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Tuesday 8 October 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Psychiatrists.....	3
Accident and Emergency Departments (Winter Planning)	7
CHALLENGE POVERTY WEEK	11
<i>Motion moved—[John Swinney].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Russell Findlay].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Anas Sarwar].</i>	
The First Minister (John Swinney).....	11
Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con).....	16
Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab)	21
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	26
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	28
Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)	31
Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)	32
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	34
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab).....	36
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)	40
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	42
Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	45
Miles Briggs (Lothian).....	47
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	50
Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)	52
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)	55
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	58
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	60
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)	63
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	67
BUSINESS MOTION	72
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	73
LIVER DISEASE	80
<i>Motion debated—[Clare Haughey].</i>	
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP).....	80
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	82
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	83
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	85
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green).....	86
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	88
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	89
The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto)	91

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 8 October 2024

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Aaron Moffat-Jackman, the rector of St Saviour's Scottish Episcopal church, Bridge of Allan, and St Modoc's Scottish Episcopal church, Doune.

The Rev Aaron Moffat-Jackman (Rector of St Saviour's Scottish Episcopal Church, Bridge of Allan, and St Modoc's Scottish Episcopal Church, Doune): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, good afternoon. It is a privilege for me to be here.

Three years ago, I made the bold decision to leave Manchester and move to Scotland to be nearer to my wife's family and to continue my vocation as a priest in the Episcopal Church. It has been a deeply fulfilling experience. I love the communities and people that I serve, and Scotland feels like home.

However, it came as a surprise to me when I discovered recently that I am the only Episcopal priest of West Indian origin in the country. My parents are from Jamaica and Trinidad—two countries with close ties to Scotland's colonial past—and somehow I have found myself here. My family's history is intertwined with that of the nation I now call home. Things have come full circle.

This black history month, as I reflect on my heritage, I have also been thinking about Scotland's historical ties to the Caribbean. Although the country has become my home, its colonial past continues to shape my life and the experiences of the many black and brown people who live here. Racism remains a reality in Scotland. It is often driven by ignorance and prejudice, and it prevents us from truly seeing and valuing one another. However, my faith speaks to that. Jesus's mission, as he proclaimed in Luke's gospel, was

"to set free those who are oppressed."

He did that by breaking down societal barriers by reaching out to those whom society saw as outsiders and affirming their inherent dignity. Jesus teaches me to embrace diversity, not to ignore it, and to confront the systems that divide people on the basis of race, status or any other difference. His life challenges me to see every

person as being made in God's image and deserving of love and justice.

As a priest of West Indian heritage, I embody that diversity. I stand as a reminder that the church—and, indeed, Scotland—is enriched by the many cultures and stories that shape us—stories of pain and of pride. I believe that, just as my own journey has come full circle, by embracing diversity and challenging the injustices that persist, we can help to build the inclusive, loving community that Jesus imagined. That is what I feel called to do, and I believe it is an invitation for all of us. Thank you.

Topical Question Time

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in questions from as many members as possible, short and succinct questions and responses would be appreciated.

Psychiatrists

1. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the reported growing concerns over the shortfall of psychiatrists employed by the national health service to deliver psychiatric care. (S6T-02138)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): We are actively encouraging medical students to consider a long-term psychiatry career. We have created 42 additional posts in core psychiatry since 2014, and, with one exception, 100 per cent of entry-level posts have been filled for the fourth year.

The psychiatry recruitment and retention working group will report back to ministers in spring 2025. The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland is a critical partner in this work, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is meeting with college representatives on Thursday. Ensuring the provision of high-quality and safe patient care remains our utmost priority.

Edward Mountain: That sounds like a lot of things in the future—but I thank the minister for the answer. I thank *The Guardian* and the BBC, which have done some investigation into the matter. They have found that health boards are paying up to £837 an hour for locum psychiatrists. Last year, total payments exceeded £35 million. Not only that, but there are serious concerns that some locums are being used in remote consultations from places outside the United Kingdom, such as India, meaning that they are not even members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Does the minister accept those concerns, and does she accept that mental health services in Scotland are at breaking point?

Maree Todd: I certainly do accept those concerns. I am aware of the incident that Edward Mountain raises with me of a psychiatrist who was working outside the UK. I am assured that the arrangement happened only when there were no consultant psychiatrists available to work in that particular health board and that the practice has been stopped. It is not a common practice. I am absolutely aware of the challenges that exist across the workforce, which can be particularly marked in more remote and rural areas. It is

helpful to see the latest statistics, which show an increase in full-time posts in the past year and, indeed, an increase since 2014. I have absolutely no doubt that there are concerns.

As I mentioned in response to a question last week, there are concerns in specific areas of the country—particularly remote and rural areas, where boards find it difficult to recruit and there are concerns about certain specialties. We are working closely with the royal college and others to improve the situation.

Edward Mountain: Well, there's a surprise: emergency locums are being used because there is an emergency. When the minister and I were elected as regional Highlands and Islands MSPs, we both knew the problems that patients in the Highlands faced. New Craigs hospital was reducing bed numbers, there was a shortage of psychiatrists, and constituents were having to travel vast distances or were having online consultations via Near Me with different psychiatrists.

It is clear, minister, that you have no idea of the extent of the problem, and you had no idea of it before it was flagged up to you as a result of the investigation. Surely, if you did, the Scottish Government would have done some workforce planning years ago—and you have not. Do you think—

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

Edward Mountain: Thank you—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Do continue, Mr Mountain.

Edward Mountain: Sorry, but I am hearing a lot of barracking from my right and it is difficult to ask the question. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if members could resist any temptation to contribute.

Edward Mountain: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I do not believe that the minister had any idea of the problems until they were flagged up as a result of the investigation. Otherwise, the Scottish Government would have done proper workforce planning to ensure that that did not happen. Trying to solve the problem now is like bolting the door after the horse has bolted. Minister, do you think that you really are in charge of what is going on?

The Presiding Officer: Again, Mr Mountain, I would ask that you always speak through the chair.

Maree Todd: The member is aware that, before I came into politics, I worked for 20 years as a mental health pharmacist in NHS Highland. The

issue is very close to my heart, and it has been throughout my working life. Not only that, but it is important to my constituents.

Many of the issues that the member raises in the chamber today have been raised with me, and I, in turn, have raised them with NHS Highland. I am well aware of the challenges that exist right across the workforce. It is really helpful to see that the latest statistics for NHS Highland mental health nursing staff show an increase of 3.6 per cent in the latest 12 months to 30 September 2024, while the number of psychiatry staff increased by 10.5 per cent in that period. Despite that huge improvement, and in view of the ongoing challenges that NHS Highland faces, my officials continue to offer enhanced monitoring and support to NHS Highland's mental health services.

I will address what we are doing nationally to tackle those issues. The mental health and wellbeing workforce action plan is committed to the on-going work of the psychiatry recruitment and retention working group, which is considering how we can better support the recruitment and retention of psychiatrists. As I said in answer to the member's first question, the psychiatry working group is actively exploring possible solutions to issues such as the use of locums. The group will meet in December 2024 and will report back to me in spring 2025. I look forward to seeing that report and taking forward the group's recommendations.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is welcome to hear the minister outline what is happening right now. Will she set out the changes that have happened in the psychiatry and mental health workforce over the past decade? What impact are the pension rules set by the UK Government having on the retention of psychiatrists?

Maree Todd: The member asks really good questions. Although record numbers of staff are providing mental health support to a larger number of people than ever before, we acknowledge that it does not feel like that on the ground. That is why we have continued to invest heavily in our mental health workforce—that is, the broad, multidisciplinary health workforce.

I have already referenced the increase in mental health nursing and psychiatrists in Highland. In 2024-25, in order to support multidisciplinary teams, the Scottish Government provided national health service boards with approximately £2.7 million for mental health pharmacists and technicians, and we provided NHS Scotland with around £30 million for continuing education and training and for workforce expansion. *[Interruption.]* Mr Mountain is now barracking me from a sedentary position, which I find profoundly unhelpful as I am trying to get on the record the

work that we are doing, in response to the question that he asked.

We have exceeded our commitment to provide funding for 320 additional staff in child and adolescent mental health services by 2026. We have also funded more than 800 additional mental health workers in accident and emergency departments, general practices, police custody suites and prisons.

The issue of pension taxation is reserved. We have raised it with the UK Government, in recognition of the fact that we have limited ability to influence that space. We have taken the action that we can, by devolving powers to NHS boards to use local flexibilities within NHS pension arrangements and to offer pension recycling.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Despite that, Scotland's mental health has worsened, according to all measures. The most recent Scottish mental health survey found that the CAMHS waiting time target has never been met and that a total of 28,000 Scots are waiting for mental health support. We have seen the Government's response, which has taken the form of an extortionate sticking plaster through more than £130 million being spent on locum psychiatrists over the past five years. As we have heard, health boards have been paying up to £837 per hour to plug the gaps. Does the minister's idea of a robust NHS workforce strategy involve anything resembling such a figure? Does she consider such expenditure to be an appropriate and good-value use of taxpayers' money?

Maree Todd: NHS Scotland's staff pay bill is more than £10 billion a year, with spending on locum psychiatrists being a tiny fraction of that. As Paul Sweeney will be aware, spending on such locums is managed by local health boards. Boards should always seek to secure the best value when they enter into arrangements for the use of locum psychiatrists.

At a national level, as I mentioned in response to the question last week, we have established a medical locum task and finish group to review and improve the processes and practices that are adopted when locums are engaged locally.

In reference to the first part of the member's question, I agree that there is undoubtedly a rise in demand. In some parts of the country, for example, we have seen a 1,500 per cent increase in requests for neurodevelopmental assessment. Those pressures could not have been predicted. That relates to the reduction in stigma associated with those causes, which is a really good thing, but it undoubtedly adds to the challenge in managing the current situation.

Accident and Emergency Departments (Winter Planning)

2. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported view of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine that its winter planning is “not doing enough” to support accident and emergency departments as they approach their busiest time of year. (S6T-02142)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We know that there are challenges to come for our health and social care system this winter, and in particular for our accident and emergency departments. Our health and social care winter preparedness plan sets out how we will ensure that people in Scotland receive safe and timely access to health and social care services and support over the winter.

We have a number of specific actions that will help to reduce pressure on our busy accident and emergency departments, such as improving discharge planning, enhancing our hospital at home services and treating more people in the community, when it is clinically appropriate to do so.

In addition, we have recruited a record number of NHS 24 call handlers, who will be available this winter to direct people to the most appropriate care, thereby helping to reduce unnecessary accident and emergency attendances.

Carol Mochan: Public Health Scotland recently revealed that levels of delayed discharge from hospitals reached a record high in August, which is one of our warmest months. The Royal College of Physicians has said that that should be a cause for huge alarm. Does the cabinet secretary think that hospital staff will gain any confidence from the Government saying the same thing it says year after year?

Neil Gray: I accept the fact that delayed discharge is too high and that variation in performance of local systems is too wide. That is why I have been meeting the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local chief officers weekly to monitor progress. If it had not been for the intervention, support and whole-system approach that we took over the summer, there would be an even worse picture of delayed discharge.

I hope that the work that has been put in at pace by local systems—in particular those that have had the most challenging positions to address—will bear fruit and we will see a reduction, going forward. However, we need to reduce much faster so that we give confidence to the staff who work in our acute sector to ensure that they feel prepared for winter.

Carol Mochan: According to the care homes census, one in five care homes has closed since 2014, which means that there are 18 per cent less care homes than there were a decade ago, while demand is going rapidly upwards. Many more are likely to close over the coming years. That is the root cause of hospital overcrowding: people have nowhere to go. Cabinet secretary, is it not the case that the Government has lost control of social care?

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

Neil Gray: No, that is not the case. We continue to work with local government to look at areas such as the national care home contract and improving the advice and guidance that are available for treating and supporting adults without capacity, to ensure that we support the position in local areas. There have been challenges in relation to care home closures and the decisions that have been taken at the local level in that regard, but there is more cause for optimism in some of the more challenging areas, where local authorities are looking at innovative ways of bringing some of those care homes back into use. That will be important.

We must also recognise that residential care is not the right place for everybody, and that we need to support more people at home. Hospital at home is an important investment that we are making. It is now the eighth-largest hospital for geriatric services in Scotland, and we will continue to support the work on expanding that, both as a means to support people to stay at home for longer and as a means to avoid hospital in the first place.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. What additional support is the Scottish Government providing to health boards to implement its winter planning?

Neil Gray: A record number of NHS 24 call handlers are available this winter to direct people to the most appropriate care. We have also strengthened arrangements to alternative services, including flow navigation centres and same-day emergency care, to support people to receive the right care in the right place and to help to reduce unnecessary A and E attendances.

Over the months ahead, we will continue to work with boards to enhance patient flow at our acute sites, to improve discharge planning and hospital at home services and to reduce conveyance of people from care homes where it is clinically appropriate. We have baselined the funding that is available for health boards to support all-year-round surge planning, rather than

its just being a focus in winter, as we recognise that such pressure could be faced at any point in the year.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has said:

“We are seeing lots of discussion, but we haven’t seen any useful measures so far that will make it any better for people working in A&Es this winter”.

That sums up the situation perfectly. Cabinet secretary, you have been in post for eight months and you are wheeled out time and again to provide smokescreens—

The Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Tess White: The cabinet secretary has not delivered any meaningful action. Why has the cabinet secretary failed to improve A and E times?

Neil Gray: First, I fully respect the views of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine—I went to Forth Valley hospital with representatives of the royal college to see the work that is being done there to improve the flow through the accident and emergency department.

I recognise the pressures that exist in our accident and emergency services. That is partly due to the delayed discharge picture and the need to make more beds available in hospitals, but we also need social care packages in place to enable people to leave hospital and return home without delay. We are supporting local systems to try to achieve that, both by getting the processes right and exemplifying best practice and by supporting those who have further to travel in order to ensure that they are able to meet our expectations for a much better service for the people whom we are here to serve.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned hospital at home a couple of times in his answers. Can he say any more about the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to further develop the programme, which, as we know, plays an important role in reducing pressure on hospitals and ambulance services?

Neil Gray: I thank Joe FitzPatrick for raising an important issue. To continue to develop the hospital at home service, the Scottish Government has made available £3.6 million of funding for 2024-25, which takes the overall funding for hospital at home for older people to more than £15 million since 2020.

The Scottish Government’s continued investment demonstrates that it is committed to hospital at home and sees the programme as a national priority. By providing care in that way, we are enabling more people to receive treatment in

the comfort of their own home, rather than in an acute ward; we are relieving the pressure on front-line services in traditional hospital settings; and, crucially, we are getting better outcomes for those patients, which means that they are re-enabled at home and are more likely to stay at home for longer, and will require a smaller social care package as a result. That is a win-win, which is why we are continuing to invest in the hospital at home scheme.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time.

Challenge Poverty Week

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-14820, in the name of John Swinney, on challenge poverty week. I would be grateful if members who wish to take part in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:21

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the opportunity to open a debate in Parliament during challenge poverty week. As Parliament will know, on 29 July, the United Kingdom Government announced its decision to restrict entitlement to the winter fuel payment, from this winter, to those in receipt of pension credit and other means-tested benefits. That meant that an important provision of financial support that was available to pensioners in the United Kingdom would no longer be in place. Instead, eligibility would be much more limited, to those eligible for pension credit and other relevant benefits.

That decision was taken with no notice or discussion with the Scottish Government. The decision came as a surprise to the Scottish Government, despite officials from both Governments working closely together on the social security programme that has been focused on delivering an effective transition to provide that benefit through devolved social security powers that this Parliament now holds.

As a result of that decision, Scotland's share of this year's block grant adjustment funding is expected to reduce by roughly £150 million. That is more than 80 per cent of the cost of our own devolved payment, the pension age winter heating payment, and it means that we no longer have the funding to offer the payment as a universal benefit, as we had intended to provide it.

In addition, the timing of the UK Government's announcement and the lack of prior consultation with Scottish ministers means that alternative approaches to universal payment, and the means-testing approach that is advocated by the United Kingdom Government, cannot be implemented in the time that is left available to us.

After careful consideration, we have made the difficult decision to replicate the UK Government's approach in Scotland, should that be necessary. My Government will, however, continue to press the United Kingdom Government to reverse that damaging decision, and we invite the Scottish Parliament to support that view in the debate today.

At the Labour Party conference, the Chancellor of the Exchequer told us that, under Labour,

"There would be no return to austerity."

However, Scottish Government analysis indicates that roughly 900,000 pensioners will no longer be entitled to support with heating costs this winter. That feels to me a lot like a return to austerity.

With the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets announcing an increase in the energy price cap from this month, low-income households will be under even greater pressure this winter. That announcement from Ofgem comes in the context of an election promise by the Labour Party to cut fuel bills by £300, only for bills to increase at the first available opportunity by, on average, £149.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Scottish National Party ministers have options, however. One such option would be to defer the block grant adjustment on the winter fuel payment this year so that ministers could make payments in the current financial year to pensioners across Scotland. Has the Scottish Government investigated that?

The First Minister: The issue and the challenge with all that is that it would require an entire system to be put in place to deal with the mess that has been created by a United Kingdom Government decision. This Scottish Government spends far too much of its time having to pick up the pieces from that Government's mistakes.

The cut to winter fuel payments and the increase in energy costs is a double whammy for people in Scotland, especially for many of the older and more vulnerable individuals in our country. The Scottish Government is working urgently to mitigate the impact of the UK Government's damaging decision.

I have written to councils and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to seek their urgent assistance in promoting the take-up of pension credit, as that is the main qualifying benefit by which our older people receive a pension age winter heating payment. Scottish Government officials have been attending events across the country to raise awareness of the connection between pension credit and the pension age winter heating payment, as well as to provide advice and support.

We are also continuing to invest heavily to protect vulnerable households from poverty and to mitigate the impacts of the UK Government's approach to funding social security. This year alone, we are spending £134 million on schemes such as discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund, which provide vital support to households struggling to meet their housing and energy costs.

We have also committed £6.1 billion for benefits expenditure. That is a record for Scotland and nearly £1.1 billion more than the UK Government

provides to us through the devolution of social security arrangements. That will help older people and low-income families with their living costs. In total, it will support more than 1.2 million people—around one in four Scots—when all Scottish Government benefits have been introduced and clients have been transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions.

We have consistently uprated all of our benefits in line with inflation, and our intention is to make it a legal requirement to uprate all devolved benefits annually. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, that is an estimated investment of at least £6 million for 2025-26, rising to at least £12 million in 2029-30.

Some have questioned and even criticised the level of social security expenditure in Scotland but, more than ever in these tough financial times, my Government and I make no apology for putting more money into the pockets of pensioners, families and those who are struggling with the cost of living.

We are also investing more than £12 million in free income maximisation support, welfare and debt advice services. That includes support for the Citizens Advice Scotland money talk team service, which supported more than 9,000 older people last year. We have invested in our council tax reduction scheme and free bus travel for older people over the age of 60. We have also provided more than £2 million from our equality and human rights fund to support older people's organisations to deliver work that is focused on tackling inequality and enabling older people to live independent and fulfilling lives.

