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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 25 April 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: The Serjeant at Arms needs to investigate the delay in the Lobby, please.

The House having divided: Ayes 1, Noes 73.

Division No. 176] [9.34 am

AYES

Thompson, Adam

Tellers for the Ayes:
Josh Fenton-Glynn and
Gareth Snell

NOES

Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Antoniazzi, Tonia

Baxter, Johanna

Berry, Siân

Billington, Ms Polly

Blackman, Kirsty

Blake, Rachel

Bowie, Andrew

Carns, Al

Chope, Sir Christopher

Chowns, Ellie

Clark, Feryal

Costigan, Deirdre

Creagh, Mary

Crichton, Torcuil

Cross, Harriet

Dalton, Ashley

Davies-Jones, Alex

Dearden, Kate

Doogan, Dave

Doughty, Stephen

Elmore, Chris

Entwistle, Kirith

Fahnbulleh, Miatta

Flynn, rh Stephen

Foxcroft, Vicky

Francois, rh Mr Mark

Gethins, Stephen

Greenwood, Lilian

Harris, Carolyn

Hillier, Dame Meg

Holmes, Paul

Hudson, Dr Neil

Jogee, Adam

Jones, Gerald

Khan, Naushabah

Lam, Katie

Lamb, Peter

Law, Chris

Leadbitter, Graham

Lewin, Andrew

Logan, Seamus

Madders, Justin

Malhotra, Seema

Martin, Amanda

Mather, Keir

Mohamed, Iqbal

Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Morgan, Stephen

Murray, rh Ian

Norris, Alex

O'Hara, Brendan

Patrick, Matthew

Peacock, Stephanie

Quigley, Mr Richard

Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Reid, Joani

Reynolds, Emma

Smith, Greg

Smith, Rebecca

Stafford, Gregory

Taylor, Alison

Taylor, Rachel

Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Timothy, Nick

Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)

Uppal, Harpreet

Ward, Melanie

Wild, James

Wishart, Pete

Woodcock, Sean

Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Christian Wakeford and
Anna McMorrin

Question accordingly negatived.

Devolution (Immigration) (Scotland) Bill

Second Reading

9.51 am

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

May I start by giving thanks to you, Mr Speaker, and colleagues who are attending today, and in particular the staff of the House of Commons for their assistance? I think it is fair to acknowledge that today's debate is slightly unexpected, so I am particularly grateful for all the help that I have received and that your team have provided over the past few days.

It might be unexpected, but this is nevertheless a very timely debate on Scotland's particular needs. It also comes the day after the election of Scotland's newest councillor. I want to give a shout-out to Lynda Holton, who won the by-election in Glenrothes last night with, I think, the SNP's second highest share of the vote ever in the area and Labour's second or lowest share of the vote ever. I think that speaks to the disappointment felt in recent times and to the notion that sometimes politicians in this place do not adequately address the needs of Scotland or other parts of the United Kingdom.

Before I get to the substance of my speech, I want to be clear about something. Given the nature of the Bill, I will concede that it is not for everyone. It is a short Bill and, to be fair, it is not for everybody; but, to repeat the point that Members made in the Second Reading debate on the assisted dying Bill, we can get into the details later on. I want to be clear: all of us across the Chamber can disagree on a wide range of areas, but I am up for working with colleagues from across the House, particularly Scottish Labour, to amend the Bill, to find some common ground and to meet the commitments that Scottish Labour has already made, which are pertinent and relate to this Bill.

I am glad that we have this valuable time. We do not always get the time to debate areas of particular interest to Scotland. It is ironic that I have been given time to debate something that relates to SNP policy, but also to Labour policy and, to a certain extent, to Liberal Democrat policy—it is unfortunate that the Liberal Democrats have been unable to attend today. This issue has become particularly apparent given the catastrophe visited on our economy and our citizens as a direct consequence of leaving the EU. When I say that, I know that I do not say anything that is particularly controversial.

I remember with fondness my time working closely with the Secretary of State for Scotland, when he was far sighted enough to see the utter catastrophe that would be visited on Scotland and the rest of the UK if we embraced a hard Brexit. I valued the time working with him on that. I have since been a bit surprised that he has subsequently embraced that hard Tory Brexit. I know that things change in politics—we take the circumstances when they change—but I am not entirely sure what has changed for the positive since we left the EU in 2016: the economy has tanked; rights and opportunities have been taken away from our citizens; and we have lost billions—£40 billion a year—to the Exchequer. Those are not just my numbers. On that point, before I mention another Labour figure, I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. He is right to talk about growing the economy. Does he agree that if the Scottish Government had used the powers they actually have to grow the Scottish economy between 2012 and 2023, it would now be £8.5 billion larger and my constituents would be much better off?

Stephen Gethins: I am a great admirer of the hon. Lady—she joined me on the Russia sanctions list this week and I pay credit to her for her work for the children of Ukraine—but I am somewhat surprised that, given those growth figures, she has now turned out in favour of independence! We all know what happened when Scotland remained part of the UK and the hit that we took. It is disappointing that Labour has embraced that. I will take a second intervention before I make some progress.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about the epiphany the Secretary of State for Scotland has had in the intervening decade about the merits and de-merits of Brexit. Is it not the case that no matter what this Minister thinks—or what any other Minister thinks in any British Government, Scottish or otherwise—they are not in thrall to the realities of the economy; they are in thrall to voters in middle England?

Stephen Gethins: As usual, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

I want to come on to the way in which we discuss and debate migration. Migration is a good thing. It benefits all of us. All of us throughout time have benefited from migration. I have been deeply disappointed by—I am sorry to say, Mr Speaker—the poison that often seeps into our rhetoric whenever we discuss this issue. We need to be honest: nobody is talking about uncontrolled migration and we need a migration policy. I want to talk about some of the industries that have talked to me, in a really sensible way that I think this House should listen to, about how we deal with migration.

I said to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) that I would mention Labour. Analysis by the Labour Mayor of London reckons that Brexit, which this Government have embraced—I do not know what happened to the Secretary of State for Scotland; I consider him a colleague—loses us £40 billion a year. So when the Government are making cuts to the winter fuel allowance and cuts to the disabled, that is all to go and pay for a Brexit that nobody voted for and nobody wants.

While I am talking about people embracing a hard Tory Brexit, I want to refer to a former Member of this place, Michael Gove. Even before the Brexit vote, the architect of Brexit could see the damage that would be caused to Scotland's economy. What did the architect say?

“If, in the course of the negotiations, the Scottish Parliament wants to play a role in deciding how a visa system could work, much as it works in other parts of the European Economic Area, then that is something we'll look into.”

He went on to say that

“the numbers who would come in the future would be decided by the Westminster Parliament and the Holyrood Parliament working together.”

That is a commitment made by a Conservative Minister prior to the Brexit referendum. I remember listening to it on Radio Scotland.

I am loath to quote Michael Gove. Frankly, when the history is written of this place hence, there can be few politicians who, along with former Prime Minister Johnson, will have caused as much damage. His legacy will be one of costs and damage economically, as well as in terms of opportunities for our young people. But in that moment of self-reflection, Mr Gove did say that Scotland needed a particular solution. I also thought that I would quote him because I was going to appeal to Scottish Labour today, and they appear to have embraced Michael Gove. They are now getting prepared to stick him in the House of Lords to make him an unelected bureaucrat for life—something he railed against. The Secretary of State is making faces; I am not sure if he has signed off on that yet, or how keen he is on it, but the Government, having heard what Mr Gove said about unelected bureaucrats, are about to stick him in the Lords. I understand from the *Press and Journal*—I believe everything that I read there—that he is about to become Lord Gove of Torry. I am not sure what the good people of Torry think of that, or what they have done to deserve it—my right hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) will have a better idea than I do—but I am not sure they will think an awful lot of that. Having embraced a hard Tory Brexit, Scottish Labour is now—

Johanna Baxter: Will the hon. Member give way?

Stephen Gethins: Oh, here we go! If you can tell me why on earth Labour is putting Michael Gove in the House of Lords, I will gladly give way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Can I remind the hon. Gentleman to do less you-ing, please?

Johanna Baxter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for indulging me a second time. He references Brexit. Can he clarify for the House why his party spent less on campaigning against Brexit than on a local by-election campaign in Scotland? The newfound conversion to opposing Brexit might be welcome, but that clarification would be helpful.

Stephen Gethins: I am glad to respond to that. I was deputy director of our Remain campaign, and I was delighted when not only did every part of Scotland vote overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, but every local authority area voted to remain in the EU—even those that had voted against joining the EU.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Could you give guidance on whether re-running the Brexit debate from 10 years ago is in any way linked to a single clause of this Bill from the Scottish National party?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): That is not a point of order. The Bill has a broad scope, so it does allow for some broadness in the debate.

Stephen Gethins: I am not that surprised that the Labour party wants to close down a debate on Brexit. The hon. Member is seeking to spare his party its

blushes—in particular Scottish Labour—and I respect him for that. We know why we need to open up that debate. The Treasury will tell us why: it is because of how much money Brexit is costing our public services. Our young people know why: it is because of the opportunities Brexit is costing them.

I listened to the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) yesterday in Westminster Hall. He made a good speech in which he tried to talk about opportunities for young people through a youth mobility scheme that he endorsed, but he also spoke of capping the number of young people who could participate, so that fewer young people had the freedom of movement that both he and I enjoyed. What a paucity of ambition from the Labour party for our young people, who have been left with fewer rights. I expected that from the Conservative party, but not in my wildest dreams would I have expected it from the Labour party, which now wants to crow about the situation and the cap on young people.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): The Westminster Hall debate was interesting, and was largely conducted in good spirit, though I think his speech slightly misjudged the tone of Westminster Hall. I and a number of Labour parliamentarians have been looking for practical steps to move forward our relationship with the European Union. We have had 15 years of moving backwards under the Conservatives, and we have now heard a speech that seems to be detached from reality. My job—our job on the Labour Benches—is to get a stronger deal with the European Union. One of the key first steps, we think, is a visa-based youth mobility system, and I am proud of that.

Stephen Gethins: I am glad the hon. Member is proud of the opportunities he will be denying young people by going ahead with Labour's plans. I found that debate yesterday slightly frustrating. My hon. Friends will have sat through similar debates in which Labour Member after Labour Member—in fairness, there are a number of them; they won the election, after all—talk about how dreadful Brexit was and the damage it did to our young people, universities, small and medium-sized enterprises, and security, and to Britain's place in the world. But what are the Government doing about it? Nothing. They are embracing the hardest of hard Brexits. They could rejoin the customs union and reintroduce freedoms, to bring benefits to citizens the length and breadth of the UK.

Gareth Snell: I sat on the Opposition Benches, behind SNP Members, during those long, tumultuous days of the Brexit debate, and I remember watching SNP Member after SNP Member game the system to push us towards a no-deal Brexit, in the hope that the Government of the time would abandon the plan. There were Labour Members who argued consistently that we should adopt plans and deals; SNP Members voted against that at every opportunity because their narrow grievance politics was more important than a good deal for this country.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Member is a born-again Brexiteer, and he has taken on the nonsense of Brexiteers. He should have a look at the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019, passed by this House, which banned a no-deal Brexit, which he said he was pushing on. Who

was one of the co-authors of that Bill? I was. I worked with Labour colleagues, Liberal Democrat colleagues, Green colleagues and SDLP colleagues to stop the damaging “no deal” that Brexiteers embraced; he has embraced it, and Boris Johnson embraced it.

Let me move on to Scottish Labour; we have heard quite enough nonsense from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) today. I was one of the authors of the Bill that we called the Benn-Burt Act because of the fine work done by those Members—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Bill is an immigration Bill? While I did say that the scope is quite wide, will he please try to stick to immigration?

Stephen Gethins: You are quite right, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I was keen to knock on the head some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central. Let me talk about Scottish Labour's commitments. I will quote the leader of the Scottish Labour Party, Anas Sarwar. I do not always do this, and I know that the Secretary of State does not like talking about him—he frequently disregards him—but let me at least give Anas Sarwar his place. He said:

“I've had a number of conversations with Yvette Cooper and UK colleagues in the run-up to the election and since the election. They already want to reform the Migration Advisory Committee to make sure there is proper Scottish representation. They recognise there are different migration needs in different parts of the country”.

As for reaching out a bit more to other colleagues, not everything in the Bill is for everybody in this House, but the Bill gives us an opportunity to meet commitments made. We could do that on Third Reading. We could introduce amendments and have a Bill team. I would love to have really good, strong Scottish Labour representation on that. [*Interruption.*] I would also like to have Conservative representation on it; let the team be reflective of who is in the House. I would be generous to the party of the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie)—almost as generous as the Labour party regularly is to his party.

Let me quote Scottish Labour's deputy leader. Jackie Baillie said:

“I would expect governments to work together, to talk to each other, to respond to each other's needs...At the moment there are no plans for one”—

this was said pre-election—

“but I think if you have governments taking common-sense approaches that an incoming Labour government would do, then dialogue will continue.”

The Secretary of State will have the opportunity to talk about this today, and I very much look forward to an update on where he is on the talks. The Bill gives precious time to him, and to the offices of other Secretary of States, and gives the rest of us time to meet the needs of the Scottish sector.

I am glad to see the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) in his place; I welcome him. As he has rightly said, when it comes to immigration policy, one size does not fit all. It should not be beyond us to devise ways to attract more people to work and settle here. He has talked effectively about the challenges for the rural and island communities that he represents,

[*Stephen Gethins*]

and I was glad to hear his productive intervention on that. I hope that he is able to have conversations with his hon. Friends about that.

Let me quote from the Scottish Labour manifesto:

“we will work with the Scottish Government when designing workforce plans for different sectors. This will ensure our migration and skills policies work for every part of the UK.”

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am struck by the hon. Gentleman’s interest in making sure that young people get the opportunities that they deserve, because in East Thanet—far away from Scotland—we are deeply concerned that one in 10 young people is out of education, employment or training. I wonder what he has to say about the SNP’s record on this issue, given that one in six young people is out of education, employment or training in Scotland.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Lady makes a good point—how can we provide opportunities for young people? She will also know that right now, we are providing fewer opportunities for young people. Scotland is working very effectively on having positive destinations, including through the great work of Skills Development Scotland. That speaks to the migration debate we have had in recent years. Migration has driven our policies and our economic growth for centuries, yet Labour is leaning into the Reform agenda—it is very disappointing that Reform Members are not in their place—which is so poisonous to our political rhetoric. Migration and refugees are two entirely separate issues. The hon. Lady will also be aware of the tragic small boats issue, which we talk about at length, although we do not talk about migration as a whole. I want us to have a more sensible debate on migration.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will not take the hon. Lady’s intervention just now. I very much look forward to the contribution of the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington). I know Kent well, and I think there will be a valuable contribution to be made from that part of the United Kingdom, including on the impact that Brexit—I know that she talks about this issue—has had on young people in her area.

The Liberal Democrats have traditionally talked about greater decentralisation of government. That is a point that they stand on, having a federal party. I would have loved to have taken an intervention from a Liberal Democrat Member today, but of course, they are not here. Alex Cole-Hamilton, the leader of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland, accepts that immigration is essential for maintaining growth, but also for the sustainability of services—I will talk about that in a moment. He has also talked about how we need “both of Scotland’s Governments to work together”

on migration

“to ensure that rules are sensitive to the skills that are needed in every corner of these islands and in every sector of our economy.”—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 9 January 2025; c. 69.]

We can pick that up in Committee, if we can work together. I note talk at the Liberal Democrat conference about a special visa for those fleeing Donald Trump.

I am not sure what representations the Liberal Democrats have made to the Government on that—maybe the Secretary of State can tell us—but there are always opportunities to be had.

I move on to a point of common ground. I concede that we are not all on the same page. There are differences on this issue, but that is the whole point of Parliament. We come together to debate and see whether we can find solutions. Sometimes, the majoritarian nature of this place does not help. I conceded that Labour and Scottish Labour won the election, and I congratulated them and the Prime Minister on that. We have seen what has happened to their poll numbers since, but they won the election. However, they did so based on a small percentage of votes. Unfortunately, that is the system we have. I ask Labour Members to not make the same mistakes that the Conservatives did, particularly Boris Johnson’s Conservatives, and to appreciate that 34% or 35% of the vote is not a majority. It might give Labour a majority of seats, but the party needs to listen to other parties, other bits of the country and all sectors. That is crucial.

We can debate and discuss, and I can quote bits from Scottish Labour manifestos, from the SNP, from the Scottish Liberal Democrats and—yes—even the Conservatives, but we all have a responsibility to try to listen to the sectors that are doing such valuable work. We all try to do so in our different ways, including in our constituencies, which is important. For example, this week, I went to East Scryne farm in Angus, just outside Carnoustie, and spoke to a local farmer about the value of migration to the berry industry—I know other Members will have done similar. A number of us will have enjoyed berries from Angus over our breakfast this morning.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): And Perthshire.

Stephen Gethins: We will also have enjoyed berries from Perthshire—and even Aberdeenshire. All of that depends on migration. I know that, in order to improve their work here, Members will try, whenever possible, to engage with and listen to constituents. I am not asking us all to come to the same conclusion, but it is in that engagement that we all seek to do our work better.

The hospitality and tourism industry is vital for rural and remote communities, for every sector in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. Leon Thompson, the executive director of UKHospitality Scotland, says:

“The hospitality and tourism industry across Scotland has been calling for a Scotland visa for some time. We believe it really is one of the ways in which we can help address the skills and workforce shortage that we have in the industry.”

The Scottish Tourism Alliance says:

“Failure to find a tailored solution risks having a further detrimental impact on the economy and opportunities for economic growth”

as staff shortages are leading to tourism and hospitality businesses closing for longer outside the summer visit season, reducing opening hours and shutting down certain services, such as food offers in hotels.

Regardless of our own thoughts, we can see straightaway the impact that has on growth and the sustainability of our services. The Scottish Tourism Alliance also says:

“Introducing a Scottish specific visa scheme not only would match immigration to the demand for certain skills”—

as it has done for centuries—

“but also encourage more people coming to live and work in Scotland, particularly in rural and island communities that are experiencing a drain in people of working age and families.”

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for bringing forward this debate, which is interesting if nothing else. How does the SNP suggest we encourage people to live in Scotland, and particularly rural Scotland, given that anyone in Scotland earning over £28,500 pays more income tax; local government has a £760 billion-odd shortfall, which affects rural communities more, given how money is spent over a larger area; and Scotland has a housing crisis? How do those things attract people?

Stephen Gethins: I will maybe leave aside some of the hon. Lady’s sums—I am not sure whether she has been reading Labour briefings—but she does make a valuable point about rural areas, and I acknowledge her commitment to her constituency and her rural background. I commend her for the way she conducts herself in this place. There are a number of points here.

We know that bringing workers to rural areas, and the very high threshold to bring people into the country, is a challenge—that is not new—which is why so many rural industries have been calling out for a Scottish visa system to plug that gap. What is Scottish Government policy? Well, we have talked with our Labour colleagues—although not, I would expect, the Conservative party, for ideological reasons—about having a more progressive taxation system in which those who earn less pay less, and those who earn more pay more. I will not criticise the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), who stood for election on a Conservative manifesto and won, but I am always surprised that the Labour party does not take the opportunity to endorse such a system more strongly.

Some 70% of the Scottish Government’s budget still comes in the form of a block grant from Westminster—that is a huge amount. For all the talk we have heard of decentralisation, empowerment and so on, why do we not have a more sensible approach to that?

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): The hon. Gentleman rightly mentions the block grant. If, as he says—not entirely correctly—the block grant is the largest part of the Scottish budget, why did he vote against the Budget in which the block grant gave the Scottish Government £4.9 billion extra?

Stephen Gethins: What I find striking is that the Scottish Government have not only had to receive their block grant, rather than making these decisions for ourselves, which those of us on the SNP Benches would like to do, but have spent years with Tory austerity and are staring down the barrel of cuts elsewhere. The Secretary of State might quote figures in terms of the cash, but after years and years of Tory government that are not being helped by the Labour party, by the cuts that have come about as a result of Brexit, which they now endorse, by the cut to the winter fuel allowance that Labour brought in, which the Scottish Government brought in measures to offset—

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The bedroom tax.

Stephen Gethins: And the bedroom tax. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State is chuntering from a sedentary position—I have always wanted to say that in this place—but in all these areas the Scottish Government are offsetting the damage that Westminster policies have caused. For how long do we have to put up with damaging Westminster policies? This Bill is a way of offsetting some of the damage that has been done by a hostile environment and by Brexit, which I am astonished day and daily that the Scottish Labour party continues to endorse.

Let me talk about the Scottish care system. All of us will benefit from the care system at some point—all of us—and we will all have loved ones who benefit, so the voice of that sector is particularly pertinent. Scottish Care has said:

“The current UK immigration system is failing the social care sector in Scotland. The recent rule changes, particularly the ban on dependants”—

which has had a big impact on other sectors as well—

“and the incompatible increase in the minimum salary threshold, exacerbate existing recruitment challenges and pose significant risks to the sustainability and delivery of essential care services.”

I talked about one bit of my constituency in Angus, and now let me talk about another bit. The Secretary of State and I had an exchange about this. We know that the ban on dependants has also had a significant impact on the higher education sector. I am glad to see the convenor of the all-party parliamentary university group, the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), in his place. Those of us with higher education institutions in our constituencies—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—will know of the damage that has been done by the ban on bringing dependants to this country.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Care is an issue that matters deeply to me, but the problem with care is not that we are not getting cheap labour from elsewhere; it is that we are not paying care workers enough. That is one of the things that a national care service would seek to solve. Why did the SNP waste so much money—£28 million—on its failed national care service, rather than working across the House in good faith to deliver the care that people need?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind all Members that the Bill is about why Scotland should have devolved powers over immigration.

Stephen Gethins: I am glad if we can get back to the Bill. I am struck that Labour Members never seem to be that keen to talk about the areas for which they have responsibility. They talk about the Scottish Government an awful lot but not the areas for which they have responsibility. This Bill speaks to a specific Scottish solution that could be brought in to meet particular Scottish needs, and it is one that, to be fair, Scottish Labour has talked about.

Let me move on to talk about think-tanks and other organisations. The Law Society of Scotland—

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will give way to the Secretary of State one more time, and then I will move on to these other organisations.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman has been very generous in giving way when it suited him to do so. All the things he is talking about are not included in the Bill. It is a simple, one-line Bill that would devolve the entire immigration system to Scotland. For Members who might not know how the Scotland Act 1998 operates, let me explain that if a matter is contained in schedule 5 to that Act, it is reserved, and if it is not, it is deemed to be devolved. This Bill is just devolving the entire immigration system, so the individual issues relating to visas that he is talking about are irrelevant to this debate.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Secretary of State, because that was a valuable intervention and he raises a good point—*[Interruption.]* I am glad that he is paying attention now. I raised that point at the start of the debate, when I said that this is not ideal. It is a short Bill that was proposed some time ago and, as I have said, I am very open to it being amended. I hope we will vote on this today and I ask the Secretary of State to meet me so that he and I can sit down with his officials, and Home Office officials if they will listen to him, and bring them in. I am looking to the Secretary of State and hope that he will today give that commitment to meet me so that we get something that works for his party, can work for others and can hopefully work for the sector as well. *[Interruption.]* I will take that as a yes, so I am very glad and thank him for being so constructive.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman has to be clear with the House about the purpose of the Bill, because we will have to vote on it today if the Division bells ring. If the Bill passes, it will merely remove immigration from schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998, which would devolve immigration to the Scottish Government—yes or no?

Stephen Gethins *rose*—

Pete Wishart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will answer the Secretary of State's point first and then give way. The Secretary of State has been here for longer than me.

Pete Wishart: I have been here longer than the Secretary of State.

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend says he has been here longer than the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State knows that this is a Second Reading debate. I have been keen to say that from the start. I have been saying it to the media this morning, and I said it in my letter to Anas Sarwar, which I copied to the Secretary of State. I wanted to do that and to make sure that my letter went to Scottish leaders—I am not sure how often they talk, but I wanted to ensure that the Secretary of State had seen the letter as well. The letter talked about us coming together and talking to each other. On that point, I will give way to a very experienced Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart).

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I know that most Labour Members are new to the procedures and workings of this House, but the Secretary of State is not, so he will know from experience that private Members' Bills are practically rewritten in Committee. My hon. Friend is asking that we be allowed to take the Bill through to Committee, where this can be worked out. Surely even the Secretary of State, who I believe has been in this House since 2010, understands how these things work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman, before I call the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) to continue, that interventions should be on the Member who is speaking.

Stephen Gethins: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Now that we have clarified that point of reference, I look forward to the vote today that the Secretary of State is committed to, and I look forward to meeting him so that we can work together, because that is the right thing to do, and we will have to make concessions. Of course we want to see the devolution of immigration—we want to see independence. We differ from other Members in this Chamber; we accept that we have differences and that we were voted in on different manifestos. But it is not beyond the wit of man—to be fair, this is something that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar has already referenced—to try and find a bit of common ground.

