitigate the cruelty dealt by Westminster. That is not a good enough position to be in.

I am proud that our Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee has called on the Scottish Government to provide free bus travel for people in the asylum system. There are things that we can do and are doing, but we need to do more.

The overlooking of the immense value that immigrants bring to rural communities, such as those in the north-east, especially in my Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency, has persisted for too long. Westminster's control over migration policy, epitomised by the hostile environment, has inflicted considerable harm on migrants and Scotland.

With the full powers of self-governance, Scotland can forge a migration policy that is finely tuned to the needs of our people, businesses and the economy. The specific challenges that communities in the north-east face, which have been long overlooked by Westminster, would be directly addressed. For example, the fisheries sector, which is integral to the livelihoods of communities along the Banffshire and Buchan Coast, is grappling with worker shortages and struggling to fill vacancies. If the north-east is to thrive, we must take our immigration policy into our own hands.

Paul Sweeney: Does the member recognise that other federal migration systems, such as Canada's provincial nominee programme, could be beneficial to Scotland and could be the basis for further negotiation under the devolved settlement?

Karen Adam: I would have to look into that a bit further, but I am willing to do so. I think that the Scottish Government is willing to do anything that it can to try to resolve the problems within the limited powers that we have.

There is another way. The vision that is outlined in the latest "Building a New Scotland" paper

charts a course for an independent Scotland in which the migration system is driven by humanity and dignity, fully realising the benefits of migration for our society and economy. The vision includes protecting the rights of migrants, with free movement within the EU as a priority, underlining our commitment to being an open, inclusive nation.

Most of all, the paper is a clear example of the commitment to be a welcoming country where we value the contribution of migrants. It is a call to the rest of the world that we see migration as the positive that it is and that we acknowledge that human diversity is vital to tackling ignorance.

Overall, a well-managed migration policy could be a significant asset for an independent Scotland, supporting its economic growth, demographic stability and cultural vibrancy.

Next year, my father and I will travel to Europe to trace the steps of our ancestors further afield. I know that that will be a poignant reminder of how interconnected we, as humans, are and of how countries have so much to gain from each other. Far from the bigoted anti-immigration little Britain rhetoric, we will be reminded of how migration enriches our cultural diversity and fosters social cohesion. Migration will enhance Scotland's attractiveness as a multicultural independent society.

15:33

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I am deeply disappointed by this Government's decision to spend valuable parliamentary time debating fictitious hypotheticals about what would happen if Scotland were ever, one day, to become an independent country and leave one of the most successful unions in history. There is no word on the big issues from the Government this week. There is no word on what support it will offer to families being squeezed by living costs, no word about how it will tackle the mounting storm that our national health service faces this winter and no word on how it will punish the health secretary, who tried to get away with spending £11,000 of taxpayers' money on data roaming charges that were incurred while he was on holiday in Morocco. Instead, we have the misplaced priorities of this secretive and incompetent SNP Government.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: No, I will make some progress.

Instead of addressing those legitimate concerns about ethics and the management of our public services, this Government has launched a paper on migration in an independent Scotland, which is something that is very unlikely to happen—it is

almost impossible that it could happen—in the current session of Parliament, given that its referendum date has passed. In other words, valuable Scottish parliamentary debating time is being wasted. Nearly £80,000 has been spent on the past five papers in the "Building a New Scotland" series. A minister on £100,000 a year is focused on the wrong priorities. Nearly £1.4 million of taxpayers' money is being spent on civil servant salaries for this Government's party political crusade for independence.

Kate Forbes: I just want to take on board the member's point about not dealing in hypotheticals, dealing with big issues and not wasting money on court cases. In the light of all that, what is his view on the Rwanda policy, the outcome of which we anticipate tomorrow?

Craig Hoy: It is quite clear that we need to have safe and legal routes into this country. We must also ensure that we disincentivise the people smugglers who are trafficking people and causing misery. We will wait to see how that court case progresses tomorrow.

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: No, I will not. I will make some progress. I have only six minutes.

We should not be debating these fictitious papers but should, instead, be focusing on our health service, our police, the cost of living crisis, jobs, competitiveness, and those two ferries that our island communities do not have—everything that the SNP Government does not want to address. For example, just in the past week, more than two in five patients waited more than four hours to be seen at accident and emergency in NHS Lothian. Nurses and doctors have no room to flex as winter approaches.

Let me address the implications of independence on migration into Scotland. First, let us nail some of the lies and focus on the fundamental truths that the Scottish Government is ignoring. Scotland has consistently taken below its population share of migrants compared with the rest of the UK. In the year ending June 2021, Scotland's net international migration was 18,900, which is below its population share of the 239,000 taken UK-wide at the same time. Only 4 per cent of UK visas were issued to immigrants who chose to work in Scotland between 2016 and 2020, despite Scotland having around 8 per cent of the UK population—only 4 per cent of those visas went to foreign workers who were intending to live in Scotland during that period.

Net migration to the UK is at a record high, despite what the SNP says. Total long-term immigration was estimated at 1.2 million in 2022, and immigration was 557,000—

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: No, I do not have time. Migration continues to add to the population, with net migration at a figure of 605,000. Put simply, England is a more desirable place to work for migrants compared with the SNP's Scotland. The pitfall for any future Scottish Government, should the disaster of independence ever befall us, will not be the challenge of attracting people to this country but how we stop them leaving, particularly those industries and higher-rate taxpayers who contribute disproportionately to our public services.

In short, the SNP has made Scotland an unattractive place to move to. It is the highest-taxed part of the UK, and its world-leading education system now has record low scores in maths and science. Professor Lindsay Paterson from the University of Edinburgh said:

"Scotland is now one of the worst-served education systems in the developed world for the quality of its statistical data. That's vandalism it seems to me."

Scotland is now ninth out of 10 in attracting migrant workers to the UK, and even when people move around within Scotland—

John Swinney: Will the member give way at the third time of asking?

Craig Hoy: I will.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Hoy for giving way. One of the statistics that he missed out was the record of Scotland in relation to the attraction of foreign direct investment, in which Scotland, for many years, has delivered a performance second only to London and the south-east of England. Why does Mr Hoy not recognise the attractiveness of Scotland as a place for foreign direct investment?

Craig Hoy: If that foreign direct investment is being leveraged properly, why does Mr Swinney think that the Scottish economy has underperformed that of the rest of the UK for a number of years?

To go back to my main point, however, even when there is migration within Scotland, the SNP Government does not fairly reflect it and leaves councils such as East Lothian—the second fastest-growing area in Scotland—badly short-changed when it comes to the local government settlement. That has put huge, significant pressure on general practitioners and local health services in the area that I represent.

The SNP Government is focused on the wrong priorities. When will it wake up and recognise the day-to-day concerns of the Scottish people? When will it focus on the people's real priorities?

15:39

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I start by declaring a personal interest in the topic. As a first-generation migrant to this country, who came to the UK from Pakistan as a wee girl, I look at how the UK immigration system treats people now with a deep sense of sadness. That is largely due to the treatment of those who come here either searching for a better life or new opportunities, or, as in my case, just to join their families. Like many members, I feel a sense of sadness at the loss of opportunities in an immigration system that has been taglined as a "hostile environment", for heaven's sake.

I am relieved that Suella Braverman no longer serves as UK Home Secretary. Although I am already disappointed in some of her successor's rhetoric, I have never known a more intentionally and dangerously divisive person to hold such high office. The fact that the Prime Minister allowed her to hold on to the office for so long means that the damage that has been done is on him.

Immigrants are woven into the rich tartan that makes our country what it is. Our early history was a melting pot of Britons, Picts, Angles, Gaels and Norse. More recently, Scotland has been enriched by substantial migration from Ireland in the 1800s, from Pakistan and south Asia from the 1960s and from the EU more recently. Those are just examples. People from all over the world live in and contribute to our communities. We are a cultural mosaic and rightly proud of it.

However, that attitude is not reflected in the UK Government's immigration policy agenda, and, bitterly, I see no space for that to change under the current system. Indeed, Labour's invention of the "hostile environment" immigration system has simply been carried on by the Tories. Keir Starmer has not indicated any substantial break from what the Tories have inflicted or what they threaten to do.

I know that many members are deeply anxious about tomorrow's Supreme Court verdict on Rwanda deportations. It is such a callous and cruel policy—it is truly the worst of our politics—but the paper published by the Scottish Government at the beginning of this month clearly demonstrates that there is a different way. We have a problem in Scotland. Inward migration is the sole contributor to population growth. Short of rather archaic drives to get families producing more children, the only way that we will have population growth, which we know is a major influence on economic growth, is to have more people from around the world come here and call this place home.

The Tory amendment to the Government motion attempts to distract from the issues that the paper

raises. However, it is fair to talk about Scotland being competitive in attracting migrants. Although the detail must be fine tuned, commitments to visa routes through the live in Scotland route, the Scottish connections visa, the work in Scotland visa and the family visa would certainly show that our nation is welcoming and not hostile. If we had the power to do that, I suspect that Scotland would be taking more than our population share of migrants compared with the UK.

The committee that I convene, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, last month published its report on the experience of asylum seekers in Scotland. As members will be aware, we spoke extensively to many organisations, including Refugees for Justice, which has published a paper on creating a new asylum system for Scotland. I also commend the work of Professor Alison Phipps, Sabir Zazai and many others for their involvement in that. Most important, however, are the voices of asylum seekers and refugees. The treatment of people who come here through necessity, not choice—they are among the most vulnerable people—is harrowing to hear.

They are thrust into a place of hopelessness, dependency and fear. There is no legal route outside very limited nation-specific schemes for refugees seeking asylum in the UK. That only heightens the threat of the Tory Rwanda deportation plan. Let us be clear: Rwanda has a poor record on human rights. Three months ago, a woman was charged in Kigali for wearing shameful dress. Two years ago, a journalist was arrested and remains in unlawful detention. In the same year, a YouTuber was jailed and is serving 15 years for criticising the President. There appears to be an endless list of human rights violations, unlawful detentions and disappearances of people who have dared to criticise the Government. Sending vulnerable asylum seekers to Rwanda is not the deed of a caring and compassionate nation.

I am pleased that the blueprint that was set out for an independent Scotland makes it clear that there would be safe legal routes for people to claim asylum in our country. I also commend the mention of those who are displaced due to climate change, which is a growing issue around the world. A humanitarian visa would play a significant role in the Scottish Government's commitment to climate justice and demonstrate a clear gap between the UK's agenda and that of Scotland.