In all that, we are continuing our other forms of heating cost support. Our winter heating payment guarantees a reliable annual payment of £58.75 to people on low incomes. Unlike the UK Government's cold weather payment, it does that regardless of the weather or temperature.

We are also continuing our child winter heating payment. Last year, that provided £7.2 million to support more than 30,000 children, young people and their families who had higher fuel needs due to disability or a health condition. Meanwhile, our warmer homes Scotland and area-based schemes support people who are experiencing fuel poverty to make their homes warmer and more fuel efficient.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The First Minister is right to focus on fuel poverty as we come into winter, and we have seen the energy cap rise. However, does he recognise that the roll-out of his warmer homes Scotland initiative has been glacially slow, and that it would take 100 years for all eligible homes to be fitted with the insulation that they need to keep warm?

The First Minister: It is vital that those programmes have the necessary impetus to take account of the challenges that we face in relation to the equipping of homes for the challenges that lie ahead. However, that has to be delivered within a costed programme, and that is part of what the Government is prepared to engage with in relation to the delivery of the budget propositions for 2025-26.

In the past decade, the warmer homes Scotland and area-based schemes have supported more than 150,000 households that are living in or at risk of fuel poverty. All those programmes and supports are valuable and are making a significant difference to people all across Scotland. However, they come at a time when we have challenges to address and this debate recognises the difficulty that we have, in that we cannot continue to backfill UK austerity-driven policy decisions. We have taken a number of steps to do so already, but the direct loss of the funding of winter fuel payments makes that an unsustainable option for the Scottish Government.

I therefore ask Parliament to support the Scottish Government's call for the UK Government to reverse the winter fuel payment decision and to reinstate the payment as a universal benefit. That is necessary to avoid the abrupt change in policy and provision that has been forced on us in Scotland.

Reversing the decision on the winter fuel payment will be a vital step towards ensuring that our citizens can afford to live in warm homes, but there are many other reforms that we need to see from the new UK Government. We also need reform of the UK energy markets to address the root causes of fuel poverty. We need a social tariff mechanism to provide discounted energy bills to those who face high energy costs, such as disabled people, carers and older people who are struggling with bills. That is the best way of ensuring that energy consumers are protected against high costs and that they can afford all their energy needs.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Much of what the First Minister says about what is required to be done is, of course, welcome. He will hear us on this side of the chamber wishing to collaborate. However, can he explain to the chamber why his Government has cut the fuel insecurity fund and why it cannot say clearly what it will do with £41 million of consequential from the household support fund, which has been extended across the United Kingdom?

The First Minister: The problem with the point that Mr O'Kane puts to me is that we have not yet seen that consequential funding. The problem that the Government has to wrestle with is that we have to look at the implications of all the financial

decisions that are taken by the United Kingdom Government. What we are having to wrestle with in this debate is a direct cut to our budget of about £150 million, which affects the universality of the winter fuel heating payment. That is what we are wrestling with today.

It is important for us to take forward the social tariff propositions that I have set out. Following a ministerial round-table, we secured the agreement of energy suppliers to take part in a working group that is aimed at co-designing a social tariff. There is considerable work still to be done, but that group represents a real and necessary step forward.

Unfortunately, the powers to implement a social tariff are reserved to the United Kingdom Government. We repeatedly called on the previous UK Government to introduce a social tariff as a means of targeting support to those who need it most. Those calls went unheeded prior to the election. If we are to enjoy a more constructive discussion with the current UK Government, with the policy choices and aspirations of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government being addressed in a serious, substantial and respectful way, it should be possible for us to make progress on delivering that crucial policy. We are committed to working closely with the UK Government, as well as with Ofgem, suppliers and consumer organisations, to advocate for the delivery of a social tariff across Great Britain. Here in Scotland, we will continue to tackle fuel poverty and support people during the on-going cost of living crisis, using the powers that are available to us.

If the Parliament had more powers, we would be able to do more. If the UK Government continues to take decisions such as means testing the winter fuel payment and does not heed calls for badly needed reform of the energy market, I have no doubt that more and more people will ask themselves why it is that a country as energy rich as Scotland should tolerate such decisions being imposed on us by successive Westminster Governments.

I recognise the restrictive fiscal environment in which the UK Government, my Government and local government across the UK are operating. The current budgetary challenges are the most severe that we have ever faced in the history of the Parliament, but it is a mistake to think that austerity and the restriction of entitlements is the solution to the problem. It is a mistake to think that benefits, action to tackle poverty and other supports for our most vulnerable are costs to be curtailed. Rather, it is the case that those measures are investments in our people, our communities and our nation's future.

Paul O'Kane: Will the First Minister take an intervention?

The First Minister: If Mr O'Kane will forgive me, I had better begin to draw my remarks to a conclusion.

We make those investments because they are the right thing to do and because they support thousands of people across Scotland every day. However, we also make them because they make good fiscal sense. They reduce later, greater strain on our public services. They support people to take part in our communities and to contribute to society. They grow our economy. In the long run, they make us all more prosperous, as they make our public services more sustainable. I urge the UK Government to deliver an autumn budget that understands that—a budget that is focused on investment and opportunity rather than on austerity, a budget that provides greater funding for public services and infrastructure, a budget that supports our nation's most vulnerable. I repeat those calls today.

As we begin this afternoon's debate, I hope that members across the chamber will work constructively with us to ensure that the powers, levers and funding that are available to us continue to make the greatest difference to the most vulnerable in Scotland. The steps that the UK Government has taken to restrict eligibility for winter fuel payments are not in the spirit of devolution. It cannot be appropriate in anybody's eyes to devolve power to the Scottish Parliament and, at the last minute, to withdraw the funding that goes alongside the devolution of that policy. Whatever our politics, surely no member of this Parliament can believe that that is an appropriate way for the devolution of powers to proceed.

I call on all members of Parliament to unite in a clear statement to the United Kingdom Government that the decision to end universal eligibility for winter fuel payments should be reversed and that the resources should be available to this Parliament to ensure that that vital support is available to all those in Scotland who are eligible. I appeal to Parliament to work together to make the best investment in our nation and its future. Let us ensure the best possible outcome for the people who we represent, this winter and for the years to come.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees in this Challenge Poverty Week that the UK Government must reverse the introduction of means testing for the Winter Fuel Payment.

The Presiding Officer: I call Russell Findlay to speak to and move amendment S6M-14820.1. You have up to 11 minutes, Mr Findlay.

14:37

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Poverty is unjust. It causes misery, crime, illness

and premature death. In many parts of Scotland, it has become deep rooted, trapping generation after generation. I am determined that my party will fight to increase opportunity, prosperity and good health for all people across Scotland.

This week—in challenge poverty week—it is important that we debate poverty and how best it can be tackled. However, I believe that the debate should be broad—not narrow—which is why I have lodged an amendment to John Swinney's motion. The motion refers only to the UK Labour Government's harmful decision to axe lifeline winter fuel payments for millions of elderly people.

It is shocking that Sir Keir Starmer did not conduct any assessment of the impact that his decision would have. That is despite the fact that his own party once warned that stopping these payments could result in the death of 4,000 pensioners in a single year. In the depths of a long, cold Scottish winter, we know that the winter fuel payment can be the difference between heating and eating.

Across the country, the anger at Labour is palpable. It promised change—and this is it. This is what it is really offering people. Elderly folk who have slogged hard all their days feel absolutely betrayed. Many were further angered upon discovering that Sir Keir, a man who certainly does not worry about his electricity bill, is a champion freeloader.

My party broadly agrees with Mr Swinney's motion. However, as with all state benefits, as in life, nothing is truly free. The SNP often does not seem to grasp that fact. Too often, it recklessly wastes taxpayers' money. However, the removal of this payment is the wrong way to go about introducing any form of means testing. Any change of this nature should have been made much more fairly and respectfully and with a sufficient period of notice. I think that the Labour members actually agree with that. Labour should never have put vulnerable pensioners at risk, as it has with this decision—aided and abetted by the SNP.

Today's debate is timely, following the release yesterday of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "Poverty in Scotland 2024" report. The publication is produced annually, and this year it asks

"how effective social security is at reducing poverty and advancing equality in Scotland."

Unlike Mr Swinney's simplistic one-line motion, the report sets out the complexity of the problem over 100-plus pages. It contains some truly disturbing data that ought to make left-wing politicians in the Parliament question some of their preconceived ideas.

Paul O'Kane: I am listening aghast to Russell Findlay's cognitive dissonance, given the fact that his Government salted the earth and left the public finances in an appalling situation.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): It is your Government!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr O'Kane.

Paul O'Kane: It is time that Russell Findlay apologised for poverty in this country instead of standing there and excusing it.

Russell Findlay: What an absolute brass neck. Mr O'Kane should apologise to the pensioners of Scotland for taking their winter fuel payments from them.

From 1994 to 1997, 14 per cent of Scottish households that were in receipt of some benefits were in what was described as "very deep poverty". However, by 2020 to 2023, there had been no improvement whatsoever. In fact, the figure had risen to 15 per cent. We see a similar pattern in other categories relating specifically to child poverty.

The First Minister: Mr Findlay has quoted figures up until 2023. Does he believe that the Conservative Government between 2010 and 2023 contributed in any way to the increase in poverty through its pursuit of the austerity agenda that he championed?

Russell Findlay: John Swinney has been a member of the Scottish Government for 16 of the past 17 years. That Government is in receipt of the largest-ever block grant but is unable to spend money wisely. That is part of the reason for the poverty that we experience in Scotland.

In each area, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation warns that the SNP Government looks likely to miss its targets. Before any other SNP members attempt to question the numbers, I point out that the report data is from the Scottish Government. I am usually averse to reeling off statistics in the chamber—I think that they can be a little bit abstract—but many of the numbers that the report contains are informative and consistent with other research. A recent Scottish Government study says that overall poverty has, in effect, remained unchanged since 1999. At that time, the figure was 24 per cent, and it has fluctuated since, but it is now back at about 21 per cent.

Most of the data that I have cited relates to the post-devolution period. For 25 years, we have had a Scottish Parliament with a huge array of powers at its disposal. This place has the capacity to make bold changes to the lives of people in Scotland.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention?

Russell Findlay: I need to make some headway. I do not have much time.

Throughout those 25 years, successive Labour and SNP Governments have pledged to tackle poverty. Mr Swinney regularly tells us that he will eradicate—that is the word that he uses—child poverty. However, throughout the quarter of a century of devolution, the poverty dial has barely shifted.

We need to spend more time talking about the relationship between social security and entrenched levels of poverty. The Scottish Fiscal Commission has said that annual social security spend is set to increase to about £8 billion by 2028-29, which represents a 51 per cent rise. However, social security is already the third-highest area of Scottish Government spending after the national health service and local government.

It is for those reasons that I have today appointed Liz Smith as my shadow cabinet secretary for social security. As a politician who commands widespread respect inside and outside the chamber, with a thorough grasp of economic matters, she will apply some much-needed scrutiny to that critical area.

I am not alone in thinking that our benefits system must also be fair to the hard-working taxpayers who fund it. It must be designed to lift people out of poverty, not to trap them in it. A life stuck on benefits, with no opportunity for advancement and no help to improve someone's lot and allow them to get ahead, is no life at all. As the new leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, I will champion our party's core values of aspiration and ambition, and I will argue that every child should receive the best possible education.

Our party will stand up for everyone in Scotland who feels left behind by the political establishment and who feels that nobody represents them.

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

Russell Findlay: I do not know whether I will get any time back.

The Presiding Officer: We have a little time in hand, Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: Okay.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I wonder whether the member could tell us: who does he plan to cut benefits from—the poorest, the disabled, or carers? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: This is the same Scottish Government that has demanded full control of the Scottish benefits system for the past 10 years, and it has been delayed. It wants me to do its job for it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: It is ridiculous.

People in this country feel that the Scottish Parliament wastes too much time on divisive policies such as gender reform, and that it has drifted away from the real issues that affect their lives. No politician should try to blame the public for feeling that nobody represents them any more and that nothing will change.

There is a strong feeling that politicians are all the same, but under my leadership we are going to do things differently. We are going to make promises that we can keep and deliver on the promises that we make. We are not going to stand here and promise the world, as too many in this Parliament do—I am looking at you, First Minister—knowing that they will never deliver.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, you will always speak through the chair. Thank you.

Russell Findlay: People do not expect miracles from their politicians: they just want them to tell it straight and to only make pledges that they can actually achieve.

The SNP and Labour offer different shades of socialism that keep people down and trapped in poverty. They make promises that they will never meet—and we will not do that. We will offer an alternative way forward—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: —to the high-tax, low-ambition, Holyrood consensus. We will stand up for everyone who wants their politicians to show a bit of common sense for a change. We will give people the opportunities to get themselves out of poverty, because we believe in their potential.

We believe that, given the chance, people will work their way up and find a way to succeed. All that they need is opportunity, which is what this Parliament often fails to deliver. It speaks only of giving people a hand out and not a hand up. It spends all its time talking about the problems, not providing the solutions to fix them.

There is crushing poverty out there in the real world that stops Scots from getting ahead, and it is not helped by the poverty of opportunity on their doorstep—the poverty of opportunity that this Parliament fails to tackle. It does not create the new jobs that are needed to give people a chance.

It has not looked after Scotland's education system. It has not improved healthcare. Life expectancy is falling under the SNP Government.

The Parliament has become detached from the bread-and-butter issues that people are most concerned about. All those things are barriers to people fulfilling their potential in life. I want to knock them down. I want to support people's aspirations, not block them. Only if we achieve that will we finally make progress on tackling the scourge of poverty. That will be my party's focus, and I believe that it should be what this Parliament as a whole spends most of its time and energy on.

I urge all parties to support my common-sense amendment. Either way, my party intends to support the Government's motion while recognising that it cannot absolve itself of responsibility for the winter fuel payment cut.

I move amendment S6M-14820.1, to leave out from "must" to end and insert:

"and the Scottish Government must both reverse the introduction of means testing for the Winter Fuel Payment; notes that the Scottish National Party administration has failed to reduce poverty during its 17 years in power; recognises that the best way to tackle poverty is to provide high-quality healthcare and educational and employment opportunities for people across Scotland, with appropriate levels of housing, and condemns the Scottish Government's failure to achieve any of these objectives."

14:48

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): This is, of course, challenge poverty week, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has revealed that 1 million Scots are currently living in poverty. That should act as a wake-up call for us all. That is a damning indictment of 14 years of disastrous Tory rule, and of 17 years of SNP incompetence here in Scotland.

I know that the Opposition will want to blame a Government that has been in power for a few months for the issues that we face, but let us not ignore the root cause: a morally bankrupt and economically illiterate Tory Government that has been let off the hook by far too many Opposition parties. Russell Findlay should have been apologising for the economic vandalism across the UK in the past 14 years. Perhaps Mr Findlay wants to do that now.

Russell Findlay: Mr Sarwar clearly agrees with cutting the winter fuel payment for millions of pensioners. Does he agree that there should at least have been some form of risk assessment?

Anas Sarwar: There is no apology and no taking of responsibility from Russell Findlay. Let us not forget that this is a man who backed the disastrous Liz Truss.

The SNP cannot avoid taking responsibility for its decisions in devolved areas over the past 17 years. We all have a duty to challenge poverty.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Scotland is clearly an energy-rich nation that should not be facing the prospect of its pensioners freezing to death this winter due to the actions of a callous UK Government. How can Scottish Labour support those actions, when recent research shows that they might result in the deaths of hundreds of Scottish pensioners?

Anas Sarwar: Ash Regan is right: we are a rich nation when it comes to our energy potential, which has been squandered by 14 years of broken promises from the Tories and 17 years of broken promises from the SNP. If we are to challenge poverty, that will require a collaborative approach between both our Governments, and it will require different decisions being made here in Scotland in devolved areas.

The First Minister: Will Anas Sarwar take an intervention?

Anas Sarwar: I will, for the final time, Presiding Officer, because I am conscious of time.

The First Minister: I am grateful to Anas Sarwar for giving way. He has talked about collaboration between the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments. Does Mr Sarwar believe that it is a reasonable way for the UK Government to behave, whereby it devolves a benefit and then removes the funding stream that is associated with that? On that very sharp point, does he believe that to be a reasonable act of the UK Government?

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister knows that the reconciliation has not happened yet, which means that the £41 million is also an option for the Government to use to support more families. I will come to that in a moment.

If the SNP is to be credible on tackling poverty, we need to have a proper debate to understand the causes of poverty and how to lift people out of it. The idea that poverty is caused by or solved by a single Government decision is simply not credible.

In today's challenging poverty debate, the SNP motion focuses solely on the winter fuel payment, so let me address that directly. This is a decision that the Labour Government did not want to make, but it is not responsible for the chaos and damage that it inherited from the Tories. Why SNP members, of all people, want to minimise the damage that the Tories have done is for them to explain. I repeat: the decision on the winter fuel payment was not a decision that the chancellor wanted to make. I have always said that I believe that the criterion for support based on pension

credit is too tight, and I continue to make that case.

This year, the winter fuel payment is a devolved payment, which means that we can make different choices. That is why Scottish Labour has laid out a plan to support the most vulnerable people in our society.

The First Minister: Will Anas Sarwar take an intervention?

Anas Sarwar: I have taken three interventions already. If I have time towards the end, First Minister, I will take it. *[Interruption.]* Let me lay this out, then I will let you back in.

The Scottish Government often says that we need to identify the money—well, we have. There is £41 million in Barnett consequentials, which was not money that the Scottish Government expected to have. We believe that that money should be used to reinstate the fuel insecurity fund, which was scrapped by the SNP Government. *[Interruption.]* Members are heckling, but I note that the reconciliation has not happened, so the £160 million has not gone and £41 million exists in the Scottish Government's budget. That £41 million can deliver a £200 payment for more than 200,000 households.

We have set out options. One option could be to support 200,000 low-income pensioner households, which would mean a third of pensioner households in the country receiving a payment this winter. Another option would be to target the payment at low-income households beyond pensioner households. A third option would be to do a hybrid of the two. That would go alongside a campaign to maximise uptake of pension credit, because we know that 70,000 eligible pensioners do not claim it. We are willing to work with the Scottish Government on that plan to support the Scots who are most in need, because the need for co-ordinated action could not be clearer.

I repeat that we have more than 1 million Scots in poverty. Child poverty rates have risen by 30,000 since the SNP came to power in 2007, 17 years ago. The SNP is on track to miss its interim child poverty target, with some 240,000 children remaining in poverty. I accept that not all the blame lies with the SNP Government—that situation is in large part due to 14 years of Tory chaos—but it cannot absolve itself of responsibility, because poverty is not an inevitable fact of life. It is something that can be tackled and reduced, and there are many areas—including making work pay, housing, education, justice and our NHS—where we must make progress to reduce poverty.

The First Minister: Will Mr Sarwar accept an intervention?

Anas Sarwar: I am conscious of time, First Minister.

Many of those areas are the full responsibility of the Scottish Government, which has failed to take meaningful action.

You cannot tackle poverty if people do not have safe and secure homes, but, under the SNP, thousands of Scots are stuck in substandard housing, tens of thousands are homeless and looking for homes and we have record levels of children in temporary accommodation. There was no mention of that from the First Minister.

