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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 2 June 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before I bring in the Secretary of State, I remind the House that if Members who have managed to ask a question could leave to allow others to do the same, that would be very helpful and allow you to share the Chamber. At the end of the first statement, we will have a gap of five minutes before the next statement, in order to allow people to rotate.

Hong Kong National Security Legislation: UK Response

11.33 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): I would like to update the House on the situation in Hong Kong. As all Members will know, Hong Kong's historic success was built on its autonomy, its freedoms and the remarkable resourcefulness and determination of its people. We have long admired their prosperity and their values, respected through China's own expression of the one country, two systems approach—an approach that China itself has long articulated and affirmed as the basis for its relations with Hong Kong. The UK, through successive Governments, has consistently respected and supported that model, as reflected both in China's Basic Law and also the joint declaration, which, as Members will know, is the treaty agreed by the United Kingdom and China, registered with the United Nations, as part of the arrangements for the handover of Hong Kong that were made back in 1984.

Set against this Chinese framework and the historical context, on 22 May, during a meeting of the National People's Congress, China considered a proposal for a national security law for Hong Kong, and then on 28 May the National People's Congress adopted that decision. China's Foreign Minister, State Councillor Wang Yi, made it clear that the legislation will seek to ban treason, secession, sedition and subversion, and we expect it to be published in full shortly.

This proposed national security law undermines the one country, two systems framework that I have described, under which Hong Kong is guaranteed a high degree of autonomy with Executive, legislative and independent judicial powers. To be very clear and specific about this, the imposition of national security legislation on Hong Kong by the Government in Beijing, rather than through Hong Kong's own institutions, lies in direct conflict with article 23 of China's own Basic Law and with China's international obligations freely assumed under the joint declaration. The Basic Law is clear that there

are only a limited number of areas in which Beijing can impose laws directly, such as for the purposes of defence and foreign affairs, or in exceptional circumstances in which the National People's Congress declares a state of war or a state of emergency.

The proposed national security law, as it has been described, in terms of the substance and detail, raises the prospect of prosecution in Hong Kong for political crimes, which would undermine the existing commitments to protect the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong, as set out in the joint declaration, but also reflecting the international covenant on civil and political rights. Finally, the proposals also include provision for the authorities in Hong Kong to report back to Beijing on progress in pursuing national security education of its people—a truly sobering prospect.

We have not yet seen the detailed published text of the legislation, but I can tell the House that if legislation in those terms is imposed by China on Hong Kong, it would violate China's own Basic Law. It would upend China's one country, two systems paradigm, and it would be a clear violation of China's international obligations, including those made specifically to the United Kingdom under the joint declaration.

Let me be clear about the approach that the United Kingdom intends to take. We do not oppose Hong Kong passing its own national security law. We do strongly oppose such an authoritarian law being imposed by China, in breach of international law. We are not seeking to intervene in China's internal affairs, only to hold China to its international commitments, just as China expects of the United Kingdom. We do not seek to prevent China's rise—far from it. We welcome China as a leading member of the international community, and we look to engage with China on everything from trade to climate change. It is precisely because we recognise China's role in the world that we expect it to live up to the international obligations and the international responsibilities that come with it.

On Thursday, working closely with our partners in Australia, Canada and the United States, the UK released a joint statement expressing our deep concerns over this proposed new security legislation. Our partners in New Zealand and Japan have issued similar statements. The EU has too, and I have had discussions with a number of our EU partners. The UK stands firm with our international partners in our expectation that China lives up to its international obligations under the Sino-British joint declaration.

There is time for China to reconsider. There is a moment for China to step back from the brink and respect Hong Kong's autonomy and respect China's own international obligations. We urge the Government of China to work with the people of Hong Kong and with the Hong Kong Government to end the recent violence and to resolve the underlying tensions based on political dialogue. If China continues down this current path, if it enacts this national security law, we will consider what further response we make working with those international partners and others.

I hope the whole House agrees that we, as the United Kingdom, have historical responsibilities—a duty I would say—to the people of Hong Kong. I can tell the House now that if China enacts the law, we will change the arrangements for British National (Overseas) passport holders in Hong Kong. The House will recall that the

[*Dominic Raab*]

BNO status was conferred on British dependent territories' citizens connected with Hong Kong as part of the package of arrangements that accompanied the joint declaration in 1984 in preparation for the handover of the territory. Under that status currently, BNO passport holders are already entitled to UK consular assistance in third countries. The British Government also provide people with BNO passports visa-free entry into the UK for up to six months as visitors.

If China follows through with its proposed legislation, we will put in place new arrangements to allow BNOs to come to the UK without the current six-month limit, enabling them to live and apply to study and work for extendable periods of 12 months, thereby also providing a pathway to citizenship.

Let me just finish by saying that, even at this stage, I sincerely hope that China will reconsider its approach, but if it does not the UK will not just look the other way when it comes to the people of Hong Kong; we will stand by them and live up to our responsibilities. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I shall now call the shadow Foreign Secretary, Lisa Nandy, who has up to five minutes to reply.

11.41 am

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for coming to the House to make this statement and for advance sight of it. In particular, I thank him for the sentiment of solidarity that he expressed at the end of his statement.

We are deeply concerned about events in Hong Kong. We share the Government's opposition to the national security law. We want to see real action to address police brutality and the steady erosion of the joint declaration. We want the people of Hong Kong to know that the world is watching. We also want them to know that the world is prepared to act. Can I press the Foreign Secretary for more clarity on BNO passport holders? We welcome the announcement that visa rights will be extended. He says that they will be able to come to the UK if China continues down this path and implements this legislation. Will he tell us at which stage he envisages our taking action? When will these measures be brought before the House? I also ask him for more details about how this will apply. Will it apply to the 350,000 people who hold valid passports, or to the 2.9 million who are eligible? For this to be meaningful, surely it has to apply to people's families. Will he confirm whether this is the Government's intention, and what assessment he has done of the numbers?

The first rule of any sanction against China must surely be that it does not harm the people of Hong Kong. Will he tell us what assessment he has made of the potential loss of millions of highly skilled people from Hong Kong; and what assessment he has done of the USA's recent announcement, which I understand he supports, that Hong Kong is no longer autonomous? Will he therefore support the withdrawal of trade preferences and economic sanctions? There are implications for China and, of course, implications for the UK, but there are also serious implications for the people of

Hong Kong, many of whom he does not appear to be offering safe haven to. What impact does he believe that that will have on them?

We have been asking for concrete steps, and I welcome the fact that the Government are now signalling that they are prepared to take these, but the joint declaration has been repeatedly undermined since 2012. As the former Governor of Hong Kong put it, that has been met with only "tut-tutting" and "embarrassed clearing of the throat" from UK Ministers. Why has the Foreign Secretary not pressed for an independent inquiry into police brutality? Given the serious implications for human rights, does he welcome, as we do, the suggestion by former Foreign Secretaries that an international contact group should be established? He knows that the only long-term solution to this is universal suffrage. We must see pressure from Britain on the Hong Kong authorities to begin the process of democratic reform.

I was astonished that, in his statement, the Foreign Secretary did not address how the UK intends to respond to the threat of countermeasures by China. It is increasingly clear that we need an alliance of democracies to ensure that we can maintain, as he says, a constructive dialogue with China on shared challenges, not least on climate change, while standing up to aggressive behaviour and clear breaches of international law. He referenced the statements by the UK, Australia, Canada and the US, which was welcome, and the additional statements from New Zealand, Japan and the European Union. It is time for an international democratic alliance to come together and speak with one voice. The G7 is now off. The G20 is not meeting. The discussion at the UN Security Council has been blocked by China. It is time for Britain to be far more proactive. In recent weeks, Australia has shown real leadership on the search for a vaccine for covid-19 and France has led the charge for a global ceasefire. On this of all issues, why is Britain not stepping up and showing the leadership the world needs?

Finally, I am concerned that this exposes some serious, deep contradictions in the Government's approach to China. For a decade, we have been told that we are in a "golden era" of Sino-British relations, whereas the right hon. Gentleman has said that we cannot go back to "business as usual" with China. What does any of this mean in practice? The Government have finally accepted that there are concerns about the threat the Huawei contract poses to national security and are reportedly working with other countries to explore an alternative, but will he rule out Chinese involvement in any new nuclear projects beyond Hinkley? With a long and deep recession likely, the need for a coherent approach is only becoming more urgent. We do not have a strategy abroad. We do not have a strategy at home. This needs a calm and sensible approach, to maintain a constructive dialogue and build far greater strategic independence; the two are not contradictory but go hand in hand. Now is the moment that Britain must step up, show global leadership and begin to take this seriously.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her solidarity and support, as expressed at the commencement of her remarks. She asked about the trigger point for changes. It is only right, in order to do this in a very careful and accurate way, to wait for the legislation to be published,

so that we can see the full text, because, of course, it is only at that point, or indeed at its application, that we would be able credibly and reliably to say it was in violation of the joint declaration in the way I have described. I think that is a common-sense approach, which allows China, or other countries around the world that are watching and that we want to stand up in support of international law, to see that we are proceeding on the basis of principle and on the facts.

The hon. Lady asked about the detailed arrangements. I have been working with Ministers, in particular, the Home Secretary and the Home Office, on this since last September. As I said, we will wait to see precisely what the legislation says before making any further announcements, but the Home Secretary will set out the details at the appropriate time.

Lisa Nandy: Considering families?

Dominic Raab: Of course, dependants would be considered. The hon. Lady rightly pointed out that the threat to Hong Kong is not just to its autonomy and freedoms, but to its economy and to investment in Hong Kong, which the UK and many others have serious interests in. The actions of China are, inexplicably, putting at risk what has long been regarded as one of the jewels in the economic crown for China. So she makes important points on that.

The hon. Lady asked why we had not called for an independent investigation into the police, but in fact I called for it in August 2019 and made that clear, having spoken to chief executive Carrie Lam. The hon. Lady also asked about universal suffrage, which of course is envisaged in the basic law for Hong Kong; I set that out as our position in the House of Commons last September. On both points I welcome her support and that of the Labour party. She then asked about international action, where the United Kingdom has been in the vanguard. We have been co-ordinating with our Five Eyes partners—I had a virtual meeting with them yesterday evening, where we reaffirmed our solidarity on this point. I have had calls and been engaged with the European Union, which has put out a statement—it is not as strong as the one we put out, but it shows that the EU is engaged actively on this. I have been speaking to my German, French and other European partners about it, and I also spoke to my Japanese opposite number today. The issue was discussed in the UN Security Council, but of course China, and indeed Russia, will veto any more substantive debate.

