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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 22 April 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The House entered into hybrid scrutiny proceedings (Order, 21 April).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Speaker's Statement

11.34 am

Mr Speaker: Yesterday, the House agreed to a motion to allow Members to participate virtually in proceedings of the House, for the first time in 700 years of history of the House of Commons. I would like to welcome everyone, both Members joining us remotely from their constituencies up and down the UK and Members here in the Chamber, to the first hybrid sitting of the House of Commons. I thank hon. Members who are present in the Chamber for continuing to observe the guidance that has been issued about social distancing, in relation not only to each other, but to the staff of the House who are in the Chamber, and indeed myself.

Before we begin, I want to place on record that parliamentary privilege applies on the same basis to all Members participating, regardless of whether they are contributing virtually or are present in the Chamber. Also, of course, the same rules and courtesies apply to Members participating virtually, as far as is practicable, as they do to the Members participating physically. Members present in the Chamber should not rise in their places to catch my eye but wait to be called, although they should then stand to speak—if they are in the Chamber.

We will begin with questions to the Secretary of State for Wales. I will call each Question and ask the Secretary of State to respond before calling the Member. I first call the Minister to answer the substantive Question tabled by Marco Longhi, whose birthday it is today.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19: The Union

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of the Union in tackling the covid-19 outbreak. [901908]

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of the Union in tackling the covid-19 outbreak. [901914]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart) [V]: Good morning, and welcome to Wales, Mr Speaker. Before I answer that question and the one grouped with it, let me thank you for all the work you and the staff of the House have done in making these proceedings possible—it is a remarkable achievement.

I welcome wholeheartedly the cross-Government and cross-party work that has taken place to respond to the covid-19 outbreak, including through regular meetings of Cobr(M) and the ministerial implementation groups.

Marco Longhi [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and with most people in Dudley that we are stronger as one United Kingdom in responding to coronavirus? Can he let the House know whether the devolved Administration have improved outcomes for people in ways that we can share across the United Kingdom?

Simon Hart: I join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating my hon. Friend on his birthday. It is clear that the four-nation approach to covid-19 is not only the preferred option, but the only option in dealing with this extraordinary set of circumstances. The level of collaboration between the UK Government and the Welsh Government—in our instance—is an indication of that. So I can reassure him that that is definitely the case.

Christian Wakeford [V]: May I also wish my colleague a very happy birthday from Radcliffe? I also wish to thank my right hon. Friend for the statement he has just made, which I hope will reassure my constituents, some of whom have contacted me with concerns about the lockdown extension and its economic impact, and the supply of personal protective equipment. Will he continue to keep the House updated, particularly as economic support measures and infection control are rolled out?

Simon Hart: I can definitely offer that assurance, and add to it by saying that I hold regular meetings, by Zoom, not only with my colleagues in Parliament but with Opposition colleagues, to achieve exactly those aims.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab) [V]: I would like to start by paying tribute to all NHS staff and key workers in Wales and across the UK for their outstanding efforts during this pandemic. We in the Opposition send our thoughts and prayers to all those who have tragically lost their lives, as well as to those recovering from this terrible illness, including, of course, the Prime Minister. As the UK and Welsh Governments work alongside one another to respond to the pandemic, it is vital that families and businesses have clarity on which programmes apply to Wales and which apply to the UK as a whole—that is particularly important at the Downing Street press conferences. What is the Secretary of State going to do to make sure that his colleagues across Whitehall and all Government agencies reflect the reality of devolution when responding to the pandemic?

Simon Hart: That is an entirely reasonable observation from the hon. Gentleman. It has been an ongoing case that we have regular discussions about the communication of the issues to which he refers. To minimise confusion, it is absolutely essential that we stipulate what is devolved and what is not. Of course, in some instances that line is quite blurred, but we have such discussions every day and will continue to have them.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) said about those working in the health service and those who have suffered from the virus. We know that when Ministers from Wales and the other devolved nations of the UK—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I hope that the Secretary of State can make the most of that question; the line went down.

Simon Hart: I do not know whether I caught any more of that than you did, Mr Speaker, but I got the general gist of it. I suspect I would have answered with something along these lines. The collaboration between the UK Government and the Welsh Government is a really important element of all this. We are determined to put our political differences aside to achieve the goal that the businesses and residents of Wales want us to achieve, which is to defeat covid-19 for good.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic underlines the importance to Wales, and to every part of the UK, of being part of an economically powerful Union that is able to give real help to every individual business and person who needs it in times of trouble? How well does he feel that Wales would have fared had it not been part of that Union?

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend puts his finger on a really important point. The key thing about this period is that, almost irrespective of people's political backgrounds, everybody has come to the conclusion that we could have dealt with this situation only as a Union; whether in Scotland, Northern Ireland, England or Wales, the Union has really mattered. Never has the "United" in United Kingdom been more important than it is now. It does not matter what kind of sceptic someone is; that is pretty blatantly obvious to everybody.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC) [V]: Will the Secretary of State explain why the British Government, via Public Health England, instructed major manufacturers of PPE not to supply care providers registered in Wales? To paraphrase Orwell, is it not the case that within this Union we are all equal, but some are more equal than others?

Simon Hart: I absolutely and fundamentally reject my parliamentary neighbour's assertion as to what the position is and, indeed, what the ambition is. Right from the start of this situation, our sole objective has been to get the right amount of kit to the right place, at the right time and in the right form. We have had huge help from across the nation, including from the Ministry of Defence, to achieve that. Even the hon. Gentleman's SNP colleagues in Scotland recognise that that is the case. To try to make a—dare I say it—cheap political

point out of a situation in which a number of people are striving to improve day by day is not an especially helpful contribution to the debate.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) [V]: There is no doubt that the strength of the Union has enabled the Government to support extraordinary levels of funding for the NHS, businesses, charities, families and so many others in so many ways that few nations across the globe could manage. When a common approach has been used across our Union, we have seen efficient delivery—business rates support is one obvious example. However, when it comes to notifying the most vulnerable shielded constituents in Vale of Glamorgan about gaining access to supermarkets, it has been much more difficult, so will my right hon. Friend encourage the Welsh Government to follow a united model, rather than complicate matters needlessly?

Simon Hart: The short answer to my right hon. Friend's question is yes, and indeed that is already the case in my weekly, or nearly weekly, conversations with the First Minister and members of his Government. Consistency is everything. We all understand that there may be gaps in a complicated, fast-moving situation, but my right hon. Friend and I share an absolute desire to make sure that where gaps appear, the Welsh Government and the UK Government working together fix them quickly.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), but may I press him further? There is still concern about the Downing Street press briefings not getting across the message that we have a devolved nations system of government in the UK. What representations has the right hon. Gentleman made to the BBC and other public broadcasters to ensure that it is made clearer that certain aspects of policies announced from Downing Street or by the UK Government may not apply to Wales, or may apply differently? I am sure he agrees that it is extremely important that we get the correct information out to people across Wales and across all the nations of the UK.

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman's comments about the BBC are significant, and in fact we have already made approaches through the Wales Office to a number of media outlets to make precisely that point. Regarding the Downing Street briefings, that point will be made, and it is made. I have noticed a shift towards greater clarity about devolved and non-devolved matters. I will talk to colleagues in the relevant places to make sure that we keep as close an eye on that as we should.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con) [V]: In Aberconwy and across north Wales, my colleagues and I have been working with the Betsi Cadwaladr University health board to make sure that preparations are in place for the coming wave. What assurances has my right hon. Friend had from the Welsh Government about the proper prioritisation and distribution of resources across Wales? I am particularly interested in oxygen supplies.

Simon Hart: I can offer my hon. Friend some assurances. Recently, the Welsh Government have made an application for additional military support in achieving exactly the

aims he mentioned, especially in terms of oxygen supply. Whenever we have had those requests—I think the most recent was on Thursday last week, for 20 additional military planners—the UK Government's desire is of course to grant them and get the measures in place as soon as possible.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: Wales has a higher proportion of micro or very small businesses than other parts of the UK. The survival of those businesses is vital not only for the Welsh economy but for supply chains across the four nations. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Welsh Government about removing some of the restrictive eligibility criteria for the economic resilience fund grants, such as the VAT status requirements, so that all the small businesses in Wales can get the help the fund promised to deliver?

Simon Hart: The overall point about consistency in the conditions that apply to businesses in England and in Wales is an important one. In whatever we do, we have been attempting to be as aligned as it is possible to be in the particular context, and that will continue. I think there has been a positive spirit of co-operation and collaboration. Of course, I have weekly meetings with the relevant Ministers of the Welsh Government, and that point has been raised. It will be raised again, and I will report back to my hon. Friend after our next meeting, which I think will take place on Monday.

Covid-19: Support for Businesses

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on support for Welsh businesses affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [901909]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart) [V]: Since the beginning of this crisis, Welsh Government Ministers and I have had regular discussions with the Business Secretary about the support that the UK Government can offer to Welsh businesses. We will continue to work together and in collaboration with the Welsh Government to ensure that Welsh businesses are protected and supported.

Christian Matheson [V]: I have plenty of constituents who work across the border in north Wales, all of whom are desperate to get back to work. Some of them cannot because they fall into the protected or shielded group or have family members who do and therefore need longer-term support. When the Government produce their exit strategy, will they ensure that support continues for businesses after the lockdown has ended, so that people who are not able to go straight back to work are not forced back into work because their employers have no option, since there is no support left for them?

Simon Hart: The hon. Member raises a point that I suspect every Member of the House has been considering over the last few days and weeks, and my right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State will no doubt refer to that in a few moments. It is fair to say that whatever the means by which we come out of the covid restrictions, this will need to be carefully considered at every step

and in conjunction with the devolved Administrations, to ensure that the fairness the hon. Member seeks can, between our two Governments, be delivered.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab) [V]: Welsh businesses have been hard hit by this pandemic, and they desperately need support to stay viable. Despite the Chancellor promising to do all it takes, the UK Government's loans for small and medium-sized businesses have a very low take-up rate, not because firms do not need the money but because of the personal risk involved. How will the Secretary of State ensure that more businesses in Wales can access that support, and when will the Government do the decent thing and underwrite 100% of the loans, to give businesses the confidence they need?

Simon Hart: May I start by welcoming the hon. Lady to her position on the shadow Front Bench? I look forward to lively exchanges with her, remotely or in person. I dispute the underlying point that she makes. There has been probably as much support offered by UK Government for UK businesses as any nation on the planet affected by the coronavirus. Even the Barnettised figure for the Welsh Government of a little over £2 billion is a significant contribution to address the concerns that she raises. I stress that her point is as relevant to her colleagues in the Welsh Labour Government as it is to us in the UK Government—that is crucial. I give her an assurance that it is my intention to work with the Welsh Government to ensure those outcomes, but I hope that she will not politicise this more than absolutely necessary.

Nia Griffith: The UK Government's job retention scheme is an important tool for Welsh businesses and their workers, but gaps in the programme have left some employees relying on dismally low universal credit payments. For example, where reduced demand means that employers need to put workers on short-time working, they cannot top up from the scheme for their lost hours. Will the Secretary of State urge his colleagues to close the gaps and introduce flexibility, so that those put on short-time working can receive a proportionate payment for their lost wages?

Simon Hart: As the Chancellor himself has said, we are fully aware that with schemes of this nature, set up under enormous pressure and at great pace, there may be occasions when they do not work perfectly for everybody. I offer this to the hon. Lady: if there are examples of the system not being as watertight as we think it could be and she alerts me to them individually, I will take them up with either the relevant Department in the UK Government or colleagues in the Welsh Government, if that helps.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr, Lefarydd. I too would like to thank all the technical staff. Necessity is truly the mother of invention, and they have done extraordinary work. I would also like to take the opportunity to congratulate the four Plaid Cymru-run councils Gwynedd, Ynys Môn, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire, as well as Pembrokeshire, on working together to ensure that business support money is directed to those businesses which really need it and as soon as possible.

There remains a concern that the loophole allowing holiday homeowners to register residential properties as businesses for tax purposes to avoid paying council tax

will see millions of pounds directed away from legitimate businesses in other local authority areas across England and Wales. How is the Secretary of State working with the First Minister to ensure that second homeowners do not exploit the business rates system across England and Wales and, more importantly, that covid-19 business support money is diverted to the businesses that really need it as soon as possible?

Mr Speaker: I have to say that that was far too long a question. We have to have short questions in fairness to others.

Simon Hart: On the question of collaboration, may I say how pleased I am to see the first signs of a sort of Union approach from the right hon. Lady, which bodes well for the future? On the question of second homes and/or holiday lets—the two things being distinctly different, by the way—it is absolutely crucial that a business is a business and defined as such. It would make no sense to me that a business designed around holiday lets has to go through greater hoops than some other form of business, and it is very important that the councils she mentions are consistent.

Liz Saville Roberts: We still have experiences of people making non-essential journeys to holiday homes and second homes in Wales. The penalty at present is £60 reduced to £30. Given the forthcoming May bank holiday, can the Secretary of State make a commitment that the police will have sufficient powers to have meaningful penalties in place to stop people making those non-essential journeys?

Simon Hart: My own police force and others—Dyfed-Powys police force is an example—have done a fantastic job in using just the right balance of carrot and stick to ensure that, where possible, most people comply with most of the regulations. I take the right hon. Lady's point on board, but I will be guided by the police as to whether they consider that they need additional powers in that respect, and if they make a good case we will take it to the Home Secretary.

Covid-19: Medical Supplies

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that procurement of (a) personal protective equipment, (b) medical appliances and (c) testing kits in response to the covid-19 outbreak operates effectively between the UK and Welsh Governments. [901912]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart) [V]: The UK and Welsh Governments are working together closely to make sure that Wales gets the PPE, appliances and testing kits it needs. So far more than 3.4 million PPE items have been delivered to Wales. I speak to the First Minister regularly in relation to this and the use of the armed forces.

Stephen Doughty [V]: Eight hundred companies in Wales are now in touch with the Welsh Government to help to supply critical PPE and other supplies, including a major manufacturing firm in my constituency. Like many other Welsh firms, they want to help across the UK and use the strength of our Union, so why has it taken the same firm over two and a half weeks to get an answer back from the UK Government, with as yet no

order placed and only after an intervention by me? Will the Secretary of State work with me to unblock that unacceptable delay?

Simon Hart: Of course I will work with the hon. Gentleman, who has been constructive throughout this crisis. The Department of Health and Social Care and others have had a mountain to climb in relation to this and the many very kind offers they have had, but if there are administrative gaps that we need to fill, I will of course take up individual concerns where relevant.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) [V]: In the absence of a vaccine or cure, large-scale testing and contact tracing will be essential tools in tackling coronavirus. In recent days, we have seen a Welsh Health Minister rip up his own testing targets, key people in my local health authority have told me they were not cited on the Deloitte plans for rolling out regional testing centres and there is no real evidence of contact tracers being recruited. Can my right hon. Friend tell me therefore who is actually running the test strategy in Wales—the UK Government, the Welsh Government or Deloitte? Furthermore, what assurances can he give that we have a clear plan based on the science, and that that remains at the heart of everything we are doing in Wales?