You cannot tackle poverty if children are not getting the opportunities that they deserve, but there is still an attainment gap and an opportunity gap in our education system, where children from working-class backgrounds are less likely to go to university and less likely to start a business or learn a trade. There was no mention of that from the First Minister.

You cannot tackle poverty if people do not get the healthcare that they need, regardless of their background, but health inequalities persist, with heart disease and cancer more common among the less well-off and life expectancy lower for those in poverty. There was no mention of that from the First Minister. Soaring NHS waiting lists are forcing more and more Scots to empty their savings accounts and to remortgage or sell their homes to pay for private treatment. Those long waits are forcing Scots out of work, which is only adding to their economic insecurity, but there was no mention of that from the First Minister.

You cannot tackle poverty if our communities are not safe places to live, but SNP cuts to criminal justice and policing in Scotland have left communities in a permanent state of insecurity and have led to a revolving prison door for repeat offenders. There was no mention of that from the First Minister.

You cannot tackle poverty without good, secure work, but this SNP Government continues to view zero-hours contracts as a positive destination for young Scots. There was no mention of that from the First Minister.

We know that this Government likes to talk about what it does not have control of, but the fact is that it could do so much more with its powers to tackle the root causes of poverty right now. If we are to have a credible debate about how to lift children out of poverty and eradicate poverty in our country, we must realise that we need to have a multispoke approach to tackling the root causes of the issue.

To tackle poverty, we must ensure that every Scot has a safe, warm home, a safe and secure community, an NHS that is there for them and that

is free at the point of need and an education system that helps them to thrive and achieve their potential.

I realise that I am in my final minute, but I will touch on how we are going to fulfil our promise of providing a new deal for working people and making work pay through the introduction of a bill on that in Parliament tomorrow. We will ban fire and rehire, ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, repeal Tory anti-trade union legislation and deliver a real living wage, which will boost pay for thousands of Scots. That is the change that we are getting on with delivering.

If this Government wants to have a credible debate about poverty, it must accept its responsibility, from housing to the NHS and from the economy to our education system.

Some in this chamber may want to blame a Government that has been in power for three months, while absolving the responsibility of one Government that was in power for 14 years and another that has been in power for 17 years, but if we are to challenge poverty, that will require action from both Governments. Where something is a UK Government responsibility, it must act; where responsibility is shared, both Governments must act and co-operate; and where something is the Scottish Government's responsibility, it should act, putting the national interest before its own party interest. That will require a cross-portfolio, cross-Government response, and that is what Scottish Labour supports.

I move amendment S6M-14820.3, to leave out from "agrees" to end and insert:

"regrets that poverty levels in Scotland are still far too high, with 30,000 more children in Scotland living in poverty compared with 2007; recognises the need to support vulnerable people through the cost of living crisis and over winter with energy bills; welcomes, therefore, the announcement by the UK Government to extend the Household Support Fund, which will deliver an estimated £41 million in Barnett consequential funding, and calls on the Scottish Government to use this funding to deliver a package of support to help low-income pensioners and households by re-establishing the Fuel Insecurity Fund; considers that reducing poverty in the long term will require action across all of the themes of Challenge Poverty Week, as supported by hundreds of anti-poverty charities and third sector organisations across Scotland, and believes that this will require progress in all of the areas of policy that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament, including ending the housing and homelessness emergency, improving health and education outcomes, making transport more accessible, supporting people into work and creating good, well-paid jobs in all parts of the country."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I remind members who wish to speak in the debate to ensure that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons. I also advise members that we have some time in hand.

14:59

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Some members have already mentioned yesterday's Joseph Rowntree Foundation event entitled "Working together to tackle poverty". I hope that whoever came up with that title has not been wasting their time listening to our debate so far. A little over half an hour in, it feels as if we all need to have our heads banged together, because working together has not been the theme or tone of this debate.

I genuinely hope that that changes. Shirley-Anne Somerville, as cabinet secretary, and the new Secretary of State for Scotland both spoke at the event about the need to respond to the real anger that there is and to the appetite among a great many civil society organisations, as well as people who are affected by poverty, to have Governments work together. However, the first part of our debate has been characterised by finger pointing and not by any hint of self-reflection.

I attended yesterday's launch event, and I chatted to quite a few people in the margins afterwards. Overwhelmingly, there was a clear sense that the Scottish Government can and must do better, and that the new UK Government's beginnings have been profoundly unimpressive. They recognised the deeply harmful track record of nearly a decade and a half of Conservative austerity, but they were underwhelmed. There was a recognition that most Governments like to underpromise rather than risk underdelivering, but there was a clear sense that the current UK Government appears determined to do both—underpromise and underdeliver.

I am not at all surprised by the Tory amendment saying absolutely nothing about the effect of that decade and a half of austerity, or by a Tory speech blaming the left for the effects of the economic policies of the hard right. It is deplorable, but it is not at all surprising.

What I am slightly surprised by, and certainly disappointed by, is the fact that, with the motion and amendments that are before us for a vote, we are left only with the option of taking a one-sided position. The Scottish Government motion points the finger solely at UK Government decisions instead of showing any self-reflection on the Scottish Government's track record, and the Labour amendment does the opposite by congratulating the UK Government and pointing the finger at the Scottish Government. The choice of what to unite behind as a Parliament is in stark contrast to the JRF theme of working together. We are left with those two choices.

The Scottish Government's track record includes significant measures to tackle poverty.

The Scottish child payment has been described as a game-changer and a groundbreaking policy, and it deserves that credit. There have been smaller-scale measures to tackle the cost of the school day, which can still make a huge difference to individual families and households, and to provide free bus travel for more people in Scotland. The commitment to progressive taxation to pay for some of those measures recognises that we will not succeed in tackling poverty unless, fundamentally, we accept that there is a need to redistribute wealth and that far too much of this country's wealth is hoarded by a tiny number of people and businesses.

The UK Government's track record needs to be reflected on as well. The benefit cuts and certain harmful policies, such as the two-child limit and the benefit cap, are attacks specifically on the most marginalised people in our society. They show destitution being used as a deliberate policy objective by the UK Government.

The track records of both Governments need to be reflected on, but although placing the blame is necessary, it is not sufficient. It is perfectly justified as a thing to do—as a political argument—but it cannot be an excuse for inaction.

The First Minister: I think that Mr Harvie knows me well enough to know that I engage substantively on these issues. However, the Government motion does not point the finger of blame; it calls for a policy change. It calls for a burden that Mr Harvie and I both know will cause damage to our fellow citizens to be reversed, because there is no necessity for the United Kingdom Government to have taken that policy decision. Although I hear what Mr Harvie says, I do not think that it is a fair representation of what the Scottish Government is putting to Parliament. We are asking for people to come together and say to the United Kingdom Government, "You have taken the wrong course on this policy issue".

Patrick Harvie: I hope that it is clear that my criticism of the Government motion is not a criticism of what is in it. If the motion is presented to Parliament unamended, of course I will agree with what is in it.

My criticism of the motion is of what is lacking in it—what is missing—which is any self-reflection on the track record of the Scottish Government and the things that the Scottish Government can do, as opposed to only what it cannot do. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament must use every available power. That case stands on its own merits, but it is all the stronger if we seek to convince the people of Scotland to take on more power and continue the journey towards self-government.

The additional measures that are urgently needed from the Scottish Government include reversing the harmful decisions on peak rail fares and on free school meals; cutting the cost of public transport compared with higher-carbon modes; making the country's infrastructure investment the heat in buildings programme rather than a road-building programme that will lock in high costs as well as high-carbon modes of transport; fulfilling the promise of rent controls; and funding all those measures not just from a redistribution of the capital budget but from continued steps towards progressive taxation. Perhaps less scope is left to do that on income tax, but there is a huge opportunity to do it on local taxation—through progressive local tax reform, which has stalled since the Bute house agreement ended and which the Scottish Government needs to pick up—as well as making progress towards a minimum income guarantee. We cannot fulfil that completely with current powers, but the groundwork can and must be laid.

I hope that we can expect more in the years to come, including a serious change of direction from the UK Government, but I am determined to continue making the case that the Scottish Government can and must do more, even within the constraints that it faces when it comes to power and budgets.

15:06

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am very happy to rise for the Scottish Liberal Democrats to speak to the motion that is before us, which is short and carefully worded. I do not at all disagree with it, and I recognise the First Minister's comment some moments ago that it just calls for a policy change—which the Liberal Democrats, as a matter of public record, support.

However, I would prefer that we were debating a more expanded motion. It is a missed opportunity that, in challenge poverty week, the First Minister's motion does not mention the lack of progress on this Government's child poverty targets or propose any solutions from the tools in the Government's policy arsenal to move the needle on a vital topic that many of us entered politics to resolve.

The First Minister should have lodged a motion that recognises the factors that create poverty in our society, such as social immobility, health inequalities, poor housing and deficiencies in education. The fact that the Government has lodged a motion that is so singular in focus diminishes the cross-party efforts to tackle poverty in what is a most important milestone week.

That said, I do not disagree with the sentiment: I think that the Labour Party has got it wrong. The Scottish Government thinks that, Liberal Democrat

members think that, and I dare say that my colleagues in Scottish Labour think that, too. Household heating bills are set to rise again this winter, and nowhere will that be more keenly felt than in our Scottish communities—particularly those in the far north and the remote and island communities.

One of the first acts of the new Labour Government was to remove that £300 winter fuel payment from millions of pensioners. The impact of that cut will be felt profoundly by many people across these islands, and I fear that it will cost lives. Major charities have spoken out against the cut, arguing that it risks damaging the health of many older people. Caroline Abrahams, charity director at Age UK, said that the move was

“reckless and wrong”

and that it

“spells disaster for pensioners on low and modest incomes”.

We must remember that Age UK has identified that 800,000 pensioners could be on pension credit—and thus exempted from the removal of the winter fuel payment—but are not, for whatever reason. They are most likely to be impacted and to be plunged further into fuel poverty. The decision to cut those payments is wrong. Labour has choices on the winter fuel payment, on the DWP’s chasing of carers for overpayments, and on the two-child cap.

The MPs in my party were proud to walk through the lobbies of the House of Commons to oppose things such as the two-child cap, side by side with Labour MPs. We walked through those same lobbies with Labour MPs in support of the introduction of things such as the winter fuel payment. We therefore share the disappointment of many people in the country.

The UK Labour Government could make different choices. One option would be to reverse the Conservative cuts to the big bank taxes. That would raise a sum in the region of £4 billion rather than punish our pensioners to make up for the years of Conservative Party failure.

The Scottish Government is not a bystander. It, too, has let down thousands of Scots when it comes to heating their homes. It has failed to tackle fuel poverty in Scotland—my goodness, it has failed—and is delivering a real-terms cut to that budget. Spending on energy efficiency programmes is set to be around £23 million less than it would have been had ministers allowed the budget line to keep pace with inflation. The fuel insecurity fund will go from £30 million last year to £0 in the 2024-25 financial year. It is no wonder that hundreds of thousands of Scots are living in real-terms fuel poverty.

Research by my party found that, at the current rate of progress, the Scottish Government’s warm homes scheme would take almost 100 years to insulate all eligible homes in Scotland—I intervened on the First Minister on that point. We need an insulation programme that is fit for purpose and that meets the scale of not only the fuel poverty challenge but the climate challenge as well. If we get that right, we can cut household energy bills and emissions at the same time. If the Scottish Government is to lose its winter fuel payment, there is sense in the Scottish Government’s scheme being focused on pensioner fuel poverty, in particular. Let them be first in the queue.

Franklin Roosevelt said:

“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

As liberals, we believe in giving people opportunities to succeed and tools to help themselves out of poverty.

On health inequalities, disability in this country still goes hand in hand with low income, and hundreds of thousands of Scots are trapped out of work by poor physical and mental health. They cannot get on in life while they wait years for operations to begin, for mental health treatment, to get assessed for the problems that keep them behind or for the Government to take long Covid seriously. Remember that more than 150,000 Scots have been left behind by the Government’s myopia on that important topic.

On education, the attainment gap has not closed at all in 15 years and, with that, the ladder of social mobility that education provides has been pulled up from the poorest kids. On housing, people need a secure, warm home. We also need to give our carers a fair deal, because so many of them are struggling to make ends meet but they offer much of the solution to the crisis in our NHS.

Of course I welcome the First Minister’s goal of eradicating child poverty and things such as the child payment; that is why I am in politics. However, he will forgive me for being somewhat sceptical, given that the SNP Government has already had 17 years in power and the poorest Scots—particularly the poorest juvenile Scots—have very little to show for it.

Before politics, I was a youth worker. The work that I was engaged in focused on inner-city young people who are affected by disability, parental substance use, care experience and, most of all, grinding poverty. That poverty was inexorably linked to their ability to learn, engage and form positive and productive interests. In youth work, getting it right for every child was our watchword, but progress is measured by the safe, healthy,

achieving, nurtured, active, respected and responsible—SHANARRI—indicators. The last letter in that acronym is I, which stands for inclusion. No child who is held back by poverty can ever be fully included in our society.

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

15:13

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am grateful to the Poverty Alliance for co-ordinating challenge poverty week again this year. It is important that politicians reflect and recommit to tackling poverty this week.

In the face of extremely challenging financial circumstances, the Scottish National Party Government is delivering billions of pounds of support to vulnerable households. We recognise social security as a human right, and the SNP Government is investing £6.3 billion in social security this year. That includes supporting around 325,000 children in low-income families through the game-changing Scottish child payment, which is benefiting around 4,400 children in East Kilbride alone, to the tune of £0.5 million per month.

The Scottish Government is also spending more than £90 million this year on discretionary housing payments, a decision that effectively scraps the Tory—and now Labour—bedroom tax in Scotland. We can see the results of the actions of the SNP in government. Poverty levels are much lower in Scotland than they are in England and Wales, and modelling suggests that 100,000 children are being kept out of poverty this year due to Scottish Government actions.

Recognising that there is still more to do, the First Minister is prioritising the eradication of child poverty. Given that 85 per cent of social security remains reserved to Westminster, we also need to see action from the UK Government. One of Labour's first moves in government—with no notice and no consultation—was choosing to scrap universal winter fuel payments, a move that will likely push more pensioners into poverty.

Of course, it is not just pensioners who are at risk from Westminster policies. As part of their austerity agenda, the Tories introduced the two-child limit and rape clause, yet Labour is keeping that. The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that more than 100 children have been pulled into poverty every single day since Labour took office, because it has kept that Tory cap. That is not change; it is the same old Westminster tune.

In 1997, Tony Blair promised that there would be no tuition fees under Labour. As soon as he got into Downing Street, he broke that promise, and we now see a Labour Government charging

students tuition fees of nearly £10,000 per year in England and Wales. Fast forward 27 years from 1997 to just a few months before this year's general election, and Keir Starmer challenged the previous Prime Minister to rule out cutting winter fuel payments. As soon as he got into Downing Street, Keir Starmer decided that the Labour Government would take the payment away from millions of pensioners. Age UK described that as

“reckless and wrong”

and a

“disaster for pensioners on low and modest incomes”.

Labour's solution is to apply for pension credit. However, as Citizens Advice pointed out, pension credit is one of the most underclaimed benefits. In fact, Independent Age estimates that a total of almost £2.5 million in pension credit goes unclaimed every year by more than 1,000 pensioner households in East Kilbride alone. On top of that, pension credit only tops up total weekly income to around £11,000 per year for single pensioners, or just over £17,000 for a couple. Keir Starmer has had 18 grand's worth of free football tickets in the past 12 months, yet he expects two pensioners earning less than that between them to be able to get by without their winter fuel payment.

During the election campaign, Labour also promised to lower people's energy bills. Instead, just this month, household fuel bills have gone up by 10 per cent, or £149 on average. Most pensioners are facing the double whammy of higher bills and no winter fuel payment. Last week, the *Daily Record* reported that Labour MSPs are “frustrated” with new Scottish Labour MPs for voting to cut winter fuel payments, so I wonder whether those Labour MSPs will do the right thing today and support the Scottish Government's motion calling on the UK Government to reverse its decision.

The UK Government must introduce an essentials guarantee for universal credit, and it must scrap the two-child cap. It must also reverse the introduction of means testing for the winter fuel payment. I hope that Scotland's Parliament will unite to agree on this issue, and that the Labour Government marks challenge poverty week not with warm words but by reinstating the universal winter fuel payment so that we can protect our pensioners.

15:19

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives are calling on both the UK and SNP Governments to show some common sense and work together to deliver for all those affected by poverty.

To be clear, we do not support the cut to winter fuel payments imposed on pensioners by Labour and the SNP. It is a betrayal of thousands of vulnerable people in Scotland who are trying to heat their homes. When senior Labour politicians have accepted thousands of pounds-worth of freebies, it truly beggars belief that struggling pensioners have been left out in the cold by Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves. In Scotland's colder climate and longer winter, unnecessary deaths loom large on the horizon—all because of a political decision.

The Scottish Government could have mitigated Labour's decision, but chose not to. Instead, up to 900,000 pensioners in Scotland could lose out on lifeline payments because the SNP chose to replicate Labour's cuts in full. The important point is that it had a choice but chose not to mitigate. It is shameful, but not remotely surprising, that the SNP is using the motion to try to leverage the issue for electoral advantage. Anas Sarwar's whataboutery and sticking-plaster solutions will do little to reassure pensioners who are trying to make ends meet during the cost of living crisis. They have been failed by Anas Sarwar and Labour; they have also been failed by John Swinney and the SNP.

As we mark challenge poverty week 2024, a new report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is clear that the UK and Scottish Governments are failing to use their powers to reduce poverty. "Poverty in Scotland 2024" lays bare the extent of the challenge: more than one in five Scots currently lives in poverty. According to the JRF,

"there has been little meaningful progress in reducing these figures in recent years."

We have heard woefully little from the SNP about pathways into poverty. There is no commonsense solution in sight in today's motion, which is why the Scottish Conservative amendment highlights the need to provide

"high-quality healthcare and educational and employment opportunities".

Surely the motion could have offered politicians at the heart of the SNP Government an opportunity to demonstrate the policies that are in place to tackle such issues and which devolved levers it will use to deliver them.

What about drug deaths? People in the most deprived areas in Scotland are more than 15 times as likely to die from drugs compared with those in the least deprived areas. That is Scotland's national shame.

What about the housing crisis? Homelessness in Scotland is at its highest level in more than a decade. Rough sleeping has gone up. More children—not fewer—are living in temporary accommodation.

What about the 8,200 people each year who are at the end of their lives and who die in poverty in Scotland? In addition, there are prohibitive public transport costs that impact on work commutes, the closure of vital community amenities because of council cuts, parents who are struggling to meet childcare costs so that they can keep working, and families who cannot cover the cost of school meals.

All those issues fall within the Scottish Government's control. It can decide how it spends its budget—it sets the policies—but the SNP has been far too preoccupied with blaming others to use the powers that it has to tackle poverty. Even Social Security Scotland will take a full decade to devolve all benefits under the Scotland Act 2016. The SNP has missed the 2020 transfer deadline by six years—I repeat, six years. I see that SNP members have put their heads down. I, too, would put my head down in shame if I heard that.