Now let me talk about some of the think-tanks and other organisations and what they have said, because I am keen to let other Members have the opportunity to speak.

Pete Wishart: Hear, hear.

Stephen Gethins: That is the most effective heckle I have heard all day, though that was not where I expected it to come from.

The Law Society of Scotland said:

“Bespoke visa schemes for Scotland, combined with expanding international outreach activities in relation to immigration to advertise these new arrangements, would be an effective way of ensuring that immigration policy meets Scotland's needs.”

Prosper, formerly the SCDI, says:

“SCDI supports greater flexibilities on immigration for Scotland to respond to its distinct demographic and employment needs... Other countries”—

this is something my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire has worked on very hard—

“successfully operate regional migration schemes which target the specific needs of their economies and SCDI believes that there are workable options for more differentiation in the UK's system.”

I agree with that.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: No, I want to continue with this.

Alison Evison, a former Labour councillor and former president of COSLA, says:

“There is a strong unified voice across all sectors in Scotland in favour of a flexible immigration system that can meet our particular economic, workforce and population needs. For many years,

COSLA has been calling for an immigration system that can be responsive to local as well as national needs and that recognises and addresses the challenges that we face.”

Finally, Reform Scotland has done a huge amount of work on this—I commend its paper to all Members of the House as we seek to inform ourselves when we go through to Committee, and however we work together to populate that. It has said:

“There is no reason why Westminster cannot create an immigration system which takes Scotland’s different situation into account. It is important to remember that this has been done before, through the Fresh Talent Initiative”,

which, in fairness, Lord McConnell on the Labour Scottish Executive worked with the UK Government to do.

It would not be unique—there are other decentralised approaches elsewhere in the world. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire, whose work on the Scottish Affairs Committee, along with other hon. Members, was very effective. The Committee looked into the matter, and I know he will want to talk about that. A decentralised approach has been taken in Canada, Australia, Belgium and elsewhere, so it is not unique. This is the Government of devolution—they talk about devolution. As Donald Dewar told us, devolution was “a process” not a final destination. This strikes me as being the next process, and it has happened elsewhere.

Finally, I want to go into the different conversations about migration.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Gethins: I see a number of Members want to intervene. I am glad to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) because she wanted to come in earlier and I did not take her intervention then.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an important case about Scotland’s unique needs and the way that our democracy differs. To go back to the economic point, the founding mission of this Labour Government is about growing the economy, so will my hon. Friend explain the impact of increasing migration? What is the impact on the economy of bringing more people in to do more jobs in the economy?

Stephen Gethins: I am not an economist, but any economist would say that the impact of that is growth—it is positive. In the aftermath of leaving the EU, we saw a surge in migration under Boris Johnson’s Government. Members have talked about that and criticised the Conservative Government, as I have done. However, what struck me about that migration to date was that at the same time as we saw a surge in migration to grow the economy—I am not saying anything against that—we saw a reduction in the rights that we ourselves enjoyed as UK citizens and a devaluation of the British passport. I may no longer wish to hold a British passport—that might not be something that I want—but its devaluation has impacted each and every one of us because of the loss of those rights.

Before I finish, I will take one more point from the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna), who I know has been trying to intervene.

Kevin McKenna: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for giving way. I was interested to hear what he said about the various experts talking about regional migration policies. Unfortunately, my constituency suffered from a regional migration policy in living memory as the Isle of Sheppey was separated from mainland migration during both wars in the previous century. That has left a lasting impact of deep, profound socioeconomic damage to Sheppey because people could not get on or off the island, and we could not get the workers we needed. That has left a deep legacy of distrust between the island and the rest of Great Britain. We do not want to replicate that across the whole of the United Kingdom and that is why I oppose the Bill.

Stephen Gethins: I know the Isle of Sheppey. I know Kent very well: the kingdom of Kent is a fine county—the garden of England. I know some of the challenges that the hon. Gentleman rightly raises. He is representing his constituents very effectively in doing so and I am grateful to him not just for raising the issue, but the way in which he raises it. Kent is a fine place.

Gareth Snell: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I am trying to answer the point raised by the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. Kent is not Scotland and Scotland is not an island. We have some fine islands, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O’Hara) is keen to remind us on a regular basis, but they are not the same. To compare the Isle of Sheppey with Scotland is a false comparison. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point and he is right to raise it—the value of these kinds of debates is that we can have such exchanges. The reason that I went through what has been said by all the think-tanks, the experts and the sectors—I could have gone on for longer, but I suspect you, Madam Deputy Speaker, would have hauled me up for that—is because there is such a body of evidence in Scotland around the issue. That is why the idea has had such a serious reading from every single party in Scotland.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that it is that strength of cross-sector agreement in Scotland that leaves so many people disappointed? Their expectations and hopes were raised that a change of Government in this place would lead to a change in migration policy, so does that not make it essential that Scotland’s interests in relation to this issue are served by powers resting in Holyrood, rather than the Government here?

Stephen Gethins: My right hon. Friend is right. I want to see these powers rest in Holyrood—that will surprise nobody—and he and I absolutely agree on that. I have also opened up this matter by saying, “You can amend. You can change.” I do not want my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire to have to school the Secretary of State again on process, but that is something that we can do. I say in the spirit of collegiality that I look forward to working with the Secretary of State on this issue, because I think we can find common ground.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will finish with a conversation on migration, but I will take one more intervention, because I want to hear the perspective of another Member from elsewhere in the UK.

Deirdre Costigan: The hon. Member makes the point that there is a body of evidence in favour of his Bill. I point him to another body of evidence: the fact that there are 100,000 children in Scotland who do not have a home to call their own. At the same time, we have children in schools in Scotland with the widest poverty-related attainment gap ever. That is the body of evidence that we need to look to. Does he agree that his party would be better off looking at addressing those issues to attract workers to Scotland, rather than creating more red tape for businesses?

Stephen Gethins: I have to say I am a bit struck by that, when the Government are bringing in their cuts to the disabled, which will push more children in Scotland into poverty. That is a Westminster policy driving Scottish child poverty, at the same time that we have UN reports talking about the benefits of the Scottish child payment. If that policy was brought in across the UK, it would take tens of thousands of children, including those in the hon. Lady's constituency, out of poverty. We know that that would happen. I am glad that that was the final point, because it talks to me of the paucity of ambition we have seen from the Labour party, which I find disappointing and which will drive more children into poverty through cuts to the disabled. If it simply replicated what we did in Scotland with the Scottish child payment, there could be benefits throughout the United Kingdom.

I look at the countries around us that have taken a more positive approach to European integration and to working with other countries—look at Ireland and the benefits that it has had from independence and European integration. Where under previous Governments we saw unfairness, we now see that gap being reduced, because of their wide range of powers—a country that previously suffered from emigration is now benefiting from immigration. That is ambition. Those are the benefits that these things can bring, and they are right on our doorstep.

That point talks to me about the conversation around this issue. Can we please pull the poison out of the migration debate? Nobody is talking about uncontrolled migration, and we obviously need to distinguish between migration and refugees. Maybe, on the eve of his funeral, we can reflect on Pope Francis's compassion for the most vulnerable in society. We would all do well to reflect on that, especially on the heartbreaking conversations I have had around those people desperate enough to get into small boats and try to cross the channel.

I will talk about the Scottish Trades Union Congress; Members might do well to listen to it. The First Minister is right to highlight both the negative effect of pandering to anti-immigrant sentiment and the need for a separate Scottish approach. The STUC supports additional powers on migration for the Scottish Parliament. If Government Members will not listen to us, to Reform Scotland, the care sector or the higher education sector, maybe they will listen to the Trades Union Congress instead.

The First Minister was right to push back on the hard right and on how we conduct ourselves in office. We must challenge Reform, and I am deeply disappointed that its Members are not here today, because I have been reasonably generous in taking interventions from Members of different parties. I wish they were here so that we could push back on the rhetoric that, I am sorry to say, too many in this House too often lean into.

This idea was initially proposed by Michael Gove to offset Brexit. That is the idea we got from him. Brexit left us poorer, with fewer rights and more isolated, and it left young people with fewer opportunities. It hit public finances and our rights, and it left the UK isolated and vulnerable—more isolated than at any other time since the second world war.

I am an internationalist; I want to see countries pooling and sharing sovereignty. I want to see a European Union that provides a model in the modern age, a European Union that—*[Interruption.]* This is the thing that Labour—like the Tories and Reform—leans into: this sense of British exceptionalism. They lean into the sense that this is the only Union out there, but that exceptionalism is so small in its outlook. That is how I would describe it: small, isolated and lonely.

I want to see us rejoin the European Union. Ireland and England have never had a better relationship in their history than they do now. Our relationship is one of partnership, of equals, and of previously being within the Union that built that. Labour was elected on a small minority. I say to Labour Members that it is time to listen. This Bill is imperfect; I can see that. It will not be for everybody, but let us approve it in principle, let us get it through, and then let us work together on a commitment that has been made by our party and the Scottish Labour party. I am deeply grateful for the time you have given me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

10.41 am

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) for his speech, although, as my children say, that is 50 minutes we will never get back. Even though I rise today representing a constituency that lies some 488 miles from Scotland, much of what I hear from Scottish colleagues on both sides of the House resonates deeply with me as a Member from an island constituency. Although this Bill may focus on matters far from Isle of Wight West, it has given me a chance to reflect on some fond memories of Scotland, whether that is searching for dolphins around Nairn, regularly visiting Edinburgh, or my trip to Faslane to learn about nuclear submarines. I have a very fond memory of my visit to Largs to work with the Scottish office of the Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust, an organisation that does fantastic and vital work with children to rebuild their confidence after their battle with cancer. Its dedication is a powerful reminder that no matter the distance between our communities, we share common challenges and, often, shared solutions.

During these visits to Scotland, I have always been struck by the warmth, generosity and hospitality of the people I have met, whether that is in Inverness, Edinburgh, or in smaller towns in between. This hospitality reflects something deeper than just kindness. It speaks to a strong sense of community, openness and pride in welcoming others, and it is precisely that spirit that

should be at the part of any conversation about immigration. Immigration, when done right, should strengthen communities, not divide them. It should reflect the same values that I have seen across Scotland and in my community on the Isle of Wight: a desire to offer opportunity, build belonging and contribute to something greater than ourselves.

When I speak to my hon. Friends the Members for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell), I hear echoes of my community on the Isle of Wight, despite the geographical separation. Like them, we are bound by the challenges of geography, dependent on ferry services—Members would expect me to mention that—to get to work or school, receive vital goods and supplies, and access healthcare and essential public services. Like them, we too have been let down time and again by broken promises, under-investment and poor planning by the previous Government—I would not want to leave Conservative Members out.

As hon. Members will know, I have had more than a few choice words about the current ferry situation on the Isle of Wight, but even I must admit that when compared with the so-called Scottish ferry fiasco, our situation feels slightly less dire. For those who are unfamiliar with that, back in 2015, the Scottish Government awarded a contract worth £97 million to Ferguson Marine to build two new ferries for CalMac. Those ferries were meant to modernise the fleet, improve reliability and serve island routes such as Arran and the Western Isles.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Is what my hon. Friend just mentioned not another example of the incompetence and failings of the SNP? Frankly, motions and Bills like this are simply a disguise and designed to pull the wool over the eyes of people in Scotland.

Mr Quigley: My hon. Friend might not be surprised to hear that I am coming to that point.

The ferries were supposed to be operational by 2018, but here we are in 2025 and neither ferry has set sail.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): If the ferries are such a catastrophe, would the hon. Gentleman care to explain why, in a constituency with probably more ferries than any other in the UK, I was re-elected in 2017, 2019 and 2024 with the largest SNP majority in Scotland? If the ferries are that bad, why do the people who use them vote SNP?

Mr Quigley: I think I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am sure that his constituents will be able to explain why.

The project has been plagued by delay after delay, the costs have soared to more than £360 million, and islanders have been left without the reliable transport they were promised. One vessel is now years behind schedule, while the other may not set sail until 2026—not 20:26 by the 24-hour clock, but the year 2026. It is not just a failure of infrastructure, but a failure of leadership, a failure of accountability and, most importantly, a failure to respect the island communities who rely on these lifeline services. Now the SNP is asking us to entrust it with even greater powers over immigration. Never once, while scanning the horizon for dolphins off the coast of

Nairn, did I think that Scotland should have its own separate immigration laws or that that would solve everything.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): How the hon. Member has managed to bring ferries into a debate about a Scottish visa is beyond me. Instead of focusing on the issues that he sees with capital projects in Scotland, why does he not talk about some of the capital project failures in England?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. May I remind hon. Members that this is a debate about why Scotland should have devolved powers over immigration?

Mr Quigley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are quite right to keep us on track.

The Bill fails to account for its impact on the broader UK internal market. If Scotland is granted the power to admit migrants under its own criteria, we will be left with a host of unanswered questions. What is the mechanism for managing the flow of people across borders? How will we prevent an influx of people from moving to other parts of the UK without proper oversight?

Dave Doogan: The hon. Member, who until about two minutes ago was one of the few people on the Government Benches I had any time for, talks about what a catastrophe it would be if Scotland could unilaterally control who comes to work on our shores and who comes to invest in our economy. Ironically, he forgets that that is exactly the encumbrance under which Scotland exists now: we get what England says we can get. It is a disgrace, and he is trying to defend it. Defend it now!

Mr Quigley: I thank my hon. Friend—I will call him that—for his calm and measured intervention, as usual, but I do believe that there was a referendum, and we are all fully aware of the result. I am sure I will still enjoy chatting to him in future.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend's excellent speech. He spoke about the flow of people. What this two-clause Bill does not set out is any controls or mechanisms by which that could be measured. There was mention of Ireland earlier; I have a slight fear that this will turn into a debate about a soft and hard border, and what that means for the UK. I find this very divisive. Does he agree?

Mr Quigley: Indeed I do. For example, will there be immigration checks at the border? What happens when someone granted immigration status in Scotland seeks work in Newcastle, Manchester or London? Will employers in those cities suddenly be tasked with verifying whether an individual is subject to Scottish immigration rules? These are not just theoretical concerns; they are real logistical and administrative challenges. Without clarity and co-ordination, businesses across the UK could be forced to navigate a confusing patchwork of immigration rules that add unnecessary complexity and cost to the workforce.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. He talks about the challenges of operating a system across

[Graham Leadbitter]

the Scotland-England border effectively. That is not difficult in an age of digital technology. Does he agree that it could be easily achieved? If we can achieve the arrangements that we have with Ireland and a common travel area, why could it not work to have a regional immigration system?

Mr Quigley: The hon. Gentleman is asking us to take a leap of faith. The Bill is one line. If he had the answers to those questions already, the referendum result might well have been different. [Interruption.] Sorry, the Bill is two lines.

The Bill could create uncertainty for employers, particularly in sectors that rely on a flexible and diverse labour market, such as construction, healthcare and agriculture. I have outlined the similarities of my constituency to those of my Scottish colleagues, but were I to suggest that the Isle of Wight had its own immigration laws to help correct our demographics and workforce, they would beg me to talk more about ferries.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and he makes a pertinent point that there are parts of the United Kingdom outside Scotland that also suffer with demographic challenges. One of those is Stoke-on-Trent. To suggest that Stoke-on-Trent should be able to issue its own visa or have its own immigration policy to solve that is for the birds. Given that the last Government left record high levels of inward migration to this country, does he agree that part of the solution is to think about how we make it more attractive to work in these places, rather than simply rewriting the system for our own benefit?

Mr Quigley: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. While the Bill clearly seeks to help and support employers in Scotland with workforce issues, consideration must also be given to employers in England that do not want an extra layer of bureaucracy added to their recruitment processes. Moreover, this Bill does not explain how a devolved system would integrate with the existing national framework. It is one thing to talk about devolving powers, but where is the clarity on how the new system would coexist with the broader UK immigration process? Without the answers, we risk creating more confusion than solutions, with businesses, local governments and migrants alike caught in a web of complexity.

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that given that the SNP has failed to run vital services in Scotland, we should not give it control of a border?

Mr Quigley: I agree with my hon. Friend. Let us be clear that setting up a separate immigration system in Scotland would not come free or cheap. We are talking about creating entire new departments, new staff, new infrastructure, new IT systems and likely new border controls, all of which would need to be designed, staffed and maintained. Who would foot the bill for that bureaucratic expansion? It would be ordinary working people across the whole of the UK. Let us not forget that immigration is already a complex and resource-intensive process under a single UK system.

Chris Law: The hon. Member is asking us some valuable questions on things that need to be probed a little bit deeper, such as cost and complexity. Those are all matters we are having to consider under Brexit, which is costing £40 billion a year. [Interruption.] I can hear the chuntering, but I am addressing the Member on whom I am intervening. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] Are you surprised? That is how a proper adult debate happens. I ask the hon. Member this important question: given that he is asking some legitimate questions that he and we would like to explore, why not bring the Bill to a vote, so that we can take it forward to Committee to explore those questions further?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call Richard Quigley, may I just remind Members that good temper and moderation are the hallmark of this Parliament?

Mr Quigley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I wish I had all the answers to his questions, because I am sure it would have saved us time. It is now six minutes to 11, and I could have had a longer breakfast.

Duplicating things for one part of the country does not solve a problem; it creates one. If the SNP cannot manage a shipbuilding contract without going £260 million over budget, what makes us think it would manage immigration efficiently or affordably?

Kirsty Blackman: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Quigley: I will make slightly more progress and then give way.

The Bill proposes the devolution of immigration powers to the Scottish Government, under the argument that economic migration could support rural and island communities. Let me be absolutely clear: I agree that migration, when done properly, can be a lifeline. It can bring new energy to struggling areas, provide vital workers and enrich our communities. But this Bill, with all the good will in the world, fails to offer the security, clarity or accountability needed to deliver those outcomes.

Kirsty Blackman: When I came into this debate, I did not expect the main thrust of the Labour party's argument to be a concession that it will not win the next Holyrood election. Labour Members have consistently said that this is about handing powers to the SNP. Do they understand how democracy works? Or are they looking at the polls and saying, "Oh my goodness, we are totally in trouble before 2026, so it's got to be an SNP Government next year"?

Mr Quigley: That is a bit of a reach.

How will the Scottish Government manage border security between England and Scotland? How will they ensure consistency with UK immigration policy? How will they safeguard against misuse or confusion about legal status? These questions remain unanswered, and regrettably this Bill would create far more uncertainty than solutions.

Deirdre Costigan: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Scottish National party's own Minister for independence has let the cat out of the bag and said that border

checks were expected to be a “hard reality” in the future? Does my hon. Friend agree that this Bill, in its one sentence, is the Trojan horse that will bring forward that hard reality?

Mr Quigley: I was not aware of that, but I think that this one-sentence Bill is probably the SNP’s hard border to getting any further.

Above all, the most pressing question is this. Before those in the SNP ask for more powers, why not first demonstrate that they can effectively use the powers they already have? Before reaching for immigration levers—hon. Members can all finish this line for me—fix the ferries. Before seeking new authority, show that they can deliver on their current responsibilities. Whether we are talking about those in the Outer Hebrides, the Isle of Wight, or any of the countless communities that feel overlooked and underserved, the people across Scotland deserve far better than what they have received so far. They deserve competent leadership, not constant excuses. They deserve joined-up policies that work, not duplications and distractions. They deserve public services that are strong and reliable, not stretched to the brink. Above all, they deserve Governments at every level that are honest about what they can deliver and accountable when they do not.

This Bill may be wrapped in the language of empowerment, but in reality it risks becoming just another example of symbolism over substance.

Stephen Gethins: On the point about symbolism over substance, does the hon. Member agree that we should have a vote on the Bill today and dig into it in Committee, as one would with any other Bill? I could not agree with him more.

Mr Quigley: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman—not on the vote, but we have not finished the debate, so let us see how today plays out.

Let us focus on what truly matters: fix the systems we already have, strengthen the powers that are already devolved, and deliver on the promises already made. People are not asking for grand gestures; they are asking for real change.

10.58 am

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): May I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) on introducing this vital and critical Bill this morning? I also commend him for the diplomatic and charming way that he always introduces these debates to the House. He was very generous in taking so many points of view this morning.

Before I make my substantial points, I want to say a little bit about the tone of this House today. When it was the Conservatives sat on the Government Benches, we collected what they said about Scotland and all the issues to do with devolved government. We stowed them away and we used it against them. Now they are gone—utterly and totally gone. When Scottish Labour Members speak Scotland down, as they have this morning, we collect, collate and keep those comments to use back against them. I ever so gently suggest to my Scottish friends on the Labour Benches that they look at the

by-election result last night. It was absolutely damning for the Labour party. Whatever Labour is doing through this new attack of line against the Scottish Government, it is singularly failing. It will fail Labour in the way that it failed the Conservatives. I caution Labour Members not to try to pit this House against the Scottish Parliament. It did not work for the Conservatives and it will not work for them.

Today is about the Bill. We are in real trouble in Scotland, and that is why the Bill is critical. There can be no doubt whatsoever that Scotland is in the early stages of a population and demographic crisis that will get a lot worse unless we do something. We cannot leave things in the condition that they are in. With our falling birth rate, we have too few working-age people available to look after an ever-older population. We are in the early stages of population stagnation, and we already see the impact. We need only look at our health service, which has difficulties recruiting staff. In our social care sector, we are approaching something like a workforce crisis. I appeal to people to go and look not at the nuclear subs in Clydebank, but at rural areas of Scotland like mine. They will find that hospitality and tourism businesses are cutting back hours or closing because they do not have the staff to keep themselves properly functioning and organised.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: I am somewhat confused by the hon. Gentleman’s speech. He started off by accusing Labour Members of talking Scotland down, but then told us that Scotland was in crisis—one wonders who was in government at the time—and continued his peroration by saying that there is an aging society. I wonder if he will take some sort of responsibility, or reflect on the fact that he seems to be talking down the independent Scotland of which he dreams.

Pete Wishart: I am almost grateful for the intervention, confused and clumsy as it was, because I have a solution for the hon. Gentleman. What we need when we face a crisis, as we do now, are solutions. What my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry has offered by starting this conversation is a way to deal with the issues we face in Scotland. Scotland is not unique; the same thing is happening throughout the whole western industrialised world. We face issues because birth rates across the world are falling calamitously. Every nation needs to do something about the conditions that they find themselves in. Today we are asking for a Scottish response to the distinct circumstances we are dealing with, because we have got it really bad.

Our issues with the falling birth rate have been exacerbated, not by anything that the Scottish Government are doing, as Labour Members suggest, but because of what my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry said about Brexit. Brexit has killed our population sustainability and population growth.

Joani Reid: The hon. Member talked about the consequences of Brexit. One consequence is that we have seen record soaring net migration rates across the UK, but the proportion of people coming to Scotland is low. Has he looked at how the SNP can attract immigrants and migrants to Scotland without blaming Westminster?

Pete Wishart: I wondered how long it would take to get to this point. That is utter bunkum and rubbish. The suggestion started by the Conservatives—but it seems to have been readily picked up by the Labour party—that we are not able to attract to Scotland people from the rest of the United Kingdom is utter rubbish. The figure is at a record high. Why does the hon. Lady not look at the National Records of Scotland report, which will tell her that? We have the highest net migration to Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom that we have ever had.

Joani Reid *indicated dissent.*

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady shakes her head. She has obviously not read the report. I extoll her to do so, because this nonsense has been allowed to take hold for too long and it cannot continue any longer. We have record net migration from the rest of the United Kingdom. Believe me, Madam Deputy Speaker, we do not get depressed about that. We do not think that is a bad thing. We think it is a positive. We encourage people to come to Scotland, unlike Labour Members, who discourage people from coming to the United Kingdom, and who do everything possible to put up barriers and make life difficult and miserable for people trying to come to the shores of the United Kingdom. We are the exact opposite in Scotland. Scotland is not full up, and we need people to come to our country. I welcome anybody from the rest of the United Kingdom who wants to come to a beautiful place and a fantastic country to live in. Come to Scotland! I challenge any Labour Member to say to the rest of the world, “Come to the United Kingdom.” It is not in their cultural or political DNA.

We are in a difficult situation. The simple fact is that Scotland needs more working-age people to refresh our population. If we do not get that, we will be in serious trouble. The same thing is happening all around the world, but what the Government are doing with Brexit is getting in the way and making our issues worse. Do you know what else they are doing? Although our birth rate is falling, they are trying to suppress it further through social engineering; they are using the benefits system to deny benefits to working-class people seeking to have large families. This is at a time when we should be doing everything we can to encourage more children. I want to hear the Minister defend that policy when we have a crisis in Scotland.

Oliver Ryan: How would the hon. Gentleman defend the SNP Government in Holyrood, who have failed on all the issues he has mentioned? There is a broader point here about nationalism: the SNP Government have to keep the circus on the road, and have to keep telling people a line. This is the latest in a string of subjects that keep people from talking about SNP failure.