Our strength is in our diversity. We must never stop weaving the tartan that makes our communities survive and thrive. I commend the Scottish Government's work on that, and I hope to see much of it come to fruition in the near future.

15:45

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to debate ways of bringing more workers and families into areas that face depopulation. There needs to be a longer-term approach that looks at the fundamental issues that cause depopulation in remote and island communities. Inward migration will be successful in rural and remote communities only if there is the infrastructure, housing and jobs to allow people to live in them. The Scottish Government should prioritise using the powers that it has to attract businesses and retain families instead of focusing on the powers that it does not have, which, even if it had them, might not really change the dial at all with regard to rural depopulation.

Emma Roddick: Will the member give way?

Rhoda Grant: I am going to make some progress.

Sadly, depopulation is increasing. It has been projected that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar will experience a population decline of 13.7 per cent between 2014 and 2039. That is the largest decrease for any council area in Scotland. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission and National Records of Scotland, the population of the Highlands and Islands could decrease by up to 16 per cent in the next 20 years. Without Government action, those areas will soon be unsustainable.

Fundamentally, depopulation means that we need local interventions. There must be enough jobs and houses and reliable transport. The lack of access to services is causing people to leave those communities.

Emma Roddick: The statistics that Rhoda Grant references reflect the concerns that we are trying to address. Will she welcome the forthcoming addressing depopulation action plan, which has been worked on with input from local authorities such as Highland Council? Will she clarify her views on our rural visa pilot, which will go some way in helping to up the working-age population in those areas?

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

Rhoda Grant: All those interventions are welcome. The trouble is that, without the infrastructure, we cannot expect to have inward migration or expect people in those areas to stay. Expecting migrants to fill the gap simply exploits their vulnerability rather than providing them with vibrant communities.

Those issues were addressed recently in Labour's Gaelic plan. We have focused on providing good homes for rural communities;

building resilient and reliable ferry networks; delivering a skilled workforce; supporting small businesses; ensuring that there is a transition to net zero that provides communities with energy benefits; and, obviously, promoting Gaelic, especially in Scotland's creative industries. That recognises that, when a community dies, so does its language, and that we need to sustain those communities.

All those actions will lay stronger foundations, and people will move into and stay in those communities. Those points were also made in the Scottish Council for Development and Industry's report "An Economy for All of Scotland: Harnessing Our Potential for Everyone, Everywhere".

Instead, 33 per cent of households in remote rural areas are in extreme fuel poverty, compared with 12 per cent in accessible rural areas and 11 per cent in the rest of Scotland. Although fuel poverty is always unacceptable, those figures show starkly the urban-rural divide.

Transport services are also abandoned in rural areas. There is no progress on the A9 or the A96 dualling. Transport Scotland has estimated that £19 billion-worth of goods are carried on the A9 between Perth and Inverness each year and that 40 per cent of the traffic on the A9 is goods vehicles, including large articulated lorries. The CalMac Ferries fleet is not fit for purpose. This year, the fleet has had 65 per cent performance for reliability to timetable in the Outer Hebrides, with 11 cancellations. Flights are not faring much better, with lifeline services being cut. For most rural communities, buses are non-existent. It is little surprise that people are leaving.

I cannot speak in a debate on migration without looking at illegal migration and especially human trafficking. We have a Conservative Government in the UK that is legislating on migration in a way that provides a gift to traffickers. The national referral mechanism, which people who have been trafficked are referred to for their situation to be verified, takes far too long to process their applications. That delay leaves victims in danger from their traffickers. While they wait, their traffickers can seek revenge.

The threat of deportation and the Rwanda policy prevent people from seeking help from the authorities because they risk being categorised as illegal migrants with no rights or protections. The conditions in which people are kept while they wait also leave them vulnerable. Children are being kept in hotels, which is absolutely unacceptable.

Lone children are even more vulnerable, and more than 400 are missing. What on earth has happened to those children? Traffickers force them to take on the danger of the Channel

crossing alone and pick them up easily at the other end. Sadly, only 12 per cent of police investigations into global trafficking lead to a conviction.

We need to deal with this. Inward migration can help us to repopulate our declining communities and provide a much-needed labour force, but, first and foremost, we must provide a response of compassion and humanity to migrants while growing resilience in our communities.

15:52

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): When the Government brought a motion to the chamber last week to hold a debate on Scotland having an immigration policy that suits Scotland's needs, the Labour and Tory parties challenged that motion, and they are doing that again today.

There is no doubt that the topic that Martin Whitfield proposed last week has some merit. Homelessness is a scourge on our society and one that the ex-Home Secretary Suella Braverman—who has, thankfully, now been sacked—thought that she could eradicate by destroying the tents that homeless people have clearly made a "lifestyle choice" to live in. Naked, callous Tory values are on display yet again, and I am sure that at least some of our Tory colleagues in the chamber are utterly ashamed to be associated with such a political choice.

Paul Sweeney: Does the member recognise the supreme irony of the Home Secretary's comments about homelessness being a "lifestyle choice" when it is Home Office policy that risks putting more than 1,400 people on the streets of Glasgow imminently because of the expedited approach to resolving asylum claims in the city?

Jim Fairlie: I could not agree more.

However, the motivation behind Martin Whitfield's amendment last week was as disappointing as it was glaring in its real agenda. We have always known that the Tories will put the union first—their party's name refers to the union. It is no surprise that they would throw a tantrum at the mere mention of a debate in this Parliament about an immigration policy for Scotland's benefit because, for the Tories, only the big Parliament in Westminster that Stephen Kerr is desperately trying to get himself elected to—while he tells our First Minister that he should know his place—should get to decide how Scotland's immigration policy works. Why? Well, it is for the Tories to justify that argument to the people; it is certainly not for me.

I said at the start of my speech that the Labour attack on the Scottish Government's decision to

debate how to improve Scotland's future was more surprising, but was that the case in reality? The early architects of paragraph 1(b) of schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 prevented the people of Scotland from deciding our constitutional future without Westminster's express permission. However, the irony is that, during a Select Committee on Scottish Affairs session in 1998, as the then Scotland Bill was being scrutinised, it was Henry McLeish who said:

"I think it comes ... to the point that in five, ten or 50 years' time the United Kingdom will be a very different place constitutionally and in governmental terms. What I do believe is ... right is to leave it to the separate parts of the"

UK

"to work out their own particular destiny."

Despite that, paragraph 1(b) of schedule 5 to the 1998 act was imposed.

The current Labour members do not even want us to debate the issue in the chamber. It is an issue that will add value to our economy, make us productive, bring in tax revenue for vital public services and generally help to build the feel-good factor that our country needs, especially when things have been absolutely trashed by the other unionists—the Tories. Is that not a far cry from the vision that Henry McLeish outlined, which was that we should choose our own destiny?

Scotland is renowned as a place that welcomes people with open arms and an invitation to join us, be part of our communities, contribute to our society and help us to build our economy. We should rightly be proud of that. That is in such stark contrast to Braverman's Trumpian rhetoric, which led to far-right violence on the streets of London at the weekend. Having the ability to create laws in Scotland that will allow us to continue to be a welcoming country, as opposed to the alternative, is essential to us for many reasons.

In 2021, I did a political slot on Channel 4 that highlighted the difficulties that Perthshire berry and fruit farmer Peter Thomson had in getting his blueberry crop picked. One illustration of the true cost of Brexit is that Peter no longer grows that fruit for commercial harvest in Scotland, despite having been one of the pioneers in bringing it here in the first place. In that piece, I also talked about the millions of pounds of veg that were ploughed back into the ground in Perthshire and Fife. That, too, represents the true cost of Brexit Britain.

We know that social care, the NHS, tourism, the food and drink sector, hospitality and construction are all desperate for workers. All those good, skilled and valued industries, which help the health of our people and build our economy, are being held back because of a lack of workers, which has largely been caused by a hostile environment that

refuses to recognise their value. Try telling a European-trained restaurant sommelier that they are unskilled, and then ask them to come here and work in our industry. I can tell members what their answer will be, because they are already saying, "No, thank you."

Those are just some of the issues on which we could do so much better by having an immigration policy that suits our needs. The live in Scotland visa route will focus on the skills that we need, which will incorporate place-based elements to encourage a repopulation of working-age people in our remote and island communities. Picking up Rhoda Grant's point, I note that the Scottish Government has already decided that it will put money into rural housing to ensure that such infrastructure is there. We will have a scheme to welcome the diaspora in that a Scottish connections visa route will bring them to the home of their ancestors. We will also have seasonal workers visas and family visas.

Rhoda Grant: Does Jim Fairlie not agree, though, that the Scottish Government's intervention on rural housing covers commuter areas and country towns as well as remote rural areas? How many such houses does he think the Scottish Government will actually build in remote rural areas?

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

Jim Fairlie: The Scottish Government's record on building such houses—125,000 so far—is exemplary compared with what the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition did before it was ousted from power many years ago.

In short, we will have an immigration policy that suits our needs, and we will continue to be the welcoming place that we have always been. The latest paper that has been produced by the Scottish Government demonstrates the vision that exists to make Scotland a wealthier, fairer and more welcoming place, and it is a vital addition to the next stage of building belief in ourselves and asking the question, "Independence—why not, Scotland?"

15:58

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To be in the kind of country that is so safe, secure and attractive that people want to live here is an immense privilege. To be in a position to offer sanctuary to people who are fleeing war, persecution and disaster is also such a privilege. To have a widely recognised international reputation as being friendly and welcoming is an immense privilege, too.

Most people in Scotland would agree with that position, as would most people across the UK. Research into public opinion would certainly indicate that that is the case. However, it could not be further from the approach that has defined UK immigration and asylum policy—not just under the current Tory Government, but for decades beforehand, by the Governments that preceded it.

Immigration policy should always recognise the inherent worth and rights of each individual. No human being is illegal, and we are not just units of labour. The patch of land that we were born on and the state that governed it at the time should not determine the extent to which our human rights are respected. The “Building a New Scotland” paper sets out a vision for an independent Scotland’s migration and asylum systems that would respect universal human rights. It would be a privilege to live in a country that lives up to such values

Scotland can—and does—welcome refugees and asylum seekers with open arms, despite the barriers that the Home Office throws in our way, such as the deliberate destitution policies that Paul Sweeney has just mentioned. We saw that welcome when the Syrian resettlement scheme was launched. Every local council in Scotland signed up almost immediately, thereby making it clear that they were ready and willing to take in far more Syrian refugees, particularly unaccompanied children, than the Home Office would allow.