The hon. Lady asked about the specific measures we are proposing. I have been very clear on BNOs. Equally, we will work closely with our international partners on what the right next steps are. I think the focus right now, in order to proceed in a productive way that is likely to give ourselves the best chance of the outcome we want, is on setting out our position clearly and working with our international partners, and the ball is in the court of the Government in China. They have a choice to make here: they can cross the Rubicon and violate the autonomy and the rights of the people of Hong Kong, or they can step back, understand the widespread concern of the international community and live up to their responsibilities as a leading member of the international community.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I hugely welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. May I also say that I welcome a noticeably different attitude from the Opposition Front Bench in standing up to communist tyranny for the first time in a political generation? What we are seeing in Hong Kong is an attempt to impose a very different form of government on the people there, who have rights, as agreed, as my right hon. Friend said, in the Sino-British joint declaration.

My right hon. Friend has already spoken about working with countries in the Five Eyes community and Japan. May I ask him what work he has done with African countries, South American countries and middle eastern countries, and what work is he looking to do in perhaps asking for a UN special envoy to help protect the rule of law that our nation, and indeed his former career, was so important in guaranteeing—not just in Hong Kong, but around the world?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Select Committee, who makes a range of really important points. He is absolutely right to focus on what is the most effective way to build a groundswell of support for the principled stance that we are taking and for opposition to the actions of China where they flout international law. He will also know from his position and his widespread experience, to which I pay tribute, that beyond Five Eyes, the European Union and others, there is a whole range of different opinions on how to engage and deal with China and a range of approaches that China takes—from inducements to intimidation—to cajole, sway and, frankly, coerce countries to bend to its will.

The approach that we are taking is trying to maximise the number of countries around the world—not the usual suspects that China will dismiss as trying to weaken it or to keep it down—to make the most powerful statement and, ultimately, to moderate the actions of China. Unless we can build up that bigger caucus of opinion—my hon. Friend mentioned Africa and South America, and we are working with all of those partners—we will be less effective when it comes to facing down what is clearly egregious behaviour in relation to Hong Kong and some of the other matters that he referred to.

Mr Speaker: I call Stewart Malcolm McDonald, who has two minutes. I inform the House that I am expecting to run this statement till about 12.45 pm.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and, like others, I welcome much of what was in it. SNP Members of course stand in full solidarity with those in Hong Kong, and indeed those in Taiwan, who see this as a glimpse of what Beijing might have up its sleeve for them in the future. In fact, anyone who has the heel of state oppression on them right now—let us be honest, that is increasing by the day—deserves our support.

I can accept that this is tricky: it is not a black-and-white situation, given the nature of the actors involved. I think that what the Government are doing on BNOs is right, but is there not a danger that allowing so many people to leave is actually exactly what Beijing wants? While I think it is the right thing to do to allow people

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

to come here and, as the Foreign Secretary mentioned in his statement, to provide them with a path to citizenship, when West Berliners were threatened with oppression, we did not just offer them all visas to leave; we actually stood up for them and offered to defend them. Beyond the statement on BNOs, which is I think right, what else are the Government planning to do in future to support those who are not BNOs and who will be left behind in Hong Kong to deal with the effects of this new law?

I would also like to ask the Foreign Secretary—the Chair of the Select Committee took the question out of my mouth—to expand on how he is teasing together a greater international coalition, because that will be tricky if he is going to bring in the middle east, Africa and others, given China’s enormous global economic footprint through such things as the belt and road initiative and the China strategy. Can I ask him when he expects to see the text of the law? Is there anything in the joint agreement that allows the UK Government to see that sooner rather than later? At what point does he envisage having to take further steps? No one is calling for sanctions just yet, but surely work must be going on to put together something that constitutes a price for Beijing’s heavy hand. Can he confirm whether the law that the authorities in Beijing want to impose has directly led to a reversal on the Huawei decision?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the substance and the tone of his position. We fully welcome his support, as indeed we welcome the support from all sides in the Chamber. This is a powerful opportunity for us to show a united position on this. It is something that successive Governments have agreed on. He asked whether, if we offered to change BNOs’ status, that would be a gift to Beijing. I do not think that that is true. I do not think, from the response of the Chinese Government, that that is correct. They are very sensitive about this, and in any event it is a point of principle. We have fought to live up to our international responsibilities and commitments, and, as I explained in my statement, we regard this as part of the package that went with the joint declaration. If that is upended because of action on the national security legislation, it is only right that we should rethink the position of BNO passport holders. That also explains, in relation to the question from the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), why we have been quite careful about timing. We have been prepared for this, and we have hoped it would not come, but as has often been said in this House, we hope for the best and prepare for the worst. The hon. Gentleman asked about how we build up international support. In my view, we do so based on principle and the rules of international law. The obvious riposte will be that we are intervening in internal affairs, but we are not. We are seeking to uphold China’s own freely assumed international obligations. And no, I am not expecting advance sight of the legislation from Beijing.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement, but does he not now think that the position of China is altogether too obvious, and that since President Xi arrived, its ambitions globally, both militarily and economically, are now fully on track and Hong Kong is but one manifestation of its global reach

through the South China sea, through its abuse of human rights and through its ambitions over Taiwan? Is this not a case, as a previous Prime Minister once said, that this is

“only the first sip...of a bitter cup”,

and that it is going to be offered to us again and again? Appeasement, which has been the case for the free world, is now no longer an option, so will my right hon. Friend now explain how he intends to organise the free world so that we stand up against this? Also, will he now work with all our allies around the world to get them to give all Hong Kong passport holders right of abode, if necessary?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent questions. I do think Hong Kong is part of a pattern, although it is not a uniform one. He referred to the violation of the UN convention on the law of the sea—I think that is what he was referring to in relation to the South China sea—and we could add cyber-attacks and the treatment of the Uighur Muslims. At every step, the right approach for the United Kingdom, as a matter of principle and also of effectiveness, is to call out behaviour that is contrary to international law on its own terms. In answer to the Chairman of the Select Committee and others, that is how we will build a coalition of like-minded countries to stand firm in the face of such behaviour.

My right hon. Friend asked about BNO passport holders. We have made a commitment, which he has heard today. It is important that we did that as a matter of principle, rather than waiting for others to agree in concept. However, we are already discussing with our partners—I raised it on the Five Eyes call yesterday—the possibility of burden sharing if we see a mass exodus from Hong Kong. I do not think that that is likely in the last analysis, but he is right to raise it, and we are on the case diplomatically.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I particularly welcome the commitment in relation to BNO passport holders? The Foreign Secretary has heard me make that plea on many occasions in the past. He will be aware, though, that the BNO offer was closed in 1997, so the announcement today does not offer any protection to those born after that date, who are, by definition, the brave young Hong Kongers who are out there demonstrating on the streets, and who are most vulnerable and in most need of protection. Will he look at what we can do to assist these people?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and pay tribute to him for his long-standing and principled position on this issue; he is absolutely right, and we appreciate all the cross-party support on this. He asked about those who do not qualify for BNO passport status. I would just point out that we are talking about over 300,000 people who do qualify. Of course, he makes a reasonable point about the cut-off date, but that would not apply to dependants. We have set out—based on principle, in the right way—the commitment that we are making but, as others have already mentioned, what will be important is that the international community comes together to ensure that there are options for the wider group to which the right hon. Gentleman refers.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's clear statement, and I am glad that he agrees that China's national security law for Hong Kong totally conflicts with its obligations under the joint declaration. Will he say a little more about what we plan to do with Australia because, of the countries around the world, it has the most to fear from this law coming into effect in Hong Kong?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, and welcome his remarks and comments. He is absolutely right about the violation of the joint declaration, whether that is through the infringements of peaceful protests or the legislation regarding the national anthem. He specifically asked about Australia. As he will have seen from the statement that the UK has put out, we work closely with the Australians on this matter, as we do with all our Five Eyes partners: the Canadians, the Americans and the Kiwis as well. I spoke to Marise Payne yesterday evening about this subject, and we will be working even more intensely in the future.

Of course, even to get to this point—the work that we have done and the commitment that we have made—we have been talking to the Australians and our other international partners for months, and that will continue constructively. I know that the Australians feel very much that this situation is in their neighbourhood and backyard, and are taking a very principled point of view, but they are right up against it; they see all the impacts of what China is doing, even closer than we do, and we will be working hand in glove with them.

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Lab): Amnesty International found that the Hong Kong police force has indiscriminately arrested over 1,300 people in the past year at peaceful protests, and has tortured those in detention. It has used extreme force against pro-democracy protesters, including the use of tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets. In America, we see a brutal state crackdown against protests in response to the latest police killing of an unarmed black man, and in England and Wales there have been over 1,700 deaths following contact with the police since 1990. What are the Government doing to oppose state-sanctioned violence and racism in Hong Kong and across the world?

Dominic Raab: We stand up in the United Nations, the Council of Europe and all the other international forums, as we are doing regarding Hong Kong, and call out those flagrant violations of international law. I have set out the approach that we are taking in relation to Hong Kong. We have raised the matter in the UN Security Council, of which China is obviously a permanent member. China is extremely influential. It deploys all its economic and political leverage—and, indeed, intimidation—to get others to stay quiet. What the United Kingdom has shown—and I am grateful for the hon. Lady's support—is that we are standing up as a matter of principle and saying, “This is unacceptable”, and we are taking the actions that I described.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): At the 1997 Hong Kong handover ceremony, Lord Patten said:

“Hong Kong people are to run Hong Kong. That is the promise. And that is the unshakeable destiny.”

Will the Foreign Secretary take this moment to reaffirm this Government's commitment to the commitment that we made in the joint declaration, and reassure people that Hong Kongers must continue to run Hong Kong and that that resolutely remains British foreign policy?

Dominic Raab: It is precisely because that is at stake—in respect of not only the national security legislation but the previous elections we saw and the forthcoming elections later this year—that we are taking the approach that we are. We are calling out what is a clear and manifest breach of the joint declaration, and I reassure my hon. Friend that we will continue to do so, with our international partners.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): A number of British businesses with headquarters in Hong Kong are likely to be quite concerned right now. What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment of the likely risks to the Hong Kong dollar peg, as well as the potential for control creep in Hong Kong's regulatory bodies and fiscal structures?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is quite right to reflect, as others have done already, on the fact that if China is willing to interfere on political and autonomy grounds, it is also likely to pose a longer-term threat to the economic prosperity and economic model that Hong Kong reflects and embodies. We in the UK are mindful of that, not only from an investment point of view but, frankly, from the point of view of individuals who are trying to run livelihoods or invest in Hong Kong. The sad reality is that if China continues down this track, it will strangle what has long been the jewel in the economic crown. It is clear to me that China is putting politics, as it views it, ahead of economics. I am afraid that is a natural consequence of the creeping violation of Hong Kong's autonomy that we see.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are precious human rights the world over. I am sure we have all been reminded of that as we have watched the situation in the United States of America develop over the past 48 hours—I heard what the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) had to say about that—but what specific representations and specific pressure is the Secretary of State bringing to bear on the Government of Hong Kong to ensure that police handling of protests is necessary and proportionate?