Pete Wishart: I have no idea what the hon. Gentleman is saying. We are trying to offer solutions. We have identified a range of difficulties that we have as a nation. It is right and proper that they be examined, analysed and addressed. Then we get down to the business of fixing them, and that is what we are doing today. This Government are making our situation 10 times worse through their inept, callous and heinous attempt to socially engineer the benefit system to suppress our birth rate, at the very time when we need more children. We need larger families.

All around Europe, countries face the same range of issues. What are they doing? They are not having a two-child benefit cap. They are incentivising young people to have children by giving tax breaks and positive benefits to make sure that the birth rate increases. What are the Labour Government doing in the UK? They are, shamefully, trying to suppress our birth rate. I challenge any of them to get to their feet and tell me how a two-child benefit cap helps to increase our birth rate in Scotland. Go on!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this debate is about devolving immigration to Scotland.

Pete Wishart: Okay. Right, let us look at Scotland’s population then. Scotland’s population is probably in the region of 5.5 million. Some estimates are 5.43 million and some are 5.7 million. We have been in population decline since the latter part of the 20th century. This is an issue that particularly interests and excites me. I think the Scottish Affairs Committee has done three reports on it, and I think Secretary of State served on the Committee during one of the inquiries on Scotland’s migration issues. Those were helpful reports, and hopefully they add to the debate. I am glad that a few people have referenced them. We got down to the serious business of trying to address the issue. I congratulate the Blair Government, which was visionary when it came to immigration; it was imaginative. Tony Blair opened up eastern Europe through accession, which helped our issues in Scotland. For a while, that reversed our long-term population decline.

The Tony Blair Government also gave us fresh talent. It gave people an opportunity to come to study at one of our world-class universities and stay and contribute to the Scottish economy for a period of their early lives. It was fantastic. It was backed by the UK Government and the Scottish Government, with overwhelming support from hon. Members in this House. The policy was then subsumed by a general UK policy, which meant that we lost our advantage.

Ian Murray *rose—*

Pete Wishart: I know that fresh talent is exciting and of interest to the Secretary of State, so I give way to him.

Ian Murray: I sat on the Scottish Affairs Committee when it was chaired by the hon. Gentleman and produced one of those reports on migration and depopulation in Scotland—I think it was during the 2015 to 2017 Parliament—and I remember that one of the conclusions of the report was that the biggest type of migration out of Scotland was 19 to 26-year-olds migrating to the rest of the UK. We never answered why.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. I was going to come to that, but it is good to look at that now. There are reasons for that, although I am not entirely clear about them; the Committee did not get to the heart of that in its analysis. We live in a United Kingdom and have a massive mega-city, London, so there is always the allure for young Scots to come down to London. I did it myself, and I am pretty certain that the Secretary of State spent a good part of his young life in London. Most Scots at some point find themselves living in

London. But it is worse than that for Scotland, because we have a centuries-old historical culture and tradition of emigration. Immigration has not really been that big an issue for us. We obviously benefit from it, but the key feature in the history of Scotland and this debate is emigration. As everybody knows, there are Scots communities all around the world, from Canada and New Zealand to the United States, and they have always acted as a draw for our young people. Not so much now, but previously, young Scots settled abroad, so we got into this cultural trend of people leaving Scotland. We have to address that.

One other thing that the Scottish Affairs Committee looked at but did not come to any great conclusion about was deindustrialisation and its impact on encouraging people to emigrate. We obviously have deindustrialisation in Scotland, and we need only look at some of our major cities, and at the difficulties and features of life in those cities, to see why people would leave. We are wrestling with problems that successive UK Governments have bequeathed Scotland, whether through Brexit policy or the two-child benefit cap, mixed with the historical attitude to emigration and deindustrialisation. Those are the things that my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry and his modest Bill invite us to address.

My hon. Friend has not got the solution in the Bill; he said that, and that it is an open Bill. I am quite surprised that the Secretary of State does not understand how Committee works for private Members' Bills. My hon. Friend is giving an invitation to the House. I am laying out the difficulties and issues that we have identified—I will get on to demography in Scotland in a minute; hon. Members should wait till they hear about that—and my hon. Friend is saying, "Help us." Let us work together. We have a real problem in Scotland. There are some fantastic contributions to be made, with real in-depth analysis by people who understand how to look at critical questions and come up with solutions. Help us deal with this, so that we can address the range of issues that we have. Believe me, if we do not start to address them, we will be in really serious trouble.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I have been listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. We see from other countries that there are ways of dealing with the issue without having full devolution, for many of the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) laid out. As was highlighted earlier, the Home Secretary made the Scottish Government an offer to work with the Migration Advisory Committee on solutions. Full devolution would be expensive and time consuming, and it would not deliver.

Pete Wishart: This is helpful, and I think my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry was hoping for such positive contributions. I am very much aware of the work that the Migration Advisory Committee does, and I commend it for that, but its list of occupations required in Scotland is not nearly enough—it does not even touch the sides of our difficulties. If the hon. Lady has some thoughts on how that could be beefed up and made more effective and useful, we are all ears—come and serve on the Committee and help us. We need positive solutions to identified problems. That is the territory we want to get into.

We have long-term population decline in Scotland. When I started to engage in this debate in the early 2000s, there was a real fear that, for the first time since the 19th century, Scotland's population would drop below the iconic 5 million mark. That was only reversed because of the imagination of the previous Labour Government and their generosity when it came to immigration policy—something that the current Government would never even think about. The vision of Tony Blair about how Europe would work and how the single market would develop helped Scotland to address some of the issues.

Kirsty Blackman: Around the turn of the millennium, I remember hearing Lord Jack McConnell, the First Minister of Scotland at the time, talking about that iconic 5 million mark. I was only 13 or 14, but I remember it being so important, and it was so important to Labour that immigration happened in order to keep that population. Why does he think Labour has changed its position so drastically in a relatively short space of time? Why is immigration now apparently bad?

Pete Wishart: That is such a profound question. I do not know how Labour has got itself into this situation. I suspect it is some sort of fear of Reform, whose Members are not here today, and Labour is probably right to be frightened. I think I saw an opinion poll showing that Labour is now behind Reform across the United Kingdom. Labour Members think—and this will only exacerbate the problem—that if they somehow pander to Reform's agenda, that will help them beat it. Nothing could delight Reform more than going on to its agenda. That is why we in Scotland take Reform on and tackle it.

I was so pleased and impressed that the First Minister of Scotland this week got together a summit to take on these very challenges, and I was delighted that the Scottish Labour leader attended that summit and took it seriously, because this is the sort of thing we have to do when there is a challenge from the right. We do not go on to their agenda—that is what they want. We take on their assumptions, we take them on politically, and we beat them.

That is why the SNP has not been so impacted by the rise of Reform in the United Kingdom: because we take it on. Labour is starting to experience difficulties at the hands of Reform because it is looking to pander to Reform's agenda and move on to some of the uncomfortable territory. We take Reform on; we do not pander to it. That is the lesson of history.

Andrew Lewin: Many Labour Members are actively in the business of taking on the Reform party, whose Members are absent once again from the Chamber today—I am not sure whether that is to our detriment or not. Many Labour parliamentarians, including me, are proud of the contribution of immigration to our country. We are still going to have net immigration under a Labour Government. I am proud of the University of Hertfordshire—based in my constituency—where more than 50% of students are international students. I am pleased that the hon. Member praised the Scottish Labour leader, but please do not mischaracterise the position of Labour Members.

Pete Wishart: I have no doubt that the hon. Member is utterly sincere. I have listened to several remarks from his Labour colleagues, and some of them greatly impressed me. It encouraged me to think that there is a little bit of a fight-back. I sat on the Committee considering the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, and I did not enjoy that for one minute. What I saw was a range of initiatives and policies that could basically have come from the Conservatives. It was very much the same sort of theme and trend: immigration was bad, it had to be curbed, it had to be taken on and dealt with. It was never seen as a positive. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to speak up, do more of this, and encourage his colleagues to speak out clearly on these issues. That is what we need. We are in a political crisis—at a juncture in our political culture and history—and we need brave gentlemen like him to stand up there and take it on, rather than listening to his Front Benchers. The Home Secretary in particular has a track record on this. He needs to challenge her and the Home Office.

Sean Woodcock: The hon. Member has spoken at great length about the benefits of immigration. I am married to an eastern European immigrant, so I am well aware of the massive benefits of immigration to this country. What I am bit confused about, though, is how adding an extra layer of red tape and a potential border between England and Scotland would improve or make a difference to what he has just talked about.

Pete Wishart: I was going to leave that point until later in my speech, but the hon. Gentleman tempts me to get on to that territory now—he is obviously looking for some sort of solution. I will try to explain our plans and intentions to him as best I can, as well as where I think this matter should eventually go.

When I chaired the Scottish Affairs Committee, we were lucky enough to go to Quebec to look at its state-wide immigration system, which is fantastic. Members should go to Montreal and have a look the construction there—it is a boom city. It is able to do that because the Quebecois state Parliament was able to gain control over immigration from the state Government. As a result, Quebec can appeal to Francophone Europe to think about settling there, thereby attracting the specific skills that are lacking. That has led to such incredible growth in Quebec, which is in charge of its immigration system. That works in Canada. Are we trying to suggest that what people call “the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world” could not come up with a similar or even more effective system than what we saw in Canada? That is what we can do if we have the imagination.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) asks how this would work. I think I heard somebody talk about border guards and passport controls between Scotland and England. In the past 10 years, Scotland has acquired significant new powers over taxation—we can have a debate about that at some other point—which has allowed us to set up Revenue Scotland, so all of us in Scotland have a different tax code from everybody else throughout the United Kingdom. That individual Scottish tax code allows us to know where people are living and working. If they have such a tax code, they are paying taxes in Scotland.

If we had a Scottish visa, one of the conditions for people coming to Scotland from outwith the United Kingdom would be for them to have a Scottish tax code

that would allow us to monitor where they are living and working. One of the conditions for their coming in would be to be resident and working in Scotland. If they broke the conditions for their entry to Scotland, they would no longer be entitled to a Scottish visa and would be made illegal. Who on earth would do that? Why would somebody not want the opportunity to live in Scotland. There are practical solutions that other nations use. Surely nobody is suggesting that Scotland could not introduce such a scheme. It has been done before. We have already talked about fresh talent. Labour has given Scotland an advantage in immigration before and could do it again. It is not beyond the wit of the Scottish nation to ensure that we have an immigration system and a specific tax code, but we need the means to do it.

There is another issue that I wish to take on, which I addressed in response to an intervention, and that is the idea that Scotland does not get any migrants from the rest of the UK—that they do not want to come to Scotland. That is just utter bunkum and rubbish. I hope that, after this debate, that suggestion will never be made again, because it is just rubbish. I will give the House a few statistics. According to the National Records of Scotland, in the year leading up to mid-2022, net migration from the rest of the UK to Scotland increased to 12,500, up from 8,900 the previous year. The trend continued, with net internal migration rising to 13,900 in the year to June 2023—the last figures. [*Interruption.*] That is a 21-year high, and 39% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Joani Reid: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: Just a minute—be patient.

People come to Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom because of our more affordable living costs, things such as free university tuition and free personal care, our progressive social contract, and the fact that it is a beautiful and great country to stay in. Of course people come to Scotland—let us knock this on the head. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has got a point about this; I am keen to hear what it is.

Joani Reid: The hon. Gentleman is mischaracterising what I said—we are not talking about absolute figures. Yes, the figures have risen, but they are disproportionately lower than for the rest of the UK. Once I find it, if the hon. Gentleman will let me, I will quote directly from the National Records of Scotland.

Pete Wishart: I am sorry—I thought I was going to get the figures. We do way beyond our national share when it comes to inward migration, so please let us have no more of this. Let us just agree that people come to Scotland and we want more to do so.

Regardless of how successful we have been in attracting people, we are still in a situation of long-term population decline in Scotland. That is the population, but the demography of Scotland is a bigger horror story, and it is one thing that we really need to look at. Some 22% of Scotland’s population is over 65, which is one of the highest ratios in the whole of the western world—I think the figure for England is 17%. We have a birth rate of one child for every three women—again, one of the worst rates in the whole of the industrialised world. I do

not need to lecture hon. Members about what the birth rate means. We need two children for every woman just to sustain the population at its current levels; a birth rate of one child for every three women cannot be sustainable. That is what makes the two-child benefit cap all the more absurd, heinous and callous. This Government are working contrary to what we need in Scotland to address some of these issues.

Therefore, given our falling birth rate, we are entirely dependent on immigration to keep our population at current levels, and maybe to increase it modestly for the prospects of economic growth. One of the few ambitions and commitments that this Government are sticking to is to cut net migration—that is their absolute and utter mission. They will not even bring forward a youth mobility scheme in all its glory because of their concern about the impact on net migration. Scotland is burdened with an immigration system and a set of Government policies that make our situation so much worse. Why do you think that we consistently call for this power to be devolved? No Scottish Labour MP has stood up and opposed that commitment. If they are not going to do it, they should give the power to us and allow us to do so.

All over the world, the populations of Western industrial countries are facing these difficulties. They have got the powers to address them—we have seen examples in Italy and Spain, which have particularly bad birth rates, almost on a par with what Scotland has. They have ministries devoted to trying to increase the birth rate and do something about the impending crisis that is coming their way. Even in China, population stagnation is beginning to take hold. The world population will stop growing in about 2055, and at that point there will be stagnation before rapid population fall. It is at the point where that curve starts to bend that we get stagnation, which is why nations are addressing the issues that they have.

Have a look at Japan: historically resistant to immigration, Japan is going through a structural economic crisis because of its demography and population issues. Its population is due to fall by 20% in the next 10 years because of the falling birth rate. It is going to fall from third in the GDP rankings to 10th. That is what awaits the United Kingdom over the course of the next 20 or 30 years. This Government cannot look further than the nose on their face; all they are seeing just now is Reform, and all they are thinking about is, “How do we take them on; how do we beat them?” There is no strategic thinking or long-term vision about what we will do towards the end of the century when all of this starts to take hold. Nothing, no imagination, no inquiry, but this is where we are going.

It might blow some Members’ minds, but towards the end of the century migrants might be at a premium and there will be a competition to try to get people into nations around the world. I know that is too much for them to start to contemplate just now, but that is where we are going. And yet for them the issue is about curbing migration. They see migration as a problem that has to be managed, with no concession or ground given to anything that might get in the way of the net migration figures. We are lumbered with that in Scotland. Where we want to move on and deal with our issues, we cannot do so but we should be able to do that.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry about the support that the measures in the Bill have in Scotland. That is no surprise because business organisations and think tanks have seen what is going on. They just need to look at some of our sectors to find that there is a crisis in practically every one and in our public services, so of course they support the measures. There is even political consensus in the Scottish Parliament that something needs to be done. The only thing is we need the UK Government to get on board, and the Bill before us today will help to achieve those goals.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry conceded from the outset, the Bill is not perfect—it is a one-line Bill—but invitation is there to get it to Committee—*[Interruption.]* I say to Members on the Labour Benches, including the hon. Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley), colleagues from the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats, who are not here: we have identified the issue. If somebody thinks that we have got all of this wrong, I want to hear from them. I do not want to hear about what the Scottish Government are doing with ferries or whatever it is they want to talk about—*[Interruption.]* This is the thing, Madam Deputy Speaker—Government Members do not want to talk about the issues that are important to us in this House. They want to talk about stuff that is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Is that because they think their Members of the Scottish Parliament are not up to the job, so Labour Members in this House have to constantly go on about those things? The Secretary of State can confirm, but I think Labour has about 50 MSPs up in Scotland. Why not let them get on with their jobs while we deal with the things that we need to fix down here?

Ian Murray: Immigration is wrapped up in a lot of policy areas that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government themselves, in Parliament, declared a housing emergency. Does the hon. Gentleman think that the lack of housing in Scotland has anything to do with the inability to attract migrants to do the jobs in the places where they are needed to do them?

Pete Wishart: I think that we are going to have quite a few debates like this in the next few years, so I say this ever so candidly: that is a matter for the Scottish Parliament to resolve.

The Secretary of State’s party is trying to become the party in government in Scotland next year, but his party does not have any imaginative solutions, so over the next year we will be testing his proposals and policies against what we are doing. If people in Scotland are attracted to the Secretary of State’s policies and proposals, they will vote Labour in, but I do not think that will happen, and I think, in his heart of hearts, he also believes that now. We only need to look at the last by-election result. So when we are elected to this House, let us deal with the things that matter to us, and nothing is more important than this issue. If we do not get this fixed, we will have serious issues and structural problems in our public services and our economy. I appeal to the House: let the Bill go through and then let us all work together to resolve the situation.

11.33 am

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), my vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary beer group, which is a very important group. I agree with him about how beautiful Scotland is and I am interested to hear some practical ideas on how we can increase the Scottish population. I am sure that the birth rate could be incentivised by the Scottish Government, perhaps with tax relief for more babies—that is just an idea.

The hon. Gentleman talks about pandering to the Reform agenda, but I do not think any hon. Members in this House, from any party, are immune to the dangers of Reform's rhetoric. He is misguided in saying that Labour Members are the ones pallying up to Reform. I agree with many of the interventions from Labour Members today, and I will make a few further points. Although I hate to burst the SNP's bubble, since July, Scottish Labour has won two thirds of by-elections—many, many congratulations to my friends in Scotland. Also, as a former French teacher, I am very familiar with Québec, which is a wonderful place. It has had two referendums and people have voted remain twice. Independence happens to be off the agenda, so perhaps the SNP needs to study that a bit more.

I would like to echo the words of my hon. Friends, and I wonder, when James V of Scotland became James I, did he ever think that after 400 years—

Hon. Members: James VI!

Tonia Antoniazzi: The SNP Members are right—I am really rubbish at Roman numerals. I have suffered with that since I was a child, so I put that down to my lack of intelligence around Roman numerals. My notes do actually say “VI”—I just cannot do them, but at least I can admit to my failings. When James VI of Scotland became James I, did he ever think that after 400 years and multiple Acts of Parliament and referendums, we would still be having these conversations? Either way, he had a more successful career in the monarchy than Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the last prince of Wales.

As a Welsh MP who is the Chair of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, perhaps I was destined to be involved in a debate on Scottish devolution. I believe, of course, that devolving powers is right, and I appreciate that 14 years of a Tory Government here has left a very sour taste in the devolved nations' mouths, including in Wales. But I cannot agree with devolving immigration to the Scottish Government. First, the notion that this should be a priority for the SNP here or in Holyrood is, frankly, for the birds. After a shocking result in the general election for the SNP, surely now the priority is to rebuild trust before the Scottish elections, and rebuilding that trust is difficult, guys. If we look at the record in Scotland, we see that almost one in six Scots is on an NHS waiting list. We see falling standards and rising violence in our once world-leading schools, while the poverty-related attainment gap in highers is at its widest ever, and hon. Members know how much I care about that.

Dave Doogan: Before the hon. Member gets to the end of her prepared litany of apparent failures in Scotland, she might want to touch on the far greater spending on

education and health in Scotland. But just to get clarity on this issue, in this grotesque thing that is the United Kingdom, can she give me one measure—because I know she is super-smart—on which the devolved Welsh Government perform better than the SNP Government in Scotland?

Tonia Antoniazzi: That old chestnut, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been part of that system as a teacher, and I know what the high points are. Actually, I do not think there is any comparator when the Scottish Government have had a lot more money to play with from their Barnett formula consequentials.

I want to move on to something that is very close to my heart: the Supreme Court judgment, for which Scottish women had to bring a case to the Supreme Court. I just think we have not done anybody right, and that comes from the SNP Government and their agenda in Scotland. We have seen how NHS Fife is treating the nurse, Sandie Peggie. We know how they are treating women and girls. There is a brilliant book called “The Women Who Wouldn't Wheesh”, by Lucy Hunter Blackburn and Susan Dalgety. It has 30 essays with 30 women's voices on the situation in Scotland, from the frontline of the battle for women's rights. It is a compelling read, Madam Deputy Speaker—I can get you a copy. So many women have had their reputations thrown under a bus and their jobs ruined, and their relationships with family and friends have gone.

Joani Reid: My hon. Friend rightly points out the outrageous situation that so many women in Scotland have faced over the last few years. Does she agree that if Scotland wants to attract more immigrants and more migrants, it needs to understand women's issues more coherently?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am grateful for that intervention, because I remind Members to please keep in scope of the Bill.

Tonia Antoniazzi: That was the point I was going to make: if we want to make Scotland a more attractive place to go, we have to be inclusive and ensure that we look after women and girls.

Does anyone have an idea of how the Scottish Government would police this issue when there is no border? From my time as a shadow Northern Ireland Minister, and even now as the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I know the ongoing challenges there are with electronic travel authorisation for tourists from outside the EU, many of whom will likely travel into the Republic of Ireland first before trying to visit Northern Ireland. With no border on the island of Ireland, there are still unanswered questions about how that would be managed, and I foresee the same challenges in Scotland. Has any consideration been given to that?

How do the Scottish Government propose to deal with the sudden, humongous immigration caseload, thanks to the backlog created by the last Tory Government's diabolical record on immigration? This would not be a case of a new Scottish home department starting from zero, because that is just impossible. This Bill just is not a practical proposal.

Seamus Logan: I have the benefit of having been a tour guide in a previous life. I often brought American visitors into Dublin and on into Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady says that she is the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, so I point out to her that there is no border in that regard. The tourists pass freely from the south to the north and back into the south, so I have no idea what she is talking about. Will she elaborate on where the problem might arise for those tourists?

Tonia Antoniazzi: If the hon. Member is aware of the ETA situation we have in the Home Office, he will know that people have to have applied online to be able to travel into the north. Many concerns are being raised with me that that is a real issue. *[Interruption.]* Well, it is true—tourism in Northern Ireland is struggling, because people will not go there because of the additional paperwork that there is. It is a real issue. Because I am so generous, I will send some of my correspondence and the concerns that have been raised with me to the hon. Gentleman. He may like to cast his eye over them, just to put the record straight.

An argument I have heard in favour of the Bill is that it would help with growing the hospitality sector in Scotland, which is fantastic. I enjoy visiting Scotland, particularly for rugby; the rugby games may be unsuccessful, but I enjoy it. There is tourism from Wales to Scotland, and I would hate for there to be any hindrance in that regard. Members will know my passion for rugby, and I make regular visits.

Stephen Gethins: Welsh tourists are always welcome in Scotland—I have had many great times. I have a practical point relating to the Bill. The hon. Lady has criticised it, which is fine, but I have been very clear that I want to open this issue up. Which parts of the Scottish Labour proposals does she find attractive?

Tonia Antoniazzi: Which part of the Scottish Labour proposals do I find attractive? Well, this is your Bill, mate. I do not have any comment to make there.

I am the chair of the APPG on beer, which I mentioned, so I have many thoughts on hospitality. The hospitality sector has struggled across the board, particularly in recovering post covid. Growing the sector cannot simply be resolved by changing immigration rules: this is a multifaceted issue. In fact, so many of the areas of change that could help the sector to grow, such as business rates, apprenticeships, tourism and tax, are already devolved to the Scottish Government.

Graham Leadbitter: I welcome the fact that the hon. Lady enjoys coming to Scotland for rugby games. I have a Welsh great-uncle who once had a try out for the Welsh national team, so it is a great passion within my family.

On hospitality, however, will the hon. Lady concede that although immigration might not be the only part of the problem, it is a significant part of the problem and we need to deal with it? That is what the Bill is for. There are other things that can be done and that are being explored and worked on by the Scottish Government and other Departments in the UK Government, but we are talking about immigration today. Will she concede that it is a significant issue and that this Bill could help to deal with it?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention, but it is just a shame that the SNP did not give hospitality the rates relief it had in England. That is an issue that needs to be considered.

Just in February, I spoke at an event celebrating young apprentices in the hospitality industry—restaurants, pub chains and breweries all together recognising the importance of hospitality apprenticeships in a growing sector. Support for this sector in Scotland has been seen as less desirable, especially on business rates, as I said. UK Hospitality research shows that a typical local pub in Scotland will have to pay £12,000 more in rates bills than a similar business in England. Industry leaders have argued that while support is available elsewhere in the UK, Scotland's hospitality sector is being left behind. Trying to fix this with a larger migrant workforce is just not viable when businesses are already struggling. The best way to address problems in this sector is through investment, upskilling and tackling economic inactivity, and the best way to enable this is for our devolved nations to work together, linking up migration, skills and labour market policies.

The Scottish Government want to introduce a new rural visa pilot to encourage migration to remote and rural communities where the population is declining. Is that any wonder when over 1,400 bus routes have been lost between 2006-07 and 2023-24, including 190 in the last year alone, and when a pilot that removed peak rail prices has been scrapped, meaning a total rise in rail fares of between 20% and 200%? It is simply unfair to encourage people to live in these rural communities—which are beautiful—when the infrastructure they need to function is not there.