This debate was an opportunity for the SNP to build consensus and discuss the real challenges that Scotland faces in overcoming poverty. It is a source of deep regret that its motion has failed to provide any solutions.

15:24

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The Poverty Alliance has described challenge poverty week 2024 as

"an opportunity for you to raise your voice against poverty and unite with others in calling for a just and equal Scotland."

To do that, we need to have an open and honest conversation about the variety of factors that affect poverty and how governments at all levels must play their part in tackling them.

Deprivation, health inequalities and economic challenges are well documented in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency. I listened to Russell Findlay's opening comments about deep-rooted poverty in generation after generation, so I gently remind Mr Findlay and his colleagues about the actions of his party from 1979 onwards that decimated many working-class communities across Scotland, particularly in Inverclyde, which is part of the region that Mr Findlay represents.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Save the Children says that the Scottish Government's programme for government has done nothing to shift the dial on child poverty. Does Stuart McMillan agree?

Stuart McMillan: I will come back to the point that Mr Findlay made about there being generation after generation of poverty. If we seriously want to tackle poverty, we have to accept and appreciate

the actions of politicians of the past and how they have affected politicians' decision making today.

Every single day and week as a local MSP, I deal directly with constituents who are living in poverty. I engage in debates such as this one, and I attend parliamentary events in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency. I have meetings with charities, businesses and public sector organisations to discuss how they are working to help to alleviate poverty. Tackling poverty is everyone's business, but there is no getting away from the fact that politicians and Governments have the biggest role to play in addressing the root causes of poverty. As elected representatives we design, influence and vote on policies that impact on every aspect of people's lives. Some of those decisions are easier to make than others, particularly given that this Parliament faces a finite budget and does not have full control of the powers that affect Scotland.

I firmly believe that the new UK Labour Government is fundamentally wrong to have chosen to remove universality from the winter fuel payment. That will push more pensioners into poverty and will do nothing to get the economy back on track. With Scotland experiencing colder winters than the rest of the UK, the harm that will be caused by the policy will have a disproportionate effect on pensioners who live in Scotland.

Consider the briefing that Independent Age circulated before today's debate. In Scotland, the fuel poverty rate is highest among people of pension age, with more than one in three being in fuel poverty. The briefing says:

"Older people are most vulnerable to the impacts of cold homes and are most likely to suffer respiratory and cardiovascular disease as a result."

It goes on to say that that can ultimately result in the premature death of those who cannot stay warm at home and is seen in the excess mortality rates among older people in winter.

Given that Inverclyde has an ever-increasing older population, the decision to means test the winter fuel payment will be hugely damaging for my constituents. Independent Age research estimates that 1,168 pensioners in Inverclyde, which equates to 15 per cent of the local pensioner population, live in poverty. That is an estimated £3.6 million in pension credit going unclaimed annually in my constituency by 1,590 pensioner households. Given that pension credit is now a qualifying benefit for the winter fuel payment, there are even more millions of pounds that pensioners in my area are entitled to but are missing out on.

I am determined to do all that I can as the local MSP to encourage greater take-up of pension

credit in my constituency. I have undertaken many cost of living surgeries over the past 18 months, and I am doing another one on Friday to mark challenge poverty week. I will also work with Independent Age to organise a surgery that will be aimed specifically at pensioners, particularly on increasing take-up.

I note that housing was the first theme that the Poverty Alliance chose to focus on for challenge poverty week. Under the SNP, 2,511 affordable social homes have been built in Inverclyde. That investment was desperately needed. Since coming to power in 2007, the SNP Government has introduced several measures to improve availability of housing in Scotland, including the abolition of Margaret Thatcher's right to buy, the ending of fixed-term private lets, improvement of tenants' rights and many more.

Labour has spoken of change—we have heard that often enough in the chamber and outside it. However, Labour is committed to continuing the austerity agenda in Scotland and to retaining cruel Tory policies including the two-child cap and the bedroom tax. Anas Sarwar has to answer for that. While more out-of-touch Westminster politicians focus on getting their suits, their glasses and other items paid for by wealthy benefactors—*[Interruption.]*

Mr O'Kane might want to listen to this. While that is happening, many pensioners will sit at home freezing this winter, worried about whether they will see another day.

15:30

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): In this week, every year, we in the chamber highlight the many ways in which poverty impacts on our constituents' lives and we debate our ideas for solutions to it, because there is little that is more important than addressing poverty.

As we reflect on that this year, I start by thanking the thousands of people who work tirelessly to bring about an end to poverty and to people's suffering in Scotland. They include organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group, the Poverty Alliance, Barnardo's Scotland, Aberlour Child Care Trust, Close the Gap—which reminds us that poverty is a gendered issue—and the people who work in many other organisations across Scotland, who dedicate their lives to lifting people out of poverty.

Given that 19 per cent of people in Glasgow are income deprived, I also give special thanks to the countless organisations in Glasgow that work day in and day out in the region to support them. They include Govan Home and Education Link Project, Glasgow Central Citizens Advice Bureau, Glasgow Disability Alliance and many more. They all have

an enormous job to do, and I thank them all for what they do.

Glasgow gives just a snapshot of the scale of the problem, because poverty levels across Scotland are scandalous. One million of our neighbours, friends and family members live in poverty—thousands of them are children, and there are 30,000 more of them now living in poverty today than there were in 2007, when this Government came to power. That is 1 million people in Scotland whose lives are blighted by poverty and, in some cases, by destitution. Their health is worse and their education outcomes are suffering because they do not have enough money. To be blunt, this Government is not doing nearly enough.

Disabled people, young people, lone parents and black and minority ethnic families are all more likely to live in poverty, but we hear little of them from members on the Government benches, nor do we see it in the motion for debate today. Reducing poverty in the longer term means action for all of society, across all the themes of challenge poverty week and in many policy areas over which this Government has policy control. That includes ending the housing and homelessness emergency, improving health and education outcomes, making transport more accessible and affordable, and supporting people into work, and creating good and well-paid jobs in all parts of our country.

In so many of those areas, however, the SNP is falling badly short. Rather than supporting people through a cost of living crisis, and over the winter with energy bills, the SNP Government has scrapped the fuel insecurity fund, decoupled Scottish winter heating payments from cold weather, which leaves people losing out on the coldest days—

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will Ms Duncan-Glancy give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The SNP Government has raided energy efficiency budgets, cut the affordable homes budget, failed to end care charges, scrapped the peak fares trial, cut the Scottish welfare fund in real terms and abandoned its promises to young people, including on free school meals.

I give way to Kevin Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: On all those issues, we want to do more, and we, like many, were hopeful for some change from the Labour Government, but that has not happened. During the election campaign, Anas Sarwar said,

“Read my lips: no austerity under Labour”,

yet the cut to winter fuel payments is austerity. Can Ms Duncan-Glancy understand that? What will she do to have that cut reversed?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will certainly take absolutely no lessons from the Scottish Government on austerity, because all the actions that are holding people in Scotland back, and in poverty, are at the hands of the SNP Government. It has powers and responsibilities to act—

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Will the member give way

Pam Duncan-Glancy: —but it is holding back people in Scotland, none more so than children.

I will take an intervention from the member.

Alasdair Allan: I am sure that the member will come on to this subject, but does she, or does she not, agree with the UK Government’s decision on payments for pensioners in the winter?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the member for that question. I will come to that point.

For children in Scotland, their attainment is dropping, and the poverty gap is widening. On child poverty—the Scottish Government’s defining mission—we see the stark consequences of its inaction and broken promises, which are denying young people the opportunities that they deserve. That is not because there is a shortage of incredible work going on in schools and communities: the reality is that teachers and third sector groups are still stepping in to provide supplies—pencils and even food—for young people whom they work with. They should not have to do that. Organisations, teachers and schools all have roles to play, but they should not have to go into their own pockets to lift children out of poverty because this Government did not step up.

Rather than step up, the Government has stepped back. When teacher numbers are going backwards, this Government has stepped back and said that that is not its fault. When key anti-poverty programmes such as MCR Pathways are cut, the Government has failed to step in. It has broken countless promises that it has made to young people. Even when Parliament intervened and told the Government to stick to its promises, it stepped back and ignored that, all because of its financial incompetence—incompetence that means that it does not stick by anything that it promises to do. We have seen promises from the First Minister himself on scrapping school meal debt not coming to fruition.

The impact of all that is stark, with attainment down and the gap widening. There is a class ceiling on opportunity, on this Government’s watch. It does not stop there. The problem of poverty is widespread. Of all weeks, I would have

expected the Government to know that in challenge poverty week.

Labour will work with the Scottish Government if it is prepared to understand the extent of the levers that it has. However, in today's debate, it has chosen to ignore the scale of the problem and its role in addressing it. Instead, it has chosen political point scoring in its motion. It frustrates me every day to see it squander opportunities to fix the real problems that we face in Scotland, because it is more focused on what it cannot do than on what it can do.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will I get back my time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, you will.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will take the intervention.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I was just wondering when the member was going to get to Kevin Stewart's point about whether she backs the UK Government's decision to scrap winter fuel payment universality.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We have set out quite clearly what our position on that is, and we will do so again at decision time.

The UK Labour Government has announced the extension of the household support fund, which will see Scotland receiving an estimated £41 million in Barnett consequential funding. With that money, the Scottish Government could re-establish the fuel insecurity fund and provide an additional £200 for 200,000 low-income households in Scotland.

The Scottish Government has a choice: it can support Scottish Labour's plan to get the money to people who need it and it can commit to using the funding for a package of support for people struggling, or it can focus on what it cannot do. It can work today, across Governments and local authorities, to deliver targeted grants and energy top-up vouchers through local authorities and the third sector, and support Scots who need it most. Alongside a campaign to encourage uptake of social security payments, including on pension credits, the Scottish Government could ditch zero-hours contracts as a positive destination, reduce public transport costs, create jobs and sort waiting lists so that people do not have to raid their bank accounts to get healthcare.

The Scottish Government can do all that to maximise incomes and ensure that we support people in Scotland who need it most. The Government has a choice: it can continue to let

people down with its hand-wringing and whataboutery, or it can act, use the powers and resources that it has and deliver on its moral and legal duty to tackle poverty in Scotland.

15:38

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Initially, when I sat down to work out what I was going to say today, I stopped for a while to contemplate the best way forward. Normally, these debates can descend into party-political rammies with more heat than solutions. Unfortunately, we seem to have gone down that way a bit today. I thought that I would take time not to add to that, but that in itself can be challenging.

My problem is that I have been here for a long time and I might repeat something that I have said previously. For others, the debate can become sterile and academic. That is always disappointing for me, as I see the chamber as the heart and soul of Scottish political life. It is not like some cold, calculating debating society in which it does not matter which side of the argument people are on.

For me, poverty—particularly getting our people out of poverty—is one of the main issues affecting many of our constituents, but it is more than that to me and others in the chamber: it is about our lives. Not many members will be aware not only that I am from Paisley, but that I am from Ferguslie Park. That area has had its challenges in the past. Like many areas in Scotland, it has been blighted by poverty for decades. Regardless of who was in power at Westminster, we had to work hard and struggle to get our families ahead in life. My dad's journey on that road was to work as a self-employed engineer to take his family out of poverty.

There were many highs and devastating lows. There were good years, but they were probably outweighed by the many bad years. We went from being comfortable to being homeless, and we were helped out only by the support of family members who let us stay with them, or by friends who allowed us to stay in their caravan holiday home for a year. When poverty hits, it stays with you throughout your life. No matter how I managed to get on in life, I am still that wee boy who had a quite traumatic and chaotic lifestyle when he was growing up.

For years, I put all thoughts of it to the back of my mind, because I am of a generation that does not talk about that kind of thing. With that in mind, it really irritates me when we have a debate like this in Parliament and I have to listen to posh boys debating in a very cold and calculating way. These are people's lives that we are talking about, and people should not be talked down to by elected members. I am not saying that we have to

experience poverty to understand it, but there needs to be some compassion in the debate. Sometimes, I listen to what some of those in the chamber say and it drives me to absolute distraction. I can only think what those in the real world, out there, must think when they hear some of these debates.

For the majority of my life, this place did not exist, and, no matter who has been in power at Westminster, it is Westminster that has created the many issues and challenges that we face in Scotland. The sooner that the unionist parties accept that and take some responsibility for it, the further the debate will get.

The UK Labour Government has decided to embark on a brutal programme of further Westminster austerity, cutting winter fuel payments. That is an absolute disgrace.

Paul O’Kane: Will the member take an intervention?

George Adam: If Mr O’Kane wants to defend the disgrace of winter fuel payments being taken away from pensioners, I am quite happy to let him in.

Paul O’Kane: Mr Adam is making a case that many of us—particularly those of us who come from Renfrewshire—would recognise about the real challenges that there have been in places such as Ferguslie Park. Is he really suggesting that a Labour Government that lifted a million children out of poverty and that invested in a national minimum wage for the first time, as well as in working tax credits and all the reform that we saw in that period, did nothing to help people in Ferguslie Park?

George Adam: At the time, the new Labour Government lowered the number so far that it would have been almost impossible to claim that it was doing that. This is about real people and real people’s lives, not the fantasy that the Labour Party is talking about. This winter, pensioners in Scotland are having to decide whether they can heat their homes or eat. That is an absolute disgrace, and it comes weeks after the Labour leader in Scotland, Anas Sarwar, said:

“Read my lips: no austerity under Labour.”

I have become quite passionate, and it will be no surprise to anyone here that I want independence for Scotland. In 1987, as a very young man, I joined the SNP because the Tory Government had devastated Paisley. Its economic vandalism tried to break the very heart and soul of my town. Then came the new Labour Government, which never helped much either. It continued to go down the Westminster route then, as it is doing again now, by copying Tory austerity. Initially, I did not want my children to grow up in a

UK where Scotland was forgotten. Now that I have grandchildren, the future that I want for them is that of an independent Scotland.

What is happening at the moment under the Labour Party is not change; it is a continuation of the Tory party’s years of austerity. It is more of the same, making no difference in communities such as mine and making it even harder for people to work their way out of poverty. The money comes from Westminster—

Paul O’Kane: Will the member give way?

George Adam: If Mr O’Kane is happy to explain why he has left people in Renfrewshire in poverty, he can now tell me.

Paul O’Kane: I do not think that I got an answer to the first point, about the record of a Labour Government in places such as Renfrewshire. This very week, the Labour Government will bring to the House of Commons a bill that will see a new deal for working people put on the statute book. It will end fire and rehire, end zero-hours contracts, repeal anti-trade union legislation and give people security at work. Surely, Mr Adam agrees that that is the change that people in Ferguslie Park need?

George Adam: Not if you are a pensioner in Ferguslie Park and you cannot put your heating on because of what the Labour Party has done. Labour cannot attack a part of the community and then say that it is doing other things that are okay.

This is important. This is not some academic debate; this is people’s lives that we are dealing with here. I am not cynical enough—this place has not made me cynical enough—to think that there are not those in the Labour Party who want to join me on this journey to make Scotland better. Let us talk about the big issues. Let us talk about how we can make Scotland better. The paper “Building a New Scotland: Social security in an independent Scotland” talks about taking a human rights-based approach by treating people with dignity, fairness and respect, by building a system that is an integral part of the wellbeing economy and by delivering financial security for all through a minimum income guarantee.

That is what I want to talk about. That is the future that I want to debate. I do not want to sit here, listening to the posh boys who continue to argue as though this were just some debating society. This is Scotland’s Parliament and this is Scotland’s future that we are talking about. It is about time that we started to move towards that and talked about the real issues.

15:45

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Today, Parliament gathers to challenge poverty, and we rightly challenge the inevitability of poverty

and an approach to politics that is, far too often, without hope and means that the very idea of progress is often challenged. We can assert together that the shape of society is ours to control. Although people might be victims of their circumstances, they should not be captured by those circumstances for their whole lives, and far less should it be the case that generations of families are captured by the circumstances of their birth.

Breaking the bondage of poverty pay and deprivation is the founding principle of organised labour. We know that poverty is a function of the choices that we make in politics and, crucially, the choices that we refuse to make. Poverty is inhumane, and the fight for a more equal country of dignity and equality is never done. Poverty will never be history alone; it is an argument to be won again and again. I thought that George Adam set that out well. Although he and I—and Mr O’Kane, on my side of the chamber—might disagree about what happened after 1997, he rightly made the case that the dial can move backwards as well as forwards. We should always be conscious of that, because 1,080,000 people in Scotland live in poverty. That is 130,000 more people living in poverty than did in 2007. Some 260,000 children now live in poverty, which is 30,000 more than did in 2007. The dial does move backwards as well as forwards.

However, today’s Government motion centres on the winter fuel payment. An active decision was taken by the UK Labour Government to means test a previously universal benefit. It was a decision that the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not wish to make. I understand the concerns that members have set out, and I have heard those concerns on doorsteps and from people around the country, but it is a decision that I support. The concerns that we all share for those who are around the eligibility line is clear, and rightly so. We should be doing everything that we can as a Parliament, working together, to ensure that as few people as possible are victims of being around that eligibility line and that they receive the help that they need. That is absolutely critical.

Far too many people in our country are living in poverty. The question is whether the Government wants a serious practical debate about what we can actually do to deal with the situation of poverty in Scotland. No one is claiming that the decision to means test the winter fuel payment was an easy one—far from it. However, the UK Government has taken that decision in the light of harsh economic realities, which resulted from the reckless actions of the Conservatives in the dying days of their abysmal Administration. The fiscal disaster of the UK finances is real. There is a black hole of £22 billion in this financial year, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer was presented

with that reality and had to act accordingly. It must be dealt with. Yes, in the long run it can be dealt with through growth, stability and investment. We would all agree with much of that. However, these are in-year financial adjustments that must be made. We have to reset and adjust the public finances.

The First Minister started the debate by saying that he recognises the fiscal challenge and sympathises, but I am afraid that those words do not ring true unless he recognises some of the actions that are required to be taken to deal with the fiscal circumstances.

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: Yes, gladly.

The First Minister: Mr Marra lights upon an important philosophical question about the management of the public finances in-year, whereby there are choices to be made and the Chancellor of the Exchequer could change the fiscal rules under which she is prepared to operate. I argued for that during the election, because I knew the reality of the difficulties that we face and I offered a solution of changing the fiscal rules to avoid some of the abrupt decisions that are being taken, such as this one, which will damage individuals. Mr Marra and I agree that it will damage individuals.

Michael Marra: The First Minister makes a reasonable point about how we make in-year adjustments, but, given the circumstances that the chancellor faced, making £22 billion of in-year fiscal adjustments would be akin to the action that Liz Truss proposed. When arguing for a change to the fiscal rules, the First Minister is clearly suggesting changing the borrowing rules in this country. That is inherently what this is about. He is saying that we should add an extra £22 billion in-year.

We inherited the legacy of a Government that, time and again, breached the in-year allowances that had been kept aside so that we could meet pay requirements and other requirements relating to our economy and public expenditure. It would not be reasonable for us to act in the way that the First Minister has suggested by going to the markets and asking for more money—

The First Minister: Will Mr Marra give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you—let me complete my point.