However, the immigration debate at Westminster has been defined by a race to the bottom. Since 2010, the Tory party has become increasingly radicalised. Sadly, Labour’s UK leadership has, more often than not, felt the need to accept the premise of that hostility. At best, it has compromised on it; at worst, it has tried to outdo the Tories, as we saw recently when Rachel Reeves stated that the problem with the current Home Office is that it is not deporting people fast enough. I know that that perspective is not shared by many Labour members of this Parliament, but it is the position that they will be asking people to vote for in next year’s general election.

Paul O’Kane quite rightly described the Illegal Migration Act 2023 as “pernicious”, so why has Keir Starmer refused to repeal it? Britain’s new Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, pledged in 2010 that the UK’s net migration figures would be reduced to the tens of thousands. What followed was an escalation of cruel and damaging UK Government policies, such as the cap on skilled migration, minimum income thresholds and the ramping-up of detentions and deportations, although that was clearly not fast enough for Rachel Reeves’s liking.

The Home Office has shown us that it will go to any length to criminalise, punish and dehumanise

vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers—from dawn raids to prison-like detention centres such as Dungavel that are entangled in reports of human rights abuses. Children were forced to lie on the floor pretending to hold a rifle so that Home Office officials could decide which of them were likely to be the real former child soldiers. Thousands of other children have disappeared completely and have been lost by the Home Office. LGBTQ asylum seekers have been forced to answer deeply invasive questions to prove their sexuality or gender. There has been damning report after damning report about the abuse and humiliation that have been faced by those who have come here seeking safety.

Scotland can do so much better, but there is no reason to believe that a more humane system can be achieved through Westminster. Only with the powers of independence can we establish an immigration and asylum system of which we can be proud. It is also the case that only with independence can we establish a migration system that meets our needs. Immigration is not just a huge social good for Scotland; it is a necessity for economic sustainability and for the continuing functioning of key public services.

Free movement in Europe is one of the continent’s greatest achievements. It is a source of profound sadness to most of us in this Parliament that we have all lost that right, but it has also resulted in acute skills shortages across various sectors of our economy and public services. Our rural communities have felt that impact more than anyone else, as have areas such as Inverclyde, which face some of the sharpest rates of depopulation.

As an independent nation and a full member state of the European Union, we could regain the economic and social benefits that came with freedom of movement. As a country with full powers over our migration system, we could welcome people from anywhere in the world who want to make Scotland their home, because it is a privilege to do so and because it is a straightforward necessity for a country with an ageing population, fragile rural and coastal communities and acute shortages across key sectors and services.

Some years ago, I spoke about the experiences of people whom I met on Lampedusa, which is an Italian island north of the Libyan coast that is often the first point of arrival for refugees who are coming to Europe. I have seen the suffering that comes when nations such as the UK refuse to provide safe routes for people who are seeking asylum. I met a teenage boy whose friend had drowned right in front of him a few days before, when they made that dangerous journey. I met a young girl who had been held in sexual slavery

and was pregnant as a result. Another boy was the first climate refugee I had ever met. His family's farm in Ghana had been lost to desertification, so he was forced on a journey that led to him being held as a slave in Libya before he eventually made it to Lampedusa.

I have said a few times that to offer sanctuary is a privilege, but it is also our responsibility, given the UK's role in driving climate breakdown, in selling arms to human rights abusers, in propping up authoritarian regimes and in directly engaging in conflicts such as the one in Afghanistan. The vast majority of people in Scotland—people who are pro-independence and people who are anti-independence—want this country to be a welcoming one. Craig Hoy, who is not in the chamber at the moment, mentioned the need to provide safe routes. Where are the safe routes for the Afghans who worked with British soldiers for 20 years during the occupation? Where are the safe routes for the Afghan nurses, women judges and police officers whom we abandoned to the Taliban?

Only with the powers of independence can we in Scotland achieve that vision of being a welcoming nation and seize the opportunity and hold the incredible privilege of making Scotland a truly welcoming country.

16:04

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Unlike some, I welcome the debate and the opportunity to speak in it, because it is about the importance of migration to Scotland's economy and to the social and cultural fabric of our country.

As the minister has already mentioned, much work has shown the economic value that migrants bring to Scotland. He mentioned the FSB's report on the impact of migrant businesses. The business start-up rate among migrant communities is twice that of the rest of the population, which cements Scotland's place as an outward-looking nation. Of course, we need to mitigate the damage that is being caused by Brexit and the UK Government's hostile environment for immigration.

The history of Scotland is the history of migration, and many of us will have stories of ancestors who have come from near and far. It was interesting to listen to Karen Adam's story; I wish her and her father well in finding out more about their background. In my case, of my eight great-grandparents, only one was born in Scotland.

I very much welcome the Scottish Government's "Building a New Scotland" paper, which is focused on what we would do to increase migration with the full powers of independence—powers that are necessary to deliver Scotland's full potential

economically and in many other respects. In sharp contrast to the UK Government's approach, the Scottish Government's approach is humane, dignified and principled.

Data shows that more working-age people come to Scotland from the rest of the UK than go in the other direction, which many Opposition members fail to appreciate and recognise. That fact is recognised in the Scottish Government's motion. It is instructive to note that both the Conservative and Labour amendments would delete that reference. Neither of those parties can bring itself to welcome some Scottish good news, which is very telling and sad.

However, we need to recognise that a lower number of international migrants find their way to Scotland. I suspect that that is largely a consequence of international migrants going to places where they already have cultural, family, language or other links and, therefore, gravitating towards pre-existing communities. I ask the Scottish Government to do some analysis of that in order to understand not just what the data shows but what we can do to address that challenge.

It is necessary to devolve powers before we inevitably get the full powers of independence so that we can, as soon as possible, put in place a migration policy that reflects Scotland's economic and wider needs. I fail to understand why, on this matter, the Labour Party—as in the debate on fair work last week—does not want the Scottish Parliament to have powers to do what is right for Scotland. Labour intends to wait and hopes that a UK Labour Government, if that happens, would do something that would benefit Scotland's economy rather than that of the rest of the UK.

We need a vision of what Scotland's population should look like. As I said, the paper is welcome and addresses everything that it needs to address in terms of where we want to get to, but we need to get down to the brass tacks and the nuts and bolts if we are to understand what the size of Scotland's population growth could be compared with population growth that we have seen in our neighbours. I believe that, 100 years ago, Scotland's population was broadly similar to what it is now, but Norway's population has doubled over that period. What is the potential for Scotland's population and where do we want people to be to support our rural environment?

Paul Sweeney: Is the member aware that, during the 19th century, Scotland's population increased by more than 140 per cent, so there are historical precedents for Scotland performing much better?

Ivan McKee: That is a welcome intervention. I was not aware of that statistic, but it absolutely

shows what is possible and how closely population growth is tied to economic success. A strong Scottish economy will, of course, attract people from around the world.

It is important that we have a whole-Government approach in order to be ready for an increase in migration. I welcome the work that has been done to provide in Scotland a home for a disproportionate number of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. We should continue that work. We should make sure that we have housing provision, particularly in rural areas, and make sure that other infrastructure is ready when people come here. That provision needs to be lined up with our understanding of what we want Scotland's population growth trajectory to be in the coming years and decades.

The reality is that we can do much more with the powers that we have. Notwithstanding the fact that, in order to address the problem fully, we need the full powers of independence, there is much more work that we can do to attract yet more people from the rest of the UK. As the data shows, Scotland is already an attractive location. We need to focus more on that and understand in more detail what we can do in the short term to bring more people from the rest of the UK and, in particular, from international migrant communities, as I mentioned.

There has already been mention of the Home Office's decision to batch process refugee and asylum cases in Glasgow. That is putting significant short-term pressure on Glasgow City Council and others, but it shows that there is scope for Scotland to attract yet more asylum seekers from the rest of the UK if we have in place the services to deal with that. Clearly, there are, in terms of our lack of borrowing powers, challenges in addressing that fully, but I believe that that is something that we should focus on.

I absolutely welcome the paper and the way that it addresses the issues and positions Scotland as a welcoming country for migrants. I ask the Scottish Government to understand the data on international migration, to consider what we can do to attract more migrants from the rest of the UK, to continue to push for more powers and to take a joined-up Government approach in order to understand what we need to do to put in place services—housing in particular—to welcome more migrants as and when we are able to attract them to Scotland.

16:11

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is disappointing that the release of yet another taxpayer-funded independence paper has led to valuable parliamentary time being taken up

today when we could have been debating issues that are priorities for families in Scotland, for example. However, the fact that the debate is taking place will not be surprising to anyone who is familiar with the tactics of this Green-SNP Government. I will be supporting the amendment in the name of Donald Cameron.

The SNP's latest independence paper follows a familiar pattern of highlighting certain challenges facing Scotland. It then blames them on the current UK Government and pretends that the problems would go away if it only had the powers of independence.

We have seen this all before. Back in 2013, in the independence white paper "Scotland's Future", the SNP claimed that Scotland needed a points-based immigration system. It also claimed that it wanted to reintroduce the post-study work visa and that there were not enough international students who were able to choose Scotland as a place to study. Ten years on, we find that the UK has a points-based immigration system, the post-study work visa has been reintroduced and the number of international students at Scottish universities has increased by more than 40 per cent.

As we have heard today, total net migration is now double what it was a decade ago.

Jim Fairlie: Does it not bother Alexander Stewart that it took a Westminster Government to make those decisions, when Scotland needed to make them 10 years ago but was not in a position to do so?

Alexander Stewart: We have heard, and we continue to hear, from the SNP what its hopes and aspirations are, but the people of Scotland have chosen not to make those decisions. As I said, the SNP can continue to bring forward papers and try to smokescreen the situation, but the people of Scotland do not want independence. We will continue to see independence not be a priority for the people of Scotland.

Given all that, the new paper talks about what the SNP would like to see. The paper contains no talk about what has been achieved to date. The obvious truth is that the paper is less concerned about finding real solutions to real problems and more concerned about stoking political grievances. We have seen those political grievances many times in the past.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Alexander Stewart: Not yet.

Time and again, the Scottish Government's new paper talks about the problems and claims that they would all be fixed if only it had the powers that it does not yet possess. For example, the paper talks about the importance of seasonal

workers. Indeed, it highlights some of the challenges that have been happening—we know that permanent UK residents make up about 11 per cent of seasonal agricultural workers. The UK Government is, and has been, tackling the issue by bringing in the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. That started as a pilot and it brought thousands of individuals to us. The scheme was then extended—

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Alexander Stewart: Eventually, Mr Swinney, but not yet.