I do not want to be accused of being anti-change; I am definitely not that person. Devolution is a process, not an event, and I am not saying here today that the devolution package should never change. I do not believe my party is saying that today, and we have a lot to say. What I do think, however, is that now is not the time. Any changes deserve a careful, thought-out and scrutinised process. The question is whether this Bill would benefit the people of Scotland now, and the answer is no.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

11.48 am

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I must thank the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) for introducing it. It is a shame that only six Scottish Labour MPs have seen fit to turn up to the debate, given their majority in representing Scottish constituencies, but I will move on to the Scottish Labour position on the Bill in due course. Some 40% of Scottish Conservative MPs have turned up to this today, in comparison with only 16% of Scottish Labour MPs, which I would say is a roaring success.

I must start from first principles. Devolution of immigration and asylum is a non-starter. It is, frankly, an absurd and unworkable idea, and the Conservative party is resolutely opposed to it. If we were in government, we would have the courage of our convictions and vote against the Bill, but the weak approach of the Labour party to this Bill, in avoiding a vote and trying to talk it

[*Andrew Bowie*]

out, should shame the Secretary of State and, indeed, the Government and the Scottish Labour party. Whatever our view of the proposal, on this Bill Members should have a vote—Members should be forced to say what their position actually is. We all know why there is not going to be a vote today: it is because the branch office in Edinburgh might like certain elements of the Bill, but London Labour says no—’twas always thus.

I am proud to say that the Conservative party opposes the Bill, but the Labour party—the Scottish Labour party—is scared to do anything that might damage its SNP-lite approach to politics and Scotland. It is supine in opposition in Holyrood and absent from the field in government. Labour should have the courage of its convictions to vote against the Bill today, despite how uncomfortable it might make certain Government Members.

Turning to the Bill, the idea that immigration and asylum matters should be devolved to Scotland simply should not be countenanced.

Stephen Gethins: Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

Andrew Bowie: It is always a pleasure to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Gethins: I will start on a positive note: I think we should take the Bill to a vote. I take the shadow Secretary of State’s point, but why does he think that Michael Gove backed this Bill? When Labour sticks him in the Lords, Lord Gove could take this Bill through the Lords. Does the shadow Secretary of State agree?

Andrew Bowie: Michael Gove, soon to be Lord Gove of Torry, is answerable for his own opinions on whether immigration powers should be devolved to Scotland. I would not be in any way surprised if his views on that issue have changed, as indeed have his views on certain other issues over the years.

First, we should not enable regional immigration policies within the United Kingdom. Secondly, there is absolutely no case for a special immigration policy for Scotland outwith the United Kingdom’s legislative framework. Thirdly, the Scottish Government under the SNP over the past 18 years have demonstrated an unparalleled and unprecedented level of incompetence, which ought to preclude consideration of granting greater powers over, frankly, anything. We all know that there is such a thing as Scottish exceptionalism. The only exceptionalism that the Scottish Government have demonstrated is an exceptional reverse Midas touch to almost every single area over which they have responsibility, whether it is education, health or transport infrastructure. I could go on.

Pete Wishart: Just before the shadow Secretary of State gets into his usual anti-Scottish Government stuff, he has told us what he does not like about this Bill moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins). How would the Scottish Conservatives resolve our population demography crisis and the fact that we have a shrinking working-age workforce in Scotland? What would they do?

Andrew Bowie: If the hon. Gentleman has some patience, I will come to that. I do not intend to detain the House for quite as long as he did in giving his remarks, but I will come to what the Scottish Conservatives propose to address the demographic challenge that we face north of the border.

There is no case for devolving immigration to Scotland. Doing so would be unproductive at best, and given the SNP’s record in Holyrood, it would likely be disastrous. The devolution of immigration policy to Scotland would be incoherent within a United Kingdom and, indeed, wholly impractical.

We have heard arguments today that Scotland is more reliant on immigration than elsewhere in the UK. In many sectors, such as healthcare, adult social care, construction and agriculture, the UK benefits from—or relies too heavily upon, some might argue—imported labour. The Migration Advisory Committee, however, has found that labour market needs are similar across the UK and that there is no case for Scottish exceptionalism in this regard or for a Scotland-specific immigration system.

Let us talk about attracting skilled labour to Scotland. Let us start by looking at one of Scotland’s most successful industries: oil and gas. That is an industry we should be championing. We should be championing the world-class workforce, the leading supply chain, and the opportunities for growth, for good, well-paid jobs and for prosperity. I represent a constituency in a region that is seeing a decline in the number of people living and working there. That is a direct result of years of hostile rhetoric towards this energy industry from the Scottish National party, or is it not still the policy of the SNP to have a presumption against oil and gas? It was the SNP that was in coalition with the extremist Scottish Green party. With this Labour Government, it looks like that party might be getting its way, with a refusal to grant new licences and cuts to investment allowances signalling that the North sea is closed for business. That is driving industry and people away, and opportunities for well-paid jobs are drying up.

If the Scottish National party are serious about attracting a talented and productive workforce to Scotland, it should start by rethinking its policies towards our home-grown energy industry and start backing Scottish workers and Scottish businesses. A Scottish Government publication from last year admits that they

“need an immigration system that supports our higher education sector”.

Goodness me! Under the SNP, universities, students and staff have not been supported, but have been utterly hung out to dry. Dundee University is in dire financial straits, shedding 600 jobs to make emergency savings. My former university, Aberdeen, has resorted to a hiring freeze in an attempt to fill a £15 million shortfall. The University of Edinburgh echoes those warnings, saying that it needs to reduce costs by £140 million.

Chris Law: The shadow Secretary of State is correct to raise the dire situation at Dundee University. There is a £35 million deficit, £12.5 million of which is a direct result of Conservative policies that have meant a restriction on immigration visas for dependants. We saw an 84% drop the year that that came in, with an 18% drop even among undergraduates coming on their own. Why will

he not take some responsibility for the fact that Dundee University is facing such dire circumstances because of his party's heinous hostile immigration policies?

Andrew Bowie: Goodness me—talk about taking responsibility! It was only a few weeks ago that the SNP's Education Minister refused to take any responsibility for the situation facing higher education in Scotland and claimed that there is no direct link with the failed funding model on which Scottish universities rely north of the border. That model has made them far too reliant on foreign students paying exorbitant fees to keep their doors open, rather than being funded properly from the Scottish Government's own budget. SNP Members have failed to mention that. When they talk about immigration in the context of higher education, they always fail to mention that the funding model designed by the Scottish National party has obliged our higher education institutions to be so reliant on stratospheric fees to keep the doors open and keep research going. No contrition and no responsibility—that is the Scottish National party.

Chris Law: The shadow Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. To be clear, this is not a policy that affects just Dundee University, or even just Scotland. It is affecting universities across these islands, in England, Wales and Scotland. Of the top 10 universities that are facing financial problems, due in large part to immigration policies brought in under the last Conservative Government, more than half are in England. Would he like to spread the blame across these islands, rather than making it specifically about Scotland?

Andrew Bowie: I am very happy to talk about our record on higher education and compare it with the Scottish National party's. It is a fact that someone from a deprived background in England is more likely to get into university than someone from a similar background in Scotland. That is a record of which the Scottish National party should be ashamed. There are fewer opportunities for Scottish students to get into world-leading Scottish higher education institutions than before the Scottish National party came into office.

The SNP cannot admit that its funding model has failed, although the University and College Union in Scotland has said so and has repeatedly called on the Scottish Government to address the decline in Scottish university funding. If the hon. Gentleman acknowledges and apologises for the Scottish Government's failures, I might then engage in a debate about whether we should look at an immigration system that does more for Scottish higher education.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: Listening to the Conservatives after 14 years in government and the Scottish National party after 18 years in government argue about who is responsible for the problems in universities is a bit like watching two bald men argue over a comb. However, the point is well made that this is a national problem. National problems are not solved by having a different policy for different parts of the country; they have national solutions across the British Isles.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Will hon. Members please note that interventions and speeches are two very different things?

Andrew Bowie: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we are far better when we work together on these islands than when we drive each other apart.

The Scottish National party's model for higher education in Scotland has been nothing short of a failure. Disadvantaged teenagers are less likely to get into university in Scotland than their peers south of the border. The Scottish National party is failing the least well-off in society, blocking social mobility through the transformative power of education.

Seamus Logan: After the shadow Secretary of State's long litany of talking down Scotland, the Scottish Government and all their failures, can he explain why the people of Scotland have elected the SNP for the past 18 years and why the polls show that we can expect to be elected again next year?

Andrew Bowie: It ill behoves me to correct the hon. Gentleman, but I was not talking down Scotland; I was talking down the Scottish National party's record. I know the SNP thinks that it is Scotland and that Scotland is the SNP, but it most certainly is not. As for setting out a long litany of failures, I have only just started, believe you me—but as this debate must conclude at 2.30 pm, we simply do not have time to go through the list of failures of the Scottish National party in government over the past 18 years. The people of Scotland will have the chance to demonstrate at the polls next year whether they have confidence in the Scottish National party to continue in government. That is the only poll that matters, and we will see what happens in May 2026.

Let us address the utter absurdity of the Scottish Government's proposed additional Scottish graduate visa, which would allow graduates four unsponsored years. It is even possible that those on the four-year graduate visa would qualify for permanent residence. Members have also raised the issue of Scotland's declining birth rate. Proposing immigration as a quick fix for a declining population is wrong-headed and short-sighted. High immigration to solve low birth rates and an ageing population is a pyramid-scheme response. Working-age immigrants initially slow the growth of the age dependency ratio; however, they will in turn age and perpetuate the same crisis. Nations across the developed world face the myriad issues that an ageing population presents. The Scottish National party should be more focused on supporting working families and improving the economic outlook and prosperity, rather than proposing unfettered immigration. It might take the radical approach proposed by the Scottish Conservative party of making Scotland the lowest-taxed, rather than the highest-taxed, part of our United Kingdom and see what that does to attract people north of the border.

Dave Doogan: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Bowie: I am always delighted to give way to my constituency neighbour.

Dave Doogan: The hon. Member is too kind. Will he identify which SNP elected Member has prescribed unfettered immigration to Scotland, because I would like to know?

Andrew Bowie: As I often used to say when I was on the Government Benches, I will write to the hon. Gentleman with my answer—I am sure there is one. The idea that

[Andrew Bowie]

immigrants to a country as compact as ours would not seek job opportunities in other areas of the UK, should they so wish, is for the birds. Are we talking about border posts at Berwick, or papers being checked on the Caledonian sleeper? We are talking about a party founded over 90 years ago with the sole aim of achieving Scotland's separation from the rest of the UK—but it still cannot tell us what currency should be used in that separate Scotland. The idea that SNP Members could design an intuitive scheme so foolproof and clever that nobody could take advantage of the situation is absolutely absurd, and nobody takes that seriously.

Turning back to the Government, it is a real shame that the Labour Government are choosing to talk out this private Member's Bill rather than be forced to take a stance, but that is unsurprising, because we are well used to Labour Members demonstrating the utterly supine nature of the Scottish Labour party on Scottish issues. When faced with the madness of the SNP's gender recognition Bill—this was raised this morning—Labour whipped their MSPs to vote to allow male offenders into women's prisons. When the Labour leader in Scotland pays lip service to the plight facing oil and gas workers in the north-east of Scotland as a direct result of the Government's damaging policies, Labour MPs stay silent. They refuse to stand up for women in Scotland; they refuse to stand up for working people in Scotland. Time and again, they refuse to do the right thing. Devolving immigration policy to the Scottish Government is clearly not the right thing, and Labour should have the courage of its convictions and say so.

As set out this morning, there is no case for the devolution of immigration. This is an invented exceptionalism. Scotland is no more dependent on immigration than the rest of the United Kingdom, and the purported crises—funding for universities, the rural workforce and the declining birth rate—are not solvable by this supposed silver bullet. This is a lazy solution to a series of complex issues that the SNP in Holyrood have neglected to resolve with the power already in their hands.

Stephen Gethins: I was careful to outline the views of the Scottish hospitality sector, care sector, tourism sector and Reform Scotland, and I could have gone on. Does the hon. Member think that they are wrong? We all think Michael Gove is wrong on a number of things; the hon. Gentleman clearly thinks that Mr Gove is wrong on this. Does the hon. Member think that all those sectoral organisations are wrong?

Andrew Bowie: I represent a part of the country that relies on tourism for its economic prosperity, and when I speak to the Scottish hospitality sector, it is not immigration that it raises as its biggest concern, but the failure of the Scottish National party—the Scottish Government—to pass on the rates relief for hospitality businesses across the United Kingdom. That is the biggest issue facing hospitality and tourism in Scotland right now, and the hon. Member would do well to raise point that with his colleagues in the Parliament north of the border who have power over that rate of tax. Parcelling out reserve powers to the SNP Government will solve none of the problems raised in this debate, and as I said, the Labour party should have the backbone to say so.

A month ago, I was on a Statutory Instrument Committee on the devolution of the operation of some Social Security Scotland competences in order to avoid duplication with the Department for Work and Pensions. I said that in devolving these powers to the Scottish Government

“We have created additional barriers, burdens and borders where there were none before, and we have added no benefit whatsoever for those receiving...payments either north or south of the border.”—[*Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee, 25 February 2025; c. 5.*]

By the way, it has cost more than £650 million so far to establish Social Security Scotland, so lessons should be learned by the Labour Government. Just as many Labour Members believed in 1997 that devolution would kill nationalism stone dead, too many UK politicians of all parties, mine included, believe that giving ever more power to the Scottish Government will appease the Scottish National party's desire for independence. It will not; that is the reason the SNP was founded, and it is a perfectly rational and respectable position to hold, but the desire to break Scotland away from United Kingdom will not be diminished by devolving ever more powers to Holyrood. Far too often, far too little thought is given to the impact of devolution on the policies or functions on which people rely. Is the complex, expensive, duplicative and bureaucratic quagmire brought about by Social Security Scotland working with the DWP in Scotland really to the benefit of those in receipt of benefits?

We must ensure that we do not have devolution for devolution's sake. We must decide whether the devolution of a certain power to the Scottish Parliament will have a beneficial impact on people and businesses in Scotland. If the answer is no, the answer to devolving the power must be no, and the Government should have the courage of their convictions and say so. The Government could have demonstrated that they understood that. They could have forced a Division and voted down this flawed and fanciful Bill.

There is no case whatsoever for the devolution of immigration and asylum policy to Scotland, but even if there were, it would not be practicable to do that. It is not viable. Instead of those in the SNP coming up with madcap schemes to sow more division and create more difference across our one nation, they ought to spend more time and money on proposals for investing in Scotland's underfunded universities, tackling violence in the classrooms, bringing down the length of NHS waiting lists, reducing drug deaths, building desperately needed new roads and bridges, improving community policing and making our neighbourhoods safer; but we see where their priorities lie. It is not just that the plans in the Bill are unviable, would be grossly inefficient and are completely unnecessary; devolving power over immigration to the SNP-run Scottish Government would be to the detriment of Scots and the United Kingdom.

We could spend countless hours in this place on statutory instruments designed to realign Scotland with the rest of the UK where needless duplication has already occurred—for example, across the justice system, and across welfare and benefit payments. We do not need more needless duplication to be created by thoughtless legislation. I have set out His Majesty's official Opposition's opposition to this motion on the basis of its economic and political impacts, but this is also a matter of principle.

It is about whether we ought to be introducing sub-national visa and immigration systems, creating a more powerful sub-national or devolved Government in Scotland. The record of the SNP Government is damning, and we cannot in good conscience allow yet further vandalism.

12.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): May I begin by thanking all Members for their contributions, and the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) for bringing the Bill before us today? I am slightly confused, after his 42-minute contribution, about what he is actually promoting. He seems to be suggesting that the Bill should pass and go into Committee, and then he will invent another Bill to do different things. The Bill before us, which is what we should be debating, is a short Bill that would essentially remove immigration from schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 and devolve it wholly to the Scottish Parliament. As I have said before, if nothing is in schedule 5—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Forgive me, I may have misheard, but did you say it was a 42-minute contribution?

Ian Murray: Maybe it was 41 minutes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It was a 50-minute contribution.

Ian Murray: I stand corrected, Madam Deputy Speaker. It was an even longer contribution, at 50 minutes, and the hon. Member was still not honest about what the Bill does. The Bill before us today devolves the entirety of the immigration system to Scotland.

Stephen Gethins: I am going to try to be productive with the Secretary of State, even though he has accused me of not being honest—I wanted to take as many interventions from his colleagues as I could, and I did. I have been open enough to say that the Bill is short so that we can try to work together, and I would love to hear Scottish Labour's proposals.

Ian Murray: I did not accuse the hon. Gentleman of being dishonest. Those are his words. Maybe he is reflecting on his own contribution. Let me take that intervention straight on and give the House the actual quote from the deputy leader of the Scottish Labour party, not what Members have determined that she may have said. I will come on to why what she said is really important and completely aligned with UK Government policy. The quote from the deputy leader of the Scottish Labour party was:

“there would be dialogue and discussion but we need to recognise that growing home-grown talent is really important.

At the moment there are no plans for”

A Scottish visa,

“but I think if you have governments taking common-sense approaches”

to skills shortages, as

“an incoming Labour Government would do,”

that helps resolve the problem. That is what she said, and what we are working on.

Let me conclude my remarks with some clarity on the Scotland Act 1998. As I said, if something is in the Scotland Act and is mentioned in schedule 5, it is reserved. If it is not, it is deemed to be devolved. The

Bill would devolve immigration to the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament. I make that point strongly at the start because it leads into all the other arguments we have heard from hon. Members from across the House about what the requirement would be at Berwick, on the border between Scotland and England.

Gareth Snell: I, too, have read the very short sentence in the Bill, which does not talk just about immigration. It states:

“including asylum and the status and capacity of persons in the United Kingdom who are not British citizens”.

My understanding—I am happy to be corrected—is that if the issue was devolved to the Scottish Government, they could, essentially, grant indefinite leave to remain and all sorts of British citizenship statuses through their powers in Scotland. That could distort the entire immigration system of the United Kingdom.

Ian Murray: And the consequence is that we would require checks in both directions. As the Minister for Independence—did my hon. Friend know that the Scottish Government had a Minister for Independence?—clearly said, as we have heard, that a hard border would be required in particular cases. Scottish Ministers, incidentally, have just awarded themselves a £20,000 pay rise—certainly not on the basis of their performance.

It is important to acknowledge the complexities of immigration as a cross-cutting policy area. SNP Members do not want to talk about it as a cross-cutting policy area, because many of the policy areas around immigration are devolved to the Scottish Government. This is not simply about numbers. It covers issues of social cohesion, as we heard this morning, economic stability and public services. Ensuring we have a fair and properly managed immigration system that takes account of those complexities is a priority for this Government. We have made clear that the immigration system we inherited is not working. Indeed, the previous Government, which the shadow Secretary of State served in, said that the immigration system in the UK was broken. Under the previous Government, between 2019 and 2024, net migration almost quadrupled, heavily driven by a big increase in overseas recruitment.

I have the net migration figures here, and they have been a key part of the debate. In 2023, the net migration figure for the United Kingdom was 906,000. If there was a proportionate share of that net migration going to Scotland, then the immigration to Scotland would be somewhere in the region of 80,000 to 85,000. Indeed, it was below 60,000, so a huge number of net migrants who are coming to the UK are not going to Scotland. The big question has to be why. We had a huge tirade from the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry about Brexit and its consequences, but those lower figures are still higher than before the UK left the European Union. The big question has to be asked: why are people not going to Scotland to work and live?

Stephen Gethins: I am grateful for the constructive way the Secretary of State is approaching the debate. I am not sure he can blame us for Tory migration policy. Does he think we should be driving down migration, because that is not what we are hearing? Does he

[Stephen Gethins]

think—we are talking about the health of the economy—that the Brexit he and I stood up against has been a net benefit for the economy?

Ian Murray: I have said already that net migration has to come down. That is the view of the Prime Minister and this Government, because it is too high. The reason it has to come down—this goes right to the heart of some of the big issues in Scotland that the SNP Scottish Government do not want to talk about—is that nearly one in six young people in Scotland are not in education, employment or training. We have shipyards in Scotland that build the very best ships in the world, employing Filipino and South African welders who look from the top of those ships into some of the poorest communities in Scotland and the United Kingdom, where a huge number of young people are not in employment, education or training. We need to do something about that. That is why net migration has to come down.

Workforce and skills planning is a much more important way to tackle skills shortages. We have been leaving businesses unable to find the skills they need in the UK reliant on workers from abroad. That is the record of the previous Conservative Government.

Let me say it again: net migration is too high, and the interaction between migration and skills in the labour market is fundamentally broken. All those organisations read out by the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry in support of his proposal also say the very same thing. Skills in the labour market is broken, and the link between migration and skills in the labour market is fundamentally broken. That is why we need confidence in the whole system, and that whole system needs to be fundamentally rebuilt.

That is the UK Government's focus. We will face these challenges head-on by delivering on our missions in Scotland by kick-starting economic growth, which has been a disaster under the Scottish Government. If Scotland had grown at the same level as even Manchester, the Scottish economy would be tens of billions of pounds larger. If the city and region of Glasgow had grown at the same level as Manchester, its economy would be £7 billion larger. Kick-starting economic growth is therefore a key driver for this Government, as well as making Britain a clean energy superpower, in which Scotland will play a key part, and of course tackling poverty. I set out my Department's priorities in Scotland during a recent speech at the University of Edinburgh. Given the relevance of that to the debate's subject matter, let me draw on some of the points I made then.

Pete Wishart: I hope that the Secretary of State will get to the territory of how we address some of the issues we face. One of issues I pointed out is our poor birth rate in Scotland, with only one child for every three women. How does he think his Government's policy of a two-child benefit cap helps address our birth rate issues?

Ian Murray: I do not think we can determine birth rate issues through the welfare system. The hon. Gentleman is essentially saying that people are choosing not to have larger families because of the welfare system. The fundamental problem of depopulation in Scotland has

been around for 100 years—he mentioned that himself—but he sits on one small part of the welfare system to try to make a point that is not relevant to the debate.

Dave Doogan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ian Murray: I am happy to give way. Can the hon. Gentleman intervene less angrily than he has in the past?

Dave Doogan: The Secretary of State always enjoys the better side of my face. He characteristically paints Scotland as some sort of economic basket case, which I find a little offensive. If he wants to be robust in that accusation against our industry and our enterprise, how does he explain why Scotland is persistently in the top half of economic performing regions of the United Kingdom, and oftentimes on certain measures in the top quartile?

Ian Murray: I am tempted to say that Scotland is not a region but a country, but I will not go down that rather juvenile route. The clear point is that the No. 1 priority and mission of this new UK Labour Government is economic growth, because we require it in our communities. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that everything is rosy in Scotland, he should go to his communities and see whether he thinks that is indeed the case. There are lots of wonderful opportunities in Scotland in terms of economic growth, and we should be exploiting those to create the jobs and careers of the future. That is a key part of what we should be talking about.

It is clear that levels of immigration need to be reduced. The Prime Minister has also been clear that we will not be introducing an arbitrary cap. This issue will not be resolved by gimmicks, unlike what we see from Opposition parties. It is simply not enough to cap numbers. Without a joined-up approach, our economy will be left without the skills it needs to grow. By creating a fair and properly managed system, we will reduce net migration back down to sustainable levels. We will achieve that through the hard work of tackling the root causes of reliance on overseas recruitment, not through gimmicks such as arbitrary targets. We want to ensure that businesses are helped to hire domestic workers first. We will ensure that different parts of Government draw up skills and workforce improvement plans in high migration sectors.

When the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry introduced his Bill, he challenged the Labour Government on what we were actually doing. Let me just read our manifesto to him, because actually it reflects much of what he was asking for, but that is not what his Bill wants to try to achieve. It states:

“We will strengthen the Migration Advisory Committee, and establish a framework for joint working with skills bodies across the UK, the Industrial Strategy Council and the Department for Work and Pensions. The needs of our economy are different across the regions and nations, and different sectors have different needs. Given skills policy and employment support are devolved we will work with the Scottish Government when designing workforce plans for different sectors. This will ensure our migration and skills policies work for every part of the UK.”

It also states:

“The next UK Labour Government will also ensure that UK-wide bodies are more representative of our nations and regions, this includes representation for Scotland on the Industrial Strategy Council, and Scottish skills bodies working jointly with the Migration Advisory Committee.”

Before the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry pops up and says, “Well yes, but who is on the Migration Advisory Committee?”, I refer him to Professor Sergi Pardos-Prado, professor of comparative politics at the University of Glasgow. He was recruited to the Migration Advisory Committee because of his knowledge on migration-related issues in devolved areas. All of the accusations laid by the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry through his 51-minute speech have been completely dispelled by the manifesto and the actions of this Government already.