We cannot do that while not taking reasonable but difficult and challenging fiscal decisions in-year to address spending. Borrowing is not infinite—it simply is not—but, time and again, I hear arguments from Government members that it almost could be. I am afraid that difficult decisions have to be taken. That is why we have come here

today to offer a constructive contribution to the debate.

The UK Government's decision to extend the household support fund is expected to deliver about £41 million in consequentials. That money is available to the Scottish Government, because the £160 million has not been removed yet. [Interruption.] That is the reality of how the finances work, and I am afraid that Mr Arthur knows that better than most. That money could be used to reinstate the fuel insecurity fund, which was scrapped in the previous Scottish budget.

We must address the many other causes of poverty, and there is common ground on so many of them. We have to make work pay, as Mr O'Kane set out so eloquently. I hope that the SNP will agree with that. We have to deal with housing, although the affordable housing budget has been cut. We must take action to reform education, because the gap between rich and poor is far too wide. We have to further reform our justice system. We have to reform addiction services and deal with drug deaths, which fall on the poorest in our society. We have to rescue our NHS from what some people believe is terminal decline. That will ensure that people can get to work and have the route out of poverty that so many need.

15:52

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have spoken many times in the chamber during challenge poverty weeks, and I am very disappointed that my calls this year are pretty much exactly the same as those that I have made in previous years, because there has been no change with the new UK Government.

Back in 2019, figures showed that, across Lanarkshire's seven Westminster constituencies, more than 6,500 families were affected as a result of not receiving benefits for more than 22,300 children because of the two-child limit. In the Motherwell and Wishaw and Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill constituencies, that equated to 16 per cent of the children who lived there. As Mr Adam so eloquently said, we are talking about children who are living in poverty in our constituencies.

That policy was imposed, and Labour used to campaign against it. The Labour Government has now voted to keep it and to cut the winter fuel payment for pensioners. People wanted change, but they have got a changeling. It looked like Labour and sounded like Labour, but it is packed full of Tory austerity and Tory values.

Michael Marra: Does Ms Adamson agree that, 13 weeks into the Labour Government, we are bringing forward legislation for a new deal for working people and that we have not yet had a budget to make some of the transformative

decisions that we hope to make? Would it not show some generosity to say that change has started but that there is great potential to make further changes?

Clare Adamson: Unfortunately, the first thing that Labour did to address the £20 billion hole that it found—although everybody told it that it was there in the first place—was to put the burden on the poorest people, such as pensioners. What about taxing the rich? What about putting the burden on those with the broadest shoulders?

Michael Marra: Will Ms Adamson give way?

Clare Adamson: No, I will not take another intervention.

The Labour Party used to value universalism. It is the party that introduced the national health service, free at the point of use, that introduced child benefit as a universal benefit and that introduced the universal state pension, adopting the Beveridge report principles.

Our pensioners have been poorly served by successive Westminster Governments. Analysis by the OECD shows that we have the 11th-highest retirement age of the 28 European countries that it studied, and the poorest pensions, compared with a lot of our European neighbours. That is simply not a sustainable position.

Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that was published last week concluded that removing the two-child limit is

"the single most cost-effective policy for reducing the number of children living below the poverty line".

Social security remains the most effective lever to lift children out of poverty.

I have heard today that we do not keep our promises, but we have done so. We still have universal free prescriptions, universal free tuition and universal support for childcare, in the 1,140 hours of free childcare that we give to parents. It is beyond belief that I am having to try and persuade Labour colleagues of the value of universalism and how we should look after those who are most vulnerable in our constituencies.

The Scottish Government welcomes every citizen in this country—it welcomes them with the baby box. At the same time, Labour has forgotten the values of universal benefits, which involve the values of our country and how we treat our citizens. By bringing in means testing for the winter fuel payments, Labour has turned round and said to our pensioners that they are no longer valued in that way.

Labour could also have considered the fact that our citizens in Scotland pay a higher standing charge than other people in the UK. We pay a higher standing charge than people in London,

and we have a colder climate than people in London. Labour's policy will therefore disproportionately affect Scotland's pensioners. I do not see that as a value of the Labour Party that I remember from when I was growing up. I can see that, while Westminster is making decisions for the people of Scotland, we are always going to be disproportionately affected by those decisions and that the only way for us to fully attain our ambitions in relation to the values that we have for Scotland and universalism is for us to become an independent country.

This week, in my constituency, I mark challenge poverty week by hosting what we call the community action network, which brings together all the organisations in our area that are helping people in poverty—from food banks and churches to third sector organisations that deal with people with addictions, people in recovery, families that have carers and disabled people's families—to ensure that we are all working together for the common purpose of making a difference in our communities. It would be really good if we could feel that there are people here in this chamber who, with us, want to make a better life for our citizens.

15:58

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I start by thanking the organisations that have provided helpful briefings ahead of today's debate. I also thank those charities across our country for the work that they are doing to challenge poverty. It is important that we note their work this week.

I welcome today's debate, which gives us an opportunity to, rightly, put on record serious concerns about the impact that the removal of the winter fuel payment will have on older citizens and people who live in fuel poverty, especially those who live in off-grid households across rural communities across Scotland. The policy will have a severe impact, and I know from speaking to people that their decisions about fuel payments are being taken today, as we head into winter.

The policy is a double whammy for many people in rural communities. People living in fuel poverty in Aviemore, Braemar and Aboyne have seen a cut of £100 to the winter heating payment that they had last year from the SNP Government, and they are now likely to see a cut of between £200 and £300 from the Labour Government.

Politics is about choices, and we need to be honest: this decision by the UK Labour Government will cost lives. The payment is an essential benefit and should be restored to prevent avoidable deaths, as many members have already said.

Last week, *The Daily Telegraph* published a freedom of information response that revealed that the Scottish Government had not undertaken any specific assessment of how many additional deaths the decision will cause. The Labour Government has not done so, either. In my intervention on the First Minister, I said that ministers have opportunities and options to try to ensure that the cut does not progress this year—

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Will Miles Briggs give way?

Miles Briggs: Yes, if I can get some time back.

Keith Brown: Did the UK Government undertake any analysis of the number of deaths that were caused during the energy crisis by the UK Government's failure to do what other Governments did and get on top of the crisis in support of people who were struggling to pay their bills?

Miles Briggs: That is a complete rewriting of history. Keith Brown will be aware of the £400 heating payment that he and everyone else across the country will have received from the UK Government. That was real action in difficult times—not cuts, as we see from the Labour Government now.

We need to look at what can be done. I have been as constructive as I can be with ministers by putting forward where they have the opportunity to defer the block grant adjustment on the winter fuel payment this year, so that ministers can make the payment. That would present an opportunity for people across Scotland to continue to benefit from the payment. I hope that ministers will go away and look at that, because it is an option that they could take forward.

The debate has presented an opportunity to consider other groups that will be impacted. One group that has not been mentioned so far is kinship carers and unpaid carers. The nature of kinship care is that it is often grandparents and retired individuals who care for young people—in many cases, they care beyond anything that we would ask. They, too, will be impacted by the decision, and we need to ensure that that is taken into account. The Carers Scotland report showed greater levels of poverty and financial insecurity for unpaid carers across Scotland, with more than a quarter of carers—28 per cent—struggling to make ends meet, which increases to 41 per cent of carers who are in receipt of carers allowance.

Alex Cole-Hamilton's and Stuart McMillan's points about people not claiming pension credit are important. It is critical that take-up is encouraged and that all of us across the chamber, in whatever opportunities we have, encourage low-income households to claim pension credit and, therefore, unlock access to the winter fuel

payment in the future. I hope that the Government channels that are available will be looking at doing all that they can in that regard.

We need to ensure that people do not forget about this policy. After just three months in power, the Labour Government has taken this decision. It is clear that Labour was not honest with the people of the United Kingdom at the general election. At no point did it mention that there was—

Michael Marra: At some level, Miles Briggs has a hard neck in that regard, given the financial legacy that was left. The Office for Budget Responsibility has said that the scale of the cuts and the black hole in the finances that were left by the Tories were not disclosed to it. Perhaps SNP members do not understand it, but this was a £22 billion in-year black hole and not the £20 billion structural deficit that Miles Briggs's party created. It was in-year. That is what the chancellor has had to deal with.

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

Miles Briggs: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Michael Marra fails to say that the black hole includes all the pay deals to which the Labour Government has signed up, as well. That is the truth. There is a simple fact here—

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will Miles Briggs give way?

Miles Briggs: I do not think that I will have time to do so.

Daniel Johnson: It will be brief.

Miles Briggs: Okay—very briefly.

Daniel Johnson: Is Miles Briggs saying that the pay award body should be disregarded in the future? Is that his position?

Miles Briggs: No, I am not saying that. I am saying that Labour politicians need to be honest. This is their black hole, and no one else's. Michael Marra and Daniel Johnson are not in opposition now—they need to wake up to that fact. These are Labour Party decisions and this is Labour's mess alone. I believe that the Labour Party will pay a huge price in 2026 when pensioners across Scotland are given the opportunity to pass judgment on this decision.

The decision will have huge impacts.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will Miles Briggs take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: If I can get some time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Miles Briggs: I am sorry, Mr McKee; I do not have time.

The First Minister mentioned work on a social tariff. I welcome that and hope that there can be cross-party involvement on that issue. Children's Hospices Across Scotland—CHAS—and other organisations have been looking at that, and the fuel poverty campaigner Carolynne Hunter and I are trying to take forward a round-table meeting. Although it looks as though the First Minister is not listening to members on this side of the chamber, I hope that he is willing to include cross-party involvement in that work.

I support the amendment in Russell Findlay's name.

16:05

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): There is a lot for me to unpack in just six minutes.

In his opening speech, Anas Sarwar reminded us four or five times that we have been in power for 17 years, as opposed to the three months of the UK Labour Government, and that is an important point. The UK Government has been in power for only three months, but what a lot it has managed to do to Scottish pensioners in that time.

Three months is barely enough time for a Government to do a detailed impact assessment of the impact of pulling money out of heating pensioners' homes, so it is no surprise that we still do not have one. People of pension age are the group most likely to experience fuel poverty and my region, the Highlands and Islands, has the highest level of fuel poverty in the UK. The decision to cut the universal winter fuel payment was taken not only against the best interests of the Highlands and Islands but without sparing a thought for that region. If the Labour Government knew that it was sentencing my constituents to a harsh winter without even as much support as they got from the previous Conservative Government—which was the Government that introduced the two-child cap and a terrifying review of disability benefits—it would surely have thought twice, assessed the potential impacts, engaged with the Scottish Government and with older people's organisations and then taken the correct decision to keep people warm and alive.

Miles Briggs: The member's constituents in Aviemore have also lost out due to the Scottish Government's changes to winter heating payments. Does she believe that the Scottish Government should look at that again? Someone who currently receives a payment of £58.75 would

have received three times that amount last year. Will the Government look at that?

Emma Roddick: Thanks to the Scottish Government's changes to that payment, my constituents in Aviemore will know what support to expect year-on-year, rather than having that based on results from a weather station that do not necessarily describe the situation within their households.

Sadly, however generous we want to be about the Labour Government's ignorance of what the decision meant when it was first announced, there is now no chance that Keir Starmer does not know what he has done, because he has experts, members of the public and people of all political parties, including his own, telling him every day.

People are angry. Labour politicians might assume that this will all be forgotten by the time of the next election, but they are wrong. Every winter will be a reminder to people up and down this country, from the pensioners who are shivering at home to the third sector organisations that are coming up with ever more creative ways to provide heat at low cost, that UK Labour prioritises showing off to oil and gas companies over actually ensuring that people can stay warm inside their houses.

I have a lot of respect for many Scottish Labour colleagues to my right, particularly for those who are not that far to my right, so it is quite painful to hear some of them being apparently genuinely unable to state, when questioned directly, whether they think that the decision to take money away from pensioners who need it to heat their houses was wrong. Of course it was wrong, and I hope that some of them will have the guts to loudly oppose that decision and to help the SNP to call on the Labour Government to reverse the cut in the forthcoming budget and introduce a social tariff that stands a chance of targeting energy bill support to those who need it most. As a socialist, I say to them that Labour's change cannot just mean having a harsher welfare system than that of the Tories. Labour MSPs must not become, as Unite Scotland's general secretary, Derek Thomson, has described them,

"just as culpable as UK Labour"

for those harsh and unnecessary choices.

Anas Sarwar complained about the focus on the winter fuel payment and he is right to say that poverty is not made, or solved, by one Government action. However, I remember standing on the front bench during a similar debate last year and declaring that an incoming Keir Starmer Government looked set to uphold the two-child cap, ditch universal benefits, threaten tuition fees and fail to act on rising energy costs, all to calls and shouts from those on the Labour

benches that that was nonsense. Never mind reading my lips, read Keir Starmer's press releases. Austerity is here, under Labour.

There are some things on which I agree with Labour today. I agree that work needs to be done on housing, education and social security when we have further powers to tackle poverty in Scotland. I stood here last week and said that we cannot tackle poverty without tackling homelessness, and I spent this morning in committee discussing capital investment in housing and how that is necessary for the same journey. I agree with all of that, and I will always say so, but progress on those devolved matters is why poverty levels are 10 per cent lower in Scotland than they otherwise would have been, and why an estimated 100,000 children are not living in poverty today.

It is shameless, hypocritical and completely contrary to evidence for members to turn up to Parliament and defend a new UK Government that is coming in and cutting welfare budgets, ramping up austerity and removing fiscal opportunities from the Scottish Government, all the while claiming that the reason that the people from whom it has taken money this winter are going cold is the SNP. The SNP is the reason that £3 billion is being spent this year to directly support vulnerable households. The SNP is the reason that the families of more than 30,000 children last year got a child heating payment. The SNP is the reason that disabled people can now access social security in this country through a system that treats them with dignity, fairness and respect.

I am here to tackle poverty, and I know that that is true for people across the chamber. I have agreed in the past when Labour colleagues have come to me and said, "This isn't good enough." I worked with those Labour MSPs on period poverty, on the rent freeze and on disabled people's poverty, because we are here for the same reason. I say to them today that this is not good enough. UK Labour's decisions since its election in July are not good enough. Leaving pensioners cold, and trampling over devolution, is not good enough. Please join us in telling UK Labour to get it right.

16:11

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I do not think that the debate has reached the level that it should have, given how important and profound the issue is that we are discussing. In particular, some of the contributions from Labour and Conservative members give us an absolute definition of "post-truth politics".

Both Tory and Labour are reading from the same playbook, which is on how to punish and cut funding to devolved Administrations and then attack them for the inevitable consequences of the cuts that they have caused in the first place. That kind of politics is both tawdry and, in my view, Trump-like.

If we look at the title of the debate and the theme of the week—challenge poverty—we have to ask ourselves how the two-child cap challenges poverty. In what way does it do that? How does the bedroom tax challenge poverty? We used to hear about the bedroom tax an awful lot in Parliament—we used to hear about it regularly from Jackie Baillie, who is just coming back into the chamber. We have heard nothing about it since the Scottish Government started making sure that people in Scotland are protected from it, but it still exists in the rest of the UK. If the UK Government were to get rid of it, that would produce a benefit for people in Scotland, but we hear no more about the bedroom tax. How does the bedroom tax challenge poverty? How does the rape clause challenge poverty? The Labour Party is committed to keeping those things.

How does it challenge poverty to have a cut of £150 million to £160 million in the Scottish Government's budget with 90 minutes' notice? I have not seen a single Labour member give a defence of that. The First Minister's question was, "Do you support that? Do you think that that is the way to conduct business between a UK Government and a devolved Administration?" In what way does a sudden, huge cut in the budget, in year, within 90 minutes of the decision being taken pay any respect to the kind of Parliament that was meant to be established under Donald Dewar?

Michael Marra: I appreciate the member giving way, but that is just not how it works. An in-year adjustment happens in the next reconciliation. The money does not get taken out of the bank account—it is still there for the rest of this year. The question now is how that might be profiled over years to come. That is a choice that the Scottish Government can make. *[Interruption.]* That is just not the case.

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

Keith Brown: I understand the point that the cut of £160 million will have an effect next year. It will mean that next year people will not get the benefit that we are talking about.

I realise that that is the point, but do you support—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Keith Brown: Does the member support the UK Government taking the decision that it did in the way that it did?

Surely, if Labour has any pretensions to be the Government in this place in 2026—and let us face it, its support is falling like snow off a dyke—it has to at some stage show that it is standing up for people in Scotland. If it were, it would condemn that cut from the UK Government. There is not a word on that £150 million from the Labour Party.

How does increasing the cost of energy by 10 per cent overnight, when Labour said that it would do exactly the opposite, help people to challenge poverty in this country? When I asked Anas Sarwar about that, he said that that was nothing to do with Labour and that it was due to Ofgem. I have screeds of quotes from Labour people condemning the Tory Government when it said that Ofgem was doing it. Of course, it was the Labour Government that made that increase, which comes on top of people who are already hard pressed.

Aneurin Bevan said that politics is the language of priorities. What are Labour's priorities? You could cut the £100 billion or so that is going towards the renewal of Trident. You could choose to do that. That is an option that you have. That is a difficult decision, but you say that you are willing to take difficult decisions.

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

Keith Brown: Choices can be made and, as some have pointed out, the Labour Party has made the choice of going after the poorest people in society.

I challenged Anas Sarwar to say that Labour knows that people in Scotland will die because of the measure that we are debating. It knows that because it has done the research. I ask, how many people in Scotland will die?

That research was before the 10 per cent increase in energy costs. Labour condemned the Conservatives for doing it before. Will it say how many people will die because of the cut to the winter fuel payment? It is really important that we understand the effect of what is happening. We surely must have a better prospect in Scotland than the perpetual austerity that we get under the UK.

That austerity also means the perpetuation of poverty. The two things go hand in hand. The policy of austerity does not even work. The Tories started austerity because they wanted to get a grip on public spending. They have just left office with £2.5 trillion of debt—more than 100 per cent of gross domestic product. Even on that measure, they have completely failed.

Paul O’Kane accused Russell Findlay of cognitive dissonance. Members should listen to this quote from Labour’s amendment. It

“recognises the need to support vulnerable people ... over winter with energy bills”.

Given the cut that Labour has just agreed, that is not cognitive dissonance but utter hypocrisy.

As Patrick Harvie said, the Scottish Government must challenge itself on what it has done, but we heard from Emma Roddick the record on tuition fees. According to a programme that I heard on Radio 4 this week, people are having to deal with a burden of £70,000, £80,000 or £90,000 as a result of having gone to university in England and Wales. There are no tuition fees in Scotland. There are free prescriptions, and that is most important to those who could not afford them otherwise.

We have also heard about the childcare payments. Most of all, however, the Scottish child payment is an earnest statement of our intent to tackle child poverty. No other Government or Parliament has done that, and it has been called “a game changer”. Leaving that aside, members should think of the difference that it has made to individual families who are getting that money every week. They can buy food and clothes for their kids, especially in the winter. Maybe it is not enough to allow them to put on the heating, given what Labour is doing to people, but it is certainly a big help to people in this country.