Simon Hart: That was three questions rolled into one. Being driven and guided by the science is absolutely the ongoing priority of the UK and Welsh Governments. As my right hon. Friend will know, being a former Secretary of State for Wales, the question of responsibility for the pilot and other testing schemes is a matter for the devolution settlement. If there is a lack of clarity there—the test centre he mentioned is rumoured to be situated in my own constituency—I will take it up with the First Minister in Cardiff.

Mr Speaker: We now come to questions to the Prime Minister. I will be running questions for 45 minutes and I will call the First Secretary of State to answer the engagement question. I welcome him to the Dispatch Box.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[901923] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 April.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have been asked to respond on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and I am pleased to tell the House that he is making a good recovery and is in good spirits.

The coronavirus pandemic presents us with one of the biggest challenges we have faced as a country in decades. Our message to the British public is clear: please stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives. As a Government, we continue to take the right measures at the right time, guided by the science and the medical experts. I pay tribute to the enormous contribution that our NHS and other frontline workers have made to tackling the virus. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude, and we will continue to do whatever it takes to support them. Our aim has always been to protect the

NHS and save lives, and with the public's incredible support, we are doing that by flattening the peak of this virus.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, for all your efforts to ensure that Parliament can meet and apply the scrutiny to Government that we expect and embrace. The House meets in challenging times. Together we can and will defeat this virus.

Mr Speaker: I echo the sentiments about the Prime Minister. We wish him a speedy recovery. I should also tell the House that the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) has withdrawn, so I call Sir Keir Starmer and welcome him to his first outing at the Dispatch Box.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank you, the House authorities and the staff for allowing us to meet in this way today; it is important that we have this scrutiny. I also send all our best wishes through the First Secretary of State to the Prime Minister for a full and speedy recovery. I am sure I speak for the whole House in sending our best wishes to all those affected by coronavirus and the condolences of the whole House to those who have lost loved ones. Again on behalf of the whole House, I offer our deepest thanks to those on the frontline, risking their lives to keep us safe and our country going.

I promised that Labour would give constructive opposition, with the courage to support the Government where that was the right thing to do. We all want and need the Government to succeed and defeat coronavirus, but we also need the courage to challenge where we think they are getting it wrong. In that spirit, I want to start with testing. Testing is obviously crucial at every stage of the pandemic, but we have been very slow, and are way behind other European countries. The Health Secretary made a very important commitment to 100,000 tests a day by the end of April, but yesterday the figure for actual tests was 18,000, and that was down from Monday, when it was 19,000 tests. We are way behind the curve and the end of the month is a week tomorrow. What does the First Secretary expect to happen in the next eight days to get us from 18,000 tests a day to 100,000 tests a day?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman and I congratulate him on his success in being elected leader of the Labour party. I will certainly pass on his best wishes to the Prime Minister—I know he would want to be here in person—and I join him in paying tribute to all our NHS and other frontline workers.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly raised the crucial issue of testing, which will be an incredibly important part of our strategy for transitioning from the current social distancing measures. However, I have to correct him: our capacity for tests is now at 40,000 per day. That is an incredibly important milestone. He is right to say that in the final week that will require a big increase, but of course a project like this requires an exponential increase in the final days, the final week, of the programme. I reassure him that we are working with a range of commercial partners to boost the testing to get to that 100,000 tests per day. Two of our super-labs, in Milton Keynes and Alderley Park, are now fully functional, and Glasgow will be open later this week.

Keir Starmer: I thank the First Secretary of State for his kind comments. I did not need correcting, because I gave the figure for the actual tests a day. The First Secretary says that there is capacity for 40,000 tests a day and I think it is really important that we fully understand what he just said, because it means that the day before yesterday 40,000 tests could have been carried out, but only 18,000 tests were actually carried out. All week, I have heard from the frontline, from care workers who are frankly desperate for tests for their residents and themselves—desperate. They would expect every test to be used every day for those who need them. There is clearly a problem. Why are the Government not using all the tests available every day?

Dominic Raab: It is important to pay tribute, because there are two elements to this: getting the capacity up, which is half of it, and we are making good progress—I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman concedes that point—and the issue of increasing the demand, which is something we have control over. Of course we are making sure that the eligibility is broadened. Our focus, as I think he would agree, should be on frontline NHS staff, broadened out to care workers and other key workers in a way that the system can manage. We are confident that, based on our test capacity, we will be able to deliver that. On the capacity itself reaching the 100,000 target, we have a range of deals with firms such as Randox, or AstraZeneca, GSK and Cambridge University working together to staff a new lab. We will deliver, and those tests will be crucial, not just to control the virus but to allow the country to move to the next phase.

Keir Starmer: I welcome the fact that capacity has gone up, but it is not now a question of driving up demand; demand is there. Last week, the Health Secretary said that every care worker who needed a test would get one, but the reality on the ground is very different, and there are very few tests indeed.

The position is this: if a care worker has symptoms of coronavirus—or a family member does—he or she has to self-isolate, quite rightly. To get a necessary test, they are then instructed to travel to a testing centre, which is often many miles away. For example, social care workers in Leicester are told to go to the outskirts of Nottingham, a 45-minute drive, in order to get tested. There are lots of examples of this across the country.

There is an obvious problem with that system. Not all care workers have access to a car and, because they or a family member have symptoms, they obviously cannot use public transport, so it is little wonder that we see those pictures of half-empty testing centres. That does not look like a good plan. It is not about driving up demand; it is about tests and where they are needed. What reassurance will the First Secretary give to care workers on the frontline that things will improve for them, and fast?

Dominic Raab: It is certainly about capacity. I addressed that issue in my earlier answers and also explained how we will bridge the 100,000. It is also about demand. We need to encourage those who are able to take the test to come forward. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that it is also about distribution and about some of the logistical and transport challenges that people, particularly some of those that he described, will have in getting to the test. We are working with the local

resilience forums to make sure that we can distribute the tests as effectively as possible. We have mobile labs to go to some of those hard-to-reach areas. We will be using the Army, which, along with the other key workers, has made an incredible contribution to support that effort.

I just come back to the key point, which is that it is important to have a target and to drive towards that target. We are making good progress. We are confident that we will meet our target, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman should join me, as we engage in this national effort, in saying to the Welsh Health Minister, Vaughan Gething, who has abandoned the Welsh target in Labour-run Wales of 5,000, that, actually, all four corners of the United Kingdom need to work together in this effort to make sure that we reach that national target. It is about capacity and it is about distribution. We will only be able to hit that target if all of us come together to deliver on it.

Keir Starmer: I do recognise how hard people are working to try to drive up the number of tests, but there is a significant gap and there are only eight days left. On Monday, Manjeet Singh Riyat, an A&E consultant at the Royal Derby Hospital, sadly died of coronavirus. He was, I think, the first Sikh A&E consultant, respected widely across the country and instrumental in building up Derbyshire's emergency services. Sadly, he is just one of the many frontline health and social care workers to have died from coronavirus during this crisis. Will the First Secretary of State tell us how many NHS workers have now died from coronavirus, and how many social care workers have now died from coronavirus?

Dominic Raab: May I just say that I entirely agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's broader point, which is that our key workers who are fighting for us and tending to the most vulnerable in our society—whether in the NHS or in social care—need our full support? That is why it is so important that we ramp up the testing and ramp up the PPE deliveries. On the latest figures, my understanding is that 69 people in the NHS have died of coronavirus. I do not have the precise figure for care homes. It is more difficult to establish that number in relation to care home workers as opposed to care home residents. I think that we can all agree in this House that every one of those is a tragedy, and that that can only make us double down on our efforts to tackle this virus and to do everything we can to support those amazing workers in the NHS who are delivering so much in taking the battle to the coronavirus.

Keir Starmer: I thank the First Secretary of State for giving us the figure in relation to NHS workers and, of course, each and every one of them is a tragic case. I am disappointed that we do not have a number for social care workers, and I put him on notice that I will ask the same question again next week and, hopefully, we will have a better answer.

Let me turn to protective equipment. Clearly, this is crucial to those at risk on the frontline who are risking their lives to save ours. The least they deserve is the right protective equipment. We have all heard countless examples of frontline workers not getting the equipment that they need. This is from a Unison care worker just last weekend:

"I work in a nursing home. I'm terrified. I don't know if residents have the virus. We are wearing home-made masks. This is horrible and I am very scared."

That word "scared" is one that we have all heard many times in the past two or three weeks. A survey by the Royal College of Nursing found that half of nursing staff felt under pressure to work without the levels of protective equipment set out in official guidance. This has been a stress test of our resilience, and the Government plan is clearly not working. I ask the First Secretary of State to tell frontline workers at risk when they will finally get the equipment they need to keep them safe.

Dominic Raab: In relation to all those frontline staff who have passed away battling coronavirus and who have worked so hard to protect other people who are suffering, may I first say that our hearts go out to them? The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right that we must do everything we can to protect those frontline staff. I know that a consultant recently passed away at Kingston Hospital, which is where I have been treated and where both my boys were born and delivered, so I know how important and how personal this is to so many of us. We all absolutely agree on the need to protect those workers. He will know that getting PPE to where it needs to be is a massive international challenge that every country faces, from China to Germany. We have made a huge effort to provide, for example, the ventilators that have bolstered the NHS during this incredibly difficult time. If we had not done that, the NHS would not have been able to cope.

Since the start of the outbreak, we have delivered 1 billion items of personal protective equipment, and tens of millions have been distributed via the devolved Administrations. We recognise, though, that we have to strive even harder in this incredibly difficult and competitive international environment to source the equipment. That is why we brought in my noble friend Lord Deighton, formerly chief executive of the London 2012 Olympics, who has been appointed to lead on our domestic efforts.

We have delivered 34 million items of PPE across 38 local resilience forums. We have established the hotlines, the Royal Mail procedures and a new pilot website to ensure not only that we have the amount of PPE that we need, but that it can get to the most vulnerable and those on the frontline who need it the most.

Keir Starmer: I share the sentiments of the First Secretary in relation to all those working on the frontline. I also pay tribute to all those who have ramped up the capacity of the NHS. It has been incredible to see what has happened in the past few weeks, and I know that that has been a huge effort.

I understand the challenge of getting the right equipment to the right place every time, but, as the First Secretary knows, there is a significant gap between promise and delivery. Over the past few days, it has emerged that British manufacturers have got in touch with many Opposition Members, and probably with Members across the House, saying that they offered to help to produce protective equipment but did not get a response from the Government. I understand due diligence, and that not all the offers could be taken up, but some of those who offered to help are now supplying in other countries, so they clearly could have supplied in this country.

Something is going wrong, and there is a pattern emerging here. We were slow into lockdown, slow on testing, slow on protective equipment and now slow to take up those offers from British firms. The Prime Minister has

said that this is a national effort, and he is right about that. In that spirit, I ask the First Secretary to commit to working with the Opposition to identify and take up those offers from British manufacturers for protective equipment as soon as possible.

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman, although I do not accept his premise that we have been slow. We have been guided by the scientific advice, the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer at every step along the way. If he thinks that he knows better than they do, with the benefit of hindsight, then that is his decision, but that is not the way we have proceeded, and it is not the way we will in future.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned offers from British businesses. It is not quite right to say that they must have been acceptable for UK standards just because they are supplying different needs for different countries abroad, but I reassure him that 8,000 businesses have offered PPE in response to the Government's call. Every business receives a response, and 3,000 of those 8,000 are followed up where they have either the specification or the volume that makes it a sensible thing for the NHS to do.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman made a sensible point about specifications and health standards. He will know from the reporting that in other countries that have distributed PPE items without those high standards, they have been distributed with faults or flaws, they have had to be recalled, and health workers in those countries have had to go into isolation. I appreciate that he wants to put pressure on and scrutinise the Government, but I think and hope that he will understand the need to take the right decisions and to scrutinise very carefully the precious PPE that we are putting on the frontline to protect our key workers.

Mr Speaker: We have been unable to connect David Mundell, so I will go to Ian Blackford for the first of his two questions.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As the covid-19 pandemic continues, we are reminded every day of the terrible toll that it takes on our society, and of the heroic efforts of our frontline workers. I put on record our gratitude for everything that they do.

It is now 34 days since the Chancellor first announced a package of economic support—at the time, heralded as a package of support for all businesses and workers during this health emergency. Yet, 34 days on, thousands of businesses and individuals have found themselves with no income, no support and no end in sight—all because of arbitrary cut-off dates and bureaucratic barriers imposed by the UK Government. People are being left behind.

Today, the Scottish National party is leading a cross-party call for a universal basic income to finally protect everyone. It will put cash in people's pockets and help to ensure a strong economic recovery and a fairer society. Can the First Secretary of State give us a straight answer today: does he support that proposal, or does he reject it?

Dominic Raab: First, I pay tribute with the right hon. Gentleman to the key workers who have served every one of our four nations. I will also say, in relation to

Scotland, that we recognise the UK-wide effort to tackle coronavirus: the Royal Air Force helicopters helping Scottish patients to get treatment, the Royal Regiment of Scotland setting up test centres in Glasgow, and the 11 million items of personal protective equipment that have been delivered from central Government stocks to make sure that, as one United Kingdom, we defeat the coronavirus.

I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman's point on universal income. The Chancellor has, I think quite rightly, adopted and announced a series of measures, second to none in the world, to support workers through the job retention scheme and to ensure that for those who do not qualify, other support such as an increase in universal credit and working tax credits is able to deal with the challenge. We need to have a very focused approach, providing the resources that we need to those who need them most. A universal income, without being based on need, would not provide that.

Ian Blackford: Of course, the simple fact is that many people are being left behind. Many people are not getting an income just now. A universal basic income is the right economic policy at the right time. Its time has come. More than 100 Members of Parliament from seven political parties—parties from across the four nations and regions of the United Kingdom—have come together to support this solution. Polling shows that 84% of the public now support it. A universal basic income is a solution that will provide support for anybody and, crucially, it will leave no one behind. It is a solution that deserves more than the answer that we got just now from the First Secretary of State. The Government should think again, because we should not be left in a situation where the self-employed, seasonal workers or others do not get the support they deserve. Will the Government think on this again and do the right thing to make sure that no one is left behind—yes or no?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Gentleman but, as I made clear in my earlier answer, we want to make sure we provide support to those who need it most. I would respectfully suggest that a universal approach, uniform and without reference to need, income or the most vulnerable in our society, is not the way to achieve it. Our plan is one of the most extensive in the world. It makes sure that workers receive 80% of their salary up to £2,500. We have already extended that to June.

We have made other forms of support available for those who do not qualify; the right hon. Gentleman talked about the self-employed and others who may not fall within the criteria of the scheme. I have made it clear that the increases to universal credit and the working tax credit basic rate, the mortgage holidays and the energy bill deferrals are the way to have a focused approach that targets resources at those who need them most and allows our economy as a whole to pull through this coronavirus.

[901929] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: At this time of national emergency, many people are being forced to use their bank overdrafts, yet the banks are charging 20% interest per year, which they are going to increase to 40% in July. At the same time, they are offering savers a pathetic interest rate of 0.1%. Yet these are the same banks that were saved by billions

and billions of pounds of taxpayers' money. What on earth is going on? When are the banks going to act in the national interest? Acting—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman has been cut off in his prime. If the First Secretary can get the best out of that, we will all benefit.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; I am pretty sure I got the gist, and he is right to refer to the support that banks need to be providing to customers. Thanks to the work of the Chancellor, the major banks and building societies have provided relief to those impacted by coronavirus, including deferring mortgage and other loan repayments, increasing overdraft limits and increasing credit card limits. By the first week of April, 1.2 million mortgage payment holidays had been granted. In this national effort, as we pay tribute to those across the country stepping up to the plate, we certainly expect the banks to do their bit.