Andrew Bowie: So far there is very little in what the Secretary of State is saying that I can disagree with. If he does believe that the Bill is unnecessary, why are his Government adopting tactics today to avoid a vote on it? Why do they not have courage of their convictions and vote it down?

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman should be pleased, because there are only two of them to go down any of the Lobbies; 40% of the Scottish Conservatives are here, and that makes two of them—I still think it is too many, but we will work on that at the next election.

As I have said, it is simply not good enough to cap numbers without that joined-up approach. We recognise the compounding pressures that the asylum and resettlement system is placing on local authorities and devolved Governments. That is something we have not really spoken about today, but we are committed to addressing that and delivering long-term solutions, not the sticking plaster politics that we hear from the parties opposite. We are looking at these issues carefully and will develop a new cross-Government strategy, working with stakeholders across the country and the devolved Governments, who will be vital partners in this work.

We want to ensure that any policies alongside the broader approach to asylum and resettlement work in lockstep with the Government’s objectives to end homelessness and—I am sorry to mention a devolved issue—build 1.5 million new homes over the course of this Parliament in England. That is not happening in Scotland. It is important to us to work together to ensure positive integration outcomes and improve access for all.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Is it not the case that the SNP’s housing crisis has meant that 10,000 kids in Scotland have no place to call their home? I wonder whether the Secretary of State agrees that tackling that housing emergency is an urgent step to ensuring that we attract more workers into Scotland in order to have a workforce that can grow the Scottish economy?

Ian Murray: I very much welcome the intervention. I think it should be a national shame that 10,000 children in Scotland go to bed every night in a place that they cannot call their own home. SNP Members do not want to talk about that in this debate, but the single biggest thing that affects migration in every part of this United Kingdom is the lack of housing and affordable housing. This Government are determined to deliver that for England, but of course we are not in control of Scotland. What my hon. Friend might not know is that the Scottish Government declared a housing emergency on a Tuesday with a vote in Parliament and then on

a Wednesday cut the affordable housing budget by £200 million. That is the action they take following their rhetoric. They do not have any plans to resolve some of the bigger issues.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): We have talked a lot about demographic challenges in Scotland over the course of the debate, and I do not doubt the concerns about the demography—I have a lot of concerns myself about it. But the biggest factors that affect having children—many couples desperately do want to have more children—are lack of housing, lack of access to childcare and lack of economic opportunity. In the 20 years that the SNP Government have had to do something about this, where is the progress in addressing any of those issues? If they want to look at where the problem with Scotland’s demography lies, they should start by looking in the mirror.

Ian Murray: Can I just say to my hon. Friend, as someone who has a 12-week-old daughter and a four-and-a-half-year-old daughter, that we are very much—

Kirsty Blackman: Doing your bit!

Ian Murray: Indeed, we are; perhaps the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) should try doing his bit a bit more. *[Interruption.]* There is no need to confess now, Pete. But my hon. Friend is right; the biggest consideration for many families is childcare. Government Ministers are highly paid, and my wife works as well, but getting access to proper childcare that is flexible enough to ensure people can stay in work is a real challenge. Again, that is something the Scottish Government do not want to talk about.

We have talked about the economy, public services, housing and childcare. The First Minister made a growth speech a few weeks ago, and his only conclusion on growth in Scotland was that we need access to visas. There was nothing else. There was no ambition. There were no solutions to how we get planning sorted in Scotland. There was nothing about making sure we win the global race to green power. His one recommendation was getting something that has no control over, so that he does not have to take responsibility for the things he does have control over.

Stephen Gethins: I think I have already congratulated the Minister on his personal contribution to population growth—that is happy news we can all get behind—but I want him to answer the question I posed earlier. He talks about the First Minister and growth. The biggest impediment to growth is our hard Brexit and our relationship with the EU. Does he think that has been good or bad for growth?

Ian Murray: This UK Labour Government are determined to reset our relationship with the European Union, have a much closer trading relationship and do what is in the UK national interest. The biggest impediment to growth in the economy in Scotland is the SNP Scottish Government, and that has been proven through time.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way once again. He will know, because he was here with me when it happened, that this House came within six votes of coming to a settled position on customs union

[Gareth Snell]

membership, which I appreciate is no longer the Government's policy. When they became aware of how close the vote was going to be, 48 Scottish National party Members abstained, so that it would fail and they could pursue their hard Brexit grievance, to try to make sure Brexit failed, because that is what they wanted to put on their party leaflets.

Ian Murray: We should not rerun the Brexit debate in this House, but it is worth acknowledging that the Bill is written in a different way from what the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry wants to deliver. He wants to pretend that it will go to Committee, and we will all sit around the campfire with marshmallows and decide on a wonderful way forward, but that is not what the Bill says.

My hon. Friend gets to the heart of the problem, because ultimately this is all to do with the advancement of the Scottish National party's independence agenda. Nothing else gets them out of bed in the morning. I get out of bed in the morning to try to make sure that everybody in this country, including in my constituency, has better lives and better opportunities. SNP Members get out of bed to push for independence. That is the difference. When the Division bells rang on that occasion—I remember it very well—everybody thought that the vote would be carried. Those SNP Members sat on their hands and the vote was lost by six. All their credibility in trying to push something else through was completely shot at that moment—and do not forget that they also pushed for the 2019 general election at the same time.

I will now canter through page 2 of my speech. It is important for us to work together to ensure positive integration outcomes and improved processes overall. Let me turn to the valuable contribution that workers from overseas make to our economy, our public services and national life throughout the United Kingdom. As the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry has highlighted, the remote parts of Scotland face depopulation issues, and they have for a long time—I talk to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) about this on a regular basis. Skills shortages also remain across Scotland, as they do in different places across the UK. Indeed, according to the latest population projections from the National Records of Scotland, the factors driving population change are exactly the same across the whole United Kingdom.

Harriet Cross: The Secretary of State mentions depopulation in rural areas of Scotland and deskilling. North-east Scotland—as I am sure he is aware, because we have mentioned it more than once in this Chamber—is facing exactly that because of Labour's policies on the North sea. Skills are being driven abroad at an unimaginable rate compared with the rest of the UK. We are depopulating and deskilling the north-east of Scotland because of Labour's North sea oil and gas policies. Will he reflect on that or at least accept that that is the impact Labour is having on north-east Scotland?

Ian Murray: I was in the north-east of Scotland yesterday, in Buckie, turning on one of the largest offshore wind farms. Ocean Winds employs 45 to 70 local people from a 40-mile radius from Buckie. That is the kind of

opportunity there is. Most of the people in Ocean Winds were from the oil and gas sector. There is no disagreement about the challenge, which is about how we transition a world-class, highly skilled workforce from an industry that is declining because of the age and maturity of the basin to the new opportunities and industry. There is no doubt that the green revolution is one of the biggest economic opportunities this country has had in generations, and we need grab hold of it. I also met Offshore Energies UK yesterday and had very productive discussions its representatives about Government policy and the consultation on the North sea transition. Those discussions will obviously continue.

These issues—as I have laid out, based on the National Records of Scotland—are not unique to Scotland, nor have they been solved by the increase in net migration in recent years. The Bill would not address the issues that the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry has raised, because the reasons that the resident population moves away from an area will also encourage any migrant population to follow suit as soon as they are allowed. The former Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire, mentioned Quebec. I have tried to have this checked—if it is slightly incorrect, I will write to the hon. Gentleman—but when I was in Quebec back in 2013, it had introduced a particular social care visa because it had a particular social care problem. It had to scrap that visa, because after the end of the two-year restrictions, everyone moved to other parts of Canada to work. Most went to Alberta to work in the oil and gas sector. That is a key point about having a different system from the one that is part of those net migration figures.

Johanna Baxter: On the point about social care, does my right hon. Friend agree that instead of looking to a one-line Bill on immigration to solve the issues in social care in Scotland, perhaps the SNP Government in Holyrood could have avoided wasting £28 million on a flawed national care service Bill, which was ill-conceived and ill-thought-out, much like the Bill that is before us today? Perhaps instead they could have invested that money in properly paying the workers who carry out the care. [Interruption.] Sorry?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The debate is taking place with the Secretary of State, who has the floor.

Ian Murray: I agree with my hon. Friend. Look at the money that was wasted for the national care service—again, just another headline in the newspapers that the SNP required in the run-up to an election. It also wasted £680 million setting up Social Security Scotland and wants to put in place a new immigration system that will not require checks, any money, or a border between Scotland and England. The key thing here, which SNP Members do not want to admit and which they voted against, is that this UK Labour Government just gave the Scottish Government the largest settlement in the history of the Scottish Parliament—£4.9 billion more—and there is still a social care crisis in Scotland. That tells us all we need to know about where they spent the money. If SNP Members want to pop up and tell us where they have spent it, I am sure that the Scottish people watching this debate would be pleased to hear from them.

It is important to address the underlying issues in a sustainable way and investigate other levers to encourage people to stay, such as boosting attractive job opportunities, affordable housing, which we have discussed, local services, transport link connectivity and suitable local infrastructure. This could include investing in the area or offering taxation incentives to individuals and businesses to do so, as we are seeing with some of the initiatives going on in Scotland at the moment.

I acknowledge the consideration that the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry has given to Scottish visas and his views on them, but a separate Scottish visa or a separate immigration system are not things that the Government are currently considering, nor have we asked the independent Migration Advisory Committee to consider them. That is a straightforward Government policy.

Kirsty Blackman: The Secretary of State is laying out that the Government are not considering this—that, basically, it is not Government policy for Scotland to have control of migration or for there to be a specific Scottish visa. I assume therefore that he is happy for there to be a vote, and that he is going to encourage a vote, so that he can walk through a Lobby opposing this Bill. If he feels so strongly about it, why is he not pushing for there to be a vote?

Ian Murray: Let me turn to what the Government are doing, which might answer the hon. Lady's question. We are not going to set up a separate Scottish visa; and I refer her back to a previous intervention from the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry, in response to which I mentioned exactly what the deputy leader of the Scottish Labour party actually said in the quote that SNP Members so often misquote. However, we have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to review key sectors, and the existing visa system makes provision for shortages specific to Scotland. Our long-term plan will see Departments working across Government, partnering with agencies and experts to build our skills base, tackle our labour market issues and reduce our reliance on migration.

The system does actually work. I have the shortage occupation list in front of me. That list features 20 or so different occupations, and Scotland has its own list, which includes occupation shortages that are not UK-wide. For example, “Boat and ship builders and repairers—all jobs” is a shortage occupation in Scotland, but not across the rest of the UK. “Managers and proprietors in forestry, fishing and related services” is on the list for Scotland, but not for the rest of the United Kingdom. Those are just two examples of big industries where Scotland does have specific entries on the shortage occupation list, as recommended by the Migration Advisory Committee.

The long-term plan has to be for us to work together to resolve those skills-based issues, tackling other labour market issues and reducing our reliance on migration for workforce planning. It is also clear that different visas for different parts of the UK would restrict movement and rights and create internal UK borders. Creating internal UK borders has been proposed by colleagues of the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry in the Scottish Government. The now Minister for Parliamentary Business—we have mentioned him before—

who was then Minister for Independence suggested that there would have to be a hard border and border checks in the event that we had a different immigration system. That is all we need to know.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): My right hon. Friend talks about the risk of introducing internal borders within the UK. Can he elaborate on whether he thinks it at all possible under our current system of governance and policing to police any such borders?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend hits the practicalities on the head. There is no way, at this moment in time, of monitoring cross-border, because there is not a border to monitor. We have the free flow of movement of people from north to south and from England to Scotland and Wales and so on. The Government do not support creating internal borders of any kind. The open land border within the UK renders tighter controls ineffective in Scotland. More permissive controls would weaken the UK's position as a whole. Consistent rules and legislation are essential to prevent a two-tier system within the United Kingdom and to avoid geographical changes becoming a pull or push factor for those who wish to abuse the system. The current system allows flexibility and freedom for migrant workers to apply for alternative employment anywhere in the UK. Furthermore, visa holders may not want to stay in particular areas for much the same reason as UK nationals, and we cannot compel them to stay indefinitely in any case.

Mr Quigley: Does my right hon. Friend agree that migration, when managed well, is a truly wonderful thing, but this Bill would do quite the opposite?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend says it all, and I could not agree more. The Bill would add extra complexity to an already extremely complex system. Adding devolved powers would increase that level of complexity even further. For example, the previous Fresh Talent: Working in Scotland scheme, which we have talked about, allowed international students graduating from Scottish universities two years in which they could work without needing a sponsoring employer. The route saw many participants relocate to other parts of the UK as soon as they could. The current graduate visa route offers all the same benefits of the old Fresh Talent route, but applies to graduates of all UK universities, not just those in Scotland.

Stephen Gethins: I am not going to comment on the common travel area—perhaps the Secretary of State can cover that—but I want to make a more productive point. Will his Government continue to be committed to that Scottish graduate route, which is so important to higher education? That is one area where I think we can agree. I wanted to bring in a point of consensus.

Ian Murray: We are concerned about the higher education system in Scotland at the moment, and this Government will do everything it can to support it. Let us work through that particular point, because it is important. The main driver for Scottish universities being in the place they are is the funding model they have been forced into having. It caps Scottish students going to university. That means the universities are completely and utterly underfunded, so their business model has

[*Ian Murray*]

had to reach into international waters to bring in much greater numbers of international students to balance the books. That model is completely broken if those international students decrease in number for a whole host of economic and other reasons. We end up in a situation whereby the whole financial issue is completely and utterly broken. To show the sums of money we are talking about, Edinburgh University is not in deficit—and it is important to say that—but it will be if it does not take action, and the deficit will be £140 million. That is a direct result of the Scottish Government's funding of higher education.

Beyond that, the Migration Advisory Committee has also noted that the scale of migration needed to try to address depopulation would be significant, but that Scotland's labour market needs are broadly similar to those elsewhere in the UK. The committee has highlighted in its work notable similarities and differences within nations and regions of the UK, and its ambition is to produce an analysis that is localised, but as rigorous as possible. We look forward to seeing that. However, the committee's geographic focus has at times been limited by the reliability or availability of regional data. It will work with stakeholders to improve the geographical migration data they use, with a view to enabling greater improvement in localised insights.

Beyond this Bill, the proposals of the party of the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry in recent years include an expanded skilled worker visa for Scotland, a bespoke Scottish visa, a Scottish graduate visa and a remote rural partnership scheme. In relation to a Scottish rural visa pilot, the Migration Advisory Committee has noted that both Australia and Canada have place-based immigration programmes, but it is suggested that these schemes may not be a long-term solution to rural depopulation. We heard from the former Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire, that depopulation in Scotland has been a century long and therefore any scheme will not be a long-term solution to that kind of rural depopulation.

Dame Meg Hillier: My right hon. Friend is making an interesting point about the challenges facing rural areas where there are shortages of people. Denmark has a rota system for doctors going into rural areas for a few months at a time, because it, like Scotland and parts of England, have these challenges. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that having a separate immigration policy for Scotland is not the answer and that this issue is being grappled with across the world?

Ian Murray: Absolutely, and the biggest grappling that we have to do as a Government and a country is resolve the disconnect between immigration, skills, opportunities for young people and the way in which our economy works across every single part of the United Kingdom.

One of the Migration Advisory Committee's key concerns about some of these schemes is the efficiency of any rural visa, primarily the ability to incentivise migrants to remain located in rural areas after any visa requirements to do so lapse, especially given that the UK is a geographically much smaller country than Australia

or Canada—and I mentioned the issue with regard to Quebec. Migrants moving to rural areas would be subject to the same factors driving non-migrant populations to relocate, such as inadequate health services, which is right at the top of the agenda in Scotland.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the state of the national health service in Scotland is contributing to the low birth rate in Scotland, and we need to invest in maternity, fertility and post-birth services for mothers?

Ian Murray: It gives me no pleasure to say this, but I take great pride in the fact that this Labour Government concentrated on getting the NHS back on its feet after the election, and for six months in a row—six winter months in a row—waiting lists have fallen. However, in Scotland they have not. Despite the Scottish Government having a record settlement from the UK Labour Government and despite £4.9 billion extra, the NHS is broken in Scotland because it does not have a Government who are solely focused on making sure that the health of their nation is a top priority.

Pete Wishart: Why is the Secretary of State talking about the Scottish Government?

Ian Murray: I know SNP Members do not like us speaking about the Scottish Government, but the Migration Advisory Committee that they have talked about a lot in this Chamber already is addressing these issues. They challenged me to tell them what this Government were doing in relation to this Bill and migration in the Scottish context, and I am telling them what the Migration Advisory Committee is saying in response to this Bill. [*Interruption.*] SNP Members do not want to talk about it, but I will continue to talk about it until health in this country improves, and I have to say that when one in seven of my constituents are on NHS waiting lists, I will continue talking about it until these lights go out.

Non-migrant populations would have the same problems as the rest of us in terms of inadequate health services, the declared housing emergency, a broader lack of investment in skills and training, and economic opportunities for young people.

The one element in common among all these proposals is they are designed to provide a means to avoid or lower the salary requirements that apply to skilled worker visas. The Migration Advisory Committee has repeatedly advised against salary variations as they could create frictions for workers moving around the UK and could risk institutionalising areas as being low wage. This could have the effect of entrenching low pay in some areas for the resident populations as well as migrant workers, which would do nothing to resolve the long-term causes of depopulation. I am very proud, as is everyone on the Government Benches, of our Make Work Pay commitment and our new deal for working people.

Having different salary thresholds for different parts of the UK would also add complexity to an already complicated immigration system and would create difficulties for employers who operate across multiple regions of the UK, potentially requiring them to monitor the physical location of their employees and report that information to the Home Office to ensure compliance.

Of course we are aware of the demographic and labour market challenges faced by certain areas, sectors and industries, but we have seen record-high net migration levels in recent years while depopulation has remained an issue for Scotland, suggesting that immigration is not a solution to those challenges, especially given that we cannot practically compel people to stay in a particular area indefinitely. Instead, we are taking action through a joined-up approach across Government, in the UK's immigration, labour market and skills system, to train up our own home-grown workforce, end the over-reliance on international recruitment and boost economic growth in every single part of the UK.

At the same time, the Government have confirmed that the changes made to key visa routes earlier last year will remain in place to drive levels down further. Additionally, as we announced last November, shameless and bad employers that flout UK employment laws will be banned from sponsoring overseas visas, as part of tough new action to clamp down on visa abuse and prevent the exploitation of overseas workers. I hope that the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry and his colleagues will give us their support in Scotland to ensure that workers are not exploited by rogue employers.

Let me turn to skills and migration. The Government recognise and value the important contribution that overseas workers make to our economy and public services throughout the United Kingdom. As the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, remote parts of Scotland face depopulation, and skills shortages remain at their highest levels across Scotland. However, those issues have not been solved by the increase in net migration in recent years. Indeed, many of the actions needed to fix Scotland's skills shortages are already devolved matters under the control of the Scottish Government, so his SNP colleagues in Holyrood already have the levers they need to address those challenges. They may wish to try pulling some of those levers—perhaps he can do so himself, because he wants to be a Member of the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, I think a high proportion of his colleagues think the same. Maybe that is why the leader of the SNP in this House, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), has already disappeared to go back to Scotland and make the case for his selection.

Let me just run through some of the levers that the Scottish Government could pull. They include powers relating to business rates, social security and tax; the record settlement of £47.7 billion, which is £4.9 billion more than before; and, of course, responsibility for education, health, housing, and employability and skills. They do not want to talk about any of those things. Businesses and unions consistently tell us that they worry about the skills gaps in Scotland. I am surprised that SNP Members do not care about this stuff. This is not just about skills and jobs; it is about opportunities for young people. Perhaps they do want to talk about it, because they all want to go to the Scottish Parliament and to refocus on what they are delivering.

The UK Government are focused on delivering outcomes and securing the future through our plan for change. Simply put, young people in Scotland—whether in work or seeking work—are not being supported with the skills and training that they need to succeed. Scotland's rate of economic inactivity remains above that of the

rest of the UK. I am not shy about repeating this: nearly one in six young people in Scotland are not in education, employment or training. Some 1,351 young people in Scotland left high school last year with absolutely no qualifications—an entire high school-worth of young people written off with no future because the Scottish Government refused to do something about it.

I am very proud that this UK Labour Government have relentlessly focused on getting people into work and developing their skills by increasing the national living wage and legislating to make work pay; strengthening workers' rights and protections; providing £240 million for the Get Britain Working plan, which will overhaul jobcentres with a focus on skills and careers; and delivering a proper industrial strategy, developed in partnership with businesses and trade unions, to ensure that we get the economy, and the people in it, working. However, the Scottish Government also have a huge role to play, and they must use the levers that they have. As I have said before, I want co-operation between Governments to drive our economic growth, and skills are central to that.

I hope that the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry, his party and his colleagues in Holyrood will engage with all that work and replicate its focus in their programme for government next month, which I think is their fourth or fifth in four years—every other programme for government so far has been an abject failure. I would be particularly interested to see further work on skills and education, building on the work of the Withers review, because right now the SNP Government are failing on skills.

Stephen Gethins: Why?

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman asks why and I will tell him. The number of college places is at its lowest level in a decade, with more cuts on the way; the attainment gap between the richest and poorest continues to grow; and, disgracefully, thousands of pupils left school last year with absolutely no qualifications, as I have said. That cannot be allowed to continue.

This is nothing new. Was it not the current First Minister who lobbied for tax breaks for private schools, whereas this Labour Government ended tax breaks for private schools?

Kirsty Blackman: Immigration!

Ian Murray: SNP Members keep shouting “Immigration!”, but as the Migration Advisory Committee has said, the immigration issue is complex, because it is about housing, health, education, skills, work and employment, and this is the First Minister's record on that.

That is not all that the First Minister did as Education Secretary. We all remember the disgrace of working-class kids being marked down by the First Minister and the Scottish Qualifications Authority during the pandemic. Under him, poorer kids were penalised by postcode—penalised by their poverty. Poorer kids could not be getting the results that they were getting, so they were marked down. Bright and from a working-class area? The First Minister did not believe that you deserved the grades that your teachers decided you should have got.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. This is a very interesting riff on education, but can we get back to the immigration point, please?

Ian Murray: Thank you for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the important point is that immigration and skills are completely linked. If the education system is broken and the skills system is broken, the SNP reaches for a Bill like this one, rather than reaching for the levers at the disposal of the Scottish Government.

I speak from experience. A working-class person looking to get on in life needs the security of a house, the opportunity of a career and someone to believe in them. During the pandemic, thousands of working-class kids were sent a clear message by the First Minister that he did not believe in them.

For our part, to tackle skills shortages, we will focus on investment in jobs, infrastructure and public services by upskilling resident workers and tackling economic inactivity. We will reduce the reliance on international recruitment to fill roles. We will have a shortage occupation list that includes specific occupations and sectors that are required in our national interest and for our economy. In addition, the UK Government want to engage with bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that are responsible for skills matters. That work is under way and will link directly to the Migration Advisory Committee, the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, the Department for Work and Pensions and, of course, Skills England from an English and Welsh perspective.

Ms Billington: What is important is not only economic security for individuals and the opportunities that a strong economy would provide for them, but the economic security of our country. The SNP voted against Great British Energy and opposes nuclear power, both of which are vital to our energy security and our economic security. If it is opposed to those, how can we be sure that it would be competent to deliver immigration policy?

Ian Murray: It astounds me that the leader of the Scottish National party in this place, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South, has GB Energy headquartered in his own constituency but voted against it. SNP Members voted against the extra £4.9 billion in the Budget, and they stand against nuclear power. Those three examples show why Scotland needs to take a new direction at the election next year.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the list of things that SNP Members oppose includes jobs being created in that constituency?

Ian Murray: With GB Energy, and indeed with the green revolution going on across the globe, my ambition is not just that Scotland will play a part, but that it will win the global race. It is well placed to do so, with first mover advantage. The things this Government have done—setting a mission for clean power by 2030, setting up and capitalising GB Energy and having a National Wealth Fund—are all part of making sure that Scotland wins that global race, and of creating the jobs of the future.

Sean Woodcock: It seems to me, to be fair, that this Bill is about creating jobs in Scotland—but jobs for form checkers and passport checkers at the border between England and Scotland, rather than anything particularly useful. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. All the Scottish National party debates that I have seen in this Chamber since I was lucky enough to be elected in 2010 have been predicated on independence. There have been no positive debates about what we can do to make things better for people in Scotland, increase economic growth, create skills and opportunities for the future, tackle inequalities in health or close the attainment gap. Those are all failures of the Scottish National party, but SNP Members do not want to talk about them. I am sure you do not want me to continue to talk about them either, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Graham Leadbitter: The point that the Secretary of State makes about the oil and gas sector is very pertinent. At Ardersier, the First Minister of Scotland and a representative of the UK Government met with Haventus relatively recently to support the investment there with joint efforts from both Governments. That was very welcome, but to support that we need a thriving service and hospitality sector, which is a real problem in my constituency. In parts of the highlands in Moray, in places such as Nairn and Aviemore, there is a growing population. Despite that, there are hospitality businesses that are open only five days a week out of seven, because they cannot staff them—they cannot get the staff. How does the Secretary of State suggest that we deal with that?