The Labour Party has to look at itself. Emma Roddick is right. Unfortunately, for whatever reason—I am sure that it is perfectly legitimate—Labour members who I would have loved to have heard from are not in the chamber. I know that they are concerned about the issue. I would say to them that this is the time to register that concern—to let the UK Government and Rachel Reeves know that the cut is not the thing to do. It will result in people dying, both in Scotland and in the rest of the UK. This is Labour members’ chance to show that they are opposed to that, so I encourage them to vote with the Government and for the First Minister’s motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: John Mason is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:18

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to take part in the debate, which marks challenge poverty week.

This morning, the Finance and Public Administration Committee considered the national performance framework. One of its outcomes concerns poverty. The vision is:

“We are committed to eradicating poverty and hunger in Scotland. We are addressing the links between poverty and income, housing, ethnicity, gender, health, disability and age. Our achievements, potential and life choices are not decided at birth or by class or background. We are all able to enjoy financial security, have a decent job, home and a good life.”

I think that we are all signed up to that commitment, which ties in with the relevant United Nations sustainable development goals. The first is no poverty; the second is zero hunger; the fifth is gender equality; the seventh is affordable and clean energy; the 10th is reduced inequalities; and the 12th is responsible production and consumption.

Others have already mentioned stark figures, but I will add a few. Between 2020 and 2023, 60 per cent of working-age adults in poverty and 70 per cent of children in poverty lived in a household in which someone was in paid work. Over the same period, the youngest households in Scotland were more likely to be in poverty: 39 per cent of households in which the head of the household was aged between 16 and 24 were in poverty, which was higher than for older aged households.

Between 2018 and 2023, people from non-white minority ethnic groups were more likely to be in relative poverty, after housing costs, compared with those from the white British and white other groups. The poverty rate was 50 per cent for Asian or Asian British ethnic groups and 51 per cent for mixed black or black British and other ethnic groups.

Attempts have been made to tackle some of those figures by successive Scottish Governments, including through free school meals, the Scottish child payment, a more generous adult disability payment, no university tuition fees and free prescriptions, as finances have allowed. Of course, all those measures cost money, and I commend attempts to raise more in income tax by the SNP and the Greens. We need to go further and get more into line with countries such as Denmark and France, where tax as a proportion of GDP is higher. However, I accept that, with close neighbours with low tax rates, it is difficult to have too great a tax differential, whether we are independent or not.

I will mention the international scene—which has not been mentioned today—where the poverty situation is considerably worse. The United Nations’ definition of extreme poverty is living on less than \$2.15 per day or \$785 per year. However, even with that incredibly low bar for extreme poverty, some 712 million people—one in 11 globally—live below it. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of children living in extreme poverty, with numbers reaching 40 per cent in 2022. Nearly 90 per cent of children living in extreme poverty reside in either sub-Saharan

Africa or south Asia. At the same time, there are some chinks of light. We understand that Pakistan has reduced poverty rates over the past 20 years. When I worked in Nepal in the 1980s, it was the sixth-poorest country in the world, and I believe that it is now out of the bottom 10.

In one sense, I am not sure whether we can ever completely eradicate poverty. Jesus said that the poor would always be with us, encouraging us to keep on helping them. Sadly, there have always been—and I fear that there always will be—those who use their strength or position to exploit others. That happens in almost every country in the world. Some have much more than they need, and some have much less. While we should design laws, taxation and fair work principles to tackle poverty, we should also remember that there will always be some who seek to get round such laws and to avoid taxation to get more for themselves and less for others.

Let us remember that poverty does not happen by chance. Sure, there are natural disasters such as earthquakes, droughts and floods, which dramatically overturn people's lives. At the same time, the world has enough food and enough resources so that, even when disasters happen, we should be able to restore things and prevent poverty if we put our minds to it.

In Scotland, and in most of the western world, there is a lot of wealth, but the problem is that it is not shared out equally enough. Ideally, the richest people would not take such high salaries nor store up wealth for themselves and their families. However, we live in the real world, and some people sit on very high incomes, with lavish properties and investments. We at Holyrood and our colleagues at Westminster are left to see how we can deal with that.

The Conservatives often tell us that growing the economy will be the answer to almost all our problems, but clearly that is not the case. I am certainly not against growing the economy, but we have been growing it for hundreds of years, yet we still face stark levels of poverty. Growing the economy does not solve the problem of poverty if we do not share out better our income and wealth.

We have poverty in this country and even more poverty overseas. We can do something about that, and we should be doing more about it. Primarily, that means the poorest getting a bigger share of the cake and the richest taking a smaller share.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches.

16:24

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): As others have done, I thank all those who have provided information for the debate. More importantly, I thank them for the work that they do, day in, day out, to support people throughout our communities.

We have had much finger pointing this afternoon. There was even an accusation that both the SNP and Labour are offering socialism. Would it not be nice if at least one of them were? As my colleague Patrick Harvie said, we have not had enough focus on what we need to do, or on our responsibilities.

I wish to reflect, in these closing words for the Scottish Greens, on the title of the debate. "Challenge poverty week" is also the title of the week that we are in. What does it mean to challenge poverty? It cannot simply be to lament its existence, to deplore its manifestations or to ascribe blame for its continuation. The concept of challenge implies an opponent: someone or something we can call to a contest or to a trial of strength, skill or endurance. It expects a struggle and a winner. That opponent for us in the chamber, as we represent our constituents, should not be one another; it should be poverty itself.

As an activist for peace and disarmament, I am not generally much taken with military metaphors, but the battle against poverty is an existential struggle—as much as the battle against climate and environmental devastation. Of course, the two are intimately and inextricably entwined. Although we use the tools of peace, not the weapons of war, we need to act with all the forethought, strategy and tactics of any general planning a campaign, or perhaps a chess grandmaster preparing for a championship match.

What are their rules? Rule number 1 is know your enemy. Unless we recognise the dimensions, shapes and characteristics of poverty, we cannot tell how best to defeat it. Stuart McMillan articulated that well.

A major characteristic is gender. As Close the Gap point out, women are more likely to be in poverty, including in-work and persistent poverty, than men, and they find it harder to escape. Women have also been hardest hit by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the so-called cost of living crisis—more accurately described, I think, as a cost of greed outrage. As the Women Against State Pension Inequality—the WASPI women—will attest, women will be disproportionately hit by the cut to the winter fuel allowance.

There are other characteristics too—other forms of inequality that shape the probability and intensity of poverty. People who are disabled, racially minoritised or single parents and people

who are refugees or seeking asylum are all more likely to experience poverty. When those characteristics intersect, as at Kimberlé Crenshaw's thunderous traffic junction, the danger is real, present and potentially lethal.

In general, young people experience more poverty than those who are older, but some of the impacts of poverty can be particularly brutal for older people, especially those in poor health. That is why the introduction of means testing for the winter fuel allowance is both cruel and inept. It is a profound mistake, which I hope the Labour Government will have the sense and grace to recognise and reverse.

Rule number 2 is minimise your casualties. This is not a new struggle for us. It has been waged for centuries—for millennia—as John Mason outlined, with long lists of the fallen. Existing poverty, here and now, has brutal impacts. Those impacts fall on children today, opening wounds that they bear for life. That is why we in this Parliament, from all points along the political spectrum, have rightly chosen to make action on child poverty a shared priority.

We can mitigate those impacts by increasing family incomes through measures such as an increased Scottish child payment, by ensuring that parents have the childcare support to take up job opportunities and by ending the inhuman nonsense that is the two-child limit and accompanying rape clause. It is impossible to express the depth of dismay that we share with our constituents at the continuation of those bitter Tory legacies.

There are other ways of countering those impacts: by ensuring that the basic needs of all people, families and communities are met in ways that are accessible, sustainable, compassionate and respectful of human dignity. That means ensuring safe and secure homes for all, ending the stigma, shame and exclusion of a system where only some children receive free school meals, and acting responsibly to address not only the costs of a school day but the costs of a work day, too. We thought that we had seen the end of the cynical system of peak rail fares, which benefits those with the privilege of choosing when they travel and punishes those whose travel times are determined by others.

Finally, rule number 3 is create space in which to act. Challenging poverty cannot stop at working to mitigate its effects, essential as that is. It is also about making systemic changes that do not just react to poverty but proactively prevent it. As the Poverty Alliance outlines, that means taking active steps towards delivering a minimum income guarantee for all. It also means reforming the unfair and regressive system of council tax, freeing families from the burden of arrears debt,

and giving local authorities powers to raise the resources that they need through equitable wealth taxes. It means continuing the vital work to enhance and fulfil human rights. As the Fair Way Scotland partnership has urged, it means designing out the destitution that has been inflicted upon us by the UK immigration system. It also means ensuring that the third sector has the multiyear funding that it needs to do its invaluable work of support, representation and justice every day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Ms Chapman.

Maggie Chapman: Poverty is our enemy—an ancient and bitter one—but if it is fed by the greed and indifference of some, it can be defeated by the determination of others. Let us be determined and make our challenge a bold one. As Emma Roddick and Clare Adamson did well to remind us all, there are people at the end of the decisions that we make.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude.

Maggie Chapman: They—our neighbours, friends and families—require nothing less.

16:31

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): In closing the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour, I will return to some of the themes that we opened with. Anas Sarwar, Patrick Harvie and others opened with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on poverty in Scotland that was released yesterday morning. The report makes it clear that we face significant challenges on poverty in this country. As many members around the chamber have said, it is a sobering read, which makes it clear that the UK and Scottish Governments have been called on to step up and outline how they intend to go further.

Many people in the anti-poverty sector were pleased to see the Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Shirley-Anne Somerville, launch and speak about that work together. That is very much the spirit in which Scottish Labour wanted to engage in this debate on challenge poverty week.

The Scottish Government was presented with a chance to spend valuable parliamentary time debating the tangible actions that we could take across the Parliament. For example, we could have debated the asks of Shelter and Engender, which this week published research that shows how the housing emergency disproportionately impacts women. We could have debated the work of One Parent Families Scotland and other organisations that aim to empower single parents

to achieve sustainable and well-paid employment. We could have debated how we might bring about a new approach to dealing with public sector debt, to help families with financial struggles, which Aberlour has called for. We could have debated those issues and many others.

However, in its motion, the Government chose a very narrow focus for the debate, which I suggest has been disrespectful to the third sector organisations—

Collette Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

The First Minister: Will Mr O’Kane give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will finish this point, if I may. That is disrespectful to the third sector organisations that put so much into this week and that do so much—as we have heard from many members—all year round, as they tackle the most desperate forms of poverty that our society knows.

I believe that Ms Stevenson was the first to ask, so I will take her intervention, after which I will come to the First Minister.

Collette Stevenson: Does Paul O’Kane support the UK Labour Government’s decision to scrap universal winter fuel payments—yes or no?

Paul O’Kane: I will come on to talk about the winter fuel payment. [*Interruption.*] As we have heard—[*Interruption.*]

Hold on a minute. I am still in my opening section, and I have already had two interventions from the Government. If the Government wants to hear more about our position, the criteria that we could employ and my criticism of the Government, it would do well to listen.

I wonder whether the First Minister still wishes to make an intervention at this stage.

The First Minister: Mr O’Kane makes a point about the Government’s choice of debating material today. I respect all the contributions of third sector organisations, because they are putting forward arguments about trying to improve the situation on poverty. What the Government is putting to Parliament today is an opportunity for us to speak as one to prevent the poverty situation from getting worse because of the conscious actions of the Labour Government in the United Kingdom.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

The First Minister: That is the sharp point of today’s debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr O’Kane.

Paul O’Kane: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Yet we have not debated the actions that the Scottish Government has taken that have compounded poverty for children, families and pensioners across Scotland.

I turn to the winter fuel payment. In his contribution, Anas Sarwar very clearly outlined that the UK Labour Government did not want to take the decision that it has had to take. That was elaborated on very clearly by my colleague Michael Marra in relation to the financial reality that the new UK Government faces.

I intervened on Mr Findlay earlier to point out that the Conservatives cannot credibly take absolutely no responsibility for the mess that they left behind in the public finances. On the £22 billion of cuts, we had air quotes from Clare Adamson, which shows the breadth and depth of misunderstanding among SNP members. As Mr Marra said, that £22 billion in-year black hole is different from the structural deficit. We are talking about a situation in which the Conservatives spent reserves three times over on things such as the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. That was not known about by the Office for Budget Responsibility or the Institute for Fiscal Studies. That is the very clear reality that we face.

Russell Findlay: Mr Sarwar was unable or unwilling to tell us whether some form of risk assessment should have been carried out before the winter fuel payments were cut. Does Mr O’Kane believe that that should have happened?

Paul O’Kane: Mr Findlay had an opportunity there—he chose not to when I intervened on him earlier—to apologise for the way in which the previous Government conducted itself with regard to the public finances. Let us remember—let nobody in the chamber forget—that Mr Findlay is a supporter of Liz Truss, who rose her head again at the Conservative Party conference and reminded us of the carnage that was unleashed on this country by the Conservatives, so I will take no lectures from him.

The point is that the decision on winter fuel payments is undoubtedly a decision that nobody wanted to make, but I point to a number of issues that we need to speak about in the Scottish context. I remind the Scottish Government that it has decided to scrap many measures that would have supported people in fuel insecurity across this country—indeed, the fuel insecurity fund has been scrapped. The core of our amendment gets to the fact that that money has been taken away from supporting people who might need it this winter.

We know that £41 million of Barnett consequential will come as a result of the extension of the household support fund, and we know that that money could be delivered in a

different way to support people who need it this winter. It could be reprofiled and—this has been shown—used to support people in our country who really need support. However, every time I ask that question of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government or the First Minister, it falls on deaf ears. There is no answer on why they have cut the fuel insecurity fund or on why they are not willing to consider working with Labour to utilise that £41 million.

Across the course of today's debate, we have covered a number of issues that the UK Government is ready to act on. I thought that we had some fine speeches when we got on to those wider issues. Although we had a robust exchange, George Adam got to the point of why we are all here—to seek to serve the people in the communities that we represent. Ferguslie Park is a community that I know well. It is important that we reflect on the fact that a UK Government, within weeks of coming into office, has taken bold action to put into statute a new deal for working people that will lift people out of poverty.

We know about the pernicious nature of in-work poverty—that was outlined by John Mason in his very thoughtful contribution and by others around the chamber. We need to ensure that work pays, that it is secure and that it can lift people out of the deep, structural poverty that is increasing in Scotland. I hope that the Government will reflect on that today. It is keen to have a new relationship with the UK Government and to collaborate. I hope that it will come to the table on those issues in particular, and on the child poverty task force and all the other on-going work that the new UK Government is doing.

It is clear that today's debate cannot be only about one issue and one motion—it has to be about a wider range of issues. It is also clear that Scottish Labour's amendment seeks to reinstate the fuel insecurity fund and to use the Barnett consequential that are available to ensure that, although we acknowledge that it is an extremely difficult decision, there are ways to make sure that all families are supported in Scotland, particularly those who suffer most profoundly from fuel insecurity.

16:39

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

Russell Findlay clearly touched a nerve—or perhaps members on the SNP and Labour benches are just embarrassed, because they are blaming everyone except themselves. They are talking about problems, but not about finding solutions.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: I will not at the moment, thank you.

They are talking about problems, but not about finding solutions. I note that Alex Cole-Hamilton, and even Patrick Harvie, agree about that.

Let us take a look at Mr Sarwar's party's UK Government. He made no apology today, and he refused to answer Russell Findlay's question about whether the Labour Party will conduct a risk assessment prior to cutting the winter fuel payment for millions of pensioners. He was given two opportunities to do so. Paul O'Kane also refused to answer and instead deflected that question.

Heaven knows the chaos that has ensued with Sir Keir Starmer's chief of staff Sue Gray resigning and his own freeloading faux pas. He is like the guy with the glasses, Victor Perkins, from "Despicable Me". Not even the trade unions support cutting the winter fuel payment.

We find ourselves in a terrifying position, in which we have two completely incompetent Governments at UK and Scotland levels.

Paul O'Kane: Surely Rachael Hamilton recognises that what she has just said belittles the debate, which is about challenging poverty. Surely she must recognise that she must take responsibility for the actions of her party's previous Government, which salted the earth and destroyed the British economy.

Rachael Hamilton: I thank Paul O'Kane for that intervention. It just proves that he is entirely embarrassed about how his Government has behaved in the past three months.

John Swinney seemed to enjoy hearing my Conservative colleagues criticising Labour, because he finds himself in a unique position—but two wrongs do not make a right. Just because some of the heat has been transferred from the SNP to a completely incompetent Labour Government, that does not mean that the SNP's dangerous policy choices are being ignored by Scotland's pensioners and young people.

We want solutions, and we will support the First Minister's motion today, because 240,000 children are in poverty. Patrick Harvie is correct. I cannot believe that I find myself agreeing with Patrick Harvie; in fact, I cannot believe that I am even saying that.

It is about choice and the SNP's choices in this respect, and we need to unite around tackling poverty. Alex Cole-Hamilton and the Liberal Democrats have also ensured that we look to offer solutions—

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: I would be delighted.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful to the member for giving way, although I am not quite sure that I am grateful for her expressing agreement with my position so clearly. Would she reflect on why she got it so wrong when she once called for the minimum wage to be abolished? How on earth does she think we can tackle poverty without ensuring that poverty wages are abolished?

Rachael Hamilton: I completely agree with Patrick Harvie. That comment was taken out of context—some employers pay more than the minimum wage and are therefore giving more to people who are stuck on the minimum wage. The causes of poverty are deep rooted and, as we heard from members on all sides of the chamber, it affects many people and many communities—for example, in my constituency. *[Interruption.]*

I do not know what Maggie Chapman is laughing at. I am not sure whether she has ever actually employed anybody.

The causes of poverty are deep rooted, especially in Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire. The impact of poverty is usually generational, and it leads to unique challenges and inequalities. Poverty can affect anyone, no matter their age. More than 150,000 pensioners in Scotland live in poverty, and more than half of those are living in severe poverty.

Yesterday, I was out speaking with residents in Kelso, and the number 1 issue that came up was removal of the winter fuel payment by both the Labour and SNP Governments. Many were worried about how they will heat their home. It is estimated that 16,000 pensioners in the Borders are set to bear the brunt of reckless decisions by those parties, in the next few months. One resident told me that, without any support, they

“will have to choose to eat or heat”.

Another constituent summed up the impact that the decision will have on ordinary people, stating that it is a

“dreadful policy of Labour & SNP against the ‘just getting by’ Scottish resident pensioners like us who are dreading the winter bills and the cold.”

They—like many pensioners across Scotland, as we have heard today—are feeling unsupported and anxious about how they will afford to heat their homes.

The impact of fuel poverty has very real consequences for public services. One couple recently contacted me to share their anxiety as we approach the colder weather. They said that their health is not good and that they both “feel the cold” more severely than others. Stuart McMillan talked about Independent Age, but he did not mention that the charity has assessed the impact

of fuel poverty and has highlighted that older people are most vulnerable to those impacts and are

“most likely to suffer respiratory and cardiovascular disease as a result”

of cold homes.