[901924] **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Like Sam's Chop House, the Frog and Bucket, and hundreds more in Manchester, nearly three quarters of hospitality businesses do not qualify for grants—and for most, loans just are not an option. Given that the hospitality and retail sectors are the lifeblood of our high streets and are likely to face the longest Government-enforced closure, will the First Secretary extend cash grants and come up with a rescue package to stop thousands of pubs, restaurants, shops and venues disappearing altogether?

Dominic Raab: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady about the challenge that we have across all the sectors she mentioned in making sure that we see them through this incredibly difficult period. We want to make sure that the country, the economy, all those small businesses and all those sectors she mentioned can bounce back. The Chancellor has introduced a whole range of measures in relation to both finance—grants, where they are capable of being made—and other tax deferrals to assist small businesses in the sectors the hon. Lady described. Certainly, of course, if there are issues with any particular businesses, I will take them away, look at them very carefully, and make sure that the Chancellor can assess whether there is any more we can do. We have to make sure, from the high street to those other sectors that are adding huge value to the economy, that we are in a position, after the coronavirus ebbs and once we come through the initial crisis, to bounce back. We will do that by looking after all those small businesses and all those sectors that the hon. Lady rightly described.

[901930] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con) [V]: Beautiful Hastings and Rye is heavily dependent on tourism as a major driver in the local economy. Covid-19 has badly hit the tourism, leisure and hospitality industries. Has my right hon. Friend considered what measures are needed, first, to encourage domestic tourism, and secondly, to ensure that tourism and tourism-related businesses are given the right support to enable recovery from the impact of covid-19 and revive our local economies?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We know that the coronavirus is significantly affecting the tourism industry. That point was made by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell)

as well. The Chancellor has set out unprecedented support for businesses and workers, including those in the tourism sector. That includes business rate support for hospitality and leisure businesses. We have also announced a £1.3 million scheme through VisitEngland to provide support to destination management organisations at risk of closure because of the coronavirus pandemic in order to see them through this difficult time. We are committed to helping the industry to get through this crisis so that we can encourage people to take holidays and revive the tourism sector as we come through the crisis.

[901926] **Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab) [V]: The Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies recommended an urgent lockdown to save lives on 26 February, but it took another three and a half weeks to implement it. The Government like to claim that they have been following the scientific advice, but they haven't, have they?

Dominic Raab: We have at every stage, from January, when the original crisis started to break out in China, right the way through to the moment several weeks ago when we announced our social distancing measures, followed meticulously, carefully and assiduously the advice both from the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer. As a result of that, and as a result of the measures we have put in place, two things have happened. First of all, we have protected our precious NHS. It has not been overwhelmed in the way some had feared. Also, I pay tribute not just to the key workers we have talked about but to the huge sacrifices made by the great British public. Because of their compliance with the social distancing measures, we are starting to come through this peak. That has happened only because we have taken the right decisions, based on the evidence that we have had, at the right moment in time—and I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that that is exactly what we will continue to do.

[901931] **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con) [V]: What recent steps have the Government taken to ensure that the NHS has adequate supplies of personal protective equipment?

Dominic Raab: This has been raised already in the House, and it is critically important. I totally agree with my hon. Friend on the imminent need for getting the PPE to the places that need it most. Since the start of the outbreak, we have delivered 1 billion items of personal protective equipment, and we have ensured that we have distributed it via the devolved Administrations so that all four nations get the equipment they need. We are also working through the local resilience forums, with our local authorities and with the support of the military, to ensure that everyone who needs it, whether it is NHS key workers on the frontline or care home workers, is getting the PPE they need. With the help of my noble friend Lord Deighton, who ran the Olympics, we are going to ramp up even further our capacity not just to procure and produce PPE but to get it to where it is needed most.

[901927] **Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): At a time of national crisis, it is critical that the Government keep their word. Local councils are ensuring that communities get the support they need. I know this from the work

that has taken place in Bradford: they are the government on the frontline. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Government will meet their promise to fund whatever is necessary and fully compensate local councils for all the costs and loss of income related to the covid-19 crisis, and not just provide the funding already announced, which only partially covers what the councils have already spent?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to the councils up and down the country who, whether it is through social care or the services that they need to provide to their residents, are doing an incredible job. I can reassure her that we have already announced an additional £1.6 billion of funding just this weekend to support councils delivering those essential services on the frontline.

[901933] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Government's commitment to write off £13 billion of debt for hospital trusts across the country, freeing up our hospitals to work through the crisis and creating a firmer foundation for the NHS when we reach the other side. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government remain committed to record levels of investment in the NHS so that the world's greatest health service can become even better? And would he be willing to look at the case for capital investment in the ageing, but amazing, award-winning North Tees Hospital?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend will know that under this Government the NHS will have record funding enshrined in law, the largest hospital building programme in a generation, 50,000 more nurses and 50 million extra GP appointments. In response to the coronavirus, the Chancellor has also launched a £14.5 billion coronavirus emergency response, of which £6.6 billion will go to the NHS. In relation specifically to North Tees, we would encourage the trust to continue to develop its plans and priorities for local new NHS infrastructure. We will be looking carefully at all of those.

[901928] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab) [V]: The Port Talbot steelworks is the beating heart of the economy and the community in my Aberavon constituency, and there will be no post-pandemic recovery for our country unless we have a strong and healthy Welsh and British steel industry. The Government's coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme is capped at £50 million, which is only one tenth of what Tata Steel believes will be the cash-flow impact on the company over a six-month period. Will the Government now urgently take steps to lift the loan cap to a level that will give our steel industry a fighting chance of surviving this crisis?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the business interruption loans. We made grants of up to £25,000 available for small businesses. I understand the point he makes about the sector in his constituency. We have made changes to the loan scheme, principally to make it quicker to access, and 12,000 loans have now been approved. I know that the Chancellor is looking carefully at the steel sector in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and at all those who are not directly benefiting from this particular scheme to ensure that in

the round we are providing the measures that we need in a targeted way to support all the different crucial elements of the economy.

[901934] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): One of the most striking features of the past few weeks has been the way in which so many public, private and voluntary organisations have bent themselves out of shape to deal with the pandemic, not least in my own constituency, for which I give a heartfelt thank you. Will the First Secretary join me in commending the remarkable resilience, initiative and spirit of the British people? Will he also outline what he sees as the essential ingredients for getting our country through this?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend. We are facing a challenge we have not faced for decades in recent memory, and it is a national effort and a team effort. The critical ingredient is that the country comes together, as it has done, in this incredible national effort and national mission to defeat coronavirus. Like him, I pay tribute not just to the NHS workers, the carers and all those on the frontline, but to those in the voluntary sector and the people who we are understanding more and more are really also part of the key workers in our economy and our society—the delivery drivers, the people working in the supermarkets and all of those who are steering us through this time of national crisis. Together, we can rise to the challenge, and I am absolutely confident that we will rise to the challenge and come back, as one United Kingdom, stronger than ever.

[901932] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: For weeks, there has been a significant gap between promises from the Government and the reality that has been experienced by our constituents, so when will the Government learn from the delays they have experienced so far, learn from other countries and learn from the success of the speed at which the Nightingale hospitals were delivered? When will they learn from the best in crisis decision making and start to deliver solutions that fit the promises?

Dominic Raab: First, the hon. Lady is absolutely right: with an unprecedented crisis, of course we will learn lessons; there is no country in the world addressing this crisis that does not. But she is also right to refer to the Nightingale hospitals—an incredible achievement in this country. People said that we could not build a hospital in this country at that kind of speed, and we have built several, with more to come. People have said that we would not be able to get the 1 billion items of personal protective equipment; that is exactly what we have done. So we do not say that there are no challenges, and she is absolutely right to make the point that we need to learn the lessons as we go, but we are absolutely convinced that going along in a very deliberate way—learning the lessons, listening to the medical evidence, listening to the advice from the chief scientific adviser; not just abandoning it, but following it consistently—is how we will get through this crisis.

It is worth noting that one of the big risks as we go through this peak was the fear that we would find the NHS overwhelmed: it has not been overwhelmed. If we look at critical care capacity and at the ventilators that we have managed to secure, we can see that the NHS, as an institution—there have of course been heroic individual

achievements—has held up well. That is a good example of how we have risen to this challenge, and we will continue to do so.

[901936] **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con) [V]: Around 100 of my West Bromwich East constituents are currently stuck in India during this pandemic, which is why I very much welcome the Government's bold commitment to work with our international partners and the airlines to bring back our British nationals. Could my right hon. Friend provide the House with an update on the progress of this scheme?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend. Of course, she will know that, as Foreign Secretary, I have been working flat out with the Foreign Office and our international network on that. It is worth saying that we have worked with foreign Governments and the airlines to return those stranded, and we have returned over 1 million British nationals on commercial flights. I am sure that my hon. Friend will understand that the scale of that operation is incredible and unprecedented. We have also introduced a special charter arrangement: we have put in £75 million and have a whole range of international or UK airlines signed up to it, and we have returned over 10,000 on charter flights. In fact, in the last few weeks, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has chartered 52 flights to get more than 10,000 people back from 16 different countries, including nearly 5,000 from India, which she has mentioned. We have confirmed further flights from several countries in the next few days, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

[901935] **Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) [V]: In an answer to the Leader of the Opposition, the Foreign Secretary mentioned a consultant who died at Kingston Hospital, my local hospital. That consultant's name was Anton Sebastianpillai. Anton came to the UK after qualifying as a doctor in Sri Lanka in 1967. Anton worked in our NHS for decades, and he was treating coronavirus patients when he caught the disease and, sadly, died. He was the best of us. On behalf of Anton and the other brave NHS and careworkers who made the ultimate sacrifice for others, and so that we learn the lessons urgently ahead of a future pandemic, will the Government commit now to a future independent, judge-led inquiry into how this crisis has been handled?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and join him in paying tribute to Dr Anton Sebastianpillai. I know at first hand—I have been into Kingston Hospital; my boys were born there and I have been treated there—the incredible work they do there. It is my local hospital too, so I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to what they have done.

I have to say that I will not take up the right hon. Gentleman's offer of committing to a public inquiry. There are definitely lessons to be learnt, and when we get through this crisis it will be important that we take stock and come together to understand, with such an unprecedented challenge on an international scale, what can be done to avoid it happening again. Right now, as we come through the peak of the virus, from our key NHS frontline workers to members of the public, people would rightly expect our full focus to be on making sure that we save lives, protect the NHS and steer the whole country through this crisis, rather than engaging in that process and that set of deliberations right now.

[901937] **Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: The First Secretary of State will be aware that the Army has played a vital role in the UK's response to the coronavirus, but he may not know that in Wales the joint military command was stood up in Brecon barracks in my constituency. From there, it has been supporting local resilience forums around the country, including our seven regional health boards. I am extremely proud that Brecon is the home of the Army in Wales. As the Ministry of Defence ponders the future for Brecon barracks, will the First Secretary of State join me in thanking the Army for setting up the joint command so quickly and for working so hard?

Dominic Raab: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in paying tribute, as I did in answer to a question in relation to Scotland, to the heroic effort that our armed forces are making in all four corners of the United Kingdom, in particular in relation to Wales. Our servicemen and women have worked tirelessly to help to build the hospitals, drive the ambulances and deliver the PPE to where it is needed most. We pay tribute to them, along with the other key workers, and we also pay tribute to the UK armed forces in all four corners of the United Kingdom for helping to deliver and get this country through the coronavirus challenge.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch, Lefarydd. If the lockdown is lifted in one nation or region because it is past the peak, we will see confusion and people starting to move around, which runs the risk of spreading further infection. Will the First Secretary of State confirm that if the four-nations approach is to be meaningful, the four Governments must have an equal say, and that lifting the lockdown can only happen by the unanimous agreement of the four Governments together?

Dominic Raab: May I first pay tribute to the Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales? I think it is fair to say that, through the Cobra meetings, we have had excellent co-operation between all four nations, and indeed with the current Mayor of London. That is critically important. If the right hon. Lady looks at the social distancing measures, she will see that there has been remarkable consistency in all four nations in terms of compliance. I hope that we can continue to work together on a collaborative basis as we look towards the second phase; and, certainly on behalf of the UK Government, we are committed to doing that.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: Twycross Zoo in my constituency is world renowned for its conservation work and indeed for protecting endangered species, but it is now endangered itself, with overheads of £650,000 a month and no income coming in. It has joined others such as Bristol Zoo, Chester Zoo and London Zoo in asking for £100 million from the Government to help it to care for the animals. Will the Government commit to supporting good zoos so that, just like the animals they protect, they will be here for us all to learn from in the future?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and absolutely agree with him: we have to look after the zoos and all the incredible animals that they put on display for all of us. I am pleased to announce that, as a result of our engagement and consultation, a new zoos

support fund will be launched and opened soon. It will be able to provide dedicated support, alongside that already made available by the Treasury, to help zoos to care for their animals during this crisis. I urge the zoos concerned to look at the range of financial support already available, and also to contact officials at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs so that we can see how it can best be tailored for them.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the final question. I call Angela Eagle.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Last Sunday, the UK and 18 other G20 countries endorsed a comprehensive communiqué on covid-19 and future global pandemic preparedness. That much-needed action plan was then effectively vetoed by the

USA as part of its unfounded attack on the World Health Organisation. Given that the Prime Minister is reported to have spoken to Donald Trump yesterday, can the First Secretary of State assure the House that Britain believes that the World Health Organisation is critical to the future of global health security, and that this country will not be drawn into the US President's disgraceful vendetta against the World Health Organisation?

Dominic Raab: First, I reassure the hon. Lady that we fully support international efforts. Indeed, we are a leading player—whether on vaccines or on supporting vulnerable countries—in helping to get through what is a global crisis. We recognise that the WHO has a role to play. It is not perfect—no international institution is. We do need to work to reform it, but we have made it clear that we consider it to be an important part of the international response, and the UK will continue to lead the way in that effort.

Covid-19 Response

Mr Speaker: We will run the statement for 45 minutes. The time available for opening contributions is 10 minutes for the Secretary of State, five minutes for the Opposition, and two minutes for the Scottish National party.

12.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on coronavirus.

First, may I say how pleased I am that the House is sitting once again? At this important time, it is critical that we have the scrutiny and debate that the House provides. I thank everybody who was involved in setting up the new arrangements, which demonstrate that no virus or threat will thwart our democracy.

Coronavirus continues to spread throughout the world. The latest figures show that 17,337 people have sadly died here. Our hearts—the hearts of the whole House—go out to their loved ones. I know that across the House we are united in our determination to fight this virus with everything we've got; today I want to update the House on each part of our battle plan.

First, on the resilience of the NHS, I can tell the House that for the first time we now have over 3,000 spare critical care beds in the NHS. That is more than three times more than we had at the start of this crisis. It is thanks to the incredible work of an awful lot of people that we now have this extra spare capacity, even before we include the new Nightingale hospitals. Over the past two weeks, I have been lucky enough to attend, either in person or virtually, the opening of four of these new Nightingales—in London, Manchester, Birmingham and Harrogate—and there are several more to come, all across the UK, including in Belfast, Glasgow, Cardiff, Exeter and Sunderland. These incredible efforts from dedicated staff, supported by our armed forces, mean that our NHS has not at any point been overwhelmed by coronavirus. Some said this would be impossible.