Ian Murray: As I have said throughout this debate, this is a really complex area. We cannot deal with it by just pulling on one lever and with a separate immigration system. We can deal with it by providing proper pay in the workplace, which is what we have done through our new deal for working people. We can provide housing, so that people can live there and afford to live there. We can provide connectivity, so that people can move around. A very practical thing that the Scottish Government could have done was to pass on the full rates relief that English hospitality businesses had, which was not passed on to Scottish hospitality businesses. Indeed, despite this Government legislating for a 40% reduction in perpetuity, the Scottish Government still refuse to do that.

Seamus Logan: I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) will agree that the difficulty in my constituency is not the issue of proper pay or housing. [*Interruption.*] If Labour Members will just listen for a moment, they will hear the issue is that we are at full employment. Some 2.3% of the population between the ages of 16 and 64 are unemployed. By any definition, that is full employment. The issue is that we cannot get the staff. The Secretary of State is ducking the question, so will he please answer it?

Ian Murray: Let us do a little mathematics. Some 2.3% of the population in the hon. Gentleman's constituency are unemployed, and nearly one in six young people across Scotland are not in education, employment or training. That is nearly 100,000 young people alone. The question must be: why are those young people not seeking out those jobs in his constituency and the constituency of the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter)? The hon. Gentleman wants to say to those young people,

“You stay not in employment, education or training, and we will pull a separate immigration lever to get people to work in poorly paid industries, rather than boosting pay, careers, progression and the places that people want to live and work in.”

Scotland has a proud industrial past—indeed, we all know that from history—and it can have a bright industrial future that delivers jobs and wealth for families for generations to come. For too long, Scottish workers have missed out on work, and I worry that a new generation will miss out on the skills required to take up the new opportunities. While the Scotland Office will seek to work in co-operation with the Scottish Government, I am afraid that this debate is just another example of the SNP demanding more powers to distract from its own failures rather than take responsibility for them.

UK visas are tied to locations already—an international student at the University of Edinburgh is not commuting from Somerset. The question is then: at a time when the previous Government presided over record levels of immigration, why is Scotland not a more attractive place for people coming to the UK to work or study? I suggest that it is down to 20 years of SNP failure on policy delivery.

Johanna Baxter: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we want to attract people to work in our great nation of Scotland, it is important that he continues the work he has been doing to promote businesses and services globally in Brand Scotland? *[Interruption.]*

Ian Murray: The flippancy with which SNP Members deal with these relevant and serious issues is there for all to see. I hope that a lot of our non-Scottish colleagues who are here today have seen how utterly deplorably they operate in this Chamber and how rude and patronising they are when we are dealing with serious issues for our constituents. Brand Scotland is there to do exactly that: to ensure that we get inward investment into Scotland, to sell Scotland to the world and to have a much more thriving economy for our communities.

Gareth Snell: The Secretary of State is being exceedingly generous with his time. SNP Members keep saying, “Don’t talk about the Scottish Government”, but the Bill’s aim is to devolve power from this place to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, so I think the competence of the Scottish Parliament is in scope. Immigration is neatly and importantly linked to our national security. We have one system, which is an important layer of our national security. The Scottish National party wishes to frack that situation. Has the Secretary of State had any guidance from the Ministry of Defence or the Home Office on the implications of the immigration system changes that SNP Members are attempting to achieve?

Ian Murray: We have not yet examined this in any great detail in this debate, but defence and our national security are huge issues. We heard a bit about boat crossings; nobody wants to see those. We want to smash the gangs and stop the crossings. One person crossing by small boat is one too many, because they are putting in danger their life and the lives of others, and that has to stop. There is a huge defence and national security

issue here, because the small boats crossings are run by criminal gangs in Europe and on the streets of constituencies all around the country.

The answer to the question my hon. Friend just posed is not in the Bill. This is a short Bill to devolve the whole immigration and asylum system to the Scottish Parliament. The Bill does not actually say what it will do. I have no doubt about the honesty and integrity—and any other word we might pluck out of the sky—of the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry, but we cannot take the Bill at face value. He says, “Pop it into Committee and everything will be wonderful,” but we do not know the implications of his Bill. If he wanted to, he could have brought in a Bill that addressed that point.

Stephen Gethins: I am grateful for the Secretary of State’s characteristically kind words about me. I am happy to take guidance, and to engage with civil servants and the MOD. Either vote the Bill out or do not, but let us engage with it. This is the most that the Secretary of State for Scotland has spoken in any debate since he was elected, so why will he not use the debate positively?

Ian Murray: I think I have used the debate positively. I have spent a long time talking about our skills agenda, our plan to make work pay, GB Energy, the national wealth fund, economic growth and Brand Scotland. All those things are very positive and have been delivered in the first few months of this Labour Government. If the Scottish Government had the same focus on delivering for the people of Scotland as we have down here, they would be in a much better place.

Peter Lamb: In the debate, any number of challenges relating to practicality and principle have been raised about the Bill, and we have repeatedly had SNP Members shouting out, “Put the Bill to a vote, then!” Every time they say that, everyone else in the Chamber hears, “We don’t have any answers to the questions and points that you raise.” Putting the Bill to a vote would be purely symbolism, and not a serious use of the House’s time.

Ian Murray: Absolutely, and I hope that my hon. Friend would say that this contribution from the Government Dispatch Box is a very good use of the Government’s time.

Gareth Snell: The very best!

Ian Murray: I thank my hon. Friend very much—I hope *Hansard* heard that. I did say that the attractiveness of Scotland as a place to live and work is down to policy delivery, and let me mention one policy in particular.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: Like the shadow Secretary of State, I will be running the London marathon on Sunday. I mention that because people do not run marathons by making excuses, yet when we hear from SNP Members about skills, growth, health and universities, the excuse is always either immigration policy or a lack of devolution. If there is always an excuse for their failure, they will not achieve anything. That is why we need a serious debate about how we will get more people into Scotland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I am not sure that the hon. Member highlighting his prowess in running the London marathon is appropriate to the Bill, but I wish him well.

Ian Murray: We all wish my hon. Friend well, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that “wishing him well” goes as far as going to his JustGiving page and throwing him a few quid. My record for 26 miles is based on how fast I can drive the car, not how far I can run; I know hon. Members will find that difficult to believe.

A key reason why it might not be attractive to live and work in some places in Scotland, and why reaching for this Bill would be wrong, is the provision of health services. There is no greater issue for our constituents; health is always the No. 1 priority for them, whether they live in Wales, Northern Ireland, England or Scotland. Concern about health services is top of the agenda for Scottish people. However, people in Scotland receive less cancer treatment than their neighbours in other parts of the UK, and the 62-day waiting time standard that was put into law has not been met in Scotland since 2012, more than 13 years ago. Over the winter, waiting lists in England fell for six months in a row, but over 100,000 Scots have been stuck on an NHS waiting list for tests or treatment for over a year. That is 26% higher than just a year ago.

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Is it a real point of order?

Pete Wishart: It is. It falls to me to very humbly make this point of order. What can you, as Chair of the proceedings, do, within your powers, to ensure that we have an adequate debate on what this Bill is about?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not sure if I am thankful for that point of order. The Chair is overseeing the debate. I have listened to it very closely. I appreciate that it is about immigration. I know that the Bill is very thin—it is only two pages long—but it is broad in scope. I will continue to listen very closely to the Secretary of State, and he will ensure that his comments are within scope of the Bill.

Ian Murray: If my comments fall out of scope, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would be very happy for you to tell me, as you have the right to, and as you do so well; I will then change my remarks. However, the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire spent three quarters of his rather lengthy contribution talking about the same issues that I am addressing. He may want to reflect on that.

Seamus Logan: I welcome your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker, with regard to the focus of the debate.

You are speaking about waiting list times for cancer treatment. What has that got to do with immigration? Secondly, you keep focusing on—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I know the debate is very intense, but “you” means me. No doubt the hon. Member is not critiquing me.

Seamus Logan: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Secretary of State is talking about health metrics. We will see about the validity of some of those health metrics for England over the next few months, but there are many other metrics in health and social care. In

Scotland, we are very proud to have free prescriptions, free social care, free personal care and many more benefits. I will not list them all in the way that you do, with your litany of so-called failures, because I want to talk up Scotland—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. That is twice! “You” refers to the Chair. I think that is the end of that intervention. I call the Secretary of State.

Ian Murray: Just for clarity for Members of this House who are not Scottish, free personal care was a Labour policy of the last Labour Administration in Scotland. Let me deal directly with that intervention, which was well-meaning. The reason why we are talking about health is that the issue concerns the birth rate. We have heard already about the lack of maternity services, and the lack of maternity and paternity support, both pre-birth and post-birth. They are a key part of whether people determine to have more children.

People may have in the back of their mind the question of whether they want to go to Scotland and sit on a waiting list with one in seven of their fellow Scots, or want to live somewhere where the waiting lists are going down. Do they want to live in Scotland, where the Government have passed an Act committing to a 62-day waiting time, but have not met that target in 13 years? Do they want to be on an NHS waiting list that is 26% longer today than it was last year? Do they want to be in a place where in the first nine months of 2024, over 36,500 procedures were paid for by patients because they had to get their cataracts, hip and knee replacements done? They even had to pay for rounds of chemotherapy because their choice was pay or pain. That is the choice that this Scottish Government have given to patients. There is a two-tier NHS in Scotland: one for those who can pay, and one for those who have to wait in pain. Despite that abysmal backlog and Scots being forced to go private, almost 50,000 fewer operations are carried out a year than before the pandemic.

Does the hon. Gentleman want to intervene and say whether I have answered his question about why health is relevant to the debate? Perhaps not. The bodies responsible for community health and social care—a sector with a fair proportion of international workers—face a funding gap in Scotland of £457 million. Councils that have been slashed to the bone are responsible for social care services. The outsourcing of social care services and the driving down of wages are the only options that councils have been left with because of the constant underfunding of social care by the Scottish Government.

I make no apology for highlighting the SNP’s record in Scotland on the issues that it is responsible for. SNP Members never want to talk about the powers they have—just the powers that they do not have. But let me be slightly more positive and talk about our working together in a spirit of co-operation. The hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry might want to reflect on this. I will share an example of Scotland’s two Governments working together on an immigration issue. Last August, 19 female Afghan medical students, barred by the Taliban in Afghanistan from completing their medical university studies, arrived in Scotland to train to become doctors. Previously, the women were confined

to their homes and unable to contribute to their society through a medical career. Many feared for not just their careers but their lives. They felt that their lives were in danger, and they lived in fear of the Taliban.

The UK Government's Scotland Office proposed student visas as an alternative route to using the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and the Scottish Government confirmed that they would introduce legislation to amend student funding regulations to ensure that the women could attend Scottish medical schools and complete their studies. It was a tremendous effort of co-operation between the UK and Scottish Governments, brokered by the wonderful Linda Norgrove Foundation. Linda Norgrove was an aid worker from the Western Isles in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar. The foundation was set up by Linda Norgrove's parents John and Lorna in memory of their daughter, who was kidnapped and died during a failed rescue attempt in Afghanistan in October 2010.

The foundation aims to support women and children affected by war in Afghanistan. It has raised more than £3 million since it was established in 2010, which has been spent on a wide range of projects, from literacy programmes to calligraphy classes. It had been providing scholarships for women to study medicine, dentistry, the law and business at university. That came to an end when the Taliban banned women from attending university. On behalf of the UK Government, and I am sure the Scottish Government, I commend the foundation for its ongoing extraordinary work on this aspect of immigration. I highlight it not to make a political point, but because it shows that when we have an issue that needs to be resolved and the Scottish and UK Governments can work together, we can resolve these kinds of issues directly. Those Afghan women, when they complete their medical studies in Scotland, can contribute so much to the country and to their future.

This Government look forward to publishing the immigration White Paper. We will reduce immigration and work to provide Scotland with the economic growth, jobs and opportunities that it deserves and needs. We will continue to work with the Scottish Government on delivering for Scotland—we have reset that relationship—but we will also respect the devolution settlement. However, the UK Government do not believe that this Bill, devolving further powers on immigration, is the solution to Scotland's depopulation or skills shortage. We need both Governments working together in this vital area, and if the Scottish Government are not willing to do that, I suggest that they stand aside next year and allow Labour to do it for them.

1.13 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) on the way in which he opened the debate. I thank him for laying out why it is essential that until Scotland is an independent nation, free to return to the security and stability of the European Union, the very least we need to secure our economic future is a Scottish visa. Such a visa would allow the Scottish Government to bring people to Scotland to work in the parts of the economy in which they are most needed—in tourism, hospitality, care, our fishing industry, or wherever those closest to the problem can identify a need.

You will be delighted to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will not speak for long and will keep to the scope of the Bill. The Secretary of State will know that in my constituency of Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber, and indeed across rural Scotland, we have a large ageing population—a population that is therefore largely non-economically active—and that is utterly unsustainable. There is a demographic crisis coming, because we are suffering from population decline.

The Secretary of State knows that rural Scotland—Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber in particular—desperately needs people. It needs people to come and live, to open a business, to invest, to work, to put down roots, and hopefully to raise a family. Not only does he know that, but previous Secretaries of State have known that. Not only does the Home Secretary know that, but previous Home Secretaries have known that. But because of the anti-immigration hostile environment on the part of the previous Government and, I have to say, the complete moral cowardice on the part of this Government, it is an issue that they will not address. Indeed, it would appear—I hope I am wrong—that the Government are so craven that they will not even allow a vote on the Bill. I hope that I am wrong and that we can divide on the Bill.

This is not a crisis that has just emerged and it has not taken anyone, least of all the Government, by surprise; this has been going on for years. We have talked about it time and again in this place, but for reasons that have nothing to do with Scotland, and indeed that work against Scotland's best interests, no one in this place seems prepared to address it.

More than five years have passed since February 2020, when I asked the then Tory Scotland Secretary about the introduction of a Scottish work visa. He replied that the Government had

“no plans to devolve immigration. The new system will recognise the needs of all the nations and regions of the UK, including Scotland.”

In September this year I asked the new Labour Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill)—the exact same question, only to be given an almost identical reply. She said:

“I look forward to working with the Home Office and engaging with sectors on ensuring that immigration works for all parts of the UK.”—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 299.]

So, five years apart, and a new Secretary of State and a new Government, but almost an identical answer. That is not change; that is continuity.

Gareth Snell: What the hon. Gentleman is talking about as a potential solution to the demographic problems he faces seems to be much narrower than the total of what the Bill would achieve, should it pass through the House. The Bill is about immigration, including asylum and status. I am sure he has had conversations with the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) about the practicalities of that. The UK has an asylum backlog, although that is getting lower because of work by the Home Office. Under the proposals for a devolved asylum and immigration system, would the Scottish Government take a proportion of that backlog, move those people to Scotland and process those asylum claims as part of an independent system in Scotland, or

[Gareth Snell]

would he expect the remainder of the UK to keep that burden and share it out? I am genuinely interested in the practicalities of what he is suggesting.

Brendan O'Hara: First, I would question the language about asylum seekers being a burden. I think asylum seekers are here in the main for good, honourable and honest reasons. I do not view them as a burden. I believe that the Scottish Government already take care of that, and yes, there will be cross-border co-operation until such time as we can have our own independent asylum policy. But again, I do not see that as being a great barrier that should stop a good idea from being further discussed.

The Government are continuing what the previous Government did and are absolutely oblivious to the needs of rural Scotland. They will not do anything, because essentially it is not politically expedient for them so to do.

Dame Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman skirted over the question of the cost of doing this. The burden is not the individuals, but there is a huge cost to the UK Home Office of delivering the system and helping people through it—everything from detention centres at airports and elsewhere, to the processing of the claims, the greeting and receiving of people when they sadly arrive on boats and by other routes, and the management of the borders. All those things are costs, and that is a burden to the taxpayer—it is a fact of life that it does cost the taxpayer. I am wondering where the hon. Gentleman thinks the money will come from and what they are going to cut in Scotland to fund this.

Brendan O'Hara: As long as we are, unfortunately, part of the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom Government will have a responsibility and a role to play. We should be allowing asylum seekers to work and contribute to the economy, because the current system is a complete nonsense. We should also be looking very closely at how we treat these vulnerable individuals. I do not think we should be taking any lectures from the previous Government or this Government on how we treat the most vulnerable people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Brendan O'Hara: I will make some progress, because I said I would stick to the scope of the Bill. The final thing I will say to the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) is that I do not think it is beyond the wit of everyone in this place to come to an equitable solution. I do not think that throwing up this smokescreen on Second Reading—[*Interruption.*] It is a smokescreen—is a useful thing to do. Let us give this Bill its Second Reading and take it into Committee, and let us dig in to that minutiae, because unless and until we do so, this House will continue to bat this away, and it is not a sustainable position.

I do not need to remind the Secretary of State that Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union. We did that, I believe, because we recognised the enormous benefits that membership of the European

Union brought to Scotland. One of the greatest of those benefits was freedom of movement—the ability for our people to move freely across Europe and for Europeans to come here. There was hardly a café, hotel, guest house or pub in Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber that did not have a young European—more often than not, several young Europeans—working in it. They filled essential seasonal gaps in the local labour market, allowing businesses to remain open and serve the needs of visiting tourists.

That is all gone, and once thriving businesses are now struggling to find the staff they have depended on. Many hitherto successful seven-days-a-week businesses are now operating five, four or sometimes only three days a week, and not because the visitors have gone but because they simply cannot get the staff. The added bonus was that when these bright, young, ambitious Europeans came, they often decided to stay, or they would return later to raise a family and set up home in Scotland. Indeed, it was a cornerstone of Argyll and Bute council's plan for economic regeneration. That whole plan was predicated on continuing to have access to EU nationals and being able to attract them into the area.

Through no fault of our own, and despite voting overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, the insanity of Brexit has taken that away from them. The UK Government, having taken that away from them, now have a responsibility to provide a solution, particularly to help those rural areas suffering from depopulation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Brendan O'Hara: I have rarely in my life been more popular. I give way to the hon. Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm).

Steve Yemm: Given that the SNP decided to withdraw an amendment to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill on this very policy earlier this year, does the hon. Member agree that today's Bill is a cheap stunt rather than a meaningful attempt to make Scotland a more attractive place to live and work? [*Interruption.*]

Brendan O'Hara: My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) cannot respond to the hon. Gentleman, so allow me to do so: what amendment? What is he talking about? He has got no idea.

To return to the point, the UK Government, having taken that away from the rural communities in Scotland, now have a responsibility to provide a solution. If they will not do it, for ideological reasons, the least they can do is allow the Scottish Government to do it, because we cannot go on this way. I am not surprised that all we have seen from Labour Members is them lining up to kick the Scottish Government and the SNP. That is politics; and, to be fair, they would be as well taking every opportunity to do it, because they will probably not last for long.

By 2047, the proportion of working-age people in Scotland will be smaller than it is now, and the number of people of pensionable age is expected to rise. That is a huge threat, not just to our economy but to our ability to provide public services. Of course, there is no magic

bullet, and nobody has said that about this Bill, but what it proposes is a hugely important tool in the toolkit.

Johanna Baxter: The hon. Gentleman talks about the needs of his constituents, which is worthy and notable. Can he explain to the House, then, why he opposes the nuclear deterrent, which is based in his constituency and is the second biggest employer in Scotland? The jobs it provides could go some way to addressing the points he makes.

Brendan O'Hara: Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to veer ever so slightly from my promise to remain within the scope of the Bill in order to answer the hon. Lady's question. I think I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when I was 16, before I joined the SNP. I have been a lifelong opponent of nuclear weapons. When I stood in my constituency in 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024, I made no bones about my position on nuclear weapons, and my constituents voted for me. She suggests that this is a massive issue, but it is not an issue for the people of Argyll, Bute and—now—South Lochaber. I would gently point out that my position is also the position of the Labour party in Scotland.

I will conclude. The introduction of a regional immigration policy to reflect the needs of the circumstances at the time has worked in Australia, Canada and other parts of Europe, and there is no reason, other than a complete lack of political will, why that cannot happen here. We have heard a lot of quotations from the Migration Advisory Committee, and it would be remiss of me not to quote it myself. It has said that

“the current migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems remote communities experience... If these problems are to be addressed something more bespoke for these areas is needed.”

It said that six years ago. Here we are, six years on, and while we have had a change of Government and a change of Secretary of State, we have seen absolutely no progress on this issue. Indeed, I dare say that what we have heard today is the Labour party backtracking on it.

Allow me to finish by saying this: we need a bespoke immigration policy in Scotland. We have been done in by the insanity of Brexit. We are reeling from what has happened to us and the impact it is having, particularly on our rural communities. Everyone can see that, but there is intransigence on the part of the Government to recognise what is in front of their nose. I fear for them that the people of Scotland will recognise that when it comes to Scotland and the needs of Scotland, we do not figure particularly highly on this Government's agenda.

Brendan O'Hara claimed to move the closure (*Standing Order No. 36*).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 12, Noes 50.

Division No. 177]

[1.31 pm

AYES

Berry, Siân	Cross, Harriet
Bowie, Andrew	Doogan, Dave
Chope, Sir Christopher	Flynn, rh Stephen

Gethins, Stephen
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Logan, Seamus
Mohamed, Iqbal

Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kirsty Blackman and
Brendan O'Hara

NOES

Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Baxter, Johanna
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Rachel
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Botterill, Jade
Costigan, Deirdre
Creagh, Mary
Crichton, Torcuil
Dalton, Ashley
Doughty, Stephen
Entwistle, Kirith
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Gardiner, Barry
Gould, Georgia
Greenwood, Lillian
Harris, Carolyn
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Jogee, Adam
Jones, Gerald
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Khan, Naushabah
Lamb, Peter
Lewin, Andrew

Madders, Justin
Mather, Keir
McKenna, Kevin
McMorrin, Anna
Murray, rh Ian
Norris, Alex
Patrick, Matthew
Pitcher, Lee
Quigley, Mr Richard
Reid, Joani
Russell, Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Snell, Gareth
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, Rachel
Thompson, Adam
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote
cast by Adam Jogee*)
Uppal, Harpreet
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Melanie
Webb, Chris
Woodcock, Sean
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Kate Dearden and
Vicky Foxcroft

Question accordingly negatived.

Debate resumed.

1.46 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) on bringing forward this Bill. It takes me back to the halcyon days when I served as an immigration Minister. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about that experience and explain why I therefore disagree with the premise of his Bill.

There were things the hon. Gentleman said that we might find agreement on. He says that migration is a good thing. I would add that, yes, it is, but it needs to be controlled and it needs to be where there is need. I recognise that there is certainly need in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom. We need to make sure that any immigration policy that we support and any changes that the Government introduce are led by those principles.

The hon. Gentleman talked about pooling and sharing sovereignty. We are in a United Kingdom, and I agree that being part of the United Kingdom is the right thing. That is why I am a Unionist at heart. I am proud to have served in what was then Her Majesty's Government as a Home Office Minister, working on a number of issues that covered the entirety of the UK.

The hon. Gentleman spoke at length about young people. We know that the demographics of Scotland are a particular challenge, but as the Secretary of State and others highlighted, the Scottish Government's record

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

on young people is woeful, with one in six not in education, employment or training. It is a scandalous level of disregard for the future of the whole UK but in particular Scotland, where young people are the lifeblood of the future of economic development and can help us ensure that we do not have to deal with the issues that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have highlighted today.

It is shocking that the demographics of Scotland are as they are, and I compare this with England. I represent a constituency where our demographics are changing, and around one in five young people are now under the age of 16. We are investing in those young people. As I say when I go into schools, “You are the future of our country. You need to get good jobs and do well. You will be paying the pensions of older people. You will be caring for people and running the country. We need you.”

We believe in investing in our young people, and it is a shocker that the Scottish Government have sleepwalked into letting young people fail so badly. There is such talent among young people in Scotland, and they have been sorely let down. They should be the lifeblood of the country, and the Scottish Government should be doing more to support them.

A number of Members have mentioned the Migration Advisory Committee. I will go on to speak about it in more detail, but the fact that the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Home Secretary have indicated very clearly their willingness to engage rather undermines the hon. Gentleman’s argument for the need for the Bill in the first place. The Migration Advisory Committee has a role to cover the needs of migration across the country—that is, the whole of the UK, including Scotland.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned fresh talent. He talked about examples where the Scottish Government worked very closely with the Home Office. The Secretary of State highlighted an example, too—the Afghan women medical students. That is an example of how we can work together in the interests of the UK and Scotland. We are doing that already, so what on earth is the reason to have a separate Bill on migration?