The scheme was extended to 30,000 workers in 2021, and to 40,000 in 2022. For 2023 and 2024, the scheme has been extended to 55,000 workers, depending on the demand.

I give way to Mr Swinney.

John Swinney: I am grateful to Mr Stewart for giving way. He has sat with me in a number of meetings in Perthshire with NFU Scotland, where we have heard—despite all that he talks about today—about the chronic shortage of agricultural labour. Although some improvement has been welcome, we are still lagging behind on employment in that sector. Why does Mr Stewart not recognise the weakness of the solutions that the United Kingdom Government has put in place and the fact that this Parliament could do something better?

Alexander Stewart: As Mr Swinney recognises, we attend similar meetings. However, as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said, it is now providing enough visas to meet the sector's workforce needs, and there have been, and continue to be—

John Swinney: No.

Alexander Stewart: Six thousand workers have come to Scotland each year through the scheme. Many of them have come to areas of Fife and Perth and Kinross that fall within the region that I represent and the constituency that Mr Swinney represents. The scheme has been key to addressing some of the labour shortages.

The SNP likes to blame those shortages on Brexit, as it has done many times before. In reality, however, the problem is not specific to the UK—we have seen the same problems across Europe, where many countries are just as badly affected.

It is not surprising that the Scottish Government would rather talk about solutions that do not deal with the detail or with what we are trying to achieve. It talks only about the problems that are being created, which it always maintains lie at the door of the UK Government.

Time is moving on, so I will conclude. Those points demonstrate the biggest problem with the SNP's new paper: it talks about what Scotland cannot do, rather than what it can do. The Government's new strategy rightly talks about the importance of making Scotland

“an attractive and welcoming country”.

However, the mistake is to think that it does not have the powers to do that already. It has those powers. It is time that the Government, instead of complaining about the powers that it lacks, used the powers that it has to make Scotland the attractive, dynamic destination to live and work in that it truly can be, given the potential that it has.

I support the amendment in the name of Donald Cameron.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Claire Baker, who joins us remotely.

16:17

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I start by recognising the huge contribution that is made to our economy, to businesses, to public services and to our society by the many people from around the world who have chosen to come to Scotland. We want to make our country not just a welcoming place for migrants but one that supports and provides for them, as it should for everyone who lives and works here.

As our amendment makes clear, the UK Government's rhetoric on migrants is unacceptable. It is also regrettable that the UK Government has not been willing to engage with the Scottish Government on previous proposals regarding a Scottish visa and the development of a tailored policy within the UK immigration system. That engagement, however frustrating it may be, is still required, and both Governments need to find a way of working constructively rather than continuing to pursue division.

With regard to the Scottish Government's approach to migration prior to the publication of the current paper, I have previously worked with Humza Yousaf and Ben Macpherson on immigration policy, on which they sought consensus and common ground. They were involved in a process that recognised the benefits of working together as a Parliament so that we could speak with a common voice to engage with the UK Government.

Today, I have to say, there is a change of tone. Although Ben Macpherson, as the previous minister, did not hide his preference for an independent immigration system, he engaged positively with members in the chamber. I regret today's more divisive debate, in which the

Government does not seek consensus on an issue that I think we all care about.

We want an immigration system that works for all parts of the UK. The current approach is unable to take account of the distinct needs that we have in Scotland, or those in other parts of the UK. The Scottish Government should find a more constructive discussion with a UK Labour Government, which would reform and strengthen the Migration Advisory Committee with input from across the UK, working to develop a visa system that works for all parts of the UK. We have lost freedom of movement, but we can create a fair immigration system that regains the benefits of free movement for our economy and society.

The most recent figures show that Scotland's population growth is slowing and that it compares unfavourably to other parts of the UK. The declining trends in the birth rate continue, and migration remains the sole driver of population growth. We know that a number of factors have affected population numbers and the long-term population challenges that Scotland faces. It is vital that we develop a policy response that takes account of those, including the concentration of populations around towns and cities, access to fertility treatments and barriers that result in older people who want to keep working not being able to do so.

Population changes are a huge challenge for local councils, whether through the impact of depopulation or of rapid population growth, and that varies across the country. Although we argue for a migration system that better reflects the distinct needs of our country, we also need an improved local response to supporting population changes in our communities. That means properly funding our local authorities so that we have the vital infrastructure, housing, planning and education in place.

Recognition of Scotland's demographic challenge is not new, and it is not specific to Scotland. If our own response is focused on immigration, we are competing with other countries that are facing their own pressures. When we talk of an ageing population, we should also remember that our population is fitter and healthier than it has been in the past and that there are benefits to offering more flexible working options for those who want to pursue them, regardless of their age. That feeds into the wider importance of offering quality, secure employment to a working-age population that is more flexible to individual circumstances, so that people are not excluded from employment on that basis.

Alongside immigration, we need to look at other ways of addressing population decline and use the powers that we have to focus on depopulation and poor economic growth, including through the

provision of quality housing and employment opportunities. Attracting people to live and work here—the Scottish Government has targets to attract people to Scotland from across the UK—means making sure that the services that people need, such as healthcare and education, are being delivered. That means that, rather than stretching services that are under pressure, we need to provide proper resources for them to support our communities.

I will close with a brief mention of societal attitudes and the importance of continuing work in that area. The Government's paper refers to the survey on public attitudes to immigration by Migration Policy Scotland, which was published in September this year.

The survey shows that, although attitudes towards immigration in Scotland might have warmed since 2014, with the majority—59 per cent—believing that immigration has had a positive impact on Scotland, the figure believing that it has had a positive impact on their local area is not as high as that, sitting at 48 per cent. Although 38 per cent of respondents thought that immigration should be increased, 62 per cent either want it to remain as it is or would like to see it decrease.

Scotland is a place where we want everyone to feel welcome. We want to encourage people to choose to live and work here and for them to be supported and welcomed in our communities. Part of that means doing all that we can to highlight and appreciate the contribution of immigrants to our society. Although there is division in the Parliament this afternoon, members are traditionally very good at that, and we can speak collectively on the issue. However, we have to recognise that there are still challenges in some attitudes within our communities and their ability to welcome people and recognise the benefits, and we all need to work together to address those.

16:23

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): The primary reason why we should be discussing the issue today is that it is in the hypothetical that I find any hope. This country's immigration approach has descended to such a state that it is incumbent on all of us to consider what we can do to improve the system, the policy and our approach to those who seek a new life here.

I will start with what Claire Baker said. She indicated that there are areas of consensus and that it is important to retain that. That is absolutely right. The frustration for us all in the Scottish Parliament is that, irrespective of that consensus, we have not been able to see progress. In fact,

during the past seven years, when I have been part of many debates on immigration policy, we have seen that policy get worse rather than better. There was a day when all parties in the chamber could agree on things such as the post-study work visa, but, over the course of the past few years, particularly as the policy under the Conservative UK Government has declined considerably, things have got worse rather than better.

I will outline three ways in which we need a complete overhaul of policy and system. At the moment, I cannot see how that can proceed with the current constitutional arrangement. The only hope is to devolve to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament the full immigration policy and approach. As Paul Sweeney has said, there is a means by which that can be done. It works in Canada, and I see no reason why it cannot work in the United Kingdom, as it is currently established.

There are three primary concerns. The first is that it is impossible for there to be safe routes for people who really need them right now. Last week, I had the privilege of meeting a number of former refugees from Syria who, in the past few weeks, have become British citizens. I spoke to them, heard their story and tried to understand how they had reached the UK and what the process had been. All of them are currently working and contributing in some guise. Many of them are working for charities. I was absolutely taken aback to learn that all of them had arrived in the UK by what we would deem to be illegal means. Some of them have PhDs—there was a professor of science. Some of them had been chief executives of fairly substantial businesses and organisations. However, none of them are working in a way that utilises the full extent of their skills.

When I met them, they were delighted and grateful for the opportunity to chat. However, many of them arrived from 2017 or 2018 onwards and, if they had arrived with a Rwanda policy in place, I would not have had the conversation that I had this week. They would not have been contributing to society and would not have been utilising the skills that they have. I find it absolutely baffling that, in a country where we recognise the challenges with our economy, our public services and the tight labour market, we are pulling up the drawbridge and not allowing those who need it safe access to the UK.

My second point is that, even where there are legal routes, the system is designed to destroy. Last week, we published figures about the number of children who are caught up in the system for seeking asylum. In 2020, more than 1,000 children waited for more than a year to be processed. By last year, that figure had increased to 4,100. The figures for children waiting five years or more are also on an upward trajectory. If we think about

what a year or five years means for a child, their education, their emotional development, their social development and their stability—due to being caught up in a system that is clearly unworkable and is the product of a hostile approach to immigration—that suggests to us that, even ignoring the policy, the system is horrendous.

My final comment is slightly more brief. Over the past few weeks, all eyes have been on war and the warfare that is unfolding in Gaza and, since before Gaza, in Ukraine. We have looked at the war that is unfolding in Yemen and Sudan. Time and again, it is children who are caught up as victims of war that is perpetrated by others.

I look at that unfolding and feel an enormous sense of helplessness. However, there is an opportunity, as our First Minister has said, to do something, even if that is just to offer asylum and a new home for those who desperately need it. We are privileged beyond measure in this country. Out of that privilege, blessing and wealth, we have an opportunity to offer hope and help to those who cannot find it anywhere else right now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the closing speeches. I invite Foysoyl Choudhury to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:29

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I apologise to members and the ministers for my slightly late arrival in the chamber for this afternoon's debate.

Scotland benefits greatly from migration, as Jamie Hepburn rightly noted. Migration brings a set of fresh perspectives, skills and experiences to strengthen our economy. The food and drink industry—to name but one—has benefited greatly from migration and the delicious cuisines that have become family favourites in Scotland.

Sadly, however, many migrants feel unsupported in Scotland, and the economy might come under strain if the Tories' regressive migration policies continue. Kaukab Stewart spoke about her disappointment with the current hostile environment policy of the immigration and asylum system. As a first-generation migrant, I join her in deploring that policy.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in Westminster's anti-migration ideology and the use of inflammatory language, such as its references to "waves of illegal migrants". Such "fear of the other" rhetoric stokes racism and deprives the UK of the benefits that migration brings.

When the UK Government revealed its plan to prevent foreign postgraduate students on non-

research courses from bringing dependents to the UK, I raised the concern that that could impact the attraction of talent to the Scottish economy. We must welcome migrants to Scotland and provide an environment that allows them to succeed in Scotland's economy. To ensure that we can do that, we must fully plan to meet the skills needs of industries. At this point, I remind the chamber of my entry in the register of members' interests as a stakeholder in a licensed restaurant.