Today I want to reinforce the message that non-covid NHS services are open for patients: the NHS is there for you if you need advice and treatment. I want to address that message very clearly to those who might be vulnerable to heart attacks or stroke, to parents of young children, to pregnant women and to people with concerns that they may have cancer. I want to emphasise that people with non-coronavirus symptoms must still contact their GP. If you think you need medical help, please contact your GP, either online or by phone, to be assessed. If you need urgent medical advice, use NHS 111 online; if you cannot get online, call 111. And, of course, if something is serious or life-threatening, call 999. If you are told to go to hospital, the place you need to be is in hospital. The NHS is there for you and can provide the very best care if you need it.

The second part of our battle plan is on supply and working to boost supplies of core equipment. The full weight of the Government is behind this effort. Again, we have brought in the armed forces to help us to meet this demand. This includes ventilators—both purchasing extra stock and increasing the production of new ones. We now have record numbers of ventilators, with 10,700 available for use for patients. This also includes medicines, so that we can make sure everyone has access to the supplies and treatments they need, and of course it

includes personal protective equipment, too. In normal times, the NHS PPE supply chain supplies 233 hospital trusts. Currently, 58,000 separate health and social care settings are being supplied with PPE, so we are creating a whole new logistics network from scratch, and we have some of the best minds in the country working on this.

I am grateful to colleagues from the NHS, Public Health England, the Crown Commercial Service, the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Ministry of Defence, the armed forces—again—the devolved Administrations, territorial offices, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade, because they are all playing their part. Last week, I appointed Lord Deighton, who delivered the Olympics, to a new role in driving forward PPE manufacturing here.

Since the start of this crisis, we have delivered over 1 billion items of PPE. We are constantly working to improve the delivery system and buying PPE from around the world. We are also working to make more at home, and I would like to thank the UK businesses that have generously come forward with offers to turn their production lines to this national effort. I also thank Members from across the House who have put us in contact with businesses in their constituencies. We are actively engaged with over 1,000 companies which buy from abroad and are working with 159 potential UK manufacturers. We have a rigorous system of verifying the offers that we receive, because not all offers have been credible and it is important to focus on the biggest, most credible offers first. This work is crucial so we can get our NHS and care staff the kit they need so that they can do their job safely and with confidence.

The third part is to scale up testing. I have set the goal of 100,000 tests a day by the end of this month, and I am delighted to say that the expansion of capacity is ahead of plans, even though demand has thus far been lower than expected. We are therefore ramping up the availability of this testing, expanding who is eligible for testing and making it easier to access the tests. The tests are conducted in NHS hospitals, and through our drive-through centres, mobile units and home deliveries. These tests are then sent to laboratories. We have completed the construction of three Lighthouse Labs in Milton Keynes, Glasgow and Cheshire. Each site took just three weeks to complete and begin testing.

As we have reached the peak and as we bring the number of new cases down, we will introduce contact tracing at large scale. The introduction of the new NHS app for contact tracing is also in development. As we do this, we are working closely with some of the best digital and technological brains, and renowned experts in clinical safety and digital ethics, so that we can get all this right. The more people sign up for the new app when it goes live, the better informed our response will be and the better we can therefore protect the NHS.

Fourthly, we need to make sure that we make the best possible use of science and research to pursue the vaccines and treatments that are essential to defeat the virus once and for all. Here, the UK is at the forefront of the global effort. We have put more money into the global efforts to search for a vaccine than any other country, and yesterday I announced over £40 million of funding for the two most promising UK projects—at Imperial

and Oxford. The vaccine from the Oxford project will be trialled in people from tomorrow, and I am sure that the whole House agrees that that is a very promising development. I repeat what I said yesterday: in normal times, reaching this stage would take years. The innovative groups of people at both the Jenner Institute in Oxford and the regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, deserve our special praise. They are ensuring that the process is safe, yet conducted probably more rapidly than ever before. They deserve the support of the whole House in that work. At the same time, we will invest in manufacturing capability. If either of those vaccines works, we must be able to make them available for the British people as soon as humanly possible.

The fifth measure that I will talk about in the time available is the one in which everyone can play their part: social distancing. I want to thank everyone across the country for their steadfast commitment in following the rules, including in this House. It is making a difference. We are at the peak. But before we relax or make changes to any social distancing rules, we have set out five tests that need to be met: first, that the NHS can continue to cope; secondly, that the operational challenges have been met; thirdly, that the daily death rate falls sustainably and consistently; fourthly, that the rate of infection is decreasing; and fifthly, and most importantly, that there is no risk of a second peak.

Finally, we are working to protect the most vulnerable through shielding—this is the sixth part of our battle plan. There has been a huge effort across Government to contact and support those at risk. We have been boosted by the support and help of the heroic NHS volunteer responders, who signed up in droves within two days of our call to action. An unbelievable 750,000 people put themselves forward for this initiative. With those volunteers, and with the support of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the NHS and local councils, which have done amazing work on this, we are shielding the most vulnerable.

These are unprecedented times for us all. We have all seen the extraordinary impact of coronavirus in our constituencies and across the country. And even though today we are physically separated, the House is at its best when we are united in our purpose and our resolve. I will keep working with Members from right across the House in the fight against this invisible killer. This may be akin to a war, but it is one where the whole of humanity is on the same side. I commend this statement to the House.

12.57 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for making the arrangements for us to be able to participate in these circumstances. I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

My thoughts are with all those who have lost their lives to this horrific virus. I pay tribute to the NHS staff who have lost their lives. I hope that, when this is over, we can find an appropriate way to remember the frontline NHS staff who gave their lives for all of us. May we also remember those social care staff who have also lost their lives? Will the Secretary of State tell us the actual number of social care staff who have sadly died? The First Secretary did not have those figures at his fingertips a few moments ago.

It looks like we are heading for one of the worst death rates in Europe. The Government have been careful to always say that they are following scientific advice. Will the Secretary of State tell us the explanation from the Government's scientists for why our death rate seems so poor when compared with Germany's, for example? Will he undertake to publish the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies' minutes, which have not been published? Will he also undertake to publish the evidence on why we are following a seven-day rule for isolation? That appears to contradict the World Health Organisation, which suggests a 14-day rule for isolation.

As the virus develops, we see that, while it attacks the respiratory system, it also attacks cells throughout the body with ACE2 receptors, leading to cardiovascular and renal failure. In the same way that the Secretary of State can convene SAGE and other committees, will he convene the clinical societies so that we can share understanding of the disease among clinicians regarding how best to treat the disease as research emerges?

I am sure that the Secretary of State is struck, as I am, by the high proportion of deaths among black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. We see that in the United States, too. He has launched an inquiry. Will he update the House on that and tell us when it will report?

I am sure the Secretary of State is as horrified as I am by the deaths in care homes and nursing homes. This was always a high-risk sector, which is why we have long called for a social care strategy. Will he undertake to do four things? Will he ensure that all deaths are recorded on a daily basis? The CQC suggested today that the death rate in care homes is double what was reported by the ONS yesterday. Can he ensure that testing for staff is delivered in care homes at local NHS sites or by mobile units? It is clearly ludicrous to expect care workers to travel for miles and miles to drive-through testing centres. Can he ensure that PPE supply systems for the NHS are expanded to the social care sector as well? The Secretary of State said in the past that the NHS will get whatever it takes. Will the social care sector now get funding to cover the huge costs that it is facing, which are associated with increased staffing levels and PPE? I join him in praising the leadership of the NHS for what it has done.

The Secretary of State gave us the critical care figures. How many general and acute beds are currently empty in the NHS? If there are significant numbers of empty beds, could they be used for social care residents, or to start a return to elective surgery? We know that the lockdown is having an impact on people's wider health. Cancer patients are going without treatment, and we know that elective waiting lists will rise. Can he tell us the latest estimates of how high he thinks those lists will rise? There are also bound to be mental health problems associated with the lockdown.

Many people are understandably angry that front-line staff do not seem to be getting PPE on time, and we do not seem to have taken part in some of the European procurement projects. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that was because we missed an email. The Secretary of State said that we are now part of that project, but that prompts the question of why we were not part of it at the beginning. The senior civil servant at the Foreign Office said it was a political decision.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

Will the Secretary of State tell us exactly what went on? Will he publish the background briefing so that we can see exactly what happened?

Finally, I agree that testing and contact tracing are vital to coming out of a lockdown. The Secretary of State talked about wanting to upscale contact tracing, but that is very labour-intensive. Can we use the 750,000 volunteers who have signed up to do some of that contact tracing? The app that he mentioned is welcome. When will it be available? Is he proposing that it will be mandatory, or will it be voluntary? If it is voluntary, how will we ensure that it is taken up by the population? Will he comment on reports today that the PCR test, which has been used for some NHS staff, returned false results and that those staff had to be tested again? How many people have been affected by that? What is now in place to ensure that that does not happen again? If the Secretary of State cannot answer all those points today, I hope that he will write to me with the details at a later point.

Matt Hancock: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for the approach that he has taken in applying scrutiny, but in a tone that makes it clear that right across the House we are united in our efforts to tackle this virus. He asked about the number of social care staff who have sadly died: 15 social care staff have sadly lost their lives. Just as we pay tribute to and remember all those NHS staff who have died, so we do for those who serve our country and look after people in social care.

He asked about international comparisons regarding the number of deaths. Of course, that needs to be done scientifically, taking into account the size of the populations of different countries. We are constantly making an important analysis of why the death rate as a proportion of the population in Germany is lower, and I speak to my German counterparts about that. In the same way, we look at all the European countries where the death rate is higher, and we try to learn lessons and ensure that we are doing the best we possibly can. There are many explanations for what is happening in Germany. One of them, which the German Health Minister explains both in public and in private, is the nature of those who first caught the disease in Germany. There is an awful lot of analysis of why, and we are constantly looking at that question, to improve our delivery here.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the seven-day rule and the proposals through SAGE. SAGE is an advisory committee, and it advises Ministers. We are guided by the science throughout this, and the science recommends the seven-day rule for coming out of full-blown isolation—it is not returning to normal by any stretch—once somebody has had the disease and no longer has symptoms. That is the scientific advice. The basis on which that decision was taken was, precisely as he says, that we listen to the advice from SAGE and then take decisions based on it. That was one where we fully accepted the advice, as we do with most of these clinical decisions.

The hon. Gentleman asked about expanding clinical understanding. He is right that the biggest impact of this disease is on the respiratory system, but it is not the only impact, and I will seek to take up his suggestion that the key clinical figures are convened. I think that the royal colleges are doing that already, but I will check that that is happening.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the disproportionate number of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the figures of those who have died. We are indeed investigating that, and I will ensure that he has a copy of the results of that investigation as soon as it is concluded. That is a very important piece of work. There is also a disproportionate number of men who are badly affected by this disease compared with women. We need to look at all these characteristics and ensure that we have the full analysis, so that we can learn how to treat.

The hon. Gentleman asked about care homes. All deaths in care homes are, of course, recorded. In terms of the difference between the figures produced by the CQC, the Office for National Statistics and the NHS for deaths in hospitals, those figures measure slightly different things in different timeframes. It is important to look at a rigorous analysis of the comparison of the three. Yesterday there was some debate about whether the ONS figures showed that the deaths outside hospitals were 40% higher. It turned out that that was not true—it was comparing apples and pears—and the real figure is closer to 20%. I would caution the hon. Gentleman against comparing the headline figures without a true comparison of the underlying statistics.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the testing of staff. I am really pleased that we have managed to roll out testing to staff in care homes. He is right that that can helpfully be done through mobile units and the home testing kits that are increasingly available, especially for care homes that are not close to one of the drive-through centres. We now have 27 drive-through centres, and we are increasing that number over the next few days. There are new drive-through centres coming on stream all the time.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asked about PPE supplies to care. A new service is coming on stream directly to provide the PPE that is needed for care homes and domiciliary care—care provided in people's homes. As I say, increasing that supply has been a massive logistical undertaking, with over 1 billion items of PPE delivered so far.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the spare capacity in the NHS. There are over 10,000 beds currently free in the NHS. We want to reopen the NHS to non-coronavirus symptoms and patients with non-coronavirus conditions safely and carefully as soon as it is safe to do so. The first step we are taking is to send the message loud and clear to people who have suspected conditions that they should come forward. If you think you have a lump that might be a cancer, come forward now, and you will be safely and properly treated in the NHS. The same goes if you have a suspected heart attack or stroke. We have systems in place to make sure that if you come to the NHS, you will be looked after and protected.

We will gradually reopen the rest of the NHS—for instance, to the sort of non-life-threatening conditions and elective surgery the hon. Gentleman mentioned—as soon as it is safe to do so. As he can see, the combination of having some spare capacity in the NHS and at the same time having reached the peak of the virus means that we can now start to reopen the NHS. Part of that is encouraging people to seek NHS treatment when they need it.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned contact tracing and the app. The app is currently in beta trials, which are going well, but, clearly, although an app to tell people

who test positive for coronavirus whom they have been in contact with is helpful, we also need mass contact tracing so that as we bring the rate of transmission down and the rate of testing up, we can contact all the people anyone who tests positive has been in contact with and make sure that they get access to support and know what to do. In that way, we can control the virus with fewer of the extraordinary social distancing measures that have been in place.

Mr Speaker: I hope we can speed up the answers a little. I think that answer was twice as long as the question. I know you want to make sure you are thorough, Secretary of State, but we have quite a few questions to get through.

I now call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, Jeremy Hunt.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: The World Health Organisation says that one of the six essential criteria for lifting a lockdown is that we should be able to track and trace every single new covid case in the community. Will that be in place in the next two weeks, so that when the Cabinet come to consider whether they can lift the lockdown, they will be able to do so in a way that is compliant with what the WHO is recommending? Will the Secretary of State appoint a big hitter from outside frontline politics to make sure that happens within a short period, as he has very sensibly done with Lord Deighton on PPE?

Matt Hancock: We are ramping up our testing capacity and our capacity for contact tracing in a matter of weeks. We will have it ready to ensure that we can use that capacity as and when the incidence of transmission comes down. It is not tied to the specific decision that we are required by law to take in just over two weeks' time. The effectiveness of test, track and trace to keep the reproductive rate of the virus down is determined by the incidence in the community, and our goal is to get to a point where we can test, track and trace everybody who needs it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Like all MPs, I pay tribute to health and care staff across the UK. Particularly in view of the key role of care workers and in recognition of their contribution, will the Secretary of State undertake to ensure that they are paid at least the real living wage, as has been the case for some years in Scotland?

Like everyone, I welcome the stabilisation of covid cases, but does the Secretary of State accept that the testing and contact tracing must be in place before any easing of the lockdown, to avoid resurgence and a second peak? Will he achieve 100,000 tests a day by next week? If not, when? How accurate are the tests? A 25% false negative rate has been reported.

I know the Secretary of State is a fan of phone apps, so I am glad to hear him recognise the need to increase public health staff both to conduct and co-ordinate contact tracing. Will he reverse the 20% cut in public health funding in England since 2015, to ensure that those staff can be recruited now?