Dominic Raab: I totally agree with the hon. and learned Lady on that point. We disagree about many things, but one thing about which we have always firmly agreed is the upholding of those elementary human rights, including the essential freedoms of peaceful protest, which are the aspiration of the people of Hong Kong. As I mentioned to the shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), I raised the need for a fully independent and robust investigation into the recent events, including the police treatment of protesters, in my first conversation with Carrie Lam back on 9 August. I made that clear then and we have done so consistently since. We recognise the concerns about the Independent Police Complaints Council and we have been working to see what we can do to reinforce it and to make it stronger. We also recognise the inherent

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weaknesses in it, which is why we will continue, in line with the shadow Foreign Secretary, to call for a fully independent inquiry into those actions. I hope the hon. and learned Lady will support that.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has often pointed out, only 500 veterans of the former Hong Kong Military Service Corps and royal naval service were offered UK passports in 1997; the rest were disregarded. Has not the time now come to pay this debt of honour to around 250 additional former servants of the British Crown by allowing them and their families the right to relocate to the United Kingdom if they wish or need to do so in future?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important and forensic point, as ever. As a Government and as a country we are extremely grateful to those who served in the Hong Kong Military Service Corps. He is right that under the scheme, which was introduced in 1990 and ran until July 1997, only a limited number of Hong Kong Military Service Corps personnel who were settled in Hong Kong could apply to register as a British citizen. The Home Office is listening to representations made on behalf of those former service corps personnel who were unable to obtain citizenship at that time too see what, if anything, further may be done.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Rubber bullets, tear gas, central Governments clamping down on local authorities—this is not just, of course, what we are seeing in America, but it is a long-term trend in Hong Kong. I welcome what the Secretary of State has said, but I implore him to see this not just as the enactment of a particular Bill in Beijing but as a long-term trend of undermining the rights of people in Hong Kong. Will the Foreign Secretary ensure that this extension of the right to be here for six months on a rolling basis for British national overseas citizens is not just granted on condition of whether Beijing withdraws a particular Bill temporarily? Whatever it does, we should ensure that rights is given, and not just to passport holders but to all people who are entitled to BNO status.

Dominic Raab: I think the hon. Gentleman is right on this point of principle. We want to make sure that we live up to our responsibilities, but it is also important, as we try to change the long-term trend to which he rightly refers, that we are clear about the basis on which we would do it. The basis is the ripping up of the essence of the joint declaration. We need to wait and see what the national security legislation looks like, to see affirmed the terms that have already been described by the Government in Beijing. We are right to say that that particular trigger point would change our minds, because then we would be able to stand on the firm point of principle and international law as the basis on which we were extending those rights. The stronger the position we are able to be in in that regard, the more likely we are to carry wide international support for the actions that we take.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): In article 45 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, the Hong Kong people were promised universal suffrage. It is clear that that is

being ignored. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK now has a legal and moral responsibility to protect the freedoms of the people of Hong Kong?

Dominic Raab: I totally agree with my hon. Friend about the moral responsibility and our responsibility in terms of the commitments that we have made to the people of Hong Kong. We fully intend to live up to those responsibilities. There is still an opportunity for China to step back; we think it is unlikely that that will happen, but we will be steadfast in sticking to the word that we have given to stand by the people of Hong Kong and not just look the other way.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has said that there can be no return to “business as usual” in Sino-British relations. What exactly did he mean, and can he give examples of what this will mean in practice?

Dominic Raab: That quote has been much bandied around. It is absolutely right. The context for it was when I was asked what we would do in order to have a clear review of how the outbreak of coronavirus started and came about. I wanted to be clear, and the United Kingdom is clear, working with our international partners and as a matter of principle, that we need to have a sober and clear-sighted independent review and analysis of how the outbreak happened, how it was allowed to spread and what we can do to prevent it from ever happening again.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the concern of charities such as Amnesty International and Hong Kong Watch about how these laws could impact on the work that they carry out in the territory and that the political opposition more generally could be accused of subversion and imprisoned simply for speaking to foreigners with ties to foreign Governments. Will he commit to the hilt to support the work of charities and non-governmental organisations operating in Hong Kong for the protection and freedom of its citizens?

Dominic Raab: I can give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. Of course, the climate for NGOs, and for anyone speaking out in an independent forum, whether in the media or otherwise, has massively closed down. That is not just wrong as a matter of principle and the values that we share in the House. It is wrong as a matter of the joint declaration, but also as a matter of China’s view of Hong Kong’s future, reflected in Chinese law, and in particular the Basic Law.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Does he agree that the national security law proposed by Beijing undermines the one country, two systems framework? Will he assure me that the UK will continue to be robust to stop the creeping violations of Hong Kong rights and continue to work with our international friends and colleagues?

Dominic Raab: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. Of course, we are dealing with a major economic power that relies on all its economic and political leverage and, indeed, other means, to bring different countries and Governments to its way of thinking

or just to quieten them down. Our approach—as I have described, based on principle and international law—is therefore the most likely to be effective in building up that groundswell of support that has the best chance of changing China’s behaviour.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As far back as 1989, the late, great Paddy Ashdown called on the Government to institute safeguards just in case one day China not just overreached but breached the joint declaration. We now potentially find ourselves in that position. Hongkongers are finding that the world is shifting beneath their feet, with nowhere to go. I understand that former Foreign Secretaries have written to the current Foreign Secretary, asking him to set up an international contact group to look at international human rights and also a lifeboat policy for Hongkongers. Has he considered their call and will he set up such a group?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the late Lord Paddy Ashdown for all his work. The UK is in the vanguard of the international response on Hong Kong. I am not sure that we are quite in the same situation with China and Hong Kong as we were with the former Yugoslavia, on which I worked as a war crimes lawyer in the early 2000s. None the less, the spirit of the hon. Lady’s question is absolutely right. As I have described, we want to build up a groundswell of those who share our commitment to the basic tenets of international law. That is most likely to be effective in getting China to think again about Hong Kong and all those other areas. We have raised China’s conduct on human rights issues in the Human Rights Council and the United Nations Security Council, and we will raise Hong Kong in every appropriate forum that we conceivably can.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and his commitment on BNO passport holders. Back in the 1990s, this country, with a degree of regret, fulfilled its international legal obligations to China. We must be absolutely clear to the Chinese that we expect them to do the same now with the people of Hong Kong and with this country. Will he make it absolutely clear to the Chinese Government that although we want constructive relations in future, that will be incredibly difficult if they go ahead with a measure that completely breaches the agreement they have with us and sends entirely the wrong message to the international community about what China wishes to become?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his long-standing position on the issue. He is absolutely right. We are not looking for inevitable confrontation with China. This is a question of specific undertakings, which were made at the time of the handover, to the United Kingdom and, more important, to the people of Hong Kong—and, indeed, to the world. We will, with our international partners, press rigorously and robustly to try to require China to live up to its obligations and, frankly, the responsibilities that come with wanting to be treated as a leading member of the international community.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): There has been a clear undermining of the human rights of the people of Hong Kong and a blatant breach of the

Sino-British joint declaration. The Foreign Secretary says that he has been calling for an independent inquiry for 10 months. Why has nothing happened? What support are the Government giving to human rights defenders in Hong Kong?

Dominic Raab: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s spirit, but nothing has happened because we do not control China or the Government in Hong Kong. It is not entirely clear to me what specifically she proposes. I am open to all suggestions. I welcome them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Magnitsky!

Dominic Raab: We have called for a fully independent investigation in relation to police treatment of the protesters. We will introduce our mechanism for so-called Magnitsky legislation shortly. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] We have been slightly disrupted because of coronavirus, but we will bring it forward shortly. I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who speaks from a sedentary position and has a long-standing position on the issue.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): If the international security law is imposed on Hong Kong, will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will work with the Home Secretary to explore all options to support BNO passport holders?

Dominic Raab: I agree with the spirit of my hon. Friend’s question. The ideal thing would be for China to step back. If China does not step back, we will consider all the possible actions and measures that we might wish to take. Fundamentally, rather than just wait for international co-operation on the specific issue of what will happen to those who are not willing to stay in Hong Kong, we feel that we have a duty—as a matter of international law, moral responsibility and historical responsibility—to come out and lead. That is why we have said that we will allow the 300,000-plus passport holders, along with their dependants, to come to the UK in the way I described.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is right that we take our special historical responsibilities seriously and take a significant interest in this issue, but we know that, when we do take an interest in such issues, diaspora communities at home suffer more. The Chinese community and people of Chinese heritage in Nottingham and, frankly, across the country, have had a horrendous first five months to this year, with abuse increased in staggering amounts. Can I therefore seek assurances from the Foreign Secretary that, as well as the admirably assertive role he is going to play on the international stage, he is working with his colleagues across Government to formulate a sympathetic package and a thoughtful way of supporting Chinese people and those of a Chinese background in this country, because they really need us now?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have a councillor in my constituency, Xingang Wang, who is not only one of the most hard-working businessmen, but one of the most hard-working councillors, and I am sure we all have examples of that across the country and across the political divides. It is crucial that we say to the Chinese community here that we value

[*Dominic Raab*]

their contribution, that our stance is in relation to the Government of China and their violation of the rights and the autonomy of the people of Hong Kong. We will extend warm engagement to the people of Hong Kong and embrace them in the way I have described with the change of status so that they can come here, and I fully support what the hon. Gentleman said.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I welcome very much my right hon. Friend's statement. Does he agree that China itself is now at a crossroads? It can either be a partner in the international community, which is what we want to see, or take the path to becoming a pariah state with disputes in the South China sea, at the World Trade Organisation and a lack of co-operation with the World Health Organisation over covid. Does he agree that if the Chinese Communist party applies these laws to Hong Kong in clear breach of previous commitments, the world will start to wonder what the value is of a Chinese signature on an international treaty? That would have profound international consequences.