I am glad that, in its paper, the Scottish Government recognises that businesses are struggling because they do not have enough staff. That situation has been compounded by Brexit and Covid. However, the Scottish Government must do more with its current powers to proactively help businesses in Scotland now, rather than discussing independence once again. As Donald Cameron and Alex Cole-Hamilton rightly pointed out, the taxpayers' money and civil servants' time that have been wasted on that could have been spent on tackling the biggest issues that Scotland faces at the moment. Instead, the Scottish Government has left Scotland lacking the skills that it needs.

Emma Roddick: Will the member take an intervention?

Foyso Choudhury: I need to make progress.

As Paul O'Kane noted, the Scottish Government should be doing more to plan for the skills needs of the Scottish economy.

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Choudhury is right to say that we should always plan for the skills needs of the Scottish population. I hope that he will reflect on the fact that Scotland has the highest proportion of the population with graduate-level qualifications of any country in Europe.

I also invite him to reflect on the fact that we can upskill the entirety of the population as much as we like, but what we, in Scotland, struggle with is a shortage of people. Surely we could do better with an independent approach to immigration.

Foyso Choudhury: We have heard the arguments many times, and I have yet to hear a positive argument for independence from the SNP. The SNP can use the powers that it has. There needs to be a plan, but I have not yet seen a positive plan. The SNP should use the powers that it already has.

Scotland voted to remain in the UK, and the Scottish Government should respect that and work to support the nation in every way that devolution allows it to. We are a proud nation that is welcoming of diversity, so it is clear why many people move to Scotland from the rest of the UK. That is a great sign for welcoming talent to Scotland.

However, it is important to emphasise that pride in our nation should not lead to isolation. We should prioritise greater co-operation, opportunity and sharing of skills between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Scotland must welcome workers from the rest of the UK, as the rest of the UK should welcome Scottish workers. We cannot be isolationist in our policies and rhetoric; instead, we must ensure co-operation and share opportunities for migrants and all workers across the UK, for with shared opportunities can come shared prosperity.

That is what a Labour Government would bring, ensuring that our post-EU immigration system works for all nations and regions in the UK. As my colleague Paul O'Kane highlighted, a UK Labour Government would do that by strengthening the Migration Advisory Committee, with appropriate input from across the UK. Scottish Labour is also committed to ensuring that skills bodies in Scotland and across the UK are consulted, so that industry needs are met and the economy is supported. The Scottish Government should be doing that now, to ensure that we have a strong economy with well-staffed and skilled sectors.

The SNP claims to want to address population decline through migration, yet it is failing to use powers that it already has to address the causes of depopulation and poor economic growth, such as by creating good-quality housing and stable, well-paid jobs. A Labour Government would ensure that we have a progressive, welcoming immigration system and a Scotland with concrete plans for fulfilling skills-based needs to build a stronger, fairer Scottish economy for all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Murdo Fraser to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:37

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have to start by echoing what both Donald Cameron and Paul O'Kane said at the start of the debate: it is a great pity that we have spent this afternoon discussing a matter reserved to Westminster. This is time that we could have spent debating the track record of the Scottish Government—on helping to grow the Scottish economy, on stewarding the NHS, on the education system or even on the conduct of the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, which Craig Hoy referred to: a host of other issues. We could have been discussing any of those other issues. However, instead of focusing on its own record, the Scottish Government wants to talk about matters that are not in the remit of this Parliament. That is perhaps because ministers are so ashamed of their record in government.

Emma Roddick: I agree that it would be fantastic if we did not have to talk about an immigration system that worked for Scotland, because, in that situation, we would already have one. Is it not a shame that the UK Government has failed to deliver that?

Murdo Fraser: I will come on to explain, in some detail, why that is a fundamentally wrong point—if the minister will bear with me.

Once again, we are debating the hypothetical event of independence. We know that independence is not around the corner, and that it is not about to happen, because the people of Scotland do not want it. Even people in the SNP do not believe that independence is going to happen. It was not that long ago that our colleague Ash Regan—who is not in the chamber, I think—was standing to be SNP leader. Now she has left the SNP and joined Alba because she does not believe that the SNP is serious about delivering independence. Even people in the SNP do not think that independence—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: I will give way to Mr Cole-Hamilton.

Jamie Hepburn: Oh, come on!

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Does Murdo Fraser recognise, as I do, that this is safe ground for the Government on which to bring debates, as everything else in our public sector is on fire at the moment?

Murdo Fraser: Of course Mr Cole-Hamilton is correct: the Government does not want to discuss its track record; it wants to discuss what other Governments are doing and things that are not in its power.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: Yes, I will give way to the minister.

Jamie Hepburn: Can the member square the circle of saying that the Government is not committed to independence while simultaneously complaining about the fact that we secured this debate on our sixth prospectus paper on independence? Both cannot be true.

Murdo Fraser: The problem is that the Government is wasting its time and our time in debating these matters, because we know that independence is not going to happen. It is wasting our time and wasting our money.

It is wasting our money on producing the papers and on all the civil servants who are preparing the

papers, and it is wasting our money on the minister's salary. I like the minister and I enjoy debating with him, but I am afraid that he is in the wrong job. Imagine if he could deploy his talents on something more useful than a project that is not going to happen—namely, independence. What a pity that we are spending our afternoon on the issue.

Let me agree with some things that the minister said. I agree on the value that immigration can bring. If immigration is properly controlled and managed, it can bring great value to a country. We have a proud history of welcoming immigrants into Scotland. We had waves of immigration in the 19th century from Ireland, and in the early 20th century members of the Jewish population came from eastern Europe. We had immigrants from Italy, we saw immigrants from the new commonwealth, from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and we had Hong Kong Chinese. More recently, members of the Polish community came here and, much more recently, we had people from Ukraine coming here, being welcomed and enriching our society both economically and culturally. That has been a positive for Scotland.

However, we still have skills shortages—members who made that point are absolutely right. In sectors across Scotland, whether it is hospitality, the care sector or agriculture, there are issues with skills shortages. That is not unique to Scotland or the UK. Just this morning, I had a meeting with the new German consul general for Scotland. She was telling me that, in Berlin, where she has just been, there are bars and restaurants that are open only for a limited number of days per week because they cannot get the staff. That is not a consequence of Brexit, clearly, and it is the same in other European countries. We are all facing these challenges. As Alexander Stewart said—fairly, I think—all western economies are facing challenges around skills shortages. Simply to say that it is an issue of immigration policy alone is to see a very narrow part of the picture.

Let me tackle the key proposition—the basis of what we have heard from the minister and the Scottish National Party benches—which is that UK immigration policy is holding Scotland back.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Fraser give way?

Murdo Fraser: I will develop my point and give way to Mr Stewart in a second.

Let us look at exactly what is happening with immigration. Immigration into the UK today is at record levels. There has been net inward migration of more than 600,000 people over the past year, and those numbers have doubled since Brexit. Indeed, if we look at the visa figures—I think that it was Craig Hoy who reminded us about them—in the period between 2016 and 2020—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: No, not just now. Let me make this point. I will give way in a second.

In the period between 2016 and 2020, only 4 per cent of UK visas that were issued to immigrants coming into the UK were issued to people who wanted to come and work in Scotland. Our population share would be more than double that, but it was only 4 per cent. It is not that people are not coming to the UK—they are coming in record numbers—so the key question is why so few people are coming to Scotland. If Mr Stewart has an answer to that question, I will give way to him.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Mr Fraser for giving way. I have just caught sight of a letter that former Home Secretary Suella Braverman has sent to the Prime Minister about one of the reasons why she is glad to leave the UK Government. One of those reasons is in relation to the policy to

“Reduce overall legal migration as set out in the 2019 manifesto through, *inter alia*, reforming the international students route and increasing salary thresholds on work visas”.

In other words, Ms Braverman has left Government because she does not think that the UK migration policy is tight enough. We think that it is too tight and we want change. Does Mr Fraser agree with Ms Braverman, or does he agree with us that there should be much more flexibility?

Murdo Fraser: I do not agree with either, but Mr Stewart has just demolished his own argument. The former Home Secretary has left the UK Government because the immigration figures are higher than she would have liked. That shows that we have a UK Government that is delivering immigration into the United Kingdom to meet the needs of our economy. The question is why Scotland is not attracting more of those migrants to come here. Mr Stewart did not answer that point, and nobody on the SNP benches has answered it.

I suspect that there are a variety of reasons. Some are to do with the economy and some are to do with economic opportunity. Migrants will move to where they see economic opportunity and prospects. Scotland, as Donald Cameron reminded us, is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom. That is highly unlikely to attract people who want to come here and be successful and establish careers.

There might also be cultural issues. Ivan McKee made some very fair points in his contribution on some of those. People who come from migrant communities want to settle in places where they are likely to be in close connection with other people from similar backgrounds. However,

because we do not have that many migrant communities in Scotland, we are perhaps lacking in that regard.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: If I have time, I will give way again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ivan McKee.

Ivan McKee: I want to get Murdo Fraser's comments on the reason why significantly more working-age people move from the rest of the UK to Scotland every year than move in the opposite direction. Clearly, that has nothing to do with tax.

Murdo Fraser: Maybe it is to do with the cultural issues that I have just referred to. However, the net figure overall shows that Scotland is doing worse than every region in England apart from the north-west.

There is no point in the member shaking his head. He can look at the facts: the net figure on overall migration shows that we are doing worse than every part of England apart from the north-west.

On cultural—

Ivan McKee: Can I clarify something for Murdo Fraser?

Murdo Fraser: Okay, but the member had better have a fact.

Ivan McKee: I absolutely have a fact. The data shows that, on average, over the past five years, 7,000 more working-age people have moved from the rest of the UK to Scotland than have moved in the opposite direction. That is a fact.

Murdo Fraser: The point—Mr McKee was not listening to my point—is that, overall, net migration into Scotland from all places is at the lowest level compared with any part of England apart from the north-west. The Scottish Government needs to address that issue.

On cultural issues, earlier in the year, I was at an event—the migration minister will remember this—where we met some Hong Kong Chinese. Tens of thousands of visas have been issued to allow Hong Kong Chinese to come into the UK. Relatively few have come to Scotland. One of the interesting cultural issues that they raised was the education system. Children in Hong Kong are educated according to the English system of education. Those who came to Scotland were surprised to find that we have a different education system. Therefore, instead of sitting A-levels and studying the English curriculum, they were sitting highers and studying the Scottish curriculum. They

were not aware of that difference. That cultural issue might act as a barrier.