Finally, when I raised the issue of asymptomatic spread on 11 March, the Secretary of State claimed that it was rare, but actually it accounts for about 50%. How is he taking that into account in his covid strategy?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady asks a number of questions. First, on the living wage, all health and social care staff in the UK are paid the living wage, because that is the law. I am very proud that we introduced the living wage, which has led to a significant rise in pay, especially for people in social care who were on the minimum wage previously. She asks about asymptomatic transmission. The scientific evidence shows that asymptomatic transmissions occurs, which is one of the very significant challenges that this virus presents. She also asked about test, track and trace. I absolutely agree that that is a critical part of keeping the spread of this virus low. The lower the number of new cases is, the more effective test, track and trace is. We are therefore building now the capacity for the very large-scale contact tracing necessary to go alongside the large-scale testing—the 100,000 tests at the end of this month that I mentioned in my statement—and the technology that can help us to do that.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con) [V]: It is important that decisions should be informed by good advice, so has SAGE advised on whether the 100,000 tests a day target is the right one?

Matt Hancock: The target was set at 100,000 because that is what we estimated was needed—scientific advice was provided into that target—and it is what is practically achievable. As I said, we are ahead of our trajectory on capacity, but we need to make sure that demand increases. Increasing demand is about widening access to this testing. We did take scientific advice. I am not sure whether that came directly through the SAGE route or directly from Public Health England, but of course these decisions are based on the science.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): First, I want to pay tribute briefly to all those health workers, care workers, delivery workers, street cleaners and cleaners, and so many other groups all over the country, who are doing such an incredible job, together with all the volunteers, to deal with this crisis. It is an amazing moment in this country's history. However, Parliament's job is to hold the Government to account, so I have a simple question. The World Health Organisation indicated that there was a danger of an epidemic from coronavirus in January—it later declared this to be a pandemic. The WHO's director general said, in terms, that the way to deal with it is "test, test, test", in order to ascertain the levels of infection across our society, but we did not do that. The Secretary of State came to the House in January to say that he was going to increase the amount of testing. This issue was raised with the Prime Minister on 24 February and again in a meeting we had in March, at which the Secretary of State was present. He told us then that the level of testing would increase, but it is still nowhere near the level that is necessary. Can he assure us that there is going to be a really rapid increase in the level and availability of testing, in order to get on top of this dreadful virus?

Matt Hancock: The development of testing has been at pace throughout this crisis, entirely contrary to the story told by the right hon. Gentleman. We were one of the first countries in the world to develop a test. We rapidly increased the number of tests, from 2,000 at the start of March to 10,000 during March—a fivefold

[*Matt Hancock*]

increase—and it is now going up further. This is an area where we had our foot on the gas all the way through, because it is incredibly important.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement. Would he kindly update the House on the provision of a new covid testing site in north Wales and on the UK Government's role in delivering it, in the context of devolution?

Matt Hancock: Testing is an area with UK and devolved responsibilities. The drive-through testing sites are being provided right across the UK under a programme being driven by the UK Government with the support of the devolved authorities. It is incredibly important that we make testing available in north Wales, as it is right across the country, so that people can access those tests, as my hon. Friend said. I should also mention the home testing, which will be available through the post. Especially in more rural areas, such as his constituency, that might be one of the most effective ways of people accessing testing.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) [V]: It seems increasingly likely that part of what will be required to tackle this virus in the future will be the wearing of masks by members of the public in certain situations. If the Government concludes, on the basis of scientific advice, that that should be recommended, will it be their policy to provide masks to the public, and if so what is the Secretary of State's plan to source them, bearing in mind the difficulties with PPE supply? Or will members of the public be expected to source their own?

Matt Hancock: We will follow the advice and listen to what SAGE says on masks, and then we will implement that. I cannot promise that we will give everybody free masks. That would be an extraordinary undertaking. We have to make sure we have the supplies available, especially for health and care staff, where the scientific advice throughout has been that the wearing of masks is necessary. We have to ensure the provision for them.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) [V]: I start by paying tribute to the excellent staff at Epsom Hospital for all the work they are doing tackling this dreadful disease. I absolutely agree with the Secretary of State that it should be business as close to usual as possible across the NHS, but of course there are many people working in our healthcare arena—dentists, physiotherapists, and others—for whom it is very much not business as usual. Will he do everything he can, together with other Ministers, to support those people, particularly to get them back working as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. It is incredibly important that we support NHS staff to get back to work as much as possible if they are in an area where demand has fallen because people have not been coming forward in the numbers that they normally do—for instance, for emergency admission—or in a specialism where work cannot be undertaken because of the prevalence of the virus. My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, and I can give him that assurance.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: At present, only patients actually admitted to hospital with symptoms are being swabbed, leaving many with presumed covid being discharged into the community. At the same time, only healthcare workers currently with symptoms are being offered tests. Should not the main priority now be to test all patients and all health and social care workers, whether symptomatic or not, given that after a month of lockdown, hospitals and care homes are likely to be the major transmission hotspots?

Matt Hancock: We are testing all those who leave hospital for a care home setting, to make sure we control the spread of the disease and stop it moving from that group as much as possible. On the broader points about expansion, absolutely we are looking at these things. The hon. Lady makes some good points.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): The Secretary of State is rightly making sure that all patients being discharged from hospital to care homes are being tested, but there remains concern in the care home sector about normal procedures and assessments to make sure that patients or new residents coming to them are appropriate for the care setting, given the emergency admissions that always take place. Before Easter, he kindly agreed to look at whether care homes could be indemnified or have some waiver of liability in these circumstances. I wonder whether he has reached a conclusion.

Matt Hancock: We are looking into that question and I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as we have an answer.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: On contact tracing, I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is working with experts in digital ethics because if it is not run transparently by a public company with code open to public oversight and data anonymised, people will not trust the system and it risks failing. Does he agree that only a community-led process of human contact tracing can provide the fine-grained and reliable data that such an app would depend on? Will he learn the lesson from the over-centralised organisation of the testing approach and instead adopt a more decentralised approach for contact tracing, using local environmental health officers and PHE's regional outbreak management teams?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the first two points, including the importance of people for contact tracing as well as technology—in fact, the two working hand in hand will be the most effective approach. I also agree with the need for ethicists on this. We are all giving up a huge amount of our liberty because of social distancing, so measures to reduce social distancing through the use of data need to be considered in that context. We are making sure that that is done in a way that can provide assurance to people with concerns in that area.

On the final point, we have to make the appropriate use of both national and local resources. In testing, for instance, organising drive-through centres across the country and home testing is inevitably an issue that needs to be done centrally, and then other testing laboratories are organised locally. It is about getting the best of both worlds.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State has talked today about the test, track and trace strategy, and he has indicated that the effectiveness is determined by the incidence in the community. Can he give us guidance on what the incidence level is and when, based on current modelling, we might achieve it?

Matt Hancock: The current level of incidence is unknown until we expand testing yet further, but it is far higher than where it needs to be. Although, as I have said, we have high confidence that we are at a peak in this disease, obviously we need to see that come down. The reason I am not giving a numerical answer is because it is a question of degree. The fewer new cases, the more effective test, track and trace is as a way of keeping the disease down, and therefore the more social distancing measures can be lifted. This is all a question of degree, and we do not have an answer to the question of when that will all be doable, because we have not yet seen the curve start to come down and we do not know the pace at which the curve will come down under the current social distancing rules.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I have known the Secretary of State ever since he came into Parliament. I know he has been unwell, but he would expect me to be robust in my question. As the Member of Parliament for Huddersfield and from the Yorkshire point of view, I think the management and leadership of the present crisis has been shambolic. We should never have been in a position where we lag so far behind Germany, a similar country to ours, and behind many of the other European nations. We are predicted to be the worst. Eight hundred and twenty-three people died—that is like two jumbo jets crashing. It is a large number. Every time the Secretary of State speaks, he thinks what he is doing is a triumph, but it is a shambles of leadership and management, and we are letting down NHS staff. They have been let down, and I am particularly angry about the fact that—as I understand—the early whistleblowers were leaned on and threatened with disciplinary action to stop brave young doctors and nurses standing up and telling us what it was like on the frontline. Is that the fact? Can he get his act together, because many of us do not believe that he is telling the truth to the people of this country—

Mr Speaker: I call the Secretary of State.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman has completely missed the tone and the point of what we are trying to do, as a nation, to pull together in this time of grave difficulty. It is absolutely the case that our prime goals at the start of this crisis—our two objectives to flatten the curve and to make sure that the NHS always has the capacity to treat everybody who needs it—have thus far been met. Of course there are challenges. There are enormous challenges—distributing 1 billion pieces of PPE is not straightforward.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about whistleblowers, he is completely wrong to say that it is not possible to raise an issue in the NHS; by contrast, thousands of people do it in public and private every single day. It saddens me that a Member of this House might get the tone wrong so badly. There are reasonable questions to be asked and we try to answer them in a reasonable way. That is the best way for the House to proceed.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con) [V]: May I put on record my personal thanks to the Secretary of State for his remarkable personal efforts over the past few weeks? He is doing a terrific job in unprecedented circumstances. I welcome what he said earlier about non-covid-19 treatment. Will he set out, as soon as possible, a clear plan to enable elective surgery to take place again in hospitals that have capacity, so that we do not build up a nasty backlog of unmet health need?

Matt Hancock: Yes; that is an incredibly important issue. We want to get non-covid-19 treatment back up and running as quickly as is safely possible. We are of course putting in place the arrangements to make sure that when people do go into hospital without covid-19, they are not infected by people who are in hospital with covid-19—that segregation is a very important part of our considerations. The answer to my hon. Friend's question is that yes, within very short order we will start to restart the NHS. He asked about elective operations, which are an important part of the matter, but so too is people presenting themselves. It is important to give people the confidence to call their GP if they have a problem or, if it is urgent, call 111, because with cancer, for instance, we know that early diagnosis is critical, and I want people who think they have a risk to come forward for treatment.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]: In the statement today, and before the Health and Social Care Committee last week, the Secretary of State has implored cancer patients to come forward and assured them of treatment, yet since that Committee meeting I have been inundated with messages from all over the country from desperate patients whose treatment has been stopped, interrupted or not even started because of covid-19. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that there is no gap between his welcome words and what is actually happening? Can he guarantee that treatment will go ahead and give patients confidence that we have covid-free hospitals through the frequent and widespread testing of staff? Finally, will he ensure that death in service benefits will be paid for all healthcare workers who have died of covid-19, both now and retrospectively?

Matt Hancock: I would like to be absolutely clear—as I was at the Health and Social Care Committee meeting, which was a very good discussion—on the point about cancer treatment. There is some cancer treatment that it is clinically inadvisable to undertake during an epidemic like this, because if somebody's immune system is taken down to very low levels, that puts them at significant risk, so I cannot give the guarantee that all cancer treatment would go ahead. Even though we now have capacity in the NHS and confidence that that capacity will not be over-capped by the virus, the virus is still at large in the community, so there are some cancer treatments, especially in relation to immunotherapy, that it is clinically inadvisable to undertake now.

Having said all that, yes, we do want people to come forward, and we want as much cancer treatment as possible to go ahead, where it is safe to do so considering the impact of the virus. That is why I want people to come forward if they have a risk, and we will treat them as best as we possibly can within the constraints of the fact that we have a very serious virus stalking the land.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: Frontline workers such as those in ITU and care homes are used to death—that is part of the job—but not on this scale and not in these circumstances. What are the Secretary of State and his Department doing to support the mental health of frontline workers now and in the future, when the pandemic passes?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important question. We have put in place a helpline for all frontline workers in the NHS to ensure that they have the support they need. Working with my hon. Friend and others, I will make sure that that support stays in place long after this crisis is over.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) [V]: Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the extraordinary effort by all those involved in getting NHS Louisa Jordan in Glasgow ready to receive patients, if needed? Will he outline what discussions he has had with his Scottish Government counterpart about the different operating model of NHS Louisa Jordan from NHS Nightingale in London? Will he outline what steps he is taking to address the long-term nursing shortages in England, especially given the flight of nurses from the European Union that reports suggest is impacting on the operation of NHS Nightingale?

Matt Hancock: I am terribly sorry; I do not recognise those reports at all. There is no impact at all from Brexit on our coronavirus response. The good news is that thousands of nurses and other clinicians have come back into service since the crisis started.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: Daniel Falush, a professor of infectious diseases based in Shanghai, points to the fact that part of China's successful efforts to control the virus was immediate quarantining: people go to a clinic, they are tested immediately, they wait for the results—it is a 15-minute test—and, if the test is positive, they are quarantined there and then. Will the Health Secretary consider that as we open up our economy, because it has the potential for significant mitigation of the chances of a second wave of the virus?

Matt Hancock: Well, of course we look at all options. Under the test, track and trace strand, the policy advice on how people should isolate if they test positive is an important part of that. That advice is in place, but of course test, track and trace also relies on self-isolation to ensure that it is implemented properly. Test, track and trace is about finding out who needs to take action—they then need to take the action set out.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the final question. I call Maria Eagle.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. On 11 March, I asked the Secretary of State whether it was right to allow more than 3,000 Atlético Madrid fans to travel to Anfield to watch a Champions League game when they could not have watched their team in Madrid, as attending football matches there was banned because it was a covid hotspot. The Liverpool city region now has a higher incidence of covid-19 than the UK and English average. The mayor of Madrid and the director of public health for the city of Liverpool have both said that it was a mistake to let the match go ahead. The Government's deputy chief scientific adviser has said that the idea that there is a link is an "interesting hypothesis". Does the Secretary of State now admit that the Government were behind the curve in not banning such a gathering, and will he undertake to investigate any possible link between that match and the higher incidence of covid in Liverpool?

Matt Hancock: This is, of course, a question for the scientists. What matters now is making sure that people—including in Liverpool and across the north-west—get the treatment that they need and that we get the curve under control.

1.39 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of hybrid scrutiny proceedings, the Speaker brought them to a conclusion (Order, 21 April).

Mr Speaker: Order. Before suspending the House, I wish to place on record my thanks, and I believe the thanks of the whole House, for the commitment and the ingenuity of all those who have made today's proceedings possible. I can say that almost everything has gone smoothly, but we will learn lessons as we do this more.

Officially, following the remarks made yesterday in the debate on hybrid proceedings, I wish to explain how I will deal with points of order from Monday. Members must give notice of a point of order to my office before the start of sitting. If I am satisfied that the matter to be raised is a genuine point of order, the Members will not be called to raise it; instead, I will make a statement at the conclusion of scrutiny proceedings, setting out the point of order that the Member has raised and my ruling on it.

I will now suspend the House for 15 minutes to allow Members to leave the Chamber safely and our broadcasting colleagues to make the necessary technical changes for our physical-only proceedings. I thank all who have taken part.

1.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

1.55 pm

On resuming—

Public Advocate

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a public advocate to provide advice to, and act as data controller for, representatives of the deceased after major incidents.

We have just reached the 31st anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. It has been a difficult and painful day for the families of the 96 innocent children, women and men who were unlawfully killed on that day. It has been a difficult and painful day for thousands of survivors, many still traumatised, who witnessed what happened at the ground on that day. It has been a difficult and painful day for the people of the city of Liverpool, and much of Merseyside beyond, still united in sorrow.