We know that deprivation is already a key driver of people accessing our stretched accident and emergency departments. With many health boards, including NHS Borders, already facing extreme pressures, the decision to remove the winter fuel payment will undoubtedly put our NHS into crisis this winter.

I have highlighted just one example of the real impact of those policy decisions in my constituency, but the situation will be similar across Scotland. Unfortunately, under the SNP examples of poverty have become the norm. Sadly, the SNP continues to be disengaged from and uninterested in dealing with the root causes of poverty. Instead, it chooses to occupy its time pushing constitutional grievances, as we have heard today, at the cost of ordinary people. It chooses to blame others for its incompetence and failures.

We have stopped looking ahead to a brighter and more positive future for Scotland by growing the economy.

Stuart McMillan: Will Ms Hamilton apologise for the actions of her Government over the past 14 years, and for the actions of previous Conservative Governments, that have driven people into poverty and deprivation?

Rachael Hamilton: I return the compliment to Stuart McMillan by asking him to apologise for 17 years of SNP incompetence.

Let us scratch beneath the surface of this SNP incompetence, which is putting rhetoric over reality and consistently failing to bring forward any substantive plans. Those are not my views; they are the views of leading poverty charities. Save the Children has stated that plans in the programme for government—as I said earlier in an intervention to Stuart McMillan—do nothing that

“shifts the dial on child poverty.”

Not only has the SNP failed to bring people out of poverty but it has, through its own financial mismanagement, put the nation’s finances into a state of poverty.

The way to a fairer society after 17 years of SNP neglect is by boosting everyone up rather than dragging people down. As Conservatives, we believe that the best way to pull people out of poverty is by creating a positive vision through aspirational policies. As Russell Findlay stated, we will offer an alternative way forward to the high-

tax, low-ambition Holyrood consensus by standing up for everyone who just wants to see their politicians show some common sense for a change.

Presiding Officer, I see that my time is short, so I will close. However, let us end on a positive note by recognising the role that volunteers and charities play in picking up the slack that is left by the SNP, as was articulated by my colleague Miles Briggs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to wind up the debate.

16:47

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am pleased that we are having this debate about the UK Government's decision to restrict the eligibility for winter fuel payment, because that has had a devastating consequence for the planned launch of the pension age winter heating payment.

Recent research by Age UK shows that, across the UK, 1.6 million older people who are living in poverty will lose their winter fuel payment as a result of the UK Government's decision to restrict eligibility to those in receipt of relevant benefits. The research shows that a further 900,000 older people across the UK whose incomes are just above the poverty line will also lose the winter fuel payment. Those people have incomes that are no more than £55 a week above the poverty line.

The reason why many of those people have incomes just above that line is because of the small occupational pension that they saved for during their working lives. They were just doing what they were instructed and encouraged to do to try to ensure that they could have a more comfortable retirement. However, when that time comes, the unfairness of the pension credit cliff edge means that they are set to struggle financially.

As the First Minister said in his opening remarks, this Government will continue to press the UK Government to reverse its damaging decision on restricting the eligibility for winter fuel payments, and this Parliament has an opportunity to add its voice today.

The debate opened with a fair degree of blaming between Russell Findlay and Paul O'Kane and others from Labour. Although that was a spectacle to behold, I suggest to them that responsibility is shared.

Tory austerity is now Labour austerity, the Tory two-child cap is now the Labour two-child cap and Tory age discrimination in universal credit is now Labour's age discrimination in universal credit.

Labour had the opportunity to be different and it has chosen not to be.

I am sure that many people will reflect on the fact that, when I asked Russell Findlay what he meant when he spoke about cutting social security—whether that was against children, disabled people or carers—he did not answer. I am more than happy to take an intervention from him if he has decided which of those people he would like to cut the benefits from.

I hear nothing, again, Presiding Officer—oh no, here we go.

Russell Findlay: I return to the key point, which is that the Scottish Government has been in power for 17 years; it is in receipt of a record block grant and it is utterly incapable of spending it properly. Maybe it should take some responsibility for that.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: During those years in office, we have introduced the Scottish child payment, and we have delivered Social Security Scotland, with dignity, fairness and respect. In one of his first major speeches as leader, the people have heard that Russell Findlay wants to cut their benefits.

Anas Sarwar suggested that we look at the causes of poverty, and he is quite right, so I will suggest some to him: the two-child cap and the benefit cap. Keith Brown is quite right to say in challenge poverty week that neither of those policies has helped to alleviate poverty—but here we are with Labour keeping them.

When it comes to protecting pensioners, I reflect on a letter that I understand was sent out directly from Keir Starmer to pensioners across the UK, which stated:

"I know how much Britain's older generation have contributed to our country and the debt that is owed to them. I know how much of a struggle it's been in recent times."

and

"I'll never betray Britain's pensioners."

Well, it did not take long for people to see the reality.

We have heard much from Labour about its asks around the £41 million that it suggests is coming in consequentials. Members will forgive me if I am slightly sceptical about that, because if they will cast their minds back, they will remember that not long ago, Anas Sarwar said:

"Read my lips: no austerity under Labour."

Yet, we are supposed to read the lips of the Labour Party today and somehow expect those consequentials to appear miraculously.

Paul O'Kane: The cabinet secretary does not need a miraculous intervention. She needs to read

the letter from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to confirm the extension of the household support fund, and the information that came from the House of Commons library that confirms £41 million of consequentials to the Scottish budget.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have also read the Scottish Fiscal Commission's report, which says in its analysis that there is significant uncertainty about the level of funding that the Scottish Government will receive from the UK Government ahead of the UK budget. If we are genuinely going to be fiscally responsible, we cannot do it on a wing and a prayer and hope that some money will somehow be left when we have the Chancellor of the Exchequer talking about "difficult decisions" and the Prime Minister warning of a "painful" budget to come. Members will forgive me if I am sceptical about how far that will go.

Paul O'Kane: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If Paul O'Kane will forgive me, I will make a little bit more progress and then I will be happy to take another intervention.

We heard that Labour was going to put the country before the party, but now it is putting the party before pensioners. We have seen change being delivered, but the change is that fuel bills are going up while support is going down. I am not sure that that was the change that people had in mind.

We have an opportunity today—every single MSP has the opportunity—to support the motion, to speak with one voice, to put pensioners before party and to work together on this issue.

Patrick Harvie: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I promised to take another intervention from Mr O'Kane, and then I will try to get back to Mr Harvie.

Paul O'Kane: The point that I was going to make when the cabinet secretary reached that point in her speech was about why the fuel insecurity fund was cut. She used that money previously when it came to the Scottish budget, and then she chose to cut it. That is my first point.

The second point is that the cabinet secretary talked about wanting to engage. Why will she not engage on the concept of that £41 million and talk to us about how we might deploy it to support people in fuel poverty?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am very happy to engage with Scottish Labour, as are the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and other ministers, but I go back to the point that we

cannot try to deliver a budget without knowing how much money is coming.

I refer Paul O'Kane once again to what the Scottish Fiscal Commission has said on that.

We have also heard a great deal about the fiscal black hole, which apparently came as an absolute surprise to the Labour Party when it got into power. The First Minister made it very clear during the election campaign that that was a real and present danger. He was told not to scaremonger—that austerity would never happen. He proposed a solution of changing the fiscal rules. Somehow, it took Labour getting into office to realise that the Tories had left the economy in a mess.

Even if that were true, Clare Adamson was quite right to say that Labour noticed and then decided to take the cuts out on our pensioners. I am happy to give way to Mr Marra, if he still thinks that that is the right decision.

Michael Marra: Maybe I will have to explain this again to the cabinet secretary. What happens—*[Interruption.]* I certainly had to explain it to the First Minister—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: As I had to explain to the First Minister earlier, in the longer term, there is a structural deficit in the budget, but, in this year, there is a £22 billion gap. That is what we are talking about and it is what must be dealt with.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Well, Presiding Officer, that is two weeks in a row that the capital and revenue budget has been mansplained to me. Last week, it was by Anas Sarwar, and I am delighted that Michael Marra has joined in today. Let me say to him that the financial situation is a consequence of austerity, and Labour is continuing austerity. That is the political choice that Labour has made today.

Patrick Harvie: I agree with a great deal of what the cabinet secretary is saying, but does she understand my disappointment that the only two positions with any credibility before us today point the finger exclusively at the other Government? Does she recognise that, whatever the context of the UK Government in terms of power or budgets, the onus is on the Scottish Government to go much further than it has gone, if it wants to be successful in challenging poverty?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Patrick Harvie for that intervention, because I was just about to come to his remarks on that point. I would agree with the First Minister that the motion is not about apportioning blame. This is about the Parliament speaking with one voice about a policy change that I hope that Parliament can unite against. However, he is quite right that we should

work together and that challenges should be presented to the Scottish Government in that regard.

The budget discussions are on-going. There are a number of challenges and opportunities, which his speech rightly raised—

Miles Briggs: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If Mr Briggs will forgive me, I will not. I have taken a number of interventions.

Mr Harvie and others presented a number of challenges and opportunities. All parties should take advantage of the fact that we are at the start of those budget discussions. Mr Harvie was not the worst in this regard by any manner of means, but I say to those who came to the chamber with a list of requests, asks and demands that we should absolutely get together and discuss those as part of the budget process. I know from working with Mr Harvie over many years that he will take that offer up and take it seriously, as has been the case in the past.

Alex Cole-Hamilton said that it was a missed opportunity to have such a focused debate. Very politely, I disagree with him. As I said, this is an opportunity for us to speak with one voice as a Parliament. We could have debated many other things, and some of that has been aired today.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am looking to the Presiding Officer and I see that I do not have time. I am sorry, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

This is an opportunity for us to come together on this one issue. It is an opportunity for us to have a strong and united voice and for this Parliament to speak with a purpose. Every single MSP has that opportunity today, and I very much hope that they take it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on challenge poverty week.

Business Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-14842, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

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

for Thursday 10 October 2024—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scotland's Prison Population

followed by Ministerial Statement: Prosecution Guidance on Public Safety and Prison Population

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am aware that some members are trying to access the Zoom link but have been unable to get in.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Dunbar. We will proceed, but we will keep an eye on the situation.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-14820.1, in the name of Russell Findlay, which seeks to amend motion S6M-14820, in the name of John Swinney, on challenge poverty week, 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.

17:00

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-14820.1, in the name of Russell Findlay.

The vote is closed.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My voting app froze. I would have voted no.

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

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (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)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse)

(SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-14820.1, in the name of Russell Findlay, is: For 26, Against 86, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-14820.3, in the name of Anas Sarwar, which seeks to amend motion S6M-14820, in the name of John Swinney, on challenge poverty week, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East 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)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (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)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 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)
 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)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)

(SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 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)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Alex Cole-Hamilton]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-14820.3, in the name of Anas Sarwar, is: For 16, Against 96, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-14820, in the name of John Swinney, on challenge poverty week, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (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)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 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)
 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)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 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)

Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast
 by Alex Cole-Hamilton]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-14820, in the name of John Swinney, is: For 99, Against 14, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees in this Challenge Poverty Week that the UK Government must reverse the introduction of means testing for the Winter Fuel Payment.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Liver Disease

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-13569, in the name of Clare Haughey, on raising awareness of liver disease. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that, in the UK, there are more than 10,000 deaths due to liver disease each year, and that there has been a four-fold increase in death rates over the last 50 years; further understands that liver disease is closely linked to health inequalities, with key risk factors such as obesity, alcohol misuse and viral hepatitis most prevalent in the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities, including those in the Rutherglen constituency; understands that, while 90% of liver disease is preventable, mortality rates for chronic liver disease are now 5.5 times higher in the most deprived areas compared to the most affluent; notes the belief that greater focus on prevention and earlier detection of liver disease is essential to save lives, including through public health policies to reduce the health harms of alcohol and unhealthy food and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and pays tribute to the British Liver Trust for all of its work in raising awareness of liver disease, including through its Love Your Liver roadshow.

17:12

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I put on record my entry in the register of members' interests, as I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I thank all the members who supported the motion to allow the subject to be debated.

The debate is particularly timely, as this month is liver cancer awareness month. We know that 90 per cent of liver disease is preventable and that, if it is diagnosed at an early stage, damage can often be reversed and the liver can fully recover. Tragically, however, in the United Kingdom as a whole, there are more than 10,000 deaths each year as a result of liver disease, and there has been a fourfold increase in death rates over the past 50 years. Mortality rates for chronic liver disease in Scotland have increased by 80 per cent in the past three decades, and they have increased by 16 per cent since the pandemic.

Back in May, I sponsored the British Liver Trust's love your liver roadshow at the Scottish Parliament. It was fantastic to see more than 20 MSPs, including the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, attending the event.

Liver disease is closely linked to health inequalities. The main risk factors for chronic liver disease are alcohol use, obesity and viral hepatitis, all of which are most prevalent in our most disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Liver disease mortality rates are now

five and a half times higher in the most deprived areas, and individuals from those areas are more likely to develop, be hospitalised by and die from liver disease than those in the most affluent areas.

However, Scotland is rapidly making progress on early detection to tackle those inequalities, as nine of the 14 health boards are now implementing fully effective pathways for earlier diagnosis of liver disease. People from the Camglen area of my Rutherglen constituency often access services from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Between 2003 and 2022, the board saw the largest fall in liver disease deaths—48.6 per cent—across all health boards. Challenges persist, however, as 251 people in the board's area sadly died from chronic liver disease in 2022.

Nonetheless, Scotland is leading the charge in developing and rolling out new diagnostic technology to accelerate the earlier detection of liver disease. For example, the intelligent liver function testing pathway, which was developed by the University of Dundee, uses an automated algorithm-based system to further investigate abnormal liver function test results in initial blood samples from primary care. There has also been some local innovation, with FibroScan technology being piloted in Glasgow city to target those who are at highest risk in addiction services, which enables rapid referrals to specialist care to take place.

One reason why those innovations in tackling liver disease are so important is that liver disease is the biggest risk factor for liver cancer—it is present in between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of liver cancer patients. Alarmingly, liver cancer is now the fastest-rising cause of cancer death in the UK, with a survival rate of just 13 per cent. Sadly, as a result of barriers to earlier detection, liver cancer has seen the largest increase in mortality rates of all cancer types in Scotland over the past decade.

To tackle that crisis, Scotland has broken ground through the publication of a dedicated 10-year cancer strategy with a specific focus on improving outcomes for liver cancer as one of the six less survivable cancers. Tackling it demands that we look upstream at earlier detection of underlying liver disease—through the initiatives that I described—and at prevention. We all know, of course, that prevention is better than cure. As such, I welcome the Scottish Government's consultation on advertising restrictions on food and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, which are disproportionately marketed towards children and vulnerable groups. That is hugely significant, given that up to 40 per cent of children with obesity are now estimated to have fatty liver disease.

In addition, given that alcohol is responsible for the majority of liver disease deaths in Scotland, I am delighted to report that the increase in minimum unit pricing for alcohol took effect last week. Evidence from Public Health Scotland has shown that minimum unit pricing is highly effective in tackling alcohol-related liver disease, reducing health inequalities and, ultimately, saving lives. In fact, it is estimated that the policy has, on average, saved 268 lives and averted 899 hospital admissions each year.

In closing, I pay tribute to the British Liver Trust for all its work to raise awareness of liver disease, including through its love your liver roadshow. A continued focus on prevention, and on the early detection of liver disease, is essential to save lives, and the British Liver Trust's efforts to end liver disease should be commended.

17:17

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and I thank Clare Haughey for bringing it to the chamber.

Liver disease affects both lives and livelihoods across the country. It is the one major disease for which rates appear to be increasing. The debate is timely, as Scotland, on the Scottish National Party's watch, is in the grip of the highest alcohol-related death rates in 15 years. National Records of Scotland has confirmed that, in 2023, more than 1,200 Scots lost their lives as a result of alcohol, which is the highest number of deaths since 2008. The same research confirmed that more than 19,000 Scots have died from alcohol since 2007. In NHS Forth Valley's area, 66 people died from alcohol in 2023, and 952 have died since 2007—that is nearly 1,000 people in that part of my region alone.

To go back to the wider issue in question, it is salient to note that liver disease does not affect all parts of society equally. Analysis by Public Health Scotland shows that death rates from chronic liver disease are nearly four times higher in the most deprived areas of Scotland.

The motion mentions the British Liver Trust's excellent work, which I welcome and commend. Some months ago, I and fellow members had the opportunity to meet and welcome representatives of the trust when they were in Parliament with their love your liver roadshow, as part of its tour of Scotland. The event provided members of all parties with the opportunity to take a screening test and have a non-invasive liver scan. It was an ideal opportunity to learn more about the campaign that the British Liver Trust was organising to make early diagnosis of liver disease routine. It also provided an opportunity for us to

find out more about the trust's work to improve outcomes for liver disease and liver cancer patients across Scotland and the United Kingdom.

With the aid of diseased liver models, the event graphically highlighted for us how an unhealthy lifestyle that is laden with alcohol and processed food can have a massive effect on the efficiency of our organs. It also highlighted the pressures that are put on our health service as a result.

As the British Liver Trust highlights, a major reason for the increase in death rates has been late diagnosis. In around three quarters of cases, diagnosis of late-stage liver disease happens when it is too late for any effective treatment to take place. On that issue, I know that many health boards are working hard to ensure that the condition is detected as early as possible.

In my region, NHS Fife has been taking forward work on early diagnosis, which is to be welcomed. Last year, the board launched an early detection pathway for liver disease, which is also much welcomed. However, just nine of Scotland's 14 health boards have an early detection pathway in place, so much more requires to be done.

I hope that the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health will, in summing up, talk about what we are doing to ensure that health boards are all actively taking part in that pathway. I urge her to confirm that the Scottish Government will work enthusiastically and effectively with the remaining health boards to ensure that it becomes the norm across the country. We must do all that we can to save as many lives as possible from this terrible condition, which is a blight on many of our communities.

17:21

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank Clare Haughey for bringing the debate to the chamber during liver cancer awareness month. I also thank the British Liver Trust for all its work to tackle liver disease. I was grateful to sponsor the trust's first-ever love your liver roadshow at the Scottish Parliament, in May 2022, and it is encouraging to see the growing cross-party support on the issue.

The debate is important because Scotland has some of the worst rates of liver disease in the world, which places us at the epicentre of an avoidable public health emergency that is fuelled by stigma and health inequalities. We know that 90 per cent of liver disease is preventable and that many of the causes of liver disease, if they are tackled early with the right interventions, can be dealt with.

However, the statistics show that mortality rates for chronic liver disease are 5.5 times higher in the

most deprived areas than in the most affluent areas, which is shocking. Hospital stays as a result of liver disease are 4.4 times higher in the most deprived areas, and people in low-income groups are more than four times more likely to die from alcohol, and six times more likely to be hospitalised, than people in higher-income groups. To be frank, the difference is stark. In addition, we know that thousands have died unnecessarily without access to specialist care because liver services are consistently overlooked and underresourced.

Liver cancer is one of the six less survivable cancers that make up nearly half of all cancer deaths in Scotland. The reality of long waits for cancer treatment in Scotland needs to be highlighted, as we have to have a serious conversation about outcomes. The 62-day urgent referral target for suspected cancers has not been met since 2012. Last year was the worst year on record for Scotland's cancer waiting times, and they continue to worsen.