Emma Roddick: On that point—

Murdo Fraser: For goodness' sake!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have been quite generous with your time, Mr Fraser. Mr Fraser has also been generous in taking a number of interventions. However, he might perhaps be looking to bring his remarks to a close.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I am only making the point that that is a cultural issue that we need to be aware of. We also need to be conscious of the cultural barriers to which Mr McKee referred. The Scottish Government needs to consider how we break those down.

The fact is that it is not UK immigration policy that is stopping people coming to Scotland; there are other issues at play. Therefore, simply talking about rewriting immigration policy will not solve the problem, unless we tackle the issues of economic opportunity and the cultural issues that I have referred to.

I am sorry that we did not have a broader debate. Kate Forbes made some interesting points. We could have had a broader debate about the issues of demography in Scotland; the issue of skills shortages in the economy; issues that touch on rural depopulation and housing; and issues to do with ferries, which Rhoda Grant and others referred to. Instead, the debate has been framed around the SNP's constitutional obsession: independence. That is a disappointment to me, because an opportunity has been missed to have a well-rounded debate about issues around which, I suspect, we would agree on more than we would disagree. It was a pity that that was not allowed to happen.

I am pleased to support the amendment in the name of Donald Cameron.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick to close on behalf of the Scottish Government. It would be most helpful if the minister could take us up to decision time at 5 o'clock.

16:48

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): There have been a lot of contributions today on various aspects of our recently published paper. First, though, I want to go back the fundamental issues that we are facing and that the Scottish Government is trying to address.

Scotland is facing the largest fall in working-age population of any of the UK nations. We need migration policies that are suited to the needs of Scotland's communities. The current system does not allow us to address labour market shortages or depopulation. We need more powers to address those fully.

As per our clear mandate from the people of Scotland, we have laid out exactly what we would do with the powers of a normal independent country. In the paper, we react to current challenges—population decline, humanitarian crises and, as Kaukab Stewart pointed out, people who are being displaced by climate change. We do that by sticking to our principle of ensuring dignity, fairness and respect for the people we support.

We are also trying to work within the system that we are currently stuck with, and we are constructively suggesting improvements to be made down south, which have strong backing from communities and industry across Scotland. Those attempts to encourage the UK Government to improve the situation have been ignored.

It is more than a year since the Scottish Government published our rural visa pilot proposal, which was dismissed within a few hours. I know from speaking with business owners in rural areas, including last week with seafood and hospitality industry leaders in Fort Augustus, that the current system is resource intensive and does not work for people who come here to fill vacancies or for employers. The time that it takes, the cost of the process and navigating the complicated landscape can put off even desperate businesses from recruiting from overseas.

On Murdo Fraser's point at the end of his speech, I remember the event that we both attended and the issues that were raised by Hong Kongers. If I remember rightly, one of them said that one of the big issues is that Scotland is not promoted within the current routes. They did not know the difference between services in Scotland and those in the rest of the UK. They also did not know what Scotland has to offer them. That, to me, is an issue with the current system—

Murdo Fraser: Whose fault is that?

Emma Roddick: Murdo Fraser asks "Whose fault is that?" It is the fault of the person who is in charge of the system. The UK Government is in charge of the system: we are proposing a different way of doing things.

John Swinney: Does the minister identify a slight contradiction in the sedentary comment by Murdo Fraser a moment ago, given that the very people who want to curtail the ability of the Scottish Government to promote Scotland

overseas are Mr Fraser and his cohorts in the United Kingdom Government?

Emma Roddick: That is absolutely bang on from John Swinney. I am really confused by listening to the Tories, who criticise us for bringing forward proposals and a vision for a better Scotland and then ask why we have not made a better Scotland. It is because we are not independent yet. We keep having to go to the Tories at Westminster to ask them to do things but, unfortunately, they ignore us.

I will go back to the businesses that I met last week. Many of them are based in rural and island areas and rely on sectors including agriculture, fisheries and hospitality, and they are struggling. The ending of free movement and the hostile environment have changed and damaged the ability of people who keep those sectors and their communities going to come to Scotland and contribute. As Kate Forbes pointed out, many migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, are highly skilled. We are missing out.

I very much enjoyed last week meeting the women behind Talent Beyond Boundaries, who match skilled people with employment routes into the UK. The work that they do is incredible, but it should be work that we, as a Government that wants more people to live and work here, do to support people. We should be matching people with the best possible life that we can offer them and with the best contribution that they can make to Scotland. That is why we have proposed new routes, including those that would be available to employers and workers in an independent Scotland. I hope that the contrast that that provides with the current situation, alongside what is in other papers in the “Building a New Scotland” series, will help to inform people of the challenges that we want to be able to fix as an independent country, and of how we propose to do that.

Our vision is clear—so is the Tory Government’s, unfortunately. However, I do not know what people who have been listening to the debate will have made of Labour’s position. If one of the Labour members could explain it to me, I would be very grateful. Foysol Choudhury challenged us to set out a positive vision for an independent Scotland and then criticised us for publishing one.

I am not sure how Paul O’Kane managed in one speech to square rubbing the Scottish Government for respecting our mandate from the people of Scotland to set out what we would do with the powers of an independent country, with asking us to focus on what is going on here and delivering a party-political broadcast on behalf of the UK Labour Party. He criticised us for putting forward an alternative vision then asked what the Scottish Parliament is here to do, “if not to

mitigate”. I have higher hopes for Scotland than that; it is miserable, but unsurprising, to hear yet again that Labour does not.

Paul O’Kane: The minister is actively misrepresenting my speech. I absolutely agree with what has been said about the Tory Government’s attitude to migration in this country, and I said so throughout my remarks. However, the Scottish Government is here to take action. Why can the minister not answer the question from JustRight Scotland about why the Government has done nothing to mitigate the impacts of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, regardless of what happens tomorrow? Will she support Labour’s principles, which I outlined in my speech, which would see a reformed immigration system in this country?

Emma Roddick: The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to mitigating the worst impacts of the Illegal Migration Act 2023. Unfortunately, we do not yet have the details of how the act will be implemented, but I look forward to working with Scottish Labour on our new-found consensus on the matter.

Members also challenged our priorities. I point out that it is possible to care about more than one thing at once. I also remind members that the issue is about the cost of living crisis and about recovery of our NHS and local services. Working-age people are needed to keep those things going.

We are putting our money where our mouth is on currently devolved issues. Our forthcoming addressing depopulation action plan is an example of the approach that the Scottish Government and partners are taking on population attraction and retention. I am working very closely with local authorities, businesses and individuals across Scotland to identify the main drivers of local depopulation and to find ways to tackle them.

Many members raised the issue of housing in rural areas, which Parliament will know is very close to my heart. It is why we have committed to building 10 per cent of our affordable housing targets in rural and island areas. It is why we are tackling too-high levels of second-home ownership and residential buildings being used to promote unsustainable levels—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Minister, might you give me a moment?

I ask members to put their conversations to one side while the minister is closing.

Emma Roddick: The Conservatives want to pretend that house building is the only issue, but they will vote against all our other efforts to make sure that houses are being used as homes in those areas. If population decline were simply

about how many houses there are in an area, populations would not be declining. Houses are being snapped up by folk who have no intention of living in them, so it would be nice to hear, for once, some nuance in the Tory approach to facing up to that issue.

On Rhoda Grant's point, I note that we have to be honest with ourselves that, even if every young person currently living in a rural and island community stayed and worked where they are, that would not be enough. We have an ageing population, often more so in rural and island communities, and a falling birth rate.

Migration is a key part—but not the only part—of the effort to tackle depopulation, but it cannot be and is not the only thing that we are doing. As was set out in the earlier "Building a New Scotland" paper on the economy, our intention is to build a genuinely new Scotland using our new fiscal powers to put in place a fund of up to £20 billion during the first decade of independence, which could include funding for house building and other infrastructure improvements that have been mentioned. Members who worry that house building is our only effort in tackling depopulation should be reassured that that is not the case.

As Karen Adam empathetically pointed out, there is a humanitarian side to the proposals. We recognise the trauma and harm that have been inflicted on people unnecessarily by the situations that they have come here to flee and by the processes that are more complicated, harsh and cold than they need to be, such as those that Kaukab Stewart discussed.

There being no recourse to public funds for people who are not allowed to work is as nonsensical as it is inhumane. People who could be economically active and who do not need to live in destitution should be supported, not punished for a situation that they did not choose. We would not apply no recourse to public funds to asylum seekers, and we would allow them to work, thereby ensuring a human rights-based approach that would uphold our international obligations.

The UK Government's Illegal Migration Act 2023 is another example of the cruel legislation in the current system. JustRight Scotland has described it as a "ticking time bomb" for asylum seekers in Scotland. Rhoda Grant was correct to raise concerns about the act and the difficulty that it presents to local services and the Scottish Government in meeting obligations to support victims of human trafficking. We are clear that the UK Government must provide a clear plan for its delivery and that all four nations must be engaged.

A humane approach to immigration benefits everyone. Not only do we require migration to keep up our working-age population, and not only

does failing to help people cost more in the long run, as Foyso Choudhury pointed out, but we cannot ignore the incredible contribution that new Scots make to our communities, culture and country. That goes well beyond economic activity. Many refugees and new Scots in rural and island areas have kept school rolls up, have opened cafes such as the much-loved Helmi's on Bute and now in Glasgow, and have enriched our collective global outlook.

The Scottish Government is working across portfolios and through our forthcoming human rights bill to create a human rights culture. That cannot be fully achieved while some people are having their rights held out of their reach. We want a Scotland that treats everyone with dignity, fairness and respect. That should not be too much to ask. However, as is clear from the UK Government's response to our proposals, and from Labour's failure to do anything but follow the Tory votes on the migration paper, we will need independence to make that a reality.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if amendment S6M-11237.1, in the name of Donald Cameron, is agreed to, amendment S6M-11237.2, in the name of Paul O'Kane, will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-11237.1, in the name of Donald Cameron, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11237, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on building a new Scotland—migration to Scotland after independence, 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.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:03

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if amendment S6M-11237.1, in the name of Donald Cameron, is agreed to, amendment S6M-11237.2, in the name of Paul O'Kane, will fall.