The Hillsborough Family Support Group intended to hold their final public memorial service at Anfield—I and many thousands of others had planned to go—after which they had announced their intention to disband and in future to remember their lost loved ones privately in their own way. But the covid-19 pandemic has meant, quite rightly, that the final public memorial service has had to be postponed.

As the families prepare to end their three decades of large public commemorations of the disaster, many feeling exhausted but vindicated, it is left to us, as lawmakers in this place, to ask ourselves how we can learn the many lessons of Hillsborough. How can it be that it has taken bereaved families so long to get the truth of what happened accepted officially and to get a measure of justice for their loved ones? It was 23 years before the truth was told by the Hillsborough Independent Panel and finally officially accepted. How can it be that bereaved families have had to campaign for over 30 years in the face of official indifference, and sometimes even hostility, to get truth and a measure of justice? What can we do, as lawmakers, to ensure that no other families bereaved in public disasters will ever again have to face what they have endured?

This Bill is about learning those lessons. I would like to thank Lord Wills, Michael Wills, for drafting the Bill following work that he and I did in consulting families involved in a number of disasters. It draws on his knowledge and experience of devising the mechanics of how the Hillsborough Independent Panel should work when he was a Minister in the Ministry of Justice in 2009. Without his efforts and expertise in devising its powers to obtain and process documentation, the ability of the Hillsborough Independent Panel to establish the full truth of what happened might well have been compromised, and its findings might not have been accepted officially in the way in which they were. It is a model that can work to stop things going wrong in future disasters if the correct lessons are learned, and the Bill draws upon those lessons. If enacted, it can ensure that what has happened to the Hillsborough families will never happen again to any other families bereaved in a public disaster. Its provisions will change how we handle the aftermath of such events so that we can better enable families of the deceased and injured survivors to be central to what follows.

Families usually want two simple things: they want to know what happened to their loved ones, and why; and they want to stop it ever happening again to any other family. This does not seem like much to ask, yet it is striking how frequently bereaved families feel let down by the official processes and legal proceedings that follow disasters. This is the experience not just of the Hillsborough families, but of others I have helped in my time as an MP. The MV Derbyshire families fought for 20 years to get to the truth that it was design flaws, not alleged poor seamanship, that led to the sinking of the bulk carrier that killed their relatives. The Marchioness families, the Lockerbie families and others have all had real misgivings about the outcomes and conduct of inquiries and other legal proceedings. Perhaps such failings are continuing. I have seen reports that the Grenfell families and survivors have similar misgivings about what is happening in the aftermath of that catastrophe. Bereaved families feel alienated and excluded from processes to which they should be central. This is a common experience.

There are clearly issues about adequate resources for bereaved families to be properly legally represented, but this Bill seeks to prevent things from going wrong at an early stage and then having to right them many years later, and it is separate from those issues about legal aid. It proposes the establishment of an independent, adequately resourced public advocate for those bereaved in public disasters and injured survivors. The public advocate would be located in a Government Department and able to call on its resources, but crucially they would be independent of Government decision, direction or control. The public advocate would be required to act if in that person's opinion an event had occurred that led to large-scale loss of life and involved serious health and safety issues of failure of regulation, or other events of serious concern.

Crucially, 50% plus one or more of the representatives of the deceased and injured survivors would have to ask the advocate to act in order for them to get involved. This gives the families agency and facilitates collective solidarity among them, and it puts their collective voice at the centre of the aftermath. The public advocate would then be a representative of the interests of the bereaved and survivors collectively and act as an adviser and guide for them. The public advocate would not replace solicitors and barristers acting in legal proceedings for the bereaved and injured, but would fulfil an additional role.

The public advocate, as a data controller, would establish a panel, like the Hillsborough Independent Panel, in consultation with representatives of the deceased and survivors, to obtain and review all documentation at a much earlier stage than happened with Hillsborough, thus facilitating transparency and disclosure by way of reports to the Lord Chancellor and to Parliament. Such transparency was key to getting to the truth of Hillsborough, but it came 23 years after the event. Getting it done sooner could prevent things from going so wrong for those affected, facilitate openness and establish the truth at an early stage; and the families would be in the driving seat. This would be an important improvement to public policy in reaction to the frequent examples of things going wrong in the aftermath of public disasters. It is a simple and relatively inexpensive measure.

[*Maria Eagle*]

In the Queen's Speech of 2017, the May Government promised to establish such an office, but nothing has been done beyond a consultation in December 2018. The results of that consultation have not yet been published, and I do not know what the current Government's intention is, because I have only received holding replies to parliamentary questions about this since December 2018.

The role of the public advocate set out in that consultation document is very different from that envisaged by this Bill. The public advocate envisaged by the Government consultation would not be independent. They would not be a data controller, they would not be able to act at the behest of families but would be directed by the Secretary of State, and they would not have the power to establish and appoint independent panels like the Hillsborough Independent Panel.

I hope that Ministers will commit to establishing the role as envisaged by this Bill, because unless families have more agency and the public advocate is truly independent, it will not work. To be effective, the public advocate needs independence, the confidence of the families and survivors, and the ability to establish, as a data controller, an independent panel to require the production of documents and to report findings outside of the legal proceedings. These are the essential elements that will prevent the aftermath of future disasters from being made more traumatic for families and survivors, and that will put us on the path to preventing the Hillsborough families' experience from ever being repeated.

I feel well placed, after more than 30 years of knowing some of the Hillsborough families, and after 24 years of representing some of them as my constituents in this House, to promote this Bill as close as possible, in parliamentary terms, to the 31st anniversary of the disaster. I am proud that so many Merseyside MPs, who would have wished to have been here today, have agreed to sponsor the Bill and to support it in other ways, because Merseyside MPs understand the extent of the damage and the trauma that has resulted from Hillsborough.

May I close by saluting the courage and heroic persistence and indefatigability of the families of those unlawfully killed at Hillsborough? I know many of them. They are exceptional people—not least because they would deny that they are exceptional. By the sheer force of their determination to defend the reputations of their lost loved ones, to get truth, justice and accountability for those who were killed, to bring ease and peace to the traumatised survivors, they have won through. And backed by the people of the Liverpool city region, they have shown up the great injustices perpetrated on the innocent by the indifference and hostility of some of our official processes. I believe that this Bill, if enacted, will go a significant way towards preventing what has happened to them from ever happening to any other families in the future—something they fervently wish to see. As they end the big public commemorations on the anniversary of the disaster, it would be a fitting legacy for their efforts if they could help to ensure that what has happened to them never happens again to families who are bereaved in public disasters. This Bill would, I believe, do that. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Maria Eagle, Sir George Howarth, Derek Twigg, Alison McGovern, Ms Angela Eagle, Peter Dowd, Bill Esterson, Conor McGinn, Dan Carden, Ian Byrne, Paula Barker and Kim Johnson present the Bill.

Maria Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 126).

SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIR BY-ELECTION

Ordered,

That:

(1) In the case of a ballot for a select committee chair vacancy to which the provisions of Standing Orders Nos. 122B and 122C apply, the following provisions shall apply for the duration of this order:

- (a) Nomination forms may be submitted electronically.
- (b) All references to signing and signatures in Standing Order No. 122B shall be taken to include an electronic copy of a handwritten signature, or such other arrangements as the Speaker may specify.
- (c) The period within which nominations may be received, the date and times at which the ballot shall be held and any other arrangements made under sub-paragraph (d) below shall be announced by the Speaker not less than two working days before the time at which nominations may first be received.
- (d) The ballot shall be held in accordance with the provisions of sub-paragraphs 11 (a) and (d) of Standing Order No 122B and such other arrangements as the Speaker shall direct the Clerk of the House to make.

(2) This order expires on 30 June 2020.—(*Mr Rees-Mogg.*)

Mr Speaker: Now that the motion has been agreed, I can inform colleagues of the arrangements for the forthcoming election for the Chairs of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Standards Committee.

Nominations will open on Monday 27 April at 10 am and close on Monday 4 May at 12 noon. Only members of the Labour party may be candidates. Nominations must be submitted by email only to the Public Bill Office. The email must include a statement that the candidate is willing to stand, and a list of 15 Members from the same party as the candidate who are supporting them. Members are responsible for verifying the names of their supporters.

An online ballot will be held on 6 May between 10 am and 2 pm. It will be run on behalf of the House by Civica Election Services, and Members will receive an email from it on the morning of 6 May, with a secure link to the ballot. There will be more information about the arrangements in a briefing note that will be published online shortly and in future copies of the Order Paper.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS)

Ordered,

That

(1) the Resolution of the House of 16 January 2020 (Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)), as amended by the Order of the House of 25 March 2020 (Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)), is further amended as follows:

- (a) leave out "24 April 2020,"; and
- (b) leave out " and 5 February 2021" and insert " , 5 February 2021 and 5 March 2021".

(2) the Orders for Second Reading of Bills on each of the days listed under Day 1 in the table below are read and discharged;

(3) each such Bill is ordered to be read a second time on the corresponding day listed under Day 2 in the table; and

(4) those Bills are set down to be read a second time on the appropriate Day 2 in the order in which they were set down to be read a second time on the corresponding Day 1.

Day 1	Day 2
24 April 2020	15 May 2020
15 May 2020	12 June 2020
12 June 2020	26 June 2020
26 June 2020	10 July 2020
10 July 2020	11 September 2020
11 September 2020	16 October 2020
16 October 2020	30 October 2020
30 October 2020	27 November 2020
27 November 2020	15 January 2021
15 January 2021	29 January 2021
29 January 2021	5 February 2021
5 February 2021	5 March 2021

—(Mr. Rees-Mogg.)

MEDICINES AND MEDICAL DEVICES BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO.2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(5)),

That the Order of 2 March (Medicines and Medical Devices Bill: Programme) be varied as follows:

In paragraph (2) of the Order (conclusion of proceedings in Public Bill Committee) for “Thursday 23 April” substitute “Thursday 11 June”.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

Question agreed to.

Hybrid Substantive Proceedings

2.8 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That the following orders be made and have effect until 12 May:

Hybrid proceedings

(1) The House shall sit at 2.30pm on Mondays and 11.30am on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and on each day the business of the House shall comprise only hybrid proceedings.

(2) Hybrid proceedings comprise:

- (a) scrutiny proceedings; and
- (b) substantive proceedings.

(3) Members may participate in hybrid proceedings virtually, by electronic means approved by the Speaker, or by attending in the Chamber. The Speaker may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any one time.

(4) For the purposes of hybrid proceedings, Members shall give notice by electronic means designated by the Speaker.

(5) At the conclusion of scrutiny and substantive proceedings, the Speaker shall adjourn the House without question put.

Substantive proceedings

(1) Substantive proceedings comprise:

- (a) motions in the name of a minister of the crown;
- (b) presentation of bills;
- (c) subsequent proceedings on public bills introduced by a minister of the crown;
- (d) private business;
- (e) ministerial statements made with the permission of the Speaker;
- (f) personal statements;
- (g) motions in the name of the chair or another member of the Committee of Selection;
- (h) business which would otherwise be taken
- (i) immediately after prayers (except motions for unopposed returns); or (ii) at the commencement of public business.

(2) The question on any motion made by a minister of the crown to add one or more categories of business to the list in paragraph (1) shall be put forthwith.

(3) Except as provided in these orders, substantive hybrid proceedings shall be governed by the practice and standing orders of the House.

(4) If, on any day on which hybrid substantive proceedings are to be taken, a motion of which notice has been given relating to the allocation of time to, and the conduct of, business for that day, in the names of a minister of the crown, a Member representing the official opposition and a Member representing the second largest opposition party, is moved at the commencement of public business by a minister of the crown, the Speaker shall declare the question to be agreed to.

(5) A motion under paragraph (4) may include provision (a) to make designations under paragraph (1) of temporary standing order (remote voting) and (b) to amend the arrangements for remote voting under temporary standing order (Conduct of remote divisions).

(6) Rules relating to the giving and receiving of notices of motions and to the periods of notice required for different categories shall apply as if:

- (a) Thursdays were a sitting day on which the House rose at 5pm;
- (b) the House rose no earlier than 7.00 pm on Mondays and 6.00 pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

(7) Save as provided in paragraph (6) notice periods in respect of all substantive proceedings shall be set by the Speaker.

Presentation of bills

(1) A public bill, of whose presentation notice has been given and whose title has been read by the Clerk, shall be deemed to have been read the first time and to have been ordered to have been read a second time on such day as the Member in whose name the notice stands shall have appointed and shall be ordered to be printed.

Supplementary provisions

(1) Standing Orders Nos 7, 8, 9, 23, paragraph (5) of Standing Order No 47 and Standing Orders Nos 83J to 83X shall not have effect.

(2) In any case where the Speaker has ordered the withdrawal of a Member, or of several Members, under Standing Order No 43 and is required to direct the Serjeant at Arms to give effect to the order, the Member or Members shall be suspended from the service of the House for the following sitting day.

(3) No motion to sit in private may be made during hybrid proceedings.

(4) The Speaker may make such alterations to the practices of the House regarding the conduct of debate as are appropriate to facilitate the effective conduct of hybrid proceedings.

(5) The Speaker may amend any provision of the temporary standing orders relating to hybrid proceedings, if he determines it is necessary to do so in order to ensure that the conduct of business is consistent with the Resolution of the House (Proceedings during the pandemic) of 21 April.

(6) Before exercising his power under paragraph (5), the Speaker shall satisfy himself that he has the agreement of the Leader of the House.

Consequential amendments

That the following amendments be made to the orders of 21 April (Hybrid scrutiny proceedings):

(1) In Order A (scrutiny proceedings), leave out paragraphs (1), (6) and (7);

(2) In Order C (supplementary provisions):

(a) In paragraph (3), leave out ‘Nos 7, 8 and’ and insert ‘No’;

(b) Leave out paragraphs (4), (5), (6) and (7).

The motion builds on the House’s decision yesterday to allow hybrid proceedings for oral questions, statements and urgent questions. Should the House agree to the motion today, we will from next week also be able to debate substantive proceedings remotely. As I announced in my business statement yesterday, the House will have the opportunity to debate the Second Readings of the Finance Bill on Monday, the Domestic Abuse Bill on Tuesday and the Fire Safety Bill on Wednesday next week. By agreeing this motion, it will be possible for Members not present in the Chamber to contribute to the proceedings on those important Bills.

I accept that we have had to move quickly to bring forward these motions. The Commission agreed last week that the new hybrid proceedings approach, as delivered for the first time today for questions and statements, ought to be extended to debates on motions and legislation as soon as possible. The Procedure Committee also recommended rapid extension.

Rapid change inevitably comes with risk, but these are exceptional times, as we all recognise. I entirely concur with the concerns expressed by the Chairman of the Procedure Committee yesterday about making such changes so quickly. I reiterate that these must be temporary changes that will allow the House to carry out its important legislative functions while we comply with the current UK medical advice.

Mr Speaker, may I reiterate the thanks we have given to you and the House Service for ensuring that this morning’s proceedings managed to pass off so remarkably smoothly? It gives us confidence that we are able to build on this next week and to ensure that these changes work.