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that at the core of this, beyond all the specific issues that he has raised—freedom of navigation in the South China sea, the issue of transparency and getting to the truth in relation to the initial outbreak of coronavirus, the wider issues around cyber-attacks that China engages in and, of course, the issue of the people of Hong Kong—this is a question not just of international law and rights and the violations of those rights, but of trust and confidence in the kind of partner that China wishes to become. As I have said unapologetically, we wish to engage with China. We do not wish to prevent its rise. We wish to welcome China's rise, but I think what my right hon. Friend describes is absolutely right: China must live up to the obligations and responsibilities that come with that status.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): In his statement, the Foreign Secretary mentioned that the UK will not look away when it comes to the people of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong protest movement has been driven by disenfranchised young people who just want representation, and that can only happen if there is democratic reform. As a co-signatory to the joint declaration, the UK Government have a duty to hold China accountable for the promise it made on this issue. Will he call on the Hong Kong Government to enact political reform and give the Hong Kong people universal suffrage?

Dominic Raab: I agree with the hon. Lady. I made my view clear in the House of Commons on 26 September 2019 in my first debate on Hong Kong, and I welcome her support for the position of the Government. Of course, the bottom line is that we cannot force China and no one is seriously suggesting, I think, that we can do so through coercive measures. What we must do is build up a groundswell of international support, based on standing up for principle, rights and the rules of the international system, to persuade China that it will be bad for China, bad for Hong Kong and bad for its own aspirations for it to continue down this path.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In the spirit of solidarity across the Benches on this issue, I pay tribute to a previous MP for Bath and the last Governor of Hong Kong, Lord Patten, for all he has done and continues to do for the people of Hong Kong. One of my constituents was born in Hong Kong before 1997, but for one reason or another, his parents never applied for a BNO passport. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those who are eligible but have so far not been BNO passport holders can apply for one?

Dominic Raab: Of course, that is something we will look at. I agree with the hon. Lady about paying tribute to the noble Lord Patten in the other place for all the work that he did on the handover and as the last Governor. What we want to do—I think this is true across the House, from all the different parties—is live up to the responsibilities that we made at the time.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Is it not most unlikely that China will step back from its actions at this stage, because what it is doing is a projection of political power struggles at the top of the Communist party? If my right hon. Friend believes, as I do, that that is possible, does he agree that it is therefore necessary for the Government to prepare to permanently welcome a broader scope of people to the UK and, with them, their capital so that they can be permanently established here, where we are still free?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend because I know he stands for the cause of liberty wherever it may be—I have always been shoulder to shoulder with him and I am glad to be again. In relation to the people of Hong Kong, we have set out a very principled and generous approach. If we look at the numbers potentially involved, we are talking about over 300,000 holders of BNO passports and, in terms of those eligible, close to 3 million. So I think the UK, in the terms that I have described, is doing its bit, but we also need to work with our wider international partners who have significant Hong Kong communities, and a significant stake and interests in Hong Kong, to make sure that that is a broader international response. He is right to exude some scepticism about whether China will row back, but we have to give it every opportunity, even if it is only a marginal one.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary standing full square behind the people of Hong Kong. I believe that our economic standing is enhanced, rather than diminished, when Britain stands up for human rights across the world, but does the Foreign Secretary accept that we would be less susceptible to accusations of hypocrisy if he condemned President Trump's words and actions in saying,

“when the looting starts, the shooting starts”

and in last night using tear gas to clear peaceful Black Lives Matter demonstrators?

Dominic Raab: I understand the concern, as does anyone who has watched those distressing pictures in relation to George Floyd or indeed the wider protests and violence across America—we all want to see America come together, not tear itself apart. I just gently say to

the hon. Lady that there is a federal review of what has often been state action under way and charges have already been brought in relation to the perpetrator. Therefore—I am not sure whether she was trying to do this—I would be a bit careful about the moral equivalence between what is happening in the United States, however sobering and troubling it is, and what is happening in China.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Where does he think the United Nations is with this issue? The democratic freedoms of the people of Hong Kong are enshrined in international law and an international treaty lodged at the UN, but given what he said a few moments ago about the way China uses its negative influence to try to silence other countries, does he regard the UN as a lost cause when it comes to defending the people of Hong Kong? What we should be seeing right now is a UN special envoy being put in place to help lead the international effort.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the work that my right hon. Friend has been doing with other parliamentarians on this subject. He is right to press for what we are doing at the UN. There are, of course, some inherent limitations on what we can do in relation to a permanent member, with the veto that comes with it in the Security Council. We have raised this in the UN Security Council, although there are all sorts of challenges, as the hon. Member for Wigan described, and we have raised China's behaviour in the past in relation to human rights in the Human Rights Council. Fundamentally, I think it is important—this is why we have framed our response in the way that we have to garner as much support in the United Nations and equivalent bodies as possible—to base this on principle, international law and the UN's own international covenant on civil and political rights. That seems to me the surest way to build up the groundswell of support in the UN that my right hon. Friend described.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Hong Kong people are rightly relying on us to show solidarity at this point, especially when Hong Kong police have used extreme force against pro-democracy protesters, including the use of rubber bullets, pepper spray and tear gas. Is the Foreign Secretary concerned about that and what precise steps has he taken to help avert this in future?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman picks up on a point that has been raised by a number of colleagues. I am absolutely concerned about it. I raised the issue with Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, the first time I spoke to her, back in August. We have consistently raised it since. The so-called Independent Police Complaints Council is in place. We have serious concerns about its independence. I think that is what fuelled the remarks by the shadow Foreign Secretary. Of course, though, as the hon. Gentleman I think will recognise, there are limits to what we can do in practice to force, or to require, either China or the authorities in Hong Kong to see sense on some of this. The way we will do it is by exercising our soft power and our influence and by building up a groundswell of support, and the best way to achieve that is based on principle, including human rights and international law.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): A million Tibetans killed by Chinese oppression, 2 million Uighurs incarcerated in re-education concentration camps, and now 7.5 million Hong Kong citizens about to see their civil liberties and freedom of expression snuffed out. I acknowledge and applaud the Foreign Secretary's strong statement, but closer to home, does he share my concern that a country with such a flagrant disregard for human rights is buying and bullying influence on British campuses and in British schools and British boardrooms?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the point of principle that we must be very mindful, across campuses and universities and generally, in relation to China and otherwise, to protect the freedom of expression and freedom of speech that we are now jealously guarding for the people of Hong Kong. He is right to raise the concerns around undue influence that effectively trails back to the Chinese Government. That is something we are actively looking at.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The very fact that we are debating here today and seem to be speaking with one voice will send a strong message to the people of Hong Kong of our support for them at this time. With the postponement of the G7, when does the Prime Minister plan to raise this issue with President Xi?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will raise this, as we have raised it consistently, with the Chinese Government at every level—of course, to the extent that they are willing to engage. The important point is to engage with China, to the extent that we can, on these very specific points and the specific basis that I have set out. Of course, China just looks the other way and wants to ignore and flout not just international law but international opinion, and of course there are going to be consequences for its own ambitions in the world.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary has talked about the potential to extend to BNO passport holders the right to stay in the UK for an extendable period of 12 months. What would happen after those 12 months? What specific discussions has he had with his colleagues at the Home Office? What rights will be extended to those passport holders' dependants?

Dominic Raab: The purpose of offering extendable periods of 12 months is that there will be no guillotine that comes down. It allows BNO passport holders to come here. We are removing the six-month limitation. They can apply to work and study, and that will itself create a path to citizenship. I have been engaged with the Home Secretary and, indeed, other Ministers since last September, looking at the detail. There is further consideration that we are giving to it. Of course, it is about giving effect to those rights as effectively as possible, but also doing it in the most straightforward and swift way we possibly can.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is right to suggest that the national security legislation has a sense of inevitability about it. Will he therefore go further and make it clear to Hong Kongers that they will always be welcome here and that

[*Dr Andrew Murrison*]

the Government regard them as a potential boon, not a burden, and in so doing make it very clear that, post Brexit, we are global Britain and not little England?

Dominic Raab: I entirely share that spirit. As someone whose father and his family, to the extent that they were able to, came here as refugees, I think this country has a proud tradition of standing up as a haven for those who flee persecution, and I know the Home Secretary feels the same way. We absolutely intend to live up to our responsibilities, not just as a matter of obligation but because that is what the British people do at their very best.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has rightly made known the Government's concerns and our collective concerns about the erosion of autonomy and democratic rights in Hong Kong. I have listened carefully to his responses. Will he say more specifically what consideration he has given to our future trading relationship with China in the event that it continues down this very troubling path?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady raises a perfectly good point. We will talk with all our international partners about this. China's size and scale and potential growth means it has asymmetric economic power in this regard, but of course we are not going to just turn a blind eye. I have set out the measures, and we will look very carefully with our wider partners at what further action we can take. We want to try to engage with China and moderate its conduct, and that will be the lodestar for the action we take and that we try to galvanise the international community to take.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The Foreign Secretary's statement standing up for the people of Hong Kong is very welcome, not least given our historical ties and responsibilities. Will my right hon. Friend outline to the House what action he is taking with other members of the Commonwealth to combat the proposed actions of the Chinese Government?