Every single health board in Scotland missed the 62-day standard this quarter, which I am sure is deeply worrying to us all. Early diagnosis and treatment is absolutely crucial in saving lives, so I welcome the innovations in diagnostics that Clare Haughey outlined, but we need to do more to meet the 31-day and 62-day cancer treatment standards.

In my local area, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is, unfortunately, categorised as red, because there is no pathway in place for the early detection and management of liver disease. We need to do so much better in every area of Scotland, and we need to support the fantastic national health service staff, who are working tirelessly to deliver the standard of treatment that patients deserve.

Long waits are putting lives on the line. The situation is especially stark when it comes to liver cancer, which has seen the largest increase in mortality rates of all cancer types over the past decade in Scotland.

It is clear that we urgently need improved preventative measures and earlier diagnosis of liver disease, as well as a proper plan to tackle inequalities and geographic variation in treatment outcomes and care. For a disease that is so treatable, there should be no excuse for outcomes to continue to decline year after year.

Health inequality remains deeply entrenched in Scotland and, after 17 years of the SNP Government, it is not getting better. All members have a responsibility to try to close that gap. We must strengthen our NHS so that it works for all, invest in drug and alcohol treatment and bolster

front-line services so that we can turn the tide on liver disease.

17:25

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am grateful to my colleague Clare Haughey for securing this incredibly important debate and for raising awareness of liver disease.

First, I hope that the chamber will allow me a moment of remembrance. Sadly, in June 2019, I lost my friend Linda McColl to non-alcoholic liver disease. Linda was a former councillor and the first female depute provost of West Dunbartonshire Council. I will never forget her kindness and guidance when I was elected, so in her memory I will do everything that I can to raise awareness. For Linda, and the great many people who have lost their lives to liver disease, we must do more to promote awareness as part of our prevention strategy. We must also improve support and services for those who are impacted by it.

Liver disease does not discriminate, but unfortunately some folk are more at risk than others. It is imperative that we highlight the disease, not only for people who are currently suffering from it but for those who are at risk, because, unfortunately, it is a silent killer. As has been mentioned, people with a history of excessive alcohol use, or of obesity, and those with viral infections such as hepatitis B or C, are much more at risk of getting liver disease.

Worryingly, many people do not experience symptoms until the disease has reached an advanced stage, so it is important to look out for the symptoms early. Some common symptoms are: loss of appetite, yellow skin, a yellow tinge in the eyes, itchy skin, and feeling or being sick. When it is damaged, the liver can repair itself, but only up to a point. That is why it is so important for us to know the risk factors early, so as to protect our livers.

Although it is welcome that, in Scotland, chronic liver disease rates have generally decreased from a peak in 2003, they are still too high. More definitely needs to be done. According to the British Liver Trust, nine out of 10 cases of liver disease could be prevented. Risk factors such as obesity and alcohol misuse increase our chances of contracting it. As Clare Haughey's motion states, we cannot comprehensively tackle liver disease unless we also tackle its root causes. Health inequalities play a major part in that respect.

It is quite fitting that this debate follows the debate on challenge poverty week, as both poverty and deprivation are linked with liver disease. Public Health Scotland estimates that

chronic liver disease death rates are 3.8 times higher in the most deprived areas compared with the least deprived. Therefore, policies that tackle health inequalities and reduce the harms of alcohol and unhealthy foods are very important.

A great example of that is minimum unit pricing of alcohol. Although it is subject to regular, and often misleading, criticism at times—including, unfortunately, from some sectors of the mainstream media—our academics are clear about its success. A report undertaken by Public Health Scotland found strong evidence that minimum unit pricing in Scotland has reduced deaths directly caused by alcohol consumption as well as hospital admissions due to chronic causes. Deaths caused by alcohol dropped by an estimated 13.4 per cent and hospital admissions by 4.1 per cent, with the largest reduction seen among men and those living in the most deprived areas. That is significant and, I believe, extremely important from the perspective of saving lives.

Finally, I thank the British Liver Trust for all its work in raising awareness of liver disease, and for bringing the love your liver roadshow to Parliament earlier this year. Although Alcoholics Anonymous is not a liver disease charity, I put on record my sincere thanks to it. I have known many people who have turned their lives around through its groups and who have subsequently improved their health as a result. For that, I am grateful.

We must do more to raise awareness. We must also improve early detection of the disease and ensure that treatment and support are easily accessible. The impact that liver disease is having in Scotland needs our full attention. Our constituents expect no less.

17:30

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, thank Clare Haughey for bringing the debate to the chamber. As other members have done, I thank the British Liver Trust for its work.

Raising awareness of liver disease is especially important, because, as we have heard from other members, it is a silent killer. In its early stages, it tends to be asymptomatic—which is not an easy word to say at this time on a Tuesday. Statistics provided by the British Liver Trust demonstrate that three quarters of people who are currently diagnosed with cirrhosis receive their diagnoses in an emergency hospital, when it is too late for effective treatment.

The situation is critical, as Scotland has the highest mortality rate for liver disease in the UK, and one of the highest in Europe. The trends are equally alarming, with death rates for chronic liver disease in Scotland increasing by 80 per cent in the past three decades and by 16 per cent

between 2019 and 2022—that is, since the pandemic. That is in stark contrast to the rates for other major diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, which have either remained stable or decreased.

I also thank Clare Haughey for sponsoring the love your liver roadshow. I went along, gently dragging some staff members with me for moral support. It absolutely made me think, and worry, about what my liver scan would say. We cannot hide from such results. It was one of those times when the worry made me think twice about going. By no means do I drink excessively, but caffeine is certainly my downfall, and many people do not realise how bad energy drinks are for the liver. It is important for us to be seen to go for tests, and to encourage others to go, too, because we cannot advocate for what we would not do ourselves.

Other conditions that are not alcohol related can affect liver health, and those are very much known about. As we expand opportunities for people to have liver scans, we should ensure that those with certain health conditions receive them, too. For example, polycystic ovary syndrome—PCOS—can be a risk factor in liver disease, due to the insulin resistance associated with it. As is the case with type 2 diabetes, insulin resistance can impact liver health. Despite the length of time that women have to wait for a PCOS diagnosis, we know who they are and can identify them. I wonder whether the minister could say whether such health conditions could be included in scanning programmes and, in the case of PCOS, whether that could be considered in the next, wider phases of the women's health plan.

Raising awareness of those diverse factors is essential if we are to improve liver health outcomes across the population. In that respect, a lot of work has been done by various organisations in the alcohol space, including Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems and Alcohol Focus Scotland, to impress on the Government the need to introduce several important mechanisms on alcohol use. I do not think that any member in the chamber would disagree with the need to tackle the current rates of alcohol-related liver disease, and those organisations have been advocating for an automatic operating mechanism for minimum unit pricing, in tandem with alcohol harm prevention levies on retailers that sell alcohol and profit from minimum unit pricing. We could use those funds for local prevention, early detection, and treatment and care services. More than 70 per cent of liver disease deaths are attributable to alcohol; tragically, three quarters of those cases are diagnosed too late. The British Liver Trust, Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems and Alcohol Focus Scotland all recommend the actions that I mentioned earlier.

Understanding liver disease in its entirety is crucial if we are to address the growing health challenges in Scotland. Although alcohol remains a significant factor, it cannot be viewed in isolation, especially for those who come to liver disease in other ways. The complex relationship between liver disease and wider health inequalities, particularly the strong impacts of deprivation, calls for a more comprehensive approach to care. Geographic variation in liver disease outcomes, and the quality of care provided across health boards, further exacerbate such disparities.

More should be done to ensure clear patient care pathways for early detection and management of liver disease. Tackling such issues demands a collective effort to create equitable access to liver care, improve early intervention and ensure that support is available where it is needed most.

17:34

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I pay tribute to Clare Haughey for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I endorse and support much of what she and other colleagues have said.

However, I want to speak about a particular issue that is related to liver disease and which a constituent asked me to talk about on their behalf. In recent years, my constituent, who is in their 50s, developed bile duct cancer. According to AMMF The Cholangiocarcinoma Charity, which is the relevant charity, it is a brutal diagnosis, because the five-year survival rate is between 2 and 9 per cent, depending on various factors. Unfortunately, less than 30 per cent of patients survive 12 months, mainly because the symptoms tend to present when it is already too late and because practitioners do not always consider cholangiocarcinoma—excuse me if I am not pronouncing that correctly; I am not a clinician—despite the fact that it is now almost as common as hepatocellular carcinoma, which is the most common form of liver cancer.

My constituent told me that surgery is the only potentially curative treatment but that less than 20 per cent of patients proceed to it. My constituent has had surgery at Edinburgh royal infirmary in recent years, and they continue to be monitored by the oncology team at the Western general hospital. Like many of my constituents, they are very grateful to NHS Lothian for its superb care and treatment.

My constituent wanted me to talk about this today, because they inform me that other life-extending treatments are emerging and that some have already been approved by the Scottish Medicines Consortium. These therapies, which

target particular gene mutations, are proving to be highly effective. My constituent states that, for example, ivosidenib, which was approved by the SMC last month, has been shown to be more than effective by doubling life expectancy. However, there are some challenges. My constituent has stated that, unlike other places, NHS Scotland does not fund the genomic testing that is necessary to identify all the new treatment options, and that is why I am speaking today.

I appreciate that there is a lot of detail to this and that the minister might not be able to respond today, but I just wanted to highlight the issue of bile duct cancer, as well as the other issues around liver disease that have been aired by colleagues. On the basis of the experience of my constituent and, indeed, experiences of others that have helped in the past—there will, of course, be others across Scotland—it is clear that dealing with this particular type of cancer is an important part of the debate.

Perhaps the minister could write to me so that I can relay to my constituents what can be done to create cohesion between the Scottish Medicines Consortium approvals process and the necessary testing to ensure that NHS Scotland patients can benefit from advances in medical science in this area.

17:38

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I thank Clare Haughey and members from across the parties for bringing the subject to the chamber. I join others in thanking the British Liver Trust for all its work on raising awareness of liver disease, including through its love your liver roadshow. I am one of many MSPs who have benefited from a liver health screening and non-invasive liver scan right outside the chamber as part of a previous year's awareness campaign.

Everyone will agree that everything possible should be done to raise awareness of liver disease in Scotland. As we have heard, October is liver cancer awareness month, so this debate is timely, especially as liver disease is the biggest risk factor for developing liver cancer. As we have heard, Scotland has the highest incidence of liver cancer in the whole UK, and liver cancer has had the highest increase in mortality rates across all cancer types in Scotland over the past decade, with a worrying 38 per cent increase.

I will not rehearse the stats that we have already heard. In coming last in a debate, it is often necessary to repeat stats, but I will not do that. I will focus on Dumfries and Galloway. Worryingly, the rate of chronic liver disease mortality in my patch—the NHS Dumfries and Galloway area—more than doubled in the decade between 2012

and 2022, increasing by 138.7 per cent from 7.13 per 100,000 to 17.02 per 100,000, and it surged by almost 40 per cent between the pre-Covid period and 2022, increasing from 12 per 100,000 to just over 17 per 100,000. The most up-to-date statistics reveal that there were 732 hospital stays for alcohol conditions in Dumfries and Galloway between 2021 and 2022.

I commend and welcome the fact that my health board has a pathway for early detection of liver disease in development. It has been reported that that pathway will include use of the liver fibrosis score and the introduction of intelligent liver function tests. I am sure that other health boards will watch with interest how that impacts on future improvements.

Of course, 90 per cent of liver disease is preventable, yet, tragically, three quarters of sufferers are diagnosed with cirrhosis when it is too late for effective treatment. Early detection of liver disease is vital in improving people's opportunity to make lifestyle changes to improve their outcomes. It is a silent killer that is often asymptomatic in the early stages, and it is frequently diagnosed in accident and emergency departments at crisis point, when liver damage is irreversible, thereby putting even more pressure on our NHS.

That is why I agree whole-heartedly with the British Liver Trust that we must act now. The Scottish Government needs to introduce new national guidance on liver disease to improve early diagnosis, including through national roll-out of intelligent liver function tests and FibroScans in primary and community care. We must ensure that liver disease prevention is prioritised through the introduction of population-wide measures to tackle obesity and alcohol misuse as the drivers of liver disease.

Although money is tight, Scottish Government ministers must make the right choice and have the right priorities. Preventing the disease is absolutely critical, as is early diagnosis. The minister and I were at a meeting of the cross-party group on brain tumours earlier this afternoon, at which we heard how critical early diagnosis is. To achieve early diagnosis, the Scottish Government must provide sustainable funding for the nationwide roll-out of the Scottish care and co-ordination service for hepato-pancreato-biliary cancers, in line with action 45 in "Cancer Action Plan for Scotland 2023-26". At the same time, we must establish recruitment targets for the liver care workforce to address the chronic workforce shortages and the geographical variation in consultant liver nurse specialists and alcohol care teams.

Much needs to be done if we are to stand any chance of beating this silent killer.

17:43

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank my colleague Clare Haughey for bringing her motion to the chamber in liver cancer awareness month, and I thank all the members who have contributed to the debate.

It is clear from everyone's remarks that there is agreement across the chamber on how vital preventing liver disease is to supporting good health in Scotland. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that everyone with liver disease is able to access the best possible care and support and benefit from healthcare services that are safe, effective and person centred. I, too, attended the love your liver roadshow and, like Gillian Mackay, I was slightly nervous about getting my liver checked. I absolutely agree that we need to advocate people getting their liver checked.

It is clear how important it is to tackle liver disease, which now affects at least 2 million people in the UK. It is clear, too, that health-harming products, such as alcohol and high fat, salt and sugar foods, play a role in the development of liver disease for some people. There are many causes of liver disease, and we know that liver diseases are often associated with lifestyles that cause stigmatisation and prejudice, as Jackie Baillie mentioned.

I can assure members that I am absolutely committed to our public health agenda and the range of priority actions that we have set out in relation to various health-harming products, including alcohol and less healthy foods. Tackling health inequalities and improving healthy life expectancy continue to be key priorities for this Government, and we will continue our efforts to ensure that everyone in Scotland lives a full and healthy life.

I noted Gillian Mackay's points about PCOS in the women's health plan, and I will share that with my team that is looking at moving that forward. I thank Ben Macpherson for sharing his constituent's story and comments. I am very happy to enter into correspondence with him on cohesion between SMC approvals and testing.

Early detection of liver disease is crucial, which is why we are supporting NHS Tayside and the University of Dundee to develop their innovative intelligent liver function testing pathway, which is an automated investigation pathway that can maximise early diagnosis of liver-related diseases. That work is being led by liver specialists in response to local need.

Following the successful assessment of the pathway, the tests have been made standard practice across Tayside, and opportunities to

support the wider roll-out of the technology across other health board areas is being considered. I recognise Alexander Stewart's comments about understanding and recognising the consistency of pathways across NHS boards. Both he and Finlay Carson raised the matter in an earlier meeting, and I absolutely recognise the importance of that consistency.

Liver cancer has a tragic impact on too many people in Scotland. Like Marie McNair, I have suffered a personal loss: my father died of secondary liver cancer.

Cancer continues to be a national priority for the Scottish Government and across NHS Scotland. That is why we published our ambitious 10-year cancer strategy and initial action plan last year. Over the 10-year period, our strategic aim is to improve cancer survival rates and to provide excellent equitably accessible care. The strategy and plan take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways, from prevention and diagnosis to treatment and post-treatment care. We continue to focus on the less-survivable cancers such as liver cancer.

As many have said, the earlier that cancer is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat. That is why the Scottish Government is committed to raising awareness of all forms of cancer, including liver cancer, through our detect cancer earlier programme. A new earlier cancer diagnosis vision was developed as part of the cancer strategy. The vision is to reduce later-stage disease, so that cancer, when it has been detected, is more likely to be curable.

We have introduced five successful rapid cancer diagnostic services, which are significantly reducing the time that is taken from referral to diagnosis for those with non-specific symptoms of cancer. We will open another service this year. Evaluation has shown that hepato-pancreato-biliary cancers are among the most-found cancers that are diagnosed through the new services, which are helping us to find those cancers faster.

As everyone who contributed to the debate has done, I want to pay particular attention to the importance of preventing liver disease. As the motion recognises, the risk of liver disease is increased by the impacts of harmful alcohol use and obesity. We are determined to do all that we can to reduce alcohol-related harm, which is one of the most pressing public health challenges that we face in Scotland. We take a whole-population approach to tackling such harm, in line with the World Health Organization's focus on the affordability, availability and attractiveness of alcohol. That approach recognises that it is not just people who are consuming alcohol at the highest levels who are at risk of health conditions due to alcohol. We continue to take steps to

prevent the health harms that are caused by alcohol. As others have mentioned, that includes the recent work to increase the minimum unit price of alcohol to 65p, as of 30 September. The Public Health Scotland evaluation of the minimum unit pricing policy found that it is estimated to have saved hundreds of lives and to have had a positive effect on health inequalities.

The World Health Organization also recommends reducing the attractiveness of alcohol as a key step to preventing alcohol harm. In a statement on 12 September, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care set out the next steps for alcohol marketing. Public Health Scotland is being commissioned to review the evidence on that. We look forward to receiving its review and considering the next steps.

We also want everyone in Scotland to eat well and to have a healthy weight in order that we can reduce the impact of a range of diet-related ill-health conditions, including liver disease. We continue to implement the wide-ranging actions to address that challenge that are set out in our 2018 document, "A Healthier Future—Scotland's Diet & Healthy Weight Delivery Plan". That includes our commitment to restrict less-healthy food promotions and to improve the availability of healthier options when eating out, as outlined in our 2021 out-of-home action plan.

In closing, I would like to thank those—

I am sorry; I have just noticed that Ben Macpherson wants to intervene.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the minister for giving way and I am sorry to interrupt just as she was concluding.

What the minister was saying reminded me of something that we have discussed previously in Parliament—namely, the availability of high-sugar energy drinks, which Gillian Mackay mentioned. The Government has considered restrictions on those in the past, and I note that the UK Government is now considering that, too. Perhaps the Scottish Government could review that as part of its considerations.

Jenni Minto: I thank Ben Macpherson for his intervention. A public health framework is one of the big areas of work that I am looking at alongside Public Health Scotland and Food Standards Scotland. Nothing is being excluded from that work, so it includes high-sugar energy drinks, and we are approaching this from the perspective of the population as a whole. I was pleased to chair a meeting that included not only Public Health Scotland and Food Standards Scotland, but Cancer Research UK, the British Heart Foundation and representatives of the retail trade, so we are taking a fully collaborative and

integrated look at what we need to do from a public health perspective.

I thank those who support our NHS and patients who have a liver disease diagnosis, including the British Liver Trust, which has a very important role in raising public awareness.

To members and people who are watching the debate, I reiterate the Scottish Government's enduring commitment to reducing the burden of liver disease in Scotland through a wide range of actions, from prevention and early intervention to strengthening treatment options and providing broader supportive care.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate, and I close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 17:52.

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