I turn to the motion and will explain the approach taken. I encourage Members to make reference to the explanatory note that has been published alongside the motion. Section E extends the provision for remote participation by defining hybrid proceedings as comprising both scrutiny proceedings—oral questions, statements and urgent questions—and substantive proceedings. Section F then lists the categories of business that are included in substantive hybrid business, which will include Government legislation.

Paragraphs (4) and (5) of section F set out a mechanism for organising substantive business. For each sitting day, a business motion will set out the proposed arrangements for business, including the timing of debates and any necessary voting arrangements. If that motion is signed by the Government, the Opposition and the third largest party, it will be declared to be agreed to and will govern that day’s business. That approach arises from the clear need communicated to us by the House authorities that, in order to facilitate remote proceedings, they need as much advance notice as possible about the arrangements for business. The Government are committed to working with both the House authorities and the other political parties to ensure that the arrangements made are workable from a technical perspective and meet the needs of Members across the House.

With time in the hybrid Chamber likely to be limited by technical capacity, the House may expect to rise each day earlier than we are used to. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of section F make consequential provisions for notices of motions to be given later in the day, if necessary. Section G allows Bills to be presented, read the First time, printed and set down for Second Reading without the formal physical proceedings in the Chamber, which are currently not compliant with social distancing requirements—although I note that we did remarkably well with the ten-minute rule Bill a few moments ago. It is modelled on the procedure for Bills brought through from the House of Lords, and it will apply to both Government Bills and private Members’ Bills.

Finally, sections H and I replicate or substitute many of the supplementary provisions to which the House agreed yesterday for the hybrid scrutiny arrangements. As this motion extends the new way of working to legislation, further provision is made here to suspend the English votes for English laws Standing Orders and to ensure that you, Mr Speaker, have the power to alter the practices of the House regarding the conduct of debate. That is essential if we are to facilitate the effective conduct of hybrid proceedings and do everything we can to make a success of the new arrangements.

I understand that some Members have concerns about the changes that we are making this week. That is why it is so important that we accept that they must be temporary and keep them under review. The Procedure Committee has an essential role in this, and I certainly intend to do the same, in order that we can be sure that these procedures are working for the House.

2.13 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for setting out the motion on hybrid substantive proceedings. We have got to an incredible place today, and I want to put on record my thanks and the Opposition's thanks to everyone who has made it possible. I know that it has been an enormous effort. We are, I was told yesterday, the first Parliament to become a virtual Parliament, so I congratulate everyone on that.

Members who were taking note yesterday will know that the House agreed to hybrid scrutiny proceedings, and we now move to hybrid substantive proceedings, which will enable the Government to put through their legislation. The motion applies to the other part of our work, beyond the scrutiny side, which will also take place using the virtual and physical process.

It is useful for Members to see exactly what the substantive proceedings comprise in section F of the motion. There is the ability in paragraph (2) for the Government to add to the list of proceedings, if they so wish. Like the Leader of the House, I want to touch on paragraph (4) of section F, which enables the usual channels, the Government, the main Opposition and the second Opposition party to work together to ensure that, if they agree on a particular motion and they all sign it, it is agreed. This is a very useful way of working.

This motion allows us to scrutinise and pass legislation and to vote in this absolutely extraordinary time. It enables us to ask the Government why, if there is personal protective equipment in Birmingham, it has been exported instead of being used here. It enables us to ask why, if there is a capacity of 40,000 for testing, we are only meeting 18,000 tests today, as was highlighted earlier in Prime Minister's Question Time, and why, if Ferrari can test its workers, we cannot do that here. Democracy is the winner today, and Her Majesty's Opposition support this motion.

2.15 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to speak on this motion in particular. I know there is great interest in the next motion, but I want to be clear that I am speaking on behalf of the Procedure Committee with regard to hybrid substantive proceedings.

It would be fair to say that the proceedings so far have gone well. From the Procedure Committee's point of view, we are pleased with the progress that has been made. Mr Speaker, you will know that we have opened an inquiry to evaluate the continued operation of the hybrid system, and I am sure that colleagues across the House will want to share their views and experiences with that inquiry.

I will make a small number of points. We note that the first substantive business to be dealt with will relate to Government business almost entirely. Could the Leader of the House give some indication of when Opposition days, Back-Bench business days and other categories of business may be considered for debate? Those are all important parts of our proceedings in the House and part of how hon. Members are able to represent their constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) made exactly that point yesterday about her Adjournment debate on flooding. That is incredibly important to her constituents, and she needs

to have a forum in which she can make those points in a timely fashion and get responses from Ministers. I realise it is not a business statement, but will the Leader of the House consider whether there will be time for an urgent debate on the approval required for the lockdown regulations, which I believe is required in any event by 15 May? That is something that the Procedure Committee would like to see the Government do sooner rather than later.

We are very grateful that the House has been able to achieve virtual proceedings in such short order. However, it is important to put on record that I do not think that any of us would feel that, after the length of recess we have had, only being able to question the Health Secretary for, I think, 45 minutes and with only around 40 Members able to take part is sufficient scrutiny and gives Members the level of contribution and debate that they would like.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I echo, and perhaps the Chair of the Procedure Committee would agree, that this is not necessarily about trying to be critical of Government, but about ensuring that Members can get answers from Ministers quickly, and often more directly, in the Chamber, be that virtually or by being here. That would be quite constructive. The Health Secretary, in fairness, has always said that he welcomes the challenge and welcomes the questions, but we need that with more Ministers. That sort of debate would be very helpful to Members across the House.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Health Secretary in particular, who was my deputy at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport some time ago, never shied away from an opportunity to be at the Dispatch Box. I am sure he would welcome every opportunity that came, because he wants to get the message across and he wants to answer those questions—and there are a lot of them.

There is a lot of confusion. People are understandably concerned and frustrated about the situation they find themselves in. They have come to their Member of Parliament wanting answers, and we need time to be able to get those answers for them.

My final point is a plea to the Leader of the House to consider giving priority to a general debate on the Government's response to the covid-19 crisis. That would not require a Division. It would not require any of the concerns, which I know will be expressed in the debate on the next motion, relating to remote voting. It would, however, mean that Members had the time to be able to raise important points on behalf of their constituents. If this place is for anything, it is for Members to express their constituents' concerns and to get responses from Ministers.

2.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this motion? I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on the way the business has been conducted. Issues were raised in Wales questions, Prime Minister's questions and the Health statement that are very important to all those involved. We saw some of the technical difficulties that may arise. Some Members—for whatever reason, whether to do with broadband or other technical issues—were unable to convey their questions in the manner in which

[Jim Shannon]

they hoped. I therefore seek some assurance from the Leader of the House that, when it comes to such technical issues, we will be in a position where we find ourselves able to navigate that technological methodology. Will assistance from House staff also be available to Members across the way?

I was reassured by the comment from the Leader of the House that the measures are temporary and under review. I insist that they are temporary. I do that personally, but I think the whole House likes it that the Leader of the House has said that. If the virtual Parliament is not seen to be working in a way that encompasses all the viewpoints in this House, we will have to ensure that it will.

The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) referred to issues that come up every day. Today, the issue I wished to raise was about cancer patients. There are 3 million people in the UK living with cancer. There is a possible impending crisis, with tens of thousands of cancer deaths possibly occurring inadvertently owing to the unavoidable focus on covid-19. We need to have a system of scrutiny that will enable me and others to bring forward questions. Those questions will not be brought forward in a critical fashion—let us be quite clear about that—but with concern and to seek the support, help and assistance of Ministers. We will be asking Ministers, for instance, what will be done for those who are waiting for life-saving surgery and treatment that has been postponed, and what assurances the Health Secretary will be able to give to those who need to attend hospital that it will be safe and secure.

The real issue is how do we do that? I understand that the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, are very keen to ensure that that happens. I welcome and support totally the system that has happened today. It shows that we are able to adapt. I hope that I will be able to adapt in the same way as everybody else. I wish to do so. I want to ensure that everyone, myself included along with all other right hon. and hon. Members, can be a part of the process to scrutinise Ministers and Departments, and to ensure that accountability is there for all.

2.23 pm

Mr Rees-Mogg: A number of important points have been made. In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), Backbench Business and Opposition days are obviously important, and the motion does provide for those to be added. That will really depend on the technological capacity as to whether it is possible to extend the time available. That also applies to Adjournment debates. The team working on the technology is a very small team and what they have done is absolutely fantastic. We have to support them and be grateful for the work they have done to expand it as far as they have.

On the lockdown requirements and a debate on them, there are a couple of affirmative statutory instruments which will at some point have to come to the House for approval. I will take away the point that a general debate would be welcome. As my right hon. Friend correctly pointed out, this is not business questions so at least I do not have to give a formal answer on that, but I did hear my right hon. Friend's point.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says he will be adaptable, and I am very impressed by that. I hope that he manages to adapt so that his presence virtually is as frequent as it is physically, because I think the whole House would miss him were it otherwise. He asked for technical assistance and whether that can be provided to Members. That is a matter for the House authorities rather than the Government, but the Government are working with the House authorities to provide technical assistance. He is right to say that this is temporary, and I cannot reiterate that strongly enough, but he also asked what other ways there are of holding the Government to account. It may be worth noting the really terrific work being done by my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, who has been holding daily calls with Members of Parliament where any issues can be raised, and then has been acting as a filter, in the absence of Parliament, to get answers from Ministers. Her action has been enormously well received, and I think it is a positive alternative form of scrutiny.

Question put and agreed to.

Remote Voting

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Leader of the House to move motion 6, I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment to the motion in the name of Karen Bradley. The amendment will be debated together with the main motion, and the Questions necessary to dispose of the motion will be put at the end of the debate. I call the Leader of the House.

2.26 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That the following orders be made and have effect until 12 May:

Remote divisions

(1) A remote division may be held only in respect of business taken in hybrid substantive proceedings.

(2) With the leave of the Speaker, the Member in charge of an item of business may designate it as subject to decision by a remote division and if so whether that divisions should be a deferred remote division.

(3) The Speaker shall determine whether a remote division is required and may announce that determination before putting the question.

(4) Standing Orders Nos 38, 40 and 41A (save as provided in temporary standing order (Conduct of remote divisions)) shall not apply to proceedings relating to remote divisions.

(5) If, when the question is put on an item of business which has not been designated to be decided by a remote division, the Speaker's opinion as to the decision on the question is challenged, the question shall not be decided and the House shall move to the next business.

Conduct of remote divisions

(1) Members shall participate in a remote division or a remote deferred division through arrangements authorised by the Speaker.

(2) A remote division shall be initiated when the Speaker puts the question and announces that it will be decided by a remote division.

(3) No tellers shall be appointed for a remote division.

(4) Members may record their vote in a remote division for a period of fifteen minutes from its initiation.

(5) The Speaker may interrupt and suspend a remote division if notified of a technical problem.

(6) The result of a remote division shall be declared from the Chair.

(7) The House may proceed to its next business before the result of a remote division is declared and the Speaker may interrupt subsequent proceedings in order to announce the result.

(8) A remote deferred division shall be held in accordance with the provisions of paragraph (5) of Standing Order No 41A and this order. If, after the result of a remote division or a remote deferred division has been announced, it is reported to the Speaker that problems in the conduct of the division occurred which might have affected the result, the Speaker may declare the division to be null and void and may make arrangements for it to be re-run.

I think it is fair to say that I am surprised to be moving a motion to introduce remote voting in the House of Commons. In general, I am not an advocate of change to the House's voting system or, to be perfectly honest, to many other things. Lord Palmerston's words ring in my mind:

"Change, change, change: aren't things bad enough already?"

I am strongly of the view that our current approach is the best one, but as I said yesterday, parliamentary procedure is not an end in itself but a means to allow the institution to function successfully. We are facing a particular set of circumstances that have required us to be innovative so that we can ensure that the House of Commons can both scrutinise the Government and continue to legislate. I am bringing forward this motion alongside the other one today because it makes sense for the House to consider it on the same day as it takes a view on extending hybrid proceedings.

It may help the House if I briefly talk through the motion. What was originally section K establishes the framework for a system of remote voting for hybrid substantive business. As we begin to bring forward Government motions, including on legislative proceedings for remote debate, we will be able to designate whether those motions are to be subject to a new remote voting process, or to a remote deferred Division process. If we choose not to designate a motion in this way, under the terms of paragraph (5), the motion becomes subject to a decision on a "nod or nothing" basis. The House agreed yesterday, in the resolution on proceedings during the pandemic, that we must aim for equal treatment between those participating in proceedings in the Chamber and those participating remotely. In the absence of remote voting, any Division called would be subject to physical Division. In the current circumstances, we cannot create a situation that encourages Members physically to attend proceedings in Westminster.

The detailed arrangements for how remote voting will work will, under section L, be set out by you, Mr Speaker. Under the new system, remote Divisions would become a process administered by the House, with the result delivered directly to the Speaker. Votes in a remote Division would be expected to be cast in a 15-minute window, and in a deferred Division during the usual 11.30 am to 2 pm slot on Wednesdays. I have tested the new arrangements, which operate via the Members' Hub interface. I must confess that that was the first time I had ever used the Members' Hub interface, but I understand that it is very widely used.

I am grateful to the House authorities, particularly staff in the Parliamentary Digital Service, for their work on developing the Division tool so quickly. I know that they are keen to facilitate further testing next week, including with Members, which will be crucial to build confidence in the new system. I am keen that the testing happens ahead of the Government designating any business for remote Divisions. Let me be clear: we are not intending to designate any business for remote divisions next week. It will not happen that fast.

Amendment (a) was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), the Chair of the Procedure Committee. May I start by reiterating the sincere thanks to her and her Committee for their rapid work? I appreciated the opportunity to join the Committee in a private session last week and to be able to set out the Government's thoughts. The Committee has produced a substantial and immensely helpful report, and I know that the Committee will continue to play a key role.

As I said yesterday, I am very much aware that the Committee has some specific concerns about moving to electronic voting. I think it is safe to say, and not unduly indiscreet of me, that I probably share a number of

[Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg]

those concerns. I have listened carefully to the Committee and am grateful for the conversations that I have been able to have with its Chairman. I understand and accept the need for the Procedure Committee to be assured that the remote voting technology works, and for the Committee to have time to express its views on the matter. However, I would ask whether the Chairman would consider withdrawing her amendment in exchange for a formal commitment from the Government today. If this motion passes, I can confirm that we will not designate any Divisions subject to these new arrangements until the Committee has examined the proposed scheme and the Chairman has written to me to set out the Committee's views on the scheme and whether it considers it to be workable. I would be most grateful if the Chairman in turn could commit to that work being carried out by the Committee as quickly as possible.

I fully understand that this motion is proposing a significant change in the way we do our business. I am grateful to the Procedure Committee for the key role that it will play, and I am committed to listening carefully to the views of Members across the House as we develop these new and temporary ways of working. Let me stress that again: this would be a temporary change, driven by the need for the House to continue to make progress on key legislation and to give Members the right to have their say. I therefore hope that the House can support the motion, which I commend to it.

Mr Speaker: It may be helpful to point out that it is only if the amendment is moved that we will need to worry. It may not be moved.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Let me hear what the Committee Chair has to say first.

2.31 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to speak to amendment (a), which is, after paragraph (5), to insert:

“6) paragraphs (1) to (4) of this Order shall not have effect until the Speaker takes the Chair on the sitting day after the Chair of the Procedure Committee shall have reported to the House a resolution of that Committee that

- (a) it is expedient to use remote divisions during the period for which this Order has effect and
- (b) the arrangements authorised by the Speaker are appropriate to be used in remote divisions and remote deferred divisions.”