Dominic Raab: I spoke last night to my opposite numbers from New Zealand, Australia and Canada, along with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, but that is the starting point, not the point of arrival. We have got to make sure we build this up into a broader groundswell. Working with Five Eyes and our European partners is important, but I have also spoken both to people within the Commonwealth and outside—I spoke to my Japanese opposite number this morning—and we must try to make this as broad a group as possible, based on a like-minded attachment to the principles of, and adherence to, international law.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and also the Home Secretary for the steps they are taking to support the BNO passport holders. China has an appalling track record when it comes to the rights of Christians and other faith groups, and there is growing concern among Church leaders in Hong Kong in light of recent developments, so what assessment has my right hon. Friend made of

the particular threat to Christians there, and will he ensure that everything possible is done to defend the rights of belief, worship and freedom of speech in Hong Kong?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and he is absolutely right to pay tribute to the Home Office and the Home Secretary for assiduously working on this with my Department and others for months. We will stand up for freedom of religion and freedom of expression wherever it stands and whichever minority or group is seeking to avail itself of it. That is a point of principle—that is what we are about—and that applies to Christian minorities and to the Uighur Muslims as well. We have, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), the Prime Minister's special envoy specifically dedicated to working around the world on this issue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As the Foreign Secretary has acknowledged, there is concern not just about what is happening in Hong Kong but also the treatment of the Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners and what is happening not just in terms of human rights abuses in Tibet but the terrible environmental destruction going on there, too. The Foreign Secretary mentioned the asymmetric economic power of China, and also implied that, basically, China's refusal to engage on human rights dialogue means it can get away with doing whatever it wants; is that really the case?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and understand the spirit in which she asked it. She made some important points, and the asymmetric economic size and growth of China is a fact and the important thing we can do is engage with China as it rises and wishes to take up the mantle of being a leading member of the international community—trying to shape the rules of the international system, which it is undoubtedly trying to do, as we can see from the number of elections in which it runs in international organisations—working with our partners to say, “I'm sorry, but unless you're willing to live up to the obligations and responsibilities that come with that role, you won't get the kind of support that will allow you to realise those aspirations.” I have had previous conversations with State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on this subject and I will continue to engage with him as constructively as possible at any moment in time, but of course it requires the Chinese Government to be willing to engage on their side as well.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his exemplary approach to this crisis so far. Will he recognise, not least from our exchanges this morning, that he has the chance to unite the House and the country behind a complete reset of our approach, recognising that the Chinese Government are implacably hostile to our democracy, to our values and to our global interests, and that Government policy should in future reflect that sobering but realistic analysis?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend, and he is right to say that the actions in relation to Hong Kong and in other areas are opposed to our values as well as our interests. I certainly welcome the fact that we have, it feels to me, a groundswell of cross-party consensus on

this issue, because we are stronger when we are bigger than the sum of our parts and we are more effective in getting our message across. We now have to translate that into the wider international community.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I applaud the Foreign Secretary for what he has said; he is being very, very reasonable and, as the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said, has the whole House behind him. I just want more oomph from him—a bit more vim and determination—because these are really important principles; the rule of law around the world must hold. So I say to him: please, please, please, bring forward the blasted Magnitsky regulations, which he proposed when he was a Back Bencher. I want him to bring them back to the Dispatch Box, not in weeks, months and years, but in days and hours.

Dominic Raab: I will do my level best to get this before the House before the summer recess. I hope that the hon. Gentleman, who is most understanding, will recognise that one or two other things have displaced our focus—*[Interruption.]* I should point out to the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) that the Government have not been in power, and I have not been Foreign Secretary, for two years, but we will get on with it. I share the hon. Gentleman's restlessness to deliver it and look forward to his support when we do.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. This country has long and historic ties with Hong Kong, and we must take this relationship extremely seriously. Can he assure me that we continue to stand up for British nationals overseas in Hong Kong, who will see their freedoms curtailed by Beijing if this law is passed?

Dominic Raab: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We have tried to proceed at the right moment and in the right way, with the generosity of spirit that defines this country at its very finest and in a way that reaches out to and shows people in Hong Kong that if China follows through on this they can come to the warm embrace of this country. We will make the practical arrangements, which of course are not straightforward, to give effect to those aspirations.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): People in the House have rightly taken note of the fact that we must protect freedom of expression and assembly, and 4 June would normally see people marking the Tiananmen anniversary, but the authorities in Hong Kong do not seem to be allowing it to go ahead. What representations have the British Government made that would allow people to mark the anniversary in a socially distant way so as to allow that freedom of expression and assembly?

Dominic Raab: The authorities in Hong Kong have today confirmed that they will not allow the Tiananmen commemoration, which has typically taken place for many years. In fairness, they have explained that on the grounds of coronavirus, but I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns within the wider context. It is worrying and disturbing, and we will continue to raise all these points, whether on the issue he has raised, the British national overseas passports, the national security law, the new legislation on the national anthem, or the wider panoply of measures that China is taking.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's explanation of the Government's position and his recognition of the growing list of acts of intimidation, authoritarianism and expansionism by the Communist party of China. Is this announcement an individual response to an isolated incident or part of a wider reappraisal of our foreign policy towards China? Does he think that the long-applied and hopeful policy of positive engagement with China is not having the desired outcome? If so, how should this approach change?

Dominic Raab: I certainly agree that there are huge challenges in engagement with China across a whole suite of issues, from cyber through to intellectual property theft and of course the people of Hong Kong. We have said throughout that we are not seeking to contain China as a matter of dogmatic strategy; we are seeking to engage with it. There are also opportunities in the relationship—on trade and on climate change, with some of the green technology it is capable of innovating as well as in relation to its role as a major emitter—and we want to engage to accentuate those opportunities and mitigate the risks involved. The issue with Hong Kong is different. It is a point of principle and relates to the historic ties to which Members on both sides of the House have referred. That is why we have set out such detail. We will stand by this relationship and continue to seek to engage, as difficult as it may be, but we will also be clear that if China flouts international law, or those wider values and principles that we hold dear, we will stand up and act. Equally, we will defend the key equities that we have in this country, whether in relation to intellectual property theft or telecoms.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday, I was contacted by a constituent who is an overseas student at St Andrews University; he did not apply for a BNO passport at the time of the original offer because he was a toddler, and his parents did not apply on his behalf. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, but there are many Hong Kong citizens who, like my constituent, did not receive a BNO passport in the first place and missed out. Will he consider the proposal made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) in his Hong Kong Bill, which I sponsored, which would offer a pathway to citizenship for all Hong Kong citizens.

Dominic Raab: We need to be realistic about the volume of people that we in this country could credibly and responsibly absorb. I do not think we can have this debate without acknowledging that. The fact is, though, that we have an historic set of responsibilities, as I set out earlier, and we will live up to them. Perhaps the hon. Lady should get in touch with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary regarding the particular case she raised, to see what more can be done around eligibility.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I had little hope but all faith in you to get me in at 50!

Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms are what have allowed it to become so successful and prosperous. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the new national security law will put that prosperity and Hong Kong's international standing in grave danger?

Dominic Raab: On all sorts of grounds—standing, economic—China’s actions are entirely self-defeating, as well as flouting its responsibilities to the people of Hong Kong and the international commitments it has made. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend.

12.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

12.51 pm

On resuming.

Covid-19 Response

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

Thanks to the collective determination and resolve of the nation, we are winning this battle. We have flattened the curve, we have protected the NHS, and together we have come through the peak. Yesterday, I was able to announce that the level of daily deaths is lower than at any time since lockdown began on 23 March. Today’s Office for National Statistics data show that the level of excess mortality is also lower than at any time since the start of lockdown, falling on a downward trend. The ONS reports 12,288 all-cause deaths in England and Wales in the week ending 22 May. That is down from 14,573 in the previous week. That latest figure is still above the average for this time of year and we must not relent in our work to drive it down, but it is now broadly in line with what we might typically see during the winter. We never forget that each of those deaths represents a family that will never be the same again. This House mourns each one.

We are moving in the right direction, but this crisis is very far from being over and we are now at a particularly sensitive moment in the course of the pandemic. We must proceed carefully and cautiously as we work to restore freedom in this country, taking small steps forward and monitoring the result, being prepared to pause in our progress if that is what public safety requires. So today I would like to update the House on two important aspects of the action we are taking.

First, NHS Test and Trace is now operational. That means we have updated our public health advice. Since the start of the crisis, we have said to people that you must wash your hands, self-isolate if you have symptoms, and follow the social distancing rules. All those remain incredibly important, but there is a new duty—and it is a duty—that we now ask and expect of people. If you have one of these symptoms—that is: a fever; a new, continuous cough; a change in your sense of taste or smell—you must get a test. We have more than enough capacity to provide a test for anyone who needs one and we have more than enough capacity to trace all your contacts. So, to repeat: if you have symptoms get a test. That is how we locate, isolate and control the virus. By the way, I make no apology for this overcapacity. The fact that we have thousands of NHS contact tracers on standby reflects the fact that transmission of the virus is currently low. If we were in a position where we needed to use all that capacity, it would mean that the virus was running at a higher rate—something that no one wants to see.

Secondly, I want to update the House on the work we are doing to understand the unequal and disproportionate way that this disease targets people, including those who are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds. This is very timely work. People are understandably angry about injustices, and as Health Secretary, I feel a deep responsibility, because this pandemic has exposed huge disparities in the health of our nation. It is very clear that some people are significantly more vulnerable to covid-19, and that is something I am determined to understand in full and take action to address.

Today, I can announce that Public Health England has completed work into disparities in the risks and outcomes of covid-19, and we have published its findings.

PHE has found the following. First, as we are all aware, age is the biggest risk factor. Among those diagnosed with covid-19, people who are 80 or older are 70 times more likely to die than those under 40. Being male is also a significant risk factor. Working-age men are twice as likely to die as working-age women. Occupation is a risk factor, with professions that involve dealing with the public in an enclosed space, such as taxi driving, at higher risk. Importantly, the data show that people working in hospitals are not more likely to catch or die from covid-19.

Diagnosis rates are higher in deprived or densely populated urban areas, and we know that our great cities have been hardest hit by this virus. This work underlines that being black or from a minority ethnic background is a major risk factor. That racial disparity holds even after accounting for the effects of age, deprivation, region and sex. The PHE ethnicity analysis did not adjust for factors such as comorbidities and obesity, so there is much more work to do to understand the key drivers of these disparities, the relationships between the different risk factors and what we can do to close the gap.

I want to thank Public Health England for this work. I am determined that we continue to develop our understanding and shape our response. I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Equalities Minister will be leading on this work and taking it forward, working with PHE and others to further understand the impacts. We need everyone to play their part by staying alert, following the social distancing rules, isolating and getting a test if you have symptoms. We must not relax our guard but continue to fight this virus together. That is how we will get through this and keep driving the infection down. I commend this statement to the House.

12.57 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): There have now been 56,308 excess deaths since the beginning of March, 12,500 of which are not related to covid, but we do have one of the worst excess death rates in the world—why does the Secretary of State think that is? What does he believe is the cause of the non-covid excess death rate?

With respect to the PHE's findings, which I am pleased to see published today, we have always known that there is a social gradient in health. The poorest and most deprived have inequality in access to healthcare and inequality in health outcomes. What the Secretary of State has confirmed today is that covid thrives on inequalities. Yes, indeed, black lives matter, but it is surely a call to action that black, Asian and minority ethnic people are more likely to die from covid and more likely to be admitted to intensive care with covid. He has seen the findings. I note that the Equalities Minister is taking work forward, but what action will be taken to minimise risk for black, Asian and minority ethnic people?

There are other vulnerable groups who are highly at risk. I am sure the Secretary of State will have seen today the Care Quality Commission report which shows a 134% increase in deaths of people with learning disabilities. Surely it is now time to expand testing to those under 65 in receipt of adult social care.

On the easing of restrictions, the Secretary of State said that this was a sensitive moment—well, quite, Mr Speaker. Our constituents have concerns and are looking for reassurance, particularly those in the shielding group. They really should not have had to wake up on Sunday morning to find out that they could now leave the house once a day. They need clarity and details. And why were GPs not informed in advance?