I want to touch on the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) in his excellent speech. He spoke from a place of real knowledge about the challenges for island communities, including ferries. I have very fond memories of spending time in the Isle of Wight as child. It is smaller, but the challenges are very similar. I feel his pain in relation to the ferries. I could repeat what he said about the failure of the SNP Government on ferries, but given the many things I need to talk about in the next half an hour or so, I will just say that he highlighted that very clearly. He also laid out clearly some of the challenges and burdens of a separate system of immigration. It is not a cost-free option. It is costly to the taxpayer, duplicative and confusing for businesses. He also debunked the myths of a virtual border—something we heard rather too much about during Brexit.

On the basis of the SNP’s track record, any future Labour Government in Scotland, which we all hope to see in 2026, will have a lot on their plate. I do not think that dealing with immigration is anywhere near the top of the agenda, because a Scottish Labour Government would see very clearly the benefits of working across the

United Kingdom, between Whitehall and Edinburgh, to make sure we all delivered for all our communities. Certainly, setting up a new system would not be a priority. It was a bit disingenuous of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) to suggest that we were conceding victory to the SNP next year. It is precisely because of the SNP Government’s mess that we need to win next year and it is precisely because of their mess that the idea of a new immigration policy as a priority, when they have failed in so many other respects, is not something we should entertain.

I want to move on to my more detailed remarks. As I have said, I am very pleased to speak in the debate because I believe in devolution. I am a passionate believer in devolving power to the most appropriate level, to competent bodies. I served as a councillor in Islington in the days when we were devolving things to neighbourhoods. For my younger colleagues, this was in the days before the internet—those days did exist. We wanted services to be within pram-pushing distance and decisions devolved to the communities best placed to make them. I had the honour of serving in the Government of Gordon Brown as an immigration Minister for three years, spending a lot of time travelling across the UK to look at the issues. I will touch on that in relation to Scotland in a moment. I both debated the issue and followed it since in the UK generally, and specifically in Scotland.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) highlighted the recruitment issues and the workload crisis, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) so eloquently put it, as is his wont, attracting people somewhere is not down to immigration policies. Immigration is one element, but as the academic Richard Florida highlights, people will go to places where there is good education, a good cultural offer, excellent transport links and a tolerant community. We can all learn about how we can make our own constituencies attractive.

Of course, we do not have problems attracting people Hackney South and Shoreditch, except on the knotty issue of the cost of housing, which is another very important factor to attract people. Given all the challenges of covid, many people moved from expensive areas like mine, where a typical two-bedroom flat is £750,000 and rents are through the roof, to areas where they could get cheaper housing, because they had the opportunity to work from home and good broadband. I therefore suggest to the SNP Government in Scotland that they think about broadband speed, and sweetening the offer on housing to attract younger people to live and work in Scotland. They should make sure that their schools, health service and so on are delivering to attract them to what is a beautiful country with much to offer. But why is it that people are not staying? That is a failure of the SNP Government and we need to be absolutely clear about that.

As I have said, I started my career devolving services to the most appropriate level, in Islington—a borough of that size! It started as 24 neighbourhoods, but we reduced down to 12, because we had to take account of costs and so on. I pay tribute to Councillor Maurice Barnes, who proposed that approach to delivering services to make sure that they were really embedded in the community. In 1998, when the Labour Government came in having promised devolution, we saw under

Donald Dewar the new dawn of a devolved Scotland. The giants who led on that devolution proposal should be respected for what they delivered. Devolution in Scotland was a breakthrough, and it is something I support, but if we are going to devolve power, we also need to make sure that the authority is competent to deal with those devolved powers. The electorate in Scotland, of course, will have their say on that in 2026.

Today, we have not heard much of the nitty-gritty of exactly what the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry is proposing, so it might be worth pausing for a moment to remind ourselves of what this one-line Bill looks to be suggesting. The Scottish Parliament is governed by the Scotland Act 1998, and the devolution settlement in Scotland operates on what is known as a reserved powers model, of which a lot of our Scottish colleagues will be fully aware. Schedule 5 to that Act lists the powers that remain reserved—that is, which are the responsibility of the UK Parliament. Generally speaking, anything not listed in schedule 5 is devolved by default to the Scottish Parliament. Under paragraph B6 of part II of schedule 5, immigration and nationality is a reserved matter. Modifications to the list of reserved matters can be made in two ways: by an Order in Council under section 30(2) of the Act, or via primary legislation. The hon. Gentleman is proposing primary legislation, but with one line, no proper detail and no working up. We would be walking, ridiculously and recklessly, into the unknown if we were to adopt the Bill that is before us today.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: As a fan of the England cricket team, I am used to having a belief that something that is slightly rubbish will be able to achieve a lot more, but that is dwarfed by the belief of the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) that 17 words will solve all the problems with the Scottish Government that have been listed. Perhaps my hon. Friend could say a bit more about some of the work that needs to go into solving those knotty problems.

Dame Meg Hillier: I plan to do so later in my speech, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Modifications under section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998—that is, Orders in Council—require Scottish, as well as UK, parliamentary approval. However, modifications via primary legislation only require approval from both Houses of the UK Parliament. By taking this approach, the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry is saying that this is a matter entirely for this Parliament—this House and the other place—cutting out his colleagues in Holyrood. That is an interesting take on events, given that we already have a good relationship between Holyrood and Whitehall on many of the issues we are discussing today.

The most significant and long-term changes to the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament have been made by Acts of Parliament, rather than Orders in Council. That is also interesting; we could have a long discussion about that, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I suspect that I would be trying your patience if I started discussing the constitutional settlement for Scotland, so I will resist that temptation. However, the Scotland Acts 2012 and 2016 implemented recommendations made by the Calman commission and the Smith commission respectively, so there has been change along the way. Devolution was never intended to be a static

thing; it was intended to reward the competencies, skills and needs of our devolved bodies, but those bodies need to play properly and professionally, not engage in cheap political gimmicks. I enormously respect the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry, but the flimsiness of this Bill suggests that it has not been properly thought through.

If the Bill were to omit some or all of paragraph B6 of part II of schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998, it would transfer responsibilities for those matters to the Scottish Parliament. There is a really big issue here, which is why I believe we should not adopt the Bill. We have seen how the different tax rates in Scotland can create challenges, for example with how the armed forces are paid. The Ministry of Defence has a formula for different branches of the armed forces, so someone on a tour in Scotland is paid more to take account of the tax rate. We cannot have two members of our armed forces personnel doing the same job with the same title but earning differently. They are UK armed forces.

Graham Leadbitter: Will the hon. Member concede that the current situation in that regard is unacceptable? There are many thousands of personnel working in my constituency who now pay less tax in Scotland; if they get transferred to a base in England they pay more tax, but there is no mechanism in the other direction. It is completely discriminatory against the people of Scotland.

Dame Meg Hillier: Dare I say it, on the hon. Gentleman's head be it. It was the Scottish Government who introduced the variation in taxation, which has left a challenge for anybody working in a UK-wide public body or UK-wide company. I repeat that personnel who are doing the same job on the same headline salary are ending up paying different taxes because they are working in different jurisdictions. That has caused a big headache for the Ministry of Defence and has been quite complicated to deliver. That is just one example—we could go into others, but we are here to discuss immigration—of what happens if we heedlessly and recklessly dive into changing something without proper preparation, thoughtful discussion and agreement.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is exposing the problem that we were trying to raise this morning and this afternoon, although hopefully not this evening too. Where changes have been made to the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom, it has happened over time, with lots of thoughtful, considered conversations before legislation has finally been passed. What we have today is a Bill with one substantive clause that seeks to make a very large change to the constitutional settlement. We are being asked to trust the Committee process to come up with the specifics. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know the old phrase that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we leave the specifics to the Committee stage, we will end up with legislation that is bad for the United Kingdom and bad for Scotland?

Dame Meg Hillier: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes the point clearly and powerfully. As he has highlighted, there are other areas that the Bill would affect; it is not simply about setting a new immigration policy. There are a raft of contradictions that could play out in the mechanics behind it, making life very chaotic. I will address that point in more detail later.

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

When I was honoured to serve as an Immigration Minister in Her late Majesty's Government, we had a lot of discussions across the nations of the UK. I sometimes felt that I was the Minister sent to the remotest parts of the UK; I made a lot of interesting visits to ports. Although the links between Stranraer or Cairnryan in Scotland and Larne in Northern Ireland were intra-UK, we had a very big challenge with illegal immigrants moving between them. The role of the UK immigration service—now Border Force—was to ensure that that was managed. Having a border at Scotland, with a different agency dealing with things, would mean an awful lot of cross-collaboration. It would make things clunky and very complicated.

For some time after the Labour Government left office—it became a problem for the Conservative party in government—people would get on a coach at London Victoria station and go to the Republic of Ireland, sometimes to claim benefits. There was benefit fraud, there were immigration issues and increasingly there were issues around drugs crime, which I know has been a problem for colleagues in Northern Ireland. People on the coach would get a text message telling them whether there were more immigration officers and police at Stranraer or at Cairnryan, so they would get off at the one at which the fewest checks were taking place on the day. It was a very well-worn route. At the time, the route was managed by the police and Border Force—this was before Police Scotland was set up—but it was a very thinly stretched team. It was intelligence-led by a UK-wide service, with support from the local force in Scotland.

Deirdre Costigan: My hon. Friend is describing in helpful detail what the Bill might lead to, with the mechanics of setting up an entirely new immigration system in Scotland. Given the issues with the performance of the Scottish National party that we have heard about, does she think it would be better for it to spend the record investment settlement that this Labour Government have given to Scotland on its broken education system, on building some housing and on helping young people into jobs?

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend is right to again highlight the failures of the Scottish Government, which is one of the reasons that people are not staying. We know that this is a challenge, and not just in Scotland. Areas of England have also been left behind and have challenges in keeping their young populations. A lot of work is being done in places such as west Cumbria, where people who left for university outside the area tended not to come back. An awful lot of work has been done there to try to hold on to those young people, so that they bring their families up there and the younger population in those communities does not reduce. There are examples where this work is being done well, and there are examples where it is still early days, but we need to acknowledge the problem. We cannot gloss over it by saying that a new immigration policy will solve everything.

The Migration Advisory Committee has been raised a number of times. It is worth sharing one of the moments in the Home Office that was a screw-up. One of the challenges is that the Home Office is a Department

of many parts, and a panic came across my desk that there was a sudden rash of marriages between Ukrainian women—this was a long time before the tragic war in Ukraine and the illegal invasion by Putin—and Scottish men. It triggered a bit of the Home Office to wonder whether fraud was going on. There were examples of newspapers advertising for brides from other countries, so it was not a frivolous concern of the Home Office.

It turned out that the Migration Advisory Committee had listened to colleagues in Scotland and acted on what they were saying. There was a severe shortage of fish filleters on the west coast of Scotland, so the Migration Advisory Committee had put it on the shortage occupation list for Scotland. It turns out that one of the many skills that Ukrainian women have is that many of them are very good fish filleters, so the word went round and they came and helped the Scottish economy. Obviously it ended up with a number of them settling and marrying Scottish men. [*Interruption.*] I fear I may choke from an hon. Friend's seated intervention; I am a happily married woman. It is not a concern for me to look to our Scottish colleagues and see what the best of the pickings are. [*Laughter.*]

Seamus Logan: This might be an opportunity for the hon. Member to catch her breath. She is making a number of claims about Ukrainian women and Scottish people, but I want to go back to something she said earlier about Stranraer and Cairnryan, which is a place I am familiar with as an Irish person and a guide. I just wanted to correct the record: Stranraer port closed many, many years ago. The example that you gave is completely impossible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Members should not use “you”. The hon. Member was told off twice earlier for using it, and he came and apologised to the Chair. I would not have mentioned it, were I not being accurate in making clear for the record that he had been inappropriate with his language.

Dame Meg Hillier: Unbelievable as it may seem to the hon. Gentleman, I was a Minister between 2007 and 2010. I was a child Minister, of course. [*Laughter.*] I can understand his confusion, but that was the case at the time, and it continued for some while, because I then dealt with the local Member of Parliament—by then I was in opposition—about the challenges of that particular route. As he will know, the route from Scotland to Larne is the shortest route that can be taken, so people would make that journey. I have done that journey and driven along the long and winding single-track route to get there. It is not somewhere to get stuck behind a lorry, for sure.

I was really demonstrating the point about the challenges of having multiple agencies. It is difficult enough with one Government, frankly. I spent over a decade on the Public Accounts Committee, looking at the problems of Whitehall, and even within one Government things do not always go smoothly as different agencies interact. To add an extra layer of complication seems to me something we would not want to see.

The police at that time were overstretched, and moving to Police Scotland did not help. That is not a criticism of that policy, although I know colleagues have strong feelings about that, but it did not mean there were

suddenly, magically, more police officers who could be deployed differently because of the challenges in that area.

Ms Billington: SNP Members talk about a period before Brexit that was ideal, and yet their proposal for this immigration system would increase the complexity at the border, including by creating a land border, despite the complexities of dealing with the island borders that we already have.

Dame Meg Hillier: Indeed. My hon. Friend was not an MP when we were discussing Brexit, but oh my word, there was a lack of thought about the issues with the land border prior to that. Madam Deputy Speaker, you may recall that when the former Prime Minister, now Baroness May, was proposing her Brexit deal, only 17% of Members of Parliament had been Members of Parliament when the Northern Ireland agreement was signed, so there was a distinct lack of understanding in this place. We all expect and hope that Members will read into these issues, but often that got missed, and there was a distinct lack of understanding about the border. We do not want to go down that route again.

Amanda Martin: As well as the concerns around Brexit, there is the Gibraltar-Spain border, which we are still in the process of dealing with, despite the previous Government.

Dame Meg Hillier: Absolutely. A lot of tripe was talked at the time about having virtual borders. Even with some of the tensions between Scotland and the UK, which were evident in what SNP Members said earlier, we are not, I hope, at the point where we would have watchtowers and border guards with guns, but once we have a border, that is a risk.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: Of course, there has previously been a border between England and Scotland: Hadrian's wall was built between 122 and 138 in the Christian era, and the Antonine wall was built between 140 and 150. There is a history of borders—and I do not think any of us were there at the time—but none of us in this House wants to see a return to that, do we?

Dame Meg Hillier: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, there is another leader in this world who has talked about building a wall.

Pete Wishart: I have a lot of time and respect for the hon. Lady, and she has contributed so much to the work of this House, but she has been simply absurd in some of her proclamations in the last few minutes. All we are asking for is the opportunity to address some of our workforce issues, because we have a real crisis in Scotland. We have a distinct and separate tax code in Scotland. There would be a requirement that a person coming here would live and work in Scotland, which could be easily assessed and monitored because of our individual tax code. It is straightforward and simple. Watchtowers and border guards? Come on! The hon. Lady is 10 times better than that.

Dame Meg Hillier: If the cap fits, maybe the hon. Gentleman should consider his position. I am not suggesting for a minute that we would see border guards and

towers, but once there is a land border there is a risk. We have seen in other parts of the world and among allies of ours more recently quite intemperate discussion about borders, walls and security. We would not want to go down that route.

Stephen Gethins: I have the same respect for the hon. Member and her service, and she usually talks an awful lot of sense, but right now she is speaking of the isolationism that I would expect to hear from the Conservative or Reform Benches. Borders have been taken down in the single market and the customs union. In Northern Ireland, they have not needed a border. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) was quite right. I ask her to temper her language and talk about this sensibly. She speaks about the disaster of Brexit.

Dame Meg Hillier: As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is important that we have debate in this place. People have made points to me and I am simply responding to those points. As I said, I am not suggesting that we would want, or would see, watchtowers with armed guards, and in my area of the country we had the second-largest anti-Brexit vote, so I know where I and my constituents stand on that issue. However, we do not want to add extra borders where we do not need to.

Sean Woodcock: We all benefit from my hon. Friend's long experience in the House. She was around during the discussions after the referendum in 2016. Does she recall that a Division on remaining in the customs union was lost by six votes when all 48 SNP MPs abstained?

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend makes the point.

Peter Lamb: The issue is not necessarily about having a border between Northern Ireland and southern Ireland; a border has in effect been put in the Irish sea by the Windsor framework. However, the SNP appears to be calling for a border between Scotland and England, without Scotland re-entering the European Union, leaving Scotland completely isolated. SNP Members talk about the UK's delusions of grandeur—about us sitting on a few small islands and considering ourselves great—but they want to restrict the lives of Scots to only a part of that island.

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend makes the point well. We could reopen the whole debate about the Windsor framework, the border in the Irish sea and the many challenges to do with that, but I will not try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. When I was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, we looked a lot at the detail of that, including the costs and the complication.

Gareth Snell *rose*—

Dame Meg Hillier: I give way to a former member of the Committee, who looked at those details, too.

Gareth Snell: I remember fondly my time on the Public Accounts Committee under my hon. Friend's chairmanship. A lot of the time, we were looking at duplication in Government agencies that caused bureaucracy, wasted money, and made things take longer.

[Gareth Snell]

Under the Bill, there would be wholesale devolution of immigration and asylum policy to the Scottish Government. That would require UK Border Force, which carries out immigration checks for external ports, and customs checks, to be separated into two in Scotland. There would be one version for UK-wide customs checks, and presumably one for external immigration checks. Does she, with her long experience on the Public Accounts Committee, have any insight into how much that would cost, what delays there would be, what sort of additional burdens would be placed on taxpayers in Scotland and the United Kingdom, and what damage that would do to business and travel?

Dame Meg Hillier: Certainly, it would not be cost-free. It would be a big burden on taxpayers across the UK, whichever tax system they were in. The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire talked about using a tax code as a marker of whether people had moved. Has he not heard of working from home, or working on holiday? That is a trend that I have read about. People can be working for an employer in one country but living somewhere else. It can get very messy, and those complications are not dealt with by this one-sentence Bill.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: I am particularly concerned about the idea of tying everything to a certain tax code. Anyone who has dealt with modern slavery knows that the more a visa is tied to a place or employer, the fewer rights the person with the visa has, and the more likely they are to be exploited. The tax code example has a whole load of unintended consequences, none of which are considered in the 17-word Bill.

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend took the words out of my mouth; he says it better than I could. Let me turn for a moment to what the SNP-led Scottish Government wish to deliver. In 2020—I think this was referred to—they published a paper arguing for some devolution of immigration policy to Scotland. I remember well before then, when I was a Minister, having discussions about that and—I would not normally be so crass—slapping down the idea that there could be a separate immigration policy for Scotland. The paper argued that Scotland was more reliant on migration than other parts of the UK, and noted that the population of Scotland would be falling if it were not for migration from the rest of the UK and overseas. An Opposition day debate on a motion condemning the UK Government's response to that paper took place on 11 February 2020.

At the time, Brexit was widely expected, and the Scottish Government's expert advisory group discussed a possible fall in net migration to Scotland of between 30% and 50%, but so far the opposite has happened, as it has in the rest of the UK. Net international migration to Scotland in 2022-23 was an estimated 48,000, according to the most recent figures from National Records of Scotland. That is about four times the pre-pandemic average of 12,000. In January 2025, the Scottish Government said that the recent increase in net migration to Scotland could be largely explained by international students, but might not be sustained when restrictions introduced by the last Government feed through. There is an important point there about the education system. We

have seen the Scottish Government introduce free tuition. That sounds like an absolutely wonderful policy, and a lot of people lobby for it, but the reality is that it squeezes the funding of our higher education institutions, so that they have no option but to find overseas students who will pay more. We have seen an element of that in England, but the problem is exacerbated in Scotland because of the proposals of the Scottish Government.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Lady must be horrified by the Scottish Labour party and its backing of free tuition.

Dame Meg Hillier: I have absolute confidence and faith that my Scottish Labour colleagues will have done the maths, will know where the money will come from, and will have looked at the matter in the round, and will be more willing to work with Whitehall on these issues. We will no doubt discuss with the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Home Secretary and others in Government, as necessary, how they will ensure that everything matches up, because that is right. Scottish Labour will invest in young people—something that the SNP has a woeful record on. That investment includes putting people through the right skilled routes, so that we have the skills that are needed in Scotland.

My point is that under the SNP, the Scottish Government have this immigration policy that they have promoted hard, but they have never dealt with its consequences. A new Government—a new broom coming in next May in Scotland—who understand these issues, are able and willing to get their head around how to tackle them, and are willing to work with Government in Whitehall, will deliver for the young people of Scotland and for the Scottish economy.

Sean Woodcock: If this Bill passed, does my hon. Friend imagine that the talk of making it harder for people to get between England and Scotland would have a beneficial or negative impact on growth prospects in Scotland? Does she imagine that there would be an impact on investment in public services in Scotland?

Dame Meg Hillier: That is exactly the point. The hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry puts great faith in Committee stages. I have been here a long time, and they are not always as good as people say that they will be. Even if there was a Committee stage, there are so many other elements. That is one of the challenges with a Bill that is simply one line long. There are issues and knock-on effects for not just the Home Office, but all the other cross-UK institutions. I spent more than a decade on the Public Accounts Committee, and I know that if we pull a lever somewhere in Whitehall, unintended consequences flow into places we would never have thought of. The skill in government is to try to work that out, and a Bill like this would not deliver that necessary joined-up approach.

Ms Billington: I am struck particularly by what my hon. Friend says about the impact being felt elsewhere in Whitehall when a lever is moved. I give the example of a friend of mine, who was a doctor working in a depopulated part of Cumbria for part of the month and in Orkney for another part of the month. How would we organise the visa that enabled her to serve the population in Orkney? Would she need a visa to operate in west Cumbria or, indeed, in both places? Those

problems that cannot be solved by a one-line Bill. We need to be serious about the fact that we need an overall immigration policy, rather than one entirely designed by and for Scotland.

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. I absolutely take what the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry highlighted. As I said, there are really challenging issues with the demographics in the Scottish population. We all need to put our shoulder to the wheel to deal with those things, rather than saying, “If only the SNP Scottish Government were in charge of immigration, it would all be fine.” This Bill is a gimmick, and the hon. Gentleman knows that it will not work.

I will touch on the higher education figures. In the last two years, we have seen the number of home Scottish students drop. In 2021-22, the figure was just over 183,000, and it has dropped to just shy of 174,000. The number of non-UK students has gone down in the past couple of years, but it is nevertheless a significant number at 73,915. The Government are not against foreign students coming here—that is important—but we need to strike a balance, so that there are enough places for the young people in Scotland and across the UK who want to attend Scottish universities, and who are perhaps being squeezed out by the imbalance and the cost of going.

Adam Thompson: My hon. Friend talks eloquently about how students would be affected if the Bill were passed. It is also important that academic staff can move fluidly between institutions, but that movement should be managed nationally, not locally or regionally. Does she agree?

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend is right. We have seen the pain and challenges caused by Brexit for academic movement. Knowledge has no boundaries or borders, but there is a danger of the Bill not recognising that.

Let me turn to the Scottish National party’s proposal for a Scottish graduate visa. Overseas students in the UK can get a two-year graduate visa. That is an extension available to those who complete their degree in the UK, allowing them to stay on and work without sponsorship for two years—or three if they are PhD graduates. The SNP Scottish Government have proposed an additional Scottish graduate visa that would be available to those on UK graduate visas. It would allow them to stay for another two years. Applicants would need to have graduated from a Scottish institution—we have already seen an interesting divide on that—to have lived in Scotland for an “appropriate amount of time”, and would have to intend to live and work in Scotland. The visa would be linked to a Scottish tax code, which we have heard a lot about today.

Gareth Snell: There is a discussion to be had in this place about how to retain graduates in the UK, so that they can contribute to our economy, but we have a national economy and a national supply chain, particularly in our defence industry, which is so important to Scotland. If, under such a visa, someone could live and work only in Scotland, or must have graduated from a Scottish institution, it would cause a disproportionate split between the rest of the UK and Scotland when it comes to

highly skilled and high-value jobs, and there would be a problem in how that knowledge was transferred around the rest of the country.

Dame Meg Hillier: As ever, my hon. Friend talks enormous sense. Let us talk through the practicalities of the proposal that I have just outlined. A person graduating from a Scottish university would be able to stay on and work in Scotland without sponsorship for four years in total. To remind the House, that means two years on a UK graduate visa—or three for a PhD—followed by two years on a Scottish graduate visa.

Mr Quigley rose—

Dame Meg Hillier: Or an Isle of Wight visa! I give way.

Mr Quigley: An Isle of Wight visa indeed. My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. Does she agree that this very short, 17-word Bill clearly creates more problems than it will solve?

Dame Meg Hillier: I hope that I am beginning to explain how some of these interactions—[*Laughter.*] I am only just beginning. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] I fear I might be cut off, which is a great shame, because I had really looked forward to going into this in more detail.

If the person completed undergraduate and postgraduate in Scotland, they would qualify for permanent residence simply by having been in the country. We might want to support that, but we ought to debate, it rather than sleepwalking into the challenges of having two systems set up for different purposes. That would be confusing for the individual and for the businesses employing them, as they might not know whether visas were needed. It would be very complicated.