We move to the division on amendment S6M-11237.1, in the name of Donald Cameron. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app froze and did not register my vote. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: I confirm that your vote was recorded, Ms Slater.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

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

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 29, Against 80, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11237.2, in the name of Paul O’Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11237, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on building a new Scotland—migration to Scotland after independence, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 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)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 17, Against 90, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11237, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on building a new Scotland—migration to Scotland after independence, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, 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)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)

McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 49, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that Scotland's population growth has relied on migration into Scotland; welcomes the fact that there are currently more people choosing to move to Scotland from the rest of the UK than those moving in the opposite direction; recognises the benefits of EU freedom of movement, which was lost as a result of Brexit; agrees that a decline in the working population would damage Scotland's public services and economy; deplors the UK Government's hostile rhetoric towards migrants, and welcomes the proposals in the Scottish Government paper, "Migration to Scotland after independence", for a humane migration system tailored to Scotland's needs.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Children's Grief Awareness Week

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11114, in the name of Stuart McMillan, on children's grief awareness week. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that 16 to 23 November 2023 is Children's Grief Awareness Week; understands that more than half of children in Scotland have experienced bereavement of a close family member by the age of eight, according to a study by the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) and the University of Strathclyde, which was published in 2020, before the impact of COVID-19 was taken into account; further understands that 62% of children in Scotland have lost a close family member by the age of 10 according to the Childhood Bereavement Network; acknowledges that the theme for 2023 is The Shape of Your Support, with the focus being on the people around a bereaved child or young person, beyond their friends or family, who can be there to support them through their grief; further acknowledges that the key question that is being asked is "Who else can you ask for help or support beyond your friends and family?"; welcomes what it sees as the great work being undertaken in Inverclyde by the Inverclyde Bereavement Network and former Clydeview Academy pupil, Ben Kane, who set up a support group in the school for children who are dealing with bereavement and has held talks with Inverclyde Council about expanding the service to all Inverclyde schools; recognises the work of Child Bereavement UK and its national development coordinator for Scotland in supporting young people when they are dealing with grief, and believes that the efforts of all organisations working in the sector are making a meaningful impact to Scotland's young people during what it considers to be such a difficult period in their lives.

17:10

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank colleagues who have signed my motion and those who will speak in the debate. I am humbled to bring such an important debate to the chamber. As my motion mentions, the Childhood Bereavement Network has informed us that, by the age of 10, 62 per cent of children in Scotland will have lost a close family member. Almost two thirds of children in our primary schools will have lost a mother, father, sibling or grandparent in their young lives. That is a very sobering statistic, but it is one of which we must all be cognisant, because death and bereavement are harsh realities of life.

It is incumbent on us all to do what we can to not only support young people when they are dealing with bereavement, but ensure that they have a level of resilience to help them to deal with any trauma that might befall them in their formative years.

I will move on to my reasons for bringing the debate to the chamber. I have previously spoken here about an incredible person named Ben Kane, and I am pleased to be able to do so again today. Ben, who is a young man from my constituency, set up a bereavement support group in his school, Clydeview academy, after he suffered the loss of a loved one. He received support from Mind Mosaic Child and Family Therapies, a local organisation based in Greenock. His support worker there suggested that it might be of use to him, and others, if he were to start a support group, and that is exactly what Ben did. The support group has now been running for two years.

Although Ben has now left school and is studying politics at the University of Glasgow, with an eye to possibly sitting in one of our seats in the future, several other pupils have kept the group running. To me, that highlights the need for such groups. I understand that it will be difficult for young people who are going through bereavement to contemplate setting up such a group, but, if they do, Clydeview academy in Gourock has set an example for them to follow. Unfortunately, the fact that there will always be more young people who experience grief will ensure that Ben's group keeps going.

I have thought long and hard about how to approach the debate. I am speaking about death, loss and grief, and no one relishes discussing those subjects. I wanted to find a balance between being respectful of the issue, but also making the most of vital parliamentary time to debate the subject and, I hope, make life even just a bit easier for our young people who are grieving today, tomorrow and in the future. That is why the work of Ben and his fellow pupils to support themselves while supporting others is so important.

According to a study by the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice and the University of Strathclyde, by the age of eight, more than half of Scottish children will have experienced bereavement through the death of a close family member. That study was published in 2020 and does not capture the effects of the Covid pandemic, so we can all expect that figure to be higher now. As we know, Covid affected our young people very acutely.

Although, so far, I have focused on bereavement, the motion also mentions children's grief awareness week 2023, which runs between 16 and 23 November.

During the Covid pandemic, children across Scotland—and, indeed, the world—struggled with being locked down in their homes, learning by virtual means and not being able to see their friends. Many of them lost friends or family members at a time when the grieving process would have been so much more challenging for

them because they were going through that Covid period.

Being aware and cognisant of children's grief is even more necessary in a post-Covid world. We know that health services that support children are stretched and that the pandemic has placed lasting strain on our national health service.

That is why the theme of this year's children's grief awareness week, "The Shape of Your Support", is very apt. The focus is on the people around a bereaved child or young person—beyond their friends and family—who can support them through their grief. The key question that is being asked is, "Who else can you ask for help or support beyond your friends and family?" Ben's support group in his old school answers that question. All of us who are speaking in today's debate are helping to advance the aims of this year's theme.

Child Bereavement UK also offers help and support. It has a dedicated phone number, 0800 0288840, and it can offer telephone or face-to-face support for bereaved young people and their parents. Child Bereavement UK helps families to rebuild their lives when a child grieves or dies. The charity supports children and young people up to the age of 25 when someone important to them has died or is not expected to live, and it supports parents and the wider family when a baby or a child of any age dies or is dying.

Child Bereavement UK provides training to professionals in health and social care and in education, as well as to those in the voluntary and corporate sectors, that equips them to provide the best possible care to bereaved families. The charity has set up 11 regional bereavement networks for professionals across Scotland who work in the statutory and third sectors, as well as for businesses that support people with bereavement. The networks are also open to campaigners and activists, and the voice of lived experience is crucial in them.

Sean Humphreys, the Child Bereavement UK national development co-ordinator for Scotland, is responsible for the facilitation and development of the networks. He is looking to establish further networks in Argyll and Bute and in the Borders to ensure that all parts of the country are covered, and he is keen to hear from anyone who wants to be part of the existing or new networks. I ask anyone living in those areas who is interested in helping to set up a network to please contact my office so that I can put them in contact with Sean.

On 5 December, all members of the networks are invited to join together for a national network event and training day. The theme will be how services have adapted to meet changing needs, as how we grieve has changed over recent years.

It will take into account Covid-19 and the associated restrictions, as well as the cost of living crisis.

In 2022, "Growing Up Grieving: The National Childhood Bereavement Project Final Report" was published and submitted to the Scottish Government. Earlier this year, I asked the Scottish Government when it would respond to the recommendations in the report, which include the need to

"Embed commitments to improving support for bereaved children and young people into wider national priorities ... Promote greater awareness of children and young people experiencing grief"

and

"Establish a national secretariat for childhood bereavement".

I ask the minister to provide an update on when the Scottish Government will respond to all the recommendations in the report.

I thank the Church of Scotland for its communication about the book that the Rev Fiona Gardner has written, "Love Songs for Healing and Hope", the proceeds from which will be donated to two Christian charities that help people, including young people, to deal with grief: Quiet Waters and Richmond's Hope.

Before closing, I will return to the work that is being undertaken in my constituency. Ben Kane has arranged for the Inverclyde bereavement network's next regular meeting to take place this Friday, to coincide with children's grief awareness week. The meeting will specifically focus on bereavement from a young person's perspective. Ben has already taken on board the recommendations in the "Growing Up Grieving" report. He asked me to conclude my speech by saying that Inverclyde has come together around this cause, and he calls on all local authorities to do so. He is extremely proud of the unity and the collective local effort, and I very much agree with him on that. I say well done to everyone in Inverclyde for making a difference by supporting our young people to deal with grief and bereavement.

17:19

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Stuart McMillan for a very moving speech. Debating this subject is an excellent use of our time.

As we all know, grief is a fact of life. Sometimes, it is an event that is anticipated, perhaps because of illness, but, more often than not, it is unexpected or unforeseen. The events of the past couple of years have brought that into sharp focus for many of us. Grief impacts us all. It has an

impact on adults, but it can have more of an impact on children.

I know from my experience, having lost all my grandparents before I left high school, and even my father shortly after, that grief affects people in very different ways. Loss at such an early age can be as confusing as it is unsettling.

I pay tribute to the Childhood Bereavement Network for the fantastic work that it does to support children at one of the most difficult points in their lives. I was struck by one particular phrase that comes up regularly in the Childhood Bereavement Network resource pack, which talks about creating "compassionate communities". I will base my contribution around that phrase.

As Stuart McMillan did, I highlight the great work that is being done in Inverclyde, which is leading the way when it comes to creating that compassionate community. In fact, according to the Public Health Palliative Care International organisation, Inverclyde is the first place in Scotland to be included on the list of compassionate cities, with the only other place in the world being Taipei. That is not just because we have amazing organisations that support people, such as Cruse Bereavement Support, the National Childhood Bereavement Network or, even more locally, Compassionate Inverclyde, which does great work through the local hospice; it is because of individuals such as Ben Kane who have suffered great loss and have taken action.

Ben Kane's ambition of creating support groups for young people in schools right across Scotland is not just an incredible ambition; it is a realistic one. It is important that we do that, given the statistic from the study that Stuart McMillan mentioned that more than half of children in Scotland will have experienced bereavement of a close family member by the age of eight. That really struck me—I was not aware of it until I read that report. The study was done before Covid, so the number could well have changed since then.

Children who experience bereavement at such a young age can be more vulnerable to risks later in life. It is not just about the loss of time at school during an event. At one end of the spectrum, the experience can lead to underachievement at school but, more worryingly, at the other end of the spectrum, it can lead to depression, prolonged grief disorder, self-harm and, in some cases, sadly, even suicide. Statistically, children who are born into low-income families are five times more likely to lose a parent by the age of 10 than children who are born into wealthier families. The risk of losing a brother or sister at a young age is four times higher in the lowest-income families than in higher-income families.

That perhaps comes as no surprise to those of us in the chamber who have talked about these issues before. We talk regularly in the chamber about issues around drug and alcohol-related deaths, suicide, mental health, ill health and comorbidity, and we know that certain communities rank much higher in those sad lists. Sadly, Inverclyde is one of those.

On a positive note, the survey brought to the fore clear recommendations that we should take on board, and I look forward to hearing the minister's response to those. In the brief time that I have, I will mention the three that most struck me. One is that young people would benefit greatly from more death and grief literacy in the education curriculum. By that, I mean that we should talk about death and grief in the right way in schools more often, because the issue is still a taboo in many schools and it is still too difficult to talk about for too many.