We are still at around 50,000 infections a week, so may I press the Secretary of State a bit further on the easing of restrictions? The biosecurity level remains at 4, but his own Command Paper from 11 May said that changes to lockdown

“must be warranted by the current alert level”.

At the Sunday news conference, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said that all the proposed easing of restrictions had been modelled and showed that the R value remained below 1. That is, of course, reassuring, but will he now publish that modelling so that it can be peer-reviewed?

The easing of restrictions was based on tests, so may I ask the Secretary of State a couple of questions? First, on NHS capacity, we know that the NHS has not been overwhelmed, but that has been on the back of cancelled planned surgery, delays to vital treatment, and the postponing of cancer screening. Arguably, it has been the biggest rationing exercise in the history of the NHS. Will he now publish the total number of planned operations that have been cancelled and detail them by procedure? As the lockdown is eased, is it his intention to step down some of that surge capacity so that this backlog of clinical need can start to be tackled?

On managing the virus, one of the tests is on whether we can manage the virus, but, as the Secretary of State has said, that depends on testing and tracing. There is now capacity for more than 200,000 tests, but there is still a lack of clarity about how that figure is arrived at. The UK Statistics Authority has written to him today, saying that his figures are still

“far from complete and comprehensible”,

that the testing statistics still fall well short of standards in the code, and that it is not surprising that testing data is mistrusted. That is quite damning, I have to say to him. Will he start publishing again the actual numbers of people tested? Will he stop counting tests mailed to homes as completed? Will he detail what proportion of the 200,000 tests are diagnostic PCR, what proportion are antibody, and what proportion are surveillance? Can he tell us how many care home staff and residents have been tested? When will he start weekly testing of all NHS staff, as that is crucial for getting on top of infections in hospitals? Will he tell us what percentage of the Deloitte-run testing facilities have been sent to GPs?

On test and trace, which is absolutely vital to safe easing out of the lockdown, the Prime Minister told the House before the recess that it would be “world-beating” and operational by yesterday, but it is not actually fully operational at a local level, is it? Can the Secretary of State confirm that local directors of public health have been told to prepare strategies for tracing with a deadline of the end of June, that they will not actually start receiving local individual data until next week, and that many have still not been told their allocations of the extra £300 million nor what they can spend it on? When

[Jonathan Ashworth]

will they get those allocations? Despite this, he said yesterday that test and trace is up and running. I am not sure how he can say that it is up and running when local directors of public health are still asking for that information. Will he publish the data and what percentage of infections have been contacted and how many contacts have been followed up? Will that data be published on a daily basis?

This is a crucial week, given the easing of restrictions, and our constituents want reassurance and clarity, but I am afraid that trust has been undermined by the Dominic Cummings scandal. Our constituents want to do the right thing for their loved ones and their neighbours. Can he give them those reassurances today?

Matt Hancock: I entirely agree that it is critical that people play their part in making sure that we continue the work of controlling this virus and driving down the number of new transmissions. I am glad that he recognises the work that has been done, not just by Government, but by all of us, to get this virus under control.

Let me answer the hon. Gentleman's questions specifically. He asks about the inequalities in health outcomes. He is quite right to address that subject. It was important before we went into the coronavirus crisis, and it is even more important now. Black lives matter, as do those of the poorest areas of our country, which have the worst health outcomes. We need to ensure that all these considerations are taken into account and that action is taken to level up the health outcomes of people across this country, because there is no more important levelling up than the levelling up of a person's life expectancy and the quality of health with which they live that life.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about those with learning disabilities and autism. That testing in care homes for those of working age has continued all the way through this crisis, and we are rolling it out further. He mentions the changes to those who are in the shielding category. I was very pleased that we were able to make these changes. We announced them at the weekend and they have been very well received, especially by those who are shielding, because they are now able, safely, to go outside. It is hard to overstate the impact of saying to people that the recommended medical advice was that they should not go outside for 10 weeks. I am glad we have been able to lift, just slightly, the restrictions on those in the shielding category.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the restart of the NHS. It is vital that we get the rest of the NHS going again, and that work is under way. The expansion of cancer facilities is under way. The demand for accident and emergency and urgent care is not as high as it was, but I look forward to the full restoration of our A&E facilities across the country, including in central Lancashire.

The hon. Gentleman asks, rightly, about the NHS test and trace capability. That is up and running, and working well. He asks how I can say it is working well. It is working well because thousands of people have been contacted and their contacts are being traced. So the system is working. We absolutely will publish data on that, but, as the letter from the UK Statistics Authority this morning shows, it is very important that we get that

data publication right. We will work with the UKSA to make sure it is happy with how we are publishing that data, to make sure we get the data published in a reasonable and sensible way, one that also supports the operation of NHS test and trace, which we agree is a critical part of the next stage. I commit to publishing that data and to working with the UKSA on how it is put together.

The final point to make in response is that the goal here is to have a more targeted approach to the lockdown, so that we can carefully and cautiously lift the broader lockdown. That is what we are working to achieve, and I am very grateful for the support from right across the House for our efforts to accomplish that.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Let me start by thanking the NHS and care workers in my constituency in the Scottish borders, who are working so hard to keep us healthy. The Health Secretary will be aware of the very low levels of testing taking place in Scotland, which is clearly a concern as we move into the test and isolate phase. Given the UK Government's role in providing test facilities in Scotland, what further assistance can they provide to the Scottish Government to help push up the testing numbers?

Matt Hancock: We have supported and helped the Scottish Government throughout this, because although they have missed their targets in the roll-out on tests delivered in Scotland, the UK programme of the drive-through centres and the home-test kits has also been operational in Scotland. I work closely with my Scottish counterparts to try to make sure that testing is as available in Scotland as it is in England, and that work is ongoing.

Mr Speaker: I call Ian Blackford to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party—you have four minutes.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am standing in today for my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is excluded from taking part, given the removal of the hybrid Parliament—for now. There are growing concerns that this Tory Government is taking a cavalier approach on coronavirus, by rushing to ease lockdown measures despite warnings from public health experts. There are serious questions to answer on the political decisions the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary have taken, which could increase the rate of infection and put lives at risk—or even cause a second wave of covid-19. The Government claim to follow the science, so why have they ignored the experts who have advised against opening schools or easing lockdown further, without pausing to evaluate each step? On what basis were the decisions made to allow groups of people from six different houses to meet in England, to tell 2.2 million people in the shielded group that they can go outside and to send people back to work in England on 11 May without a functioning test, trace and isolate system in place? The results from the Deloitte regional test centres are still not being reported to local public health teams. How does the Secretary of State plan to fix this, and by when? What financial support will be put in place for those called on to isolate as asymptomatic contacts, especially as this could happen more than once?

With test and trace depending on people being willing to isolate if told to do so by a contact tracer, does the Secretary of State not regret that he and his Cabinet colleagues have completely shredded their own lockdown rules to protect a man who thought he was above the rules? In refusing to sack Dominic Cummings for travelling 260 miles with his wife, who was symptomatic, the Prime Minister has destroyed his own “Stay home and save lives” message. We know that the Dominic Cummings scandal has undermined efforts to tackle the virus by eroding trust in the UK Government and its public health guidelines, and we have seen that people are breaking the rules as a result. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that the scandal has already undermined lockdown and could lead to more infections and even more deaths in the future? This is about leadership and responsibility. Dominic Cummings should go, and he should go now.

Matt Hancock: I look forward to my SNP opposite number returning and to being able to have a constructive discussion about how we might together tackle the virus; how we might together protect those who are shielding and for whom, thankfully, it is safe to go outside, based on the clinical advice; how we can ensure that the test and trace system is rolled out across the whole of the UK; how the systems can interact and work together to protect people, especially in border areas, where people may need to make cross-border journeys; how we can work together, as a whole country, to keep the number of new infections going down; and how we can work together to protect people and protect our NHS. Those are the conversations that I have with the Scottish Government and with my SNP opposite number here in Westminster, and those are the things that really matter.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am expecting to run this session until 2 o'clock. I call Harriett Baldwin.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking the teachers in Worcestershire, who managed to get 77% of reception classes open yesterday? I am told by these teachers that their schools are not large enough for them to welcome all pupils back and observe the 2 metre rule, so could he update the House on why the UK is continuing to maintain a distance that is double that recommended by the World Health Organisation?

Matt Hancock: We have reviewed the science on the 2 metre rule. The challenge is that the further apart people are, the less likely is transmission of the virus, so the rules we have in place are to slow the transmission of this virus. It is not really the rule that presents the challenge in schools; it is about trying to make sure that all places are as safe as possible. We keep this under review, as the Prime Minister has said. I congratulate schools across Worcestershire on reopening 77% of reception classes. It is a very important step forward. Making sure that we have the guidelines in place so that we can live with the virus while bringing the rate of transmission right down is very important.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): In view of the Secretary of State's statement confirming PHE's findings that being black or minority ethnic is a high-risk factor, what guidance is he providing to the NHS and social care sectors on the rostering of BAME staff in high-risk covid areas? Will his Department be investigating whistleblower claims that BAME locums were disproportionately placed on the rota at Weston General Hospital, which has recently experienced a major outbreak?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is right to raise the case of Weston hospital. We have been working hard to ensure that the local outbreak is brought under control, and we are making progress. She is also right, of course, to raise the PHE report that we published today. The critical next step is to ensure that we understand the drivers of the disparities that are seen in the data and, in particular, that we address the question of the impact, taking into account co-morbidities such as obesity and the impact of occupation, which are not taken into account in the PHE work thus far. That is the work that the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), will be taking forward.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I know the worry that has been felt by the BME community during this period. I have personally felt it, as have many of my family members working on the frontline in the NHS, so I sincerely thank the Secretary of State for commissioning the review and continuing its work. Can he confirm that its publication was not delayed due to the sensitivity of its findings?

Matt Hancock: I can absolutely confirm that. I know my hon. Friend understands this, not least because I think that both her parents are doctors who are absolutely in the heat of this. In terms of the data publication, when I asked PHE to undertake this piece of work, I asked it to produce it by the end of May, which it did. It delivered it to me on Sunday, and we have published it and brought it to the House at the earliest opportunity.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the previous question, is the Secretary of State saying that the publication of the report by Public Health England into the wildly disproportionate level of deaths among ethnic minority communities was delayed purely because further work was needed on elements of it? In that case, at what point will it be published?