On the tax code, I have spent quite a lot of time considering how our tax system works, and every time a Chancellor of any party stands up at the Dispatch Box to announce something, it adds complexity to the tax system, which can be very confusing for people.

One of the last things that we wanted to do in the previous Labour Government, but which was too complicated to deliver in time, was codify all immigration law into one Bill—but, boy, was that a big task. It is the sort of thing that a Government would need to start at the beginning of a 15-year Government. Perhaps I should suggest it to the Home Secretary, because I am sure that this Government have the prospect of seeing it through. People come to my constituency surgery—and to those of many other Members, I am sure—to ask for information about their immigration status. They could not possibly work through the system on their own without professional advice, which is costly. That is discriminatory, really. They find it very difficult. The more complication we add, the harder it will be.

Peter Lamb: My hon. Friend, by talking about the minutiae, is doing a fantastic job of showing the vast complexity of one aspect of the SNP trying to cut off the connection between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Does she accept that this is an existential problem for the SNP? Every time they make an argument about the damage caused by losing the integration with the European Union, the infinitely greater combination of interactions between Scotland and the rest of the United

[Peter Lamb]

Kingdom shows that this would be infinitely more damaging to the lives of Scots. This Bill is a fantastic example—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 11 July.

Business without Debate

PLANT PROTECTION PRODUCTS (PROHIBITION ON PUBLIC SECTOR USE) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 17 October.

MEAT (INFORMATION ABOUT METHOD OF KILLING) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

THEFT OF TOOLS OF TRADE (SENTENCING) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July.

CERAMICS (COUNTRY OF ORIGIN MARKING) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

PENSION (SPECIAL RULES FOR END OF LIFE) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July.

EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX (LISTED PLACES OF WORSHIP) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

CARAVAN SITE LICENSING (EXEMPTIONS OF MOTOR HOMES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES (REVIEW) BILL

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Further to the Deputy Speaker's statement on 28 March, in column 1298 of the *Official Report*, Mr Speaker has directed that the proceedings entitled the Arm's-Length Bodies (Accountability to Parliament) Bill on 14 March should be considered void and this should be reflected in the *Journal*. That title, and associated text, was substituted in error for the Arm's-Length Bodies (Review) Bill. As the House has been notified, the Arm's-Length Bodies (Review) Bill had not been correctly printed at that time, which is a requirement under Standing Order No. 14(3). The order for Second Reading therefore lapsed at the rising of the House on 13 March.

Once the Bill had been printed and made available in the Vote Office, notice could be given appointing the next available Private Members' Bill Friday for Second Reading and so all subsequent proceedings, including on 28 March and today, are unaffected.

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

PUBLIC HEALTH (CONTROL OF DISEASE) ACT 1984 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT 1946 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

DOMESTIC ENERGY (VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**BBC LICENCE FEE NON-PAYMENT
(DECriminalISATION FOR OVER-75S) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

QUANTITATIVE EASING (PROHIBITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

PETS (MICROCHIPS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

ANONYMITY OF SUSPECTS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**CHILDREN'S CLOTHING
(VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

HIGHWAYS ACT 1980 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
(PRIVATISATION) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS ACT
(REVIEW) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE
TREATMENT) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

TERMINAL ILLNESS (RELIEF OF PAIN) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**MOBILE HOMES ACT 1983
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

**ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES (ACCOUNTABILITY
TO PARLIAMENT) BILL**

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Well, Mr Chope, that has probably given you all the exercise you need.

Wickford Town Centre Regeneration

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Kate Dearden.)

2.36 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to have been given this opportunity to raise a number of important issues that are of considerable concern to my constituents in the town of Wickford, and in particular the future of the old Co-op supermarket site in the centre of the town. I am personally grateful to the Minister for being here on a Friday afternoon to respond to the debate when no doubt he also has constituency demands on his diary, so I thank him.

Perhaps I could begin on a sombre note by paying tribute to the late Councillor David Harrison, who passed away only recently. David Harrison had represented Wickford on Basildon borough council for many years and had given decades of his life to public service in the town of Wickford, which he clearly loved. He also served very successfully as the mayor of Basildon borough. He will be much missed by people of all parties, and I pay tribute in the House to his service and offer my condolences as the town's MP to his widow, Linda, and her wider family at this extremely difficult time.

For context, I point out to the Minister that Wickford has been through a rather challenging time in recent years, especially since the covid pandemic. We have seen a number of banks and several other retail outlets close on the high street, which has contributed to a decrease in footfall. I recently visited the Nationwide branch in Wickford to congratulate it on remaining open, and on its wider corporate commitment not to close any high street branch across the country until 2028 at the earliest. I understand that will roll on, year by year. Incidentally, I also visited the Nationwide branch in Rayleigh a little over a week ago for much the same reason and to celebrate it reopening once again on a Thursday to revert to a five-day-a-week service, so well done Nationwide.

Nevertheless, we also lost our police station in Wickford several years ago, and that has been boarded up ever since. Basildon borough council originally intended to replace it with flats, but it now has an alternative proposal to redevelop it as a community safety hub. We look forward to further details, including what the opening hours will be. To add to that, Greater Anglia, which operates the train line from Southend through Wickford into Liverpool Street, demolished a large part of Wickford station several years ago to extend the platforms to accommodate the new class 720 trains. I am pleased to report that the 720s have proved considerably more reliable than their rather elderly predecessors.

Nevertheless, it has taken Greater Anglia several years to confirm plans to rebuild the station. I personally lobbied Ministers at the Department for Transport, under the previous Conservative Government, to come up with the multimillion-pound funding necessary to rebuild the station and, in a bipartisan spirit, I am pleased to report this afternoon that Greater Anglia has recently signed a contract with Walker Construction. The rebuild of the station will now commence this summer and should be completed by the end of 2026 at the latest, and hopefully a little earlier, weather depending.

In addition to the rebuild, which I believe will be very popular with my constituents, there is further good news: McDonald's has recently acquired the old unoccupied Prezzo restaurant in Wickford High Street and is now refurbishing it to provide a brand new McDonald's, due to open this summer. I suspect that will also prove popular with my constituents. Crucially, that should increase footfall on the high street and will be welcomed by local traders, even if that provides competition to other restaurants in the town.

Moreover, local businesses in the town centre recently voted to form a new business improvement district in order to pool their efforts, in collaboration with the borough and town councils, to help revive economic activity in the town. As the local MP, I attended some of the preliminary meetings in this process, and I wish the newly created BID all the best for the future.

My main purpose in this debate is to talk about the economic regeneration of Wickford, but given that Labour-led Basildon borough council released its regulation 18 draft local plan a few months ago, it would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to point out to the Minister that I am strongly opposed to the council's proposals to try to cram 27,000 new dwellings into the borough by 2043, including some 4,200 in and around Wickford itself. The local infrastructure in the borough simply cannot accommodate mass house building on this scale.

I appreciate that we do need some new houses in the borough—young people cannot be expected to live at home with their parents forever. None the less, we simply do not have the infrastructure, particularly the road infrastructure and medical facilities, to accommodate mass concreting over the green belt on this scale. In particular, there are no firm proposals whatsoever to expand Basildon district general hospital, which is at the heart of the Basildon borough. According to the NHS's own standard metrics, it works on the basis of 2.4 prospective additional patients per household, which would mean pro rata almost 65,000 potential patients at the hospital, which is massively oversubscribed as it is. According to the hospital trust's management, even before so-called winter pressures kick in, the hospital is normally running a bed occupancy rate of between 98% and 99%.

The borough council's response has been completely unconvincing, frankly. It simply palmed off all responsibility for plans to expand the hospital on to the integrated commissioning board, which itself is now in the course of a major reorganisation. Having checked personally with the leadership of the current Mid and South Essex ICB, I can report that it has never been consulted by the council on any plans to expand Basildon hospital. Indeed, when the council published a supplementary document to the local plan, specifically regarding healthcare infrastructure, even then there were no clear proposals whatsoever to expand the hospital. I believe that the plan should be found unsound on that one key point alone, so I hope the Minister will understand why I wish to get my concerns firmly on the record.

Having done that, I will now turn to an area of great concern for my Wickford constituents: the fate of the old Co-op supermarket site in the centre of the town, just behind the high street. There is a long-running and complicated saga, of which I have given the Minister at least some notice, so rather than try his patience by

attempting to go through every detail, I will try to summarise the background. Several years ago, the Co-op closed its supermarket at this site. In addition, some two years ago, Aldi, which operates the other main supermarket in the town, demolished its store in order to build a larger, modernised one. The net effect was that for much of 2023 there was a perfect storm in terms of the lack of supermarket provision in Wickford, other than a small Iceland store on the high street. This meant that my constituents often had to travel some distance to do their weekly shop, a particular challenge for those who are elderly or do not have access to their own car, or both.

I am pleased to tell the Minister that I subsequently reopened the newly reconstructed and indeed enlarged Aldi supermarket in November 2023, and it now appears to be doing a brisk trade. Nevertheless, this leaves the outstanding question of what will happen to the old Co-op site, which is currently in a state of poor repair and is boarded up. Given other recent developments in Wickford, which have led to a diminution in car parking spaces across the town, the car park adjacent to the Co-op site now effectively acts as the main car park for the town itself, yet a considerable number of those places are currently unavailable because of the hoardings that surround the dilapidated Co-op site—I can see the Minister nodding, so he clearly follows my argument, for which I am grateful.

Several years ago, the Co-op site was acquired by a company called Heriot, a South African-based developer that sought to redevelop a supermarket on the site. Its first attempt was to agree an arrangement with Morrisons that would have led—eventually—to a brand-new supermarket, incorporating an underground car park and up to 137 flats above the store, some up to seven storeys high. I have to tell the Minister that I was never really convinced of the viability of those proposals, especially given the high cost of developing underground car parks post covid, and the plans were generally quite unpopular across the town, too. The plan fell through, partly I think because of some of the financial challenges that Morrisons has been experiencing as a supermarket chain, which are well documented in the press.

Heriot then entered into negotiations on an alternative scheme with Asda, which I shall refer to in more detail in a moment. For its part, Basildon borough council, understandably becoming impatient at the lack of a planning application from Heriot, threatened to issue a section 215 notice compelling Heriot to clean up the site and ultimately to demolish the old supermarket, as it was becoming a considerable eyesore—it still is. In response, and after a couple of years of preparation, Heriot finally submitted a formal planning application to Basildon borough council in February 2025, based on a revised scheme for a brand-new supermarket with no underground parking and a reduced number of flats, with three storeys of accommodation above the store as opposed to seven.

My understanding is that this planning application is extant and is due to be determined by the borough council's planning committee, hopefully by the end of May—next month. I know that the Minister will be reluctant to comment on the merits of the planning application, not least because of his quasi-judicial position in the event of a potential appeal. I hope, however, that he will at least be prepared to acknowledge that, after a number of years with a blighted, derelict supermarket,

it would certainly be to the advantage of the town if the borough council were minded to pass the application in a timely manner. In short, as he is the Minister for Local Growth, I would suggest to him that if the Government are so committed to growing business, this scheme should appeal to them.

That brings me on to the new proposal with Asda. As I am sure the Minister is aware, Asda has been through considerable financial difficulties of its own, following its sale by Walmart, and the company is now loaded with a considerable amount of debt. As a result, its former chief executive Allan Leighton, a man with a rightly strong reputation in the retail industry, has taken over as executive chairman and is attempting to turn the company around—although he is on record as saying that this might take some time.

Despite Asda's reluctance to comment publicly on its negotiations with Heriot, I have to tell the Minister that it is, in effect, an open secret across the whole of Wickford that Asda and Heriot have been working on a new scheme, the design of which is already reflected in the planning application that I have just mentioned. Indeed, I can tell the Minister that, even when I was out canvassing in Wickford nearly a year ago at the general election, multiple constituents raised with me where the Asda scheme had got to. If it drags on much longer, there is a real risk that Asda will suffer serious reputational damage as a company that struggles to make a decision. Specifically, I understand that the proposed scheme has been deferred several times from consideration by the Asda board and indeed was meant to be discussed at an Asda board meeting last week, only to be deferred yet again. I find this extremely disappointing, because—given the background that I have outlined, which I hope the Minister can appreciate—my constituents are now thoroughly fed up with what one might call, to use a military term, the paralysis by analysis that Asda has shown over all of this.

I attended Wickford town council's annual town meeting just last night, where this matter was a topic of considerable discussion among the 40 or so residents present. The general view of the audience was that Asda seemed completely incapable of making a decision either one way or another. As someone who was there said, I can say that it was not exactly Asda's finest hour. For my own part as the local MP, I must confess that I have found Asda an extremely difficult company to deal with as it is generally very uncommunicative. I understand that one of Mr Leighton's inherited challenges is poor industrial relations between Asda's management and the staff in its stores; if it communicates with its staff in the way that it communicates with MPs, I am not surprised.

For the record, Asda already has a successful store in my constituency in Rayleigh, which is often very busy, especially at the weekends, and, prior to the 2010 boundary changes, when South Woodham Ferrers was part of my constituency, it also had a very successful store there. I am not against Asda as a company per se, but the way in which it has treated both me as a Member of Parliament and, far more importantly, my constituents leaves a very great deal to be desired.

As the Minister can probably tell, I am now completely exasperated by the total inability of Asda to make a decision either one way or another. Accordingly, yesterday I wrote to Allan Leighton, the executive chairman, and have asked for a personal meeting with him in order to

[Mr Mark Francois]

try and explain to him some of the background that I have sought to lay out in this Adjournment debate, and then to try to elicit a final decision from him and his company either one way or another. We cannot go on with this endless prevarication by one of the nation's largest supermarket groups. In truth, I suspect that Mr Leighton had never even heard of Wickford before yesterday; well, he has now.

To summarise, I am pleased that Greater Anglia has finally let the contract to rebuild Wickford station, which will commence this summer and conclude by the end of next year, and that McDonald's is now converting the old Prezzo restaurant to open this summer, which I am sure will materially help to increase footfall on the high street. But we still have the major outstanding issue of what will happen to the old Co-op supermarket site. I very much hope that Labour-led Basildon borough council will agree to pass Heriot's planning application—ideally next month—not least as Basildon council's deputy leader, Councillor Adele Brown, told the town council annual meeting last night, while I was there, that it is now intending to support the application. That would represent a major multimillion-pound investment into Wickford and the borough.

Finally, given that it is an open secret across the whole of Wickford that Asda has been talking to the developer for over a year now, the time really has come for Asda to make its mind up either one way or another. I very much hope it will, which is why I have asked to meet personally with its executive chairman, Allan Leighton, to try to obtain formal confirmation of this. The time for hesitation has passed; I hope Asda will proceed and that my constituents can have a supermarket in Wickford that is fit for the 21st century.

2.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on securing this important debate, which of course comes on the heels of the debate on Wickford station in March. He set out an excellent case, but before I reflect on that I would like to associate myself with his remarks about Councillor David Harrison. I did not know him, but the right hon. Gentleman's tribute clearly showed what a passionate, effective and deeply caring man David Harrison was for the town of Wickford. I offer my condolences to his widow and family; I hope they can take some comfort from what the right hon. Gentleman said and from the fact that David Harrison's name will now be carried on the record in this place for as long as this democracy stands. I think that is a very meaningful and proper tribute to him.

The right hon. Gentleman set out a passionate case for regeneration of the town centre. By definition, right hon. and hon. Members sit on different sides of this Chamber because we often have different views and different analyses of shared problems, but one thing that unites us is our frustration at the decline of town centres and the passion to do something about it.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): As a former chartered surveyor, with 30 years in commercial property before entering this place, I congratulate the right

hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on the very proactive approach he is taking in speaking to the numerous stakeholders. I think that is exactly the correct approach in such a situation.

Alex Norris: I totally agree—one thing that I wrote down as the right hon. Gentleman was speaking was that I would not want to be Asda in this case. Asda does excellent work in Nottingham, but if it thinks that the right hon. Gentleman will go away quietly or be distracted by other things, it is very mistaken. He has a long career of showing that he will persist until eventually he gets what his constituents need, but—exactly as my hon. Friend says—that requires us to be in the room to have those conversations. I hope that Asda leans into that, because that will be very important indeed.

The conversation about town centres is one that we are having across the country. As a Government, we want to see growth in every corner of the UK—that is at the heart of our plan for change. We want that economic growth to raise living standards, and we want to support places to deliver the changes they need. That is an important message from this Dispatch Box, because we believe we have a really important role to play in the improvement of town centres, but equally profoundly, we have a responsibility to get the tools and resources out from this place into those communities. As much as I want to match the right hon. Gentleman's energy and will seek to work with him in any way I can, I believe that those 40 people who came to the town council meeting last night are the experts. They ought to be given the tools and resources to make sure they can do the job, and that is very much my role as Minister, as well as doing what we can alongside that.

That is a pretty clear theme that runs through our devolution agenda. We are delivering the biggest ever transfer of power from this place to the regions. We have set out in the "English Devolution" White Paper how we think mayors can drive growth in their areas, equipped with integrated funding settlements and a range of new powers across planning, housing, transport and skills, all of which have been a part of this debate. Of course, Greater Essex is one of the six areas that were announced by the Deputy Prime Minister on 5 February as members of the devolution priority programme, so this is something that is very much coming to Essex.

It is important that those powers and responsibilities exist at that level—that will lead to Greater Essex being part of the Council of the Nations and Regions, as well—but it is important that power is held locally, too. I was really pleased to hear what the right hon. Gentleman said about the establishment of the business improvement district; I am also the Minister for BIDs, and I am passionate about the impact they can have. If there is a useful moment for me to meet and speak with that BID, I would be very keen to do so. I take every opportunity to talk to business improvement districts, because their insights about challenges and opportunities—as one would expect and hope—very much inform the work that we are trying to do.

As I have said, we want to put tools into local communities' hands. Building on the work of the previous Government, we are very pleased to have commenced high street rental auctions in this Parliament. The right hon. Gentleman talked about long-term vacant sites and the harm that individual vacant sites can do. We all

have them in our own communities—they really bring down the place. The reality is that vacancy is rot for the vitality of high streets. It becomes a self-defeating cycle of further vacancy, increased crime and antisocial behaviour, a loss of identity, a loss of hope, and a loss of the belief that things can get better. Vacancy is rot, and it must be tackled.

There are good short-term measures that can be taken. I am really pleased to hear that the right hon. Gentleman's council was willing to use section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, but high street rental auctions are a good addition to those measures, compelling owners not just to clean up sites but to use them usefully. These are new powers that enable local authorities to require landlords to rent out persistently vacant commercial units, which will help to bring business back to the high street and drive growth across the country. They give local leaders the power to auction the lease of commercial properties that have been vacant for more than a year, providing business and community groups with the right to rent and giving local people the ability to shape and improve their high streets.

All local authorities, including Basildon borough council, are able to use these powers, and some resources are available to support them in doing so. I encourage all local authorities to reach out to us, because we are working with early adopters, but we want everybody to have access to those powers. We have a lot of insight already, and we would be very keen to have that conversation with any local authority. We will build on that by introducing a community right to buy, as was set out in our manifesto. That will give communities the ability to acquire assets of community value and not have that sense of the inexorable loss of much valued institutions.

As I say, this is about the shift of power to local communities, but it is also about national Government doing their job. In particular, I would like to talk about banking hubs. The right hon. Gentleman has previously mentioned banking challenges in his community and I think it is a challenge that many right hon. and hon. Members have. I am really pleased to hear what he says about Nationwide. If I was going to be a bit cheeky, I might say that there is a value in the building society model; a certain ethos and community mindedness is clearly played out there. On top of that, we are working very closely with banks to roll out 350 banking hubs to ensure critical cash and banking services, and face-to-face support. I know that that is important in Wickford; it is also important in Nottingham and Kimberley in my community.

If and when I get the chance to meet the Wickford business improvement district, I know that it will talk about business rates. They are a significant overhead and a real challenge. Through our reform, we will create a fairer system that protects the high street and supports investment. The recently enacted Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Act 2025 enables the introduction of permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure from April 2026. That is a permanent tax cut that will ensure those sectors can benefit and grow.

In addition, we know that having a really good licensing regime is very important, but it can also be a barrier. Earlier this month, the Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister announced their licensing taskforce to see what we can do to remove some of the barriers to

growth in the hospitality sector and the wider night-time economy. There will be more to say on that and other issues affecting businesses and high streets in our forthcoming small business strategy.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned planning and transport, so I want to pick up on both those threads before I close. Again, it is really important that they are locally shaped. For local transport plans in particular, local authorities and local communities are the experts, and they should have the power to set and shape. We want to give them greater tools and we want to give parkers greater tools. We will shortly announce our plans for a new code of practice on parking, as set out in the Parking (Code of Practice) Act 2019. I am really pleased to hear about the success of the station. For many people who visit Wickford, it will be the very first thing they see, so it should be a quality offering that shows the quality of the town.

On local plans, the right hon. Gentleman tempts me a little bit. I am conscious that there is a consultation opening in the autumn. I know that he and his constituents will make their views very clear, as they should. The key thing for us as a Government is that, yes, we know we have set a significant target of 1.5 million houses in this Parliament. We know that that has to be locally delivered. We know that that involves a planning number, but the agency within that should still be a local one. That is why local plans are so important. It is why Basildon having one is so important and why the consultation later this year will be so very important as well.

Mr Francois: On one level, I am loath to intervene on the hon. Gentleman, because he is being so charming and I do not want to spoil the moment. Just to place it on the record, on devolution, I do not quite see it the way that he and the Government do. None the less, he has been very helpful. We have a very active town council in Wickford and we have a very active BID. I will pass on his very kind offer to visit the BID. Perhaps he could come after—hopefully—we have celebrated the news that Asda will go ahead. Is that a fair deal?

Alex Norris: That seems an excellent deal and one that I will absolutely take. On devolution—if only we could go for an hour on that—I have followed a little bit what the right hon. Gentleman has said previously. I think that perhaps there might be a distinction between the Government's plans with regard to devolution and with regard to local government reorganisation, because they are similar things but not the same thing. I would hope that the shift of power and resource to Greater Essex is a welcome thing, but I appreciate that he will make his views strongly on local government reorganisation between now and the autumn, when decisions will be made.

To conclude, the right hon. Gentleman made a very strong case and it is clear that he is going to give that leadership to his community. We want to see his community have the powers and resources to shape the place themselves, so that they can do their bit. We will do our bit, too, all with the common goal of improving Wickford town centre and town centres across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

3.4 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statement

Friday 25 April 2025

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 December 2024 to 28 February 2025

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations, based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 28 February 2025)	3
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	1
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 28 February 2025)	3
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices expired (during reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	1
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during the reporting period)	2

On 3 December 2024, the Secretary of State voluntarily agreed to quash and remake a TPIM against one individual.

The TPIM review group keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. TRG meetings were convened on 13, 18 and 20 February 2025.

[HCWS604]

Written Corrections

Friday 25 April 2025

Other Corrections

NESIL CALISKAN

Residential Estate Management Companies

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Residential Estate Management Companies on 22 April 2025.

Nesil Caliskan: ...In my most recent interaction with RMG, it showed some willingness to engage and to rectify the situation, but it has also been clear that it is acting on behalf of a freeholder—a company called HomeGround. After a little digging around at Companies House, I have established that Baron William Astor is a director of HomeGround.

[*Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 334WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan):

Nesil Caliskan: ...In my most recent interaction with RMG, it showed some willingness to engage and to rectify the situation, but it has also been clear that it is acting on behalf of a freeholder—a company called HomeGround. After a little digging around at Companies House, I have established that **the hon. William Waldorf Astor** is a director of HomeGround.

SIR JOHN HAYES

Point of Order

The following extract is from a point of order on 23 April 2025.

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You, like me, have long been a supporter of Britain's nuclear test veterans, so I wonder whether you could advise me. Given that Government lawyers have finally admitted, after 73 years of denial, that tests may have taken place at the time that those veterans were in the south Atlantic—they say that

“information may have been recorded by scientists carrying out radiation monitoring”—

surely a statement in the House by a Government Minister is required. How can I facilitate that?

[*Official Report*, 23 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 1055.]

Written correction submitted by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes):

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You, like me, have long been a supporter of Britain's nuclear test veterans, so I wonder whether you could advise me. Given that Government lawyers have finally admitted, after 73 years of denial, that tests may have taken place at the time that those veterans were in the south **Pacific**—they say that

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WRITTEN STATEMENT

Friday 25 April 2025

HOME DEPARTMENT	<i>Col. No.</i> 55WS
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WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Friday 25 April 2025

OTHER CORRECTIONS	<i>Col. No.</i> 13WC	OTHER CORRECTIONS—continued	<i>Col. No.</i>
Nesil Caliskan.....	13WC	Sir John Hayes.....	14WC
Residential Estate Management Companies.....	13WC	Point of Order	14WC

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