Secondly, we need to develop the stronger informal networks that Stuart McMillan talked about, involving not just parents and teachers but peers and children supporting each other. Finally, I draw to the minister's attention the fact that grief-related services in Scotland are too often developed by adults for children and are not based on the real-life experiences of children themselves or how their tragedies and losses can help to shape the future services for other young people. To me, that is at the heart of compassionate communities, and I hope that it is what lies at the heart of this debate.

17:24

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank my colleague Stuart McMillan for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I also thank Jamie Greene for his really interesting speech.

The motion states that

“more than half of children in Scotland have experienced bereavement of a close family member by the age of eight”

and that

“62% of children in Scotland have lost a close family member by the age of 10”.

Like Jamie Greene, I was surprised and shocked by those statistics. The figures were published by the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice in 2020, before the impact of Covid was known, so the figures may be even higher now, sadly.

We know that bereavement and loss contribute to trauma and are counted as an adverse childhood experience. The Childhood Bereavement Network has done amazing work on the subject. The theme for 2023 is “The Shape of

Your Support”. Support for grieving children may come from those outside the family, as the wider family will, in all likelihood, be grieving themselves and may not be the best people for young people to turn to at an incredibly sensitive and sad time.

I was interested and encouraged to hear about the initiative by the Inverclyde bereavement network and former Clydeview academy pupil Ben Kane, who set up a support group in the school for children who are dealing with bereavement. Ben has shown incredible maturity and courage in setting that up. As Stuart McMillan explained, he has held talks with Inverclyde Council about expanding the service to all Inverclyde schools.

I hope that the initiative can go beyond Inverclyde and help grieving children in East Dunbartonshire and my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden—and, indeed, throughout all areas of Scotland. We have wonderful voluntary and third sector support networks in my constituency, and I am sure that the service is something that would be welcomed. Indeed, Child Bereavement UK and its national development co-ordinator for Scotland believe that working together could make a meaningful impact to Scotland's young people during what it considers to be such a difficult period in their lives.

We should remember, too, that bereavement often involves the death of a pet, which can be very traumatic for children and adults alike, and sensitive support and counselling should always be available for people going through that experience.

Depending on the age of a child, grief will be felt in a multitude of ways, and the Childhood Bereavement Network can provide professional and caring support in every case. Its excellent website is a source of valuable information and is well worth a visit for anyone who is struggling to cope or support a young person.

I cannot help but think about the children of Gaza and Israel at this time of terrible conflict in the middle east. I know that I will not be alone in dreading watching and reading about the suffering of babies and children in that desperate war zone. Those children are frightened and confused, unable to comprehend why they have lost their mums, dads and siblings in such a sudden, violent and incomprehensible way. They face a lifetime of trauma, and I hope with all my heart that support is there for them to help them to heal. Their grief puts all our problems into perspective.

I commend the Childhood Bereavement Network, Child Bereavement UK and, indeed, young Ben Kane for all the work that they are doing to support young people experiencing grief. Grief is a part of life for everyone, young and old, and I am heartened to see the focus on support

and understanding—something that, in the past, was in short supply. I look forward to hearing speeches from across the chamber.

17:27

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow Rona Mackay in this members' business debate.

I can only echo what was said in Stuart McMillan's very powerful speech about the issue that we are addressing this evening. Technically, children's grief awareness week starts tomorrow, on 16 November, and runs through to next week. I thank the Childhood Bereavement Network for its work on grief awareness week and on bereavement. As the title of this awareness week suggests, we are talking about grief and how young people deal with it.

We have heard the very powerful example of Ben Kane setting up the support group, and we have heard the statistics. In 2019, interestingly, the network focused on young people who were "Lost for Words". The way that the awareness week has progressed over the years shows us a route through grief that it would be helpful for all people both to understand and remember.

In 2020, the theme was "Say the Words", which referred to that most powerful moment when anybody, but particularly young people, can move from the internal language of grief to expressing something externally. Sometimes young people, particularly very young people, do not have the words. However, when they can say the words, it can lead to behavioural change. People with understanding, training and, indeed, empathy can see a young person's behaviour and know that it is not an attempt to be malicious but is—this is a phrase that we have heard frequently in this chamber—a cry for help, and one that comes from somewhere deep inside.

In 2021, the network created a word cloud of the thoughts and internal feelings that young people have about grief, which can be difficult to express. In 2022, it introduced the sharing shapes project, which has returned this year. If people go to the website, they can see the mosaic that was created from the shapes last year. I am sure that the shapes in this year's project will be incredibly powerful too.

That project speaks to the very individual nature of the grief that people suffer, which we have heard about, and—most importantly—to the support that stands around the young people. That support may come from family, who may be suffering from grief themselves, or it may come from friends. Those friends may face a challenge in understanding why their best friend or a friend in their group is behaving as they are, but, in those

situations, the innate empathy of our young people comes through. Support also comes from the charities that work around our young people, from the professionals who stand around them and from the wider community. It would sometimes be helpful for people to remember that, while they may not understand what is going on in an individual's life, they can still be kind and still care, and they can still ask the person whether they are all right.

In the short time that I have, I will mention two groups that work with bereavement. One is the Midlothian Young People's Advice Service, which was founded back in 1999. The charity has grown, but it originally came from the local community. It now works in a whole range of diverse areas to support young people, particularly in East Lothian schools, where it offers counselling. I have seen a huge amount of work done there with regard to bereavement and grief. As I said, sometimes children do not have the words to express their grief but the feelings are inside. It might not be a quick solution, but I have seen the way in which bereavement counsellors have worked, sometimes for many months, to allow a young person to get into a space where, although the grief does not vanish, they can build a wall around it, just like the shape that was chosen and shared. That can put it into proportion in relation to other events in their lives, and it can make it easier to understand.

I also want to mention Barnardo's Scotland, which does a huge amount of work with regard to grief and bereavement, supporting not just the young members of our community but communities across Scotland and the UK.

Finally, I once again compliment the network on the children's grief awareness week initiative, which starts tomorrow. The shape of our support is shown in part by what we do here this evening.

17:32

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): I thank all those members who have taken part in the debate; we have heard some really thoughtful speeches this evening. I also thank Stuart McMillan for lodging this important motion to recognise children's grief awareness week.

I believe whole-heartedly that, where children have suffered trauma and loss, they deserve appropriate support. We know through research that bereavement during childhood can have significant and long-lasting effects on emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. Key impacts include struggling to understand and process emotions, leading to potential long-term issues.

Childhood is a critical period for development, and the loss of a loved one can disrupt a child's developmental trajectory. It can affect their ability to form secure attachments, develop a sense of identity and navigate relationships with others. They may experience difficulties in school as a result of emotional distress, they may have trouble concentrating and experience a decline in academic performance, and they may have difficulty interacting with peers and teachers.

The loss of a loved one can lead to social isolation and withdrawal, with children struggling to engage in social activities, form new friendships and maintain existing relationships. That can further exacerbate those feelings of loneliness and grief. Childhood bereavement has also been linked to a higher risk of mental health issues in adulthood, and research concludes that it is crucial to provide timely, appropriate support and interventions to mitigate those possible long-term impacts.

I assure members that I take this subject very seriously. I was two years old when I lost my dad and, at that time, there was very little support available for me or for my mum. We need to remember that support is also really important for those around the child; Martin Whitfield and Jamie Greene picked up on that specifically. I want to highlight, in particular, that support is not a one-stop shop. Support for me at two years old would have been helpful, but there are numerous points in a child's life, following such an experience, when support could be required. I know that, as a child growing up, it is extremely hard to deal with the loss of a parent. That includes having to deal with questions from peers in school, the stigma—which there was for me—that comes with the death of a parent, and not having a clear understanding of why this has happened and why you are the one who has lost a parent. It is hard and, honestly, the lack of support that I received still impacts on me to this day.

I therefore express my gratitude and appreciation for the bereavement support services that we have in Scotland today, especially during challenging and unprecedented times such as the Covid-19 pandemic, as Stuart McMillan mentioned. Those services play an invaluable role in providing comfort and guidance to children and their families who have experienced the profound loss of a loved one. I am proud that, since 2016, the children, young people and families early intervention and adult learning and empowering communities fund has provided funding of more than £14 million annually to 115 organisations, including Child Bereavement UK, Richmond's Hope and Apex Scotland—many of them have been named in the chamber today—that provide much-needed support to children and young people who have suffered a loss through

bereavement. I thank members who have highlighted the important work of those vital organisations.

I would also like to thank Ben Kane. As has been highlighted by all members today, Ben's commitment to raising awareness and increasing support for those who have been impacted by bereavement has been admirable. The support group that Ben set up offers a safe place for people to find comfort in and to talk about their grief. I welcome that important work, and I am sure that many young people have found it extremely helpful.

The Scottish Government recognises that bereavement can affect many aspects of our lives, so it reaches across many different ministerial portfolios. We have therefore set up a cross-policy bereavement network that aims to support a more joined-up approach, be more strategic across existing and planned Government action and provide a single point of access for bereavement partners. That will ensure that there is collective ministerial responsibility to ensure that those who are experiencing bereavement can access the support that they need.

In 2020, we established the national childhood bereavement co-ordinator to look at the range of bereavement services that are available for young people across Scotland. That work was carried out over a two-year period, and a final report with recommendations for improvement was published in September 2022. Following that, the Scottish bereavement summit was held on 13 October, and the final report of the summit, with its 10 recommendations, as has been touched upon, was published in June.

The recommendations were based on those that came from the childhood co-ordinator and four previous bereavement reports. The Scottish Government welcomes those reports and acknowledges the huge amount of work and collaboration that has gone into developing them and the focus that they bring to improving the experience of those who are affected by grief and loss.

I understand that Stuart McMillan and other members are looking for an update on the recommendations in the report. I can confirm that the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport has agreed to meet three key bereavement stakeholders on 14 December 2023. In advance of that, the Scottish Government's cross-policy bereavement network will continue to engage with the bereavement sector as we consider how best to take forward those findings.

As a Government, we will continue to engage with and listen to the bereavement sector. I am clear that we require a collaborative approach to

supporting those who have suffered bereavement. I hope that, by sharing my personal experience, members will appreciate that I fully understand the importance of ensuring that that support is available when it is required and my commitment to doing that.

I close by reiterating my thanks to all members for participating in such an important debate and to Stuart McMillan for bringing it to the chamber this evening.

Meeting closed at 17:38.

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