Matt Hancock: No, I am not saying that. I asked Public Health England to produce this work because I was very worried by the evidence of the increased morbidity and mortality among black and minority ethnic communities. I gave a deadline of the end of May. The work was delivered to me on Sunday, at the end of May. I considered it yesterday and brought it to the House at the first chance.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the British Ceramic Confederation for its work advising the Government on safety in the hospitality industry? A chipped plate is not covid-safe, so will he encourage the hospitality industry to buy high-quality chip-resistant tableware from our world-class manufacturers in Stoke-on-Trent?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will. The manufacturing of pottery and chinaware in Stoke-on-Trent has long been one of the finest things in this country. My hon. Friend is an inestimable representative, along with her two colleagues, for Stoke-on-Trent—[*Interruption.*] Inestimable. Exactly. I think that is what I said. She rightly makes that case, but there is a broader point, which is that coming out of this, we are going to need many industries that work differently. The economy will not be the same on the way out as it was on the way in, and in many cases we can make changes for the better. She is absolutely sticking up for the pottery industry.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I very much welcome what the Secretary of State has said about the PHE report and the need to get to the bottom of why these racial disparities seem to be a thing, but it is not enough to work out after the event why there have been so many more deaths among the BAME community. What is he doing to support the public health function in local authorities so that they can work with local community groups to try to identify people who are more likely to be at risk, to prevent the illnesses and deaths from occurring in the first place?

Matt Hancock: We have put extra funding into those functions, obviously, because this is a significant crisis that demands massively more of our local public health capabilities in councils and in the devolved Administrations as they deliver local public health services on the ground. It is absolutely critical to look at these risks, but we have to look at them in the round. We have to look at all the different risks. For instance, there is growing evidence of the impact of obesity on the morbidity—that is, the impact of covid—and on people's chances of dying, and that has to be taken into account as well.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend feels a deep sense of responsibility for health outcomes across the United Kingdom, and not just health outcomes but how healthcare services are delivered. Will he provide an update on what the Government are doing to support social care in Dudley, the Black Country and the rest of the country?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted to say that the statistics published by the Office for National Statistics this morning show that the proportion of covid deaths in social care is falling, and that is very good news. I am very grateful to all those working in social care, and those working in local authorities to support those in social care, in Dudley and throughout the country. We have put in billions of pounds of extra funding, including £600 million just 10 days ago. We have to make sure that we support those working in social care, who look after some of the most vulnerable.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A growing number of constituents are getting in touch with me to express their concerns about the Public Health England report and the impact of coronavirus on ethnic minorities. The death rates of black and minority ethnic people are in many ways connected to people who have no recourse to public funds; people who are forced out to work when it is less safe for them to do so, because they are not entitled to statutory sick pay; and people who are in lower-paid jobs and, as in the case of Belly Mujinga, are

less able to complain to their employers about their circumstances. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is one thing to say that black lives matter but quite another when he forces them out to work with no alternative?

Matt Hancock: It is very important that we look all the risk factors, including ethnicity, that have an impact. Indeed, that is what our broad approach has been, led by our shielding programme, whereby we have said that those who are most vulnerable should not leave the house at all until we were able to say this weekend—I am pleased to say—that it is safe for them to go, as long as they stay two metres apart from others.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): Russells Hall Hospital in Dudley serves my constituency of Stourbridge well but, as we start to admit and treat those who require surgery and cancer therapy, the hospital urgently requires capital investment to create additional wards in a free-standing facility to maintain social distancing. Will my right hon. Friend join me in visiting Russells Hall Hospital to discuss this much-needed investment and, of course, to thank the staff there personally for their continued, compassionate and heroic efforts to protect patients and staff from covid-19?

Matt Hancock: The Dudley-Stourbridge massive are out in force today. I am delighted to thank everybody at Russells Hall for the work that they are doing. I am pleased to be able to confirm to my hon. Friend that we are working hard to restore cancer services. Many cancer treatment services have continued, but many were not able to continue because taking somebody's defences down to close to zero, which is needed in much modern cancer therapy, is not the right thing to do when a killer virus is about. We are able to restore those services and I would love to visit my hon. Friend's local hospital, whether virtually or physically.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Wales has 130,000 people who are considered most at risk from covid-19, and they deserve to be treated better than being caught up in a game of cross-border political brinkmanship. The Secretary of State's Government's changes to the status of shielded people in England were announced in the English media on Sunday. What procedure is in place to co-agree such announcements in good time with the Government responsible for health in Wales?

Matt Hancock: I work with my Welsh opposite number, Vaughan Gething, very closely. He and I have worked very closely indeed and the approach that the Welsh Government have taken has been to work through the four chief medical officers to try to do this in the best possible way.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Scotland has a daily testing capacity of 15,500 tests, but the Scottish Government's own figures suggest that the most recent daily testing total was just 2,729. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is a woeful and alarming figure for many people in Scotland? What further support can the UK Government give to the SNP Administration at Holyrood to ensure that we are not left behind as the rest of the country moves to the recovery phase?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. All I can say is that we give all the support that we possibly can to the Scottish Government to help them to get their testing numbers up.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): In the London Borough of Brent, which covers part of my constituency, two thirds of communities are from a BAME background, so it comes as no surprise that some areas in Brent have the third highest rate of covid-related deaths in the whole of London. The Secretary of State has said that he recognises the disproportionate impact that covid-19 has on BAME communities, and he has said that black lives matter, but BAME communities are not interested in slogans or empty rhetoric from us politicians; BAME communities want to know what concrete and practical steps the Secretary of State is taking right now to ensure that BAME communities are protected when the lockdown is eased, so that the lives of no more people from my communities are lost.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is quite right to raise this issue and to discuss it in the way she does. Working with the council in Brent, where this disease had one of the highest impacts at the start, we have managed to bring the incidence of disease right down. For instance, ensuring the protection of those living in care homes in Brent has led to the outbreak there coming right under control. Brent is a very good example of where, when we saw a focused outbreak at the start, we put extra resources in; we have put support into Brent Council, and together we have managed to get this disease under control.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Along with many of my constituents, I am very concerned that the number of covid cases identified in Ashford has been one of the highest in the country. I recognise that there are complex reasons for this, but in these circumstances may I ask my right hon. Friend to fill the gap that exists in the regional testing centre network—in east Kent—by placing one in Ashford?

Matt Hancock: I'm on it.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am glad that the Secretary of State has announced the publication today of the report into how covid-19 has disproportionately affected black and minority ethnic communities, but it has taken far too long. It is because black lives matter that the Government must do all they can to address this disproportionality right across the UK, so will the Secretary of State update the House on what specific discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations about the impact on those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds across the UK?

Matt Hancock: The report was delivered to me on Sunday—on deadline—and I have published it two days later, so we have been moving at pace in this space. It is a Public Health England report and therefore focuses on public health in England. I am sure that Public Health Wales will want to look at the same questions.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on hitting both the 100,000 and the 200,000 target for testing. It is indeed correct that the capacity needs to be there; we do not

use the Army every day but it is important that we have it there as a resource. We have had some issues in County Durham regarding some of the drive-through testing sites. Will the Secretary of State look at that to ensure that we do not have those problems in the future?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of having the testing capacity, but I would tell all his constituents in Durham and people right across the country to get a test if they have symptoms. The tests are available, and it is so important for tracing the disease.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as the virus increasingly comes under control, it is vital that we begin to plan for the swift resumption in full of local and urgent healthcare such as the minor injuries unit at Deal's Victoria Hospital, and other important services provided there and at Dover's Buckland Hospital?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The restoration of services across the NHS is critical, and it is important that it is done in a covid-secure way. It is critical that people know that the NHS is there for them; if they need the NHS or if they are told by a clinician to go to hospital, I ask them please to go.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Since being caught double counting tests for 11 days straight now, the British Government have refused to disclose how many people have been tested for coronavirus. Can the Secretary of State therefore explain how his test, trace and isolate system is world beating if he does not know how many people are being tested?

Matt Hancock: Ensuring that we get these statistics accurate is incredibly important. We are working on that with the UK Statistics Authority. It is a big piece of the work to ensure that we get the publications right.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement about his focus on the vital research into the risk factors of serious illness from covid, especially the impacts of age, sex and ethnicity. I look forward to future research that takes into account comorbidities, which are a crucial part of the puzzle. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are now reaping the benefits of long-term investment in research in the NHS so that we can do these studies, but in going forward and understanding better the impact of comorbidities, can he give me an idea of when that may report back so that we can make policy decisions based on it?

Matt Hancock: This is clearly urgent work to disentangle the different factors that cause the disparities evident in the data in the report published today. The Equalities Minister will be leading that work, working with Public Health England and others, to get to the bottom of that as quickly as possible.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): My constituency of Luton South is super-diverse, with a large BAME population, and it has significant pockets of deprivation. Given those risks, what do I say to my constituents who tell me they simply do not believe that it is safe to relax shielding, given the Government's confused messages

[Rachel Hopkins]

and apparent endorsement of breaches of public health guidance, with the lack of action taken over Dominic Cummings?

Matt Hancock: That is not an appropriate way to characterise the approach we are taking, because when it comes to people who are shielding, we have recommended that people shield for their own protection, but the clinical advice says that it is safe for people to go outside, because the incidence of disease is now lower than when we brought in the shielding policy, and I think—well, I know—that many of the shielded are so pleased to be able just to go outside. It has had a huge impact on them, when they have given up a great sacrifice.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for ensuring that Redcar and Cleveland is at the forefront of the Government's new test, track and trace programme. What assessment has he made of how test, track and trace will allow us to reduce social distancing in the weeks ahead from 2 metres to 1 metre, as per the guidance.

Matt Hancock: The success of test, track and trace is a critical part of making sure that we have a more targeted approach to lockdown, so that we can reduce the broader lockdown safely. That is what building the system is about—having more targeted interventions so we can reduce, when it is safe to do so, the broader interventions that everybody has been having to live under.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I have been sitting here desperately trying to give the benefit of the doubt to the Government, because we are in a national crisis, but I have to reflect the fury that my constituents have reflected to me on Facebook and in emails about the Dominic Cummings situation. I know the Secretary of State will want to shrug it off and will want to move on, but I have to say to him that it has been absolute fury. People think that there is one rule for the Government and their friends and another rule for everybody else. They have made massive sacrifices, and they feel that the Government are not standing by them. Please, please will he reflect that back to the Government?