The amendment stands in my name and those of several Committee colleagues and others.

The Leader of the House has set out succinctly and appropriately some of the concerns that my Committee has about the proposals to move to remote voting. As he said, we have looked in depth at the proposals for hybrid scrutiny, the motion on which we have just considered, and we have looked at how we deal with questions, of which we have just seen the first example happening in reality. But we have not yet had a chance to consider the proposals for remote voting, and I am therefore grateful to the Leader of the House for his comments.

I will say up front, in response to the Leader of the House's comments, that I do not propose to move the amendment, given that he has made a commitment that, in effect, delivers what the amendment would have done, but does so in a way without the need to amend the motion. I will also give him the commitment, as he asked, that I will write to you, Mr Speaker, and to him with the Committee's view on the proposed system within two sitting days of an assurance from the House service that it is ready to be deployed.

Mr Speaker: I apologise to the shadow Leader of the House for not calling her first, but I wanted to know whether the amendment would be moved.

2.33 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for outlining the Government's views on remote voting. The Chair of the Procedure Committee has not moved her amendment, but may I just say that while the Opposition are aware of the important work that the Procedure Committee does, clearly it is a matter for the Government, the House and the Opposition to decide? The Procedure Committee cannot override what the work of the House does, but we are in fast-moving times and we know that people are working incredibly hard to get this right. We know that the Procedure Committee has made comments on, for example, proxy voting, and its views are very important. It should be consulted and we will listen to its views.

Circumstances are unusual and the House is moving as fast as it can, but whatever happens, we have to make sure that—the Commission had this discussion—any remote voting is secure, and that everyone is satisfied that any remote working is secure. The optics of votes going wrong is not where we want to be, and it is certainly not the vision of the House we want to present.

Karen Bradley: I apologise for coming in again, having already had my bite of the cherry, but I wish to make a point on the practicalities. I tried the trial run that digital services have been running through MemberHub, and I pay tribute to digital services. On 6 April, when the Committee wrote to you, Mr Speaker, we were clear that we did not believe that it would be possible to get to this point, so the work that has been done is incredible.

However, people need to recognise the realities of everyday life for a Member of Parliament at the moment. We are focused on our constituents and on our constituency work. We are not sitting with our telephones waiting for a text to come in to say that a vote is happening. It is not like it is in the Chamber, and there are real concerns about ensuring that Members get used to the way the system works.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Lady. She is absolutely right: most of us have been pinned to our computers trying to get constituents back, and trying to help them to work out whether they have lost their job. She is right that we have been working incredibly hard. However, as with everything when there is legislation—only the substantive hybrid proceedings will involve a vote—it is right that it is the business of the House that will be for Members to focus on. Hopefully it will be a bit more than just standing by the telephone. As I said, I have not had the run-through and I would certainly like it.

There are other ways of voting, which hon. Members may not like. In the Welsh Assembly, they actually have a roll call. That is one way of doing it. On the subject of the Whips, we will miss the cheeky face of my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) guiding us in. Maybe he can pop up on the computer. That human interaction is very important, but the key thing, as we have all said, is that that is the way the House operated; we have to move to a new position now because of the pandemic, to keep Members safe. Any way that we can do that remotely, keeping everyone safe while ensuring that House staff are also safe and that the voting is secure, is very important. We know that we have the technology to do that, because people do it for the Eurovision song contest.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that that is so secure, with those results.

Valerie Vaz: I am not sure that the Leader of the House wants to hear this, but I think the European Parliament also operates some kind of remote electronic voting. Perhaps we will not go there, given that it has the word “Europe” in it, which has been expunged from our parliamentary vocabulary.

I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley). She and her Committee do an assiduous job. We have all appeared before it and, quite rightly, been given a hard time. Her predecessor did that too. Her Majesty’s Opposition support the motion as set out by the Leader of the House.

2.37 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker, perhaps unexpectedly, in the course of this afternoon’s brief proceedings. Observant Members will have noticed the flurry of Whips who have entered the Chamber, which is always a sign of distress for us mere ordinary Members, but let me remind every Member of this House that we are all sent on an equal basis to this place by our constituents to make representations on their behalf.

I attempted a moment ago to raise a point of order, perhaps not being au fait with the radical measures that were taken yesterday preventing Members from doing so.

Mr Speaker: Actually, you can make a point of order; I just wanted first to hear whether the amendment would be moved. If you wish to make a point of order, I can take one at this stage, but I thought that you would prefer to speak instead.

Mr Wragg: I am most grateful for that clarification, Sir. The point I wished to raise was one of procedure. Given his extensive understanding of how this place works, my right hon. Friend the Lord President of the Council would have known the answer to this. The question was whether it was perfectly orderly for a Member to add their name to an amendment, although not printed on the Order Paper, while it was in the possession of the House, and whether they could move that amendment, even if the lead Member wished not to. That was the point that I wished to make.

A lot of things are being done in haste, and I appreciate entirely the need to do so given the situation that we are in. It is right that a number of Members are present in the Chamber and can demonstrate the same guidance

that we are giving to our constituents—for example, those who email us frequently with their concerns about working in depots and factories and on construction sites.

It is right and proper that a number of us should be in the Chamber to demonstrate social distancing in this way. I merely ask the Government to be careful what they wish for, because I do not think that some of the measures, despite the protestations of wishing to get back to normality in some swift way, will be successful in getting back to that normality.

I accept the need to move quickly. Everybody regrets the situation that we are now in, but it is vital that Back Benchers should have the ability, even in these times of great uncertainty, to make important representations on behalf of their constituents.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): To be fair, through the leadership of the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), the Chair of the Procedure Committee, of which the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) was a distinguished member for many years—he and I served together on it—the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House have made commitments on behalf of the Government and the official Opposition, after representations from the Chair and through the Speaker, that these changes are temporary and that we will be able to review them as part of the changes to voting. In many ways, with the greatest of respect to the hon. Gentleman, we have that commitment. Of course I agree with him that we are all created equal, but of course, Whips are slightly more equal—speaking as a Whip. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Wragg: Indeed. As well as being a distinguished member of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Gentleman is, of course, a distinguished member of his party’s Whips Office. Whenever I think of the term “usual channels”, I am reminded that, of course, even great cities need their sewers. I am sure there is a high degree of interconnectedness in all those usual channels. We need to be mindful of the times in which we are living, and that this lockdown is not equal. We are not all in this lockdown together. There is a divide between the white-collar worker and the blue-collar worker. People working in the private sector and people working in the public sector are invariably in different circumstances. Let us always have that at the forefront of our minds and ensure that proper parliamentary scrutiny of the Government’s work can continue.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member—all Members are important to this Chamber.

2.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to talk briefly about the process. I thank the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and the Procedure Committee for bringing forward their ideas and thoughts; they are very important to put on record.

Yesterday, I brought to the attention of the Leader of the House the issue of potential legislation that may involve a vote. If a vote were involved, it would be very important to MPs from my party, from Northern Ireland and from other parts of the United Kingdom. I know that many new MPs have a similar opinion to me—indeed, I suspect, the Leader of the House does too. I want to

[*Jim Shannon*]

put on record that, if potential legislation went through a Delegated Legislation Committee that we might not be part of, which would bring legislation before this House to be voted on, and if we found in any way that we were not, and could not, be part of that voting process, that would be against the very ethos of democracy and what I believe in—freedom and liberty and my right in this House to express my view and vote about something. That would be totally erroneous and unacceptable to me as an MP and to other members of my party, and to others in this House.

The matter I refer to concerns the abortion issue, because I understand that there is some indication that that legislation may come forward. I want the assurance in this House that, as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we in Northern Ireland will be assured of our vote and that there will not be a technical reason why we cannot vote.

2.43 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I will not detain the House for long. As a member of the Procedure Committee, I associate myself with all the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley). It is important that the Government understand that she spoke for all of us on the Committee when she put forward her amendment. There are many of us who have reservations about the pace with which we are moving, and who are mindful of the precautionary principle that we act in haste and repent at leisure, and of the temporary having an awful habit of becoming the permanent.

That said, we are enormously reassured by our continued engagement with the Leader of the House, who, I believe, shares many of our views. Given the constructive approach of the Government today and the clarification by him and the shadow Leader of the Opposition, I will support the Government.

2.44 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I echo the statement that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) has just made, and I shall be brief. When decisions are made on a temporary basis, as the introduction of income tax was, they sometimes find their way of remaining for longer. The Leader of the House has been gracious enough to listen to the Procedure Committee and to the amendment, which will not be moved, so I hope he will be good enough to listen to the report. I do not wish to pre-empt the Committee's findings, but if that report says that it is vehemently against or it finds significant problems within the system, I hope he will address that and listen to those findings before we rush into the implementation of that system.

As we have heard in some of the comments made by Members from parties across the House, it is very important to ascertain whether or not we can ensure that it is the Member voting; we need to make sure there is a lock for that and that the system is efficient. Depending on when each vote is brought to this House, it is very important that that can be done. It is important that the Government listen to the findings of that report, give it its due course and give their due deliberation.

2.45 pm

Mr Rees-Mogg: I shall reply to as many of the points made as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) are both concerned about Members being able to vote. The system has to ensure that every Member is able to vote. I can give that commitment on behalf of the Government; we will not adopt a system that would fail, and we will listen carefully to what the Procedure Committee has to say. If it identifies any problems, obviously we would want to put them right before bringing in any system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) makes the point that the temporary often becomes permanent, and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes mentioned income tax. It is worth noting that one of the reasons we had to reconvene was because income tax remains an annual charge, partly because of its temporary nature when it was introduced. We had to have the Finance Bill within 30 days of the Budget statement and we have to have it completed by a date in October otherwise there would be no income tax. Therefore, safeguards that are built in sometimes turn out to be effective much, much later than anyone could have expected or anticipated.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) for deciding not to press her amendment. The commitment I have given is clear; obviously, we want a system that works, and we want the views of the Procedure Committee on that before we go any further. My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) made the point that anybody whose name is on an amendment is allowed to move an amendment. Amendments are withdrawn by leave of the House. I just make the point to him that sometimes what is possible procedurally is not wise procedurally, and that when there is a consensus of the House and someone has not moved or withdrawn an amendment, it is sometimes considered eccentric to insist on persisting with that amendment—not that I would ever dare to accuse anybody of eccentricity, because people might refer to pots and kettles, and, to mix my metaphors, I would be hoist by my own petard.

May I conclude by thanking the shadow Leader of the House for her continually constructive approach to these matters? It is a real pleasure to be working with her in these difficult times to try to create solutions that will work for everybody. The attitude of the official Opposition has been exemplary, and I am very grateful for that.

I think these are the last words that will be spoken from this Dispatch Box when we are not in a virtual Parliament; it is not that in hybrid proceedings Members may not be able to speak from the Dispatch Box, but that until 12 May these are the last physical proceedings we will have. I am very grateful for the support from across the House for the work that has been done. We will be in a new era the next time this House meets.

Question put and agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

2.49 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 22 April 2020

TREASURY

Temporary Changes to Pensions Tax in the Context of Abatement for Returning Workers

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): At this time, it is important that key public sector workforces can bring back workers with relevant and valuable experience to ensure that the Government can continue to provide critical public services. I am working with colleagues across Government to ensure we remove any potential barriers to those who wish to return to work to help in our fight against covid-19.

For public sector workers returning to support the Government's response to covid-19 the Government intend to temporarily suspend tax rules that would otherwise apply significant tax charges to pension income received by recently retired individuals aged between 50 and 55. This change, taken alongside complementary changes to rules for relevant public service pension schemes (subject to relevant HM Treasury agreement), will help ensure individuals' pension income will remain protected if they return to work at this important time.

The measure is designed to ensure that we can continue to provide important public services at this time. As these proposed tax changes form part of our response to covid-19, they will initially apply in respect of payments made in the period from 1 March to 1 June 2020.

HMRC will set out operational guidance in due course, but this measure will only apply to people returning to roles as a result of covid-19. I am working with colleagues to identify relevant workforces who should benefit from these changes.

The Government's actions will provide relevant public sector staff associations with the assurance that their members with pensions in payment and pension benefits will be unaffected if they wish to play their part in our response to this virus.

[HCWS196]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Right to Rent Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): We welcome the Court of Appeal ruling that the Right to Rent Scheme is lawful and does not breach human rights law.

The Right to Rent Scheme was launched to ensure only those lawfully in the country can access the private rental sector, and to tackle unscrupulous landlords who exploit vulnerable migrants, sometimes in very poor conditions.

In 2016, a requirement was introduced for landlords and lettings agents in England to take reasonable steps to check they are renting only to someone who has a right to do so. This is to help make sure our immigration laws are respected. It is only fair to the many people who come to the UK legally and to British citizens that accommodation is not taken by people who are here illegally.

Right to Rent checks are straightforward and apply equally to everyone seeking accommodation in the private rental sector, including British citizens, and there are penalties for landlords who fail to complete the checks and who are later found to have rented to someone without a right to be in the UK. We have adapted the checks to make it easier for landlords to carry them out during the coronavirus outbreak. Prospective renters are now able to submit scanned documents, rather than originals, to show they have a right to rent.

We have always been absolutely clear that discriminatory treatment on the part of anyone carrying out these checks is unlawful. Furthermore, the Right to Rent legislation provides for codes of practice which sets out what landlords are expected to do and how they can avoid unlawful discrimination.

We are therefore pleased that the Court of Appeal has overturned the High Court's ruling and found that the scheme has a legitimate policy purpose and is compatible with the European convention on human rights.

As the Court noted, it is in the public interest that a coherent immigration policy should not only set out the criteria on which leave to remain is granted, but also discourage unlawful entry or the continued presence of those who have no right to enter or be here.

The Right to Rent Scheme forms an important part of our immigration policy. However, as my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary said in this House, we are carefully reviewing and reflecting on the recommendations in the Lessons Learned review report, including those relating to the compliant environment. We will bring forward a detailed formal response in the next six months, as Wendy Williams recommended.

In the meantime, the provisions passed by this House in 2014 remain in force and a full evaluation of the Right to Rent Scheme is under way. The evaluation includes a call to evidence to tenants, landlords and letting agents; a large mystery shopping exercise; and surveys of landlords. Members of the Right to Rent consultative panel provided input into the design of the evaluation.

The Government are committed to tackling discrimination in all its forms and to having an immigration system which provides control, but which is also fair, humane and fully compliant with the law. The Court of Appeal has found that the Right to Rent Scheme is capable of being operated in a lawful way by landlords in all individual cases. We will continue to work with landlords and lettings agents to ensure that is the case.

[HCWS195]

Petition

Wednesday 22 April 2020

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Village Surgery in Askam, Furness

The petition of residents of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that the general practitioner (GP) provision within the village of Askam in Furness, known as "Parklands Surgery" must remain in operation after the

retirement of the village's only current doctor on 30th June 2020; further that more than 1,500 local patients with limited public and private transport options are able to continue to access a GP easily and conveniently to maintain their personal health and well-being.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to intervene to help provide a new GP to keep Parklands Surgery open and serving local people in Askam in Furness and Ireleth.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Simon Fell.]

[P002565]

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