Matt Hancock: I think the most important thing as we go forward in trying to tackle this together is that the social distancing guidelines we have set out are critical for the safety of the nation. We are able, safely, to make small changes, which will improve health because of the negative impact on people's physical and mental health of being solely shut indoors. Therefore, it is crucial that people follow the social distancing guidelines, and that will in turn help us to lift these measures more broadly.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is aware, my constituency of Kensington has some of the most extreme health inequalities in the country. The difference in average life expectancy for men is more than 16 years between the richest ward and the poorest ward. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that practical, concrete steps will be taken to alleviate these inequalities?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. As my hon. Friend eloquently puts it, there is levelling up to do not just between different parts of the country and different regions of the country, but even within individual constituencies. Hers is of course one of the greatest examples of this, as are some of the other inner-city constituencies in boroughs. I think the levelling up of health inequalities across the country is going to be an even more important part of the agenda after coronavirus than it was before.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The number of cases and deaths is falling, but several health officials, including the Association of Directors of Public Health, say they are not convinced that all five of the Government's tests have been met sufficiently to ease lockdown restrictions. As of this morning, we hear that test and trace is up and running, but no figures are available. Given that easing the restrictions is risky—one could argue that having us all here discussing it is risky—and there has been, according to my mailbox, an undermining of public confidence in the Government's approach by the Dominic Cummings scandal, what additional metrics will the Government use to monitor and contain transmission, and how do they suggest we reassure the public that they are effective and being followed by everyone?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is quite right about the devices that we need for monitoring. Through the public health authorities, extensive operations are already in place to monitor outbreaks, and we have spotted some outbreaks, as per the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who discussed the outbreak in Weston-super-Mare. She is also right to say that more is needed. The new joint biosecurity centre will be an important part of that operation.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is deeply distressing to see the toll that the disease has taken on people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. It is also worrying that so many transport workers have fallen foul of the disease. In London, many of them come from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Will my right hon. Friend urgently engage with transport companies and authorities across the country to keep our transport workers safe, especially those from BAME communities?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important point, because there has been a disproportionate impact on transport workers, particularly those who, by the nature of their work, have to be in close contact with others, for example taxi drivers. That factor was not taken into account in the Public Health England analysis. It is exactly what we mean when we say that we must understand the different causes of the disparities in the data on the impacts according to people's ethnic background. Disentangling how much is due to occupation and how much is due to other factors is an important part of the analysis that we need to undertake to be able to take action such as protecting those who work in the transport sector.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Public health professionals I have spoken to tell me that the success of the Government's track and trace system is limited by the turnaround of up to five days for coronavirus

test results. That delay severely impacts the ability of public health teams to prevent onward transmission and protect the population from the virus. Does the Secretary of State recognise that problem? If so, how does he plan to achieve a 24-hour turnaround for every test? When will that be achieved?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is quite right to report the views of local public health staff, who are right to raise the question. I am pleased to say that the turnaround speed has significantly improved in the past couple of weeks, and now 83% of tests are returned from the drive-through centres within 24 hours. There is continued work to speed that up and get the proportion even higher, and the Prime Minister has very kindly set me a goal of ensuring that all tests from the drive-through centres are returned within 24 hours.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the excellent work taking place at Colchester and Ipswich hospitals in partnership with local independent providers to increase capacity for dealing with non-covid cases such as cancer. What more can we do to increase capacity in the independent sector so that we bear down on the backlog in elective surgery?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important point, because the backlog has of course built up as we had to protect the NHS in the heat of the crisis. The independent sector has played a critical role in helping us get through the crisis and will play a critical role in future. That has put to bed any lingering, outdated arguments about a split between public and private in healthcare. What matters is the healthcare that people get. We could not have got through the crisis without the combined teamwork of the public and private sectors.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Professor Newton spoke today of the vital importance of increasing serology to tackle the virus. Capillary blood from fingerprick tests has long been used to test and control viruses, from measles to dengue fever. Will the Secretary of State therefore explain why the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency guidance asks providers of fingerprick tests to stop offering the service? Can he point to any published scientific data that suggests a clinical difference between capillary and venous blood? If not, why is he blocking the serology roll-out that Professor Newton considers so important?

Matt Hancock: First, serology tests are very important, and I am glad we are now doing over 40,000 a day. Given that they first got approval only two weeks ago, that has been a fantastic effort by the NHS and social care to get the roll-out going out so quickly. Secondly, fingerprick tests would be a big step forward. We are currently assessing the clinical validity of a number of fingerprick tests, because a bad test is worse than no test at all. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree with that.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the outbreak has taught us the importance of investing in domestic PPE manufacturing to increase our supply chain, and that south Yorkshire towns and villages with a textile heritage, such as Thurgate in Rother Valley, are prime locations for new PPE facilities?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I congratulate my hon. Friend not only on his new beard but on his support for Rother Valley. He is absolutely right that the domestic manufacture of PPE is one of the most important things we could be doing right now. We are pushing that incredibly hard, with the support of Lord Paul Deighton.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State that retaining the public's trust is absolutely crucial if we are to tackle the virus, but that trust needs to be earned and honoured. I want to put on record my constituents' deep frustration at the Government's response to Dominic Cummings breaking the rules. There are deeply felt fears among doctors, nurses and other frontline health professionals about coming out of lockdown too quickly and all the sacrifice that so many people have made going to waste. We know that some people are asymptomatic and could be spreading the virus unchecked, so how will test, track and trace work for those people if they are not being tested?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we must move cautiously and carefully. Those were not her exact words—I am putting them in her mouth—but she is nodding in agreement. We must not lose all the advantages and progress we have made. The number of people sadly dying from the disease is down to almost a tenth of what it was at the peak, but that is still far too high. Test and trace will be critical. The precise answer to the question she asks about testing is that if you are contacted by an NHS contact tracer and asked to self-isolate, you should do so. That period of two weeks of self-isolation is the time in which if you were going to get symptoms and pass on the disease, you would. Therefore, that is what breaks the chain. It is the isolation on instruction from the NHS that breaks the chain. That is the power of the NHS test and trace programme.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I start by thanking my right hon. Friend for moving so swiftly to make the bet365 stadium in Stoke-on-Trent a regional testing centre, after hearing the case for it from Councillor Abi Brown, the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, and myself. It will allow many of my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke rapid and easy access to vital tests to help to drive down R further still. Will he confirm to the House that regional test sites will remain in place for as long as they are needed to ensure we remain able to continue an effective test and trace strategy?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I can. The voice of Stoke-on-Trent is strong today.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I join all the tributes to the public health workers in my constituency who are helping to fight the virus. We hear the Secretary of State sing the praises of public and private partnership. I hope he will not be using the crisis as an opportunity to increase privatisation and profiteering in the NHS through the back door. If it is proving such a success, will he explain why the Deloitte regional test centre results are still not being provided to the local public health authorities?

Matt Hancock: The drive-through centres are a classic example of the public and private sectors working in a team spirit. I just wish that people would not try to drive teams apart, because this is a combination of the private diagnostics companies that provide the tests; Boots and Deloitte, which have provided the logistics; the armed forces, without whom we could not have made this happen right across Great Britain; and, of course, the NHS, Public Health England and the relevant Scottish authorities—they have made it happen. I will look into the specific data point that the hon. Gentleman raises, but I want to congratulate all those involved, no matter their employment status, and I urge him and others to back the team.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): With couples sat together one minute and one of them taken away in an ambulance the next, with people not being able to see their partner in hospital or in the chapel of rest—those living in Calderdale could not even pay their last respects at the crematorium either—and with grandparents not seeing new-borns or their grandchildren for 10 weeks, on the whole, people have made huge sacrifices to maintain the lockdown and the Government's public health message. Can my right hon. Friend advise whether an assessment has been made of what, if any, damage has been done to the Government's public health message by the actions of the Prime Minister's special adviser?

Matt Hancock: The critical thing is that, given the sacrifices that my hon. Friend lists and that are heartfelt, as a nation, we have the resolve to see this through. We can see that the number of cases is coming right down and the number of people dying is coming right down, and we have got to see the back of this disease. We are not there yet.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Given the disproportionately negative impact that covid-19 is having on BME men and women, has the Secretary of State given any consideration to the additional risk that the reopening of schools will have on this community? What discussions has he had with the Department for Education about the concerns around BME children returning to school, particularly among parents, and what steps are being taken to mitigate those concerns directly?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question in the sensitive manner in which he does. Of course, I have had discussions with my colleague the Secretary of State for Education, and both of us have taken clinical advice on the decisions around schools. I would not support the changes and the reopening of schools if I did not think they were safe. One of the reasons to bring in three years in the first instance in primary school is to ensure that there is the physical space that my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) spoke about earlier. We have got to be careful, cautious and sensitive, especially to the needs of those who might be disproportionately affected, and we have got to do the research to get to the bottom of why.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): A great deal of work has been done by local policing teams in Richmond and Kingston to inform my elderly constituents about

the risk of scams both online and over the telephone. What shall I tell my constituents to look for, if they are contacted by a contact tracer, before disclosing personal data?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that. It appals me that people would try to raise a scam in response to this mission-critical national project of NHS Test and Trace. NHS contact tracers will never ask for your personal financial information. They will never ask you to pay for anything, and they will never disclose your personal medical information. If any of those things start to happen on a call, it is not a call from NHS Test and Trace. We have worked closely with the National Cyber Security Centre to ensure that we get the scripts right and that we protect against these risks, and she is right to raise it.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My constituent Dr David Flavell, the scientific director of Leukaemia Busters, has sent a face mask to every Cabinet member, every shadow Cabinet member and, indeed, the entire Health and Social Care Committee. I hope my right hon. Friend has received his. Will the Government consider upgrading their advice on the use of face masks from recommended to mandatory?

Matt Hancock: I have not received mine, but I would like to. Let us try to find it, wherever it has got to in the system—it might be in the bowels of the Department of Health and Social Care somewhere. I will go and dig it out; that is an unfortunate image. The serious point is that face coverings are important, especially in areas where you might come into contact with people you would not otherwise frequently see, such as on public transport or in some shops. I will look into the issue that she raises.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): No disrespect, Mr Speaker, but I would rather be in sunny Manchester today, being cautious and careful, than here. None the less, does the Secretary of State agree that public confidence is critical in this next phase of dealing with the virus? There is no doubt that confidence has plummeted over the last few weeks. Does he agree that to restore that confidence we need a great deal more transparency about the test, track and trace system—numbers, who has been contacted, and so on—so people feel that if they are contacted action will follow?

Matt Hancock: If it's sunny in Manchester, it really must be hot. [*Interruption.*] Coming from the north-west myself, I know how much it rains in that part of the world. The, the—I have completely lost my train of thought. The hon. Lady raises a very important point about test and trace. Subject to patient confidentiality, which I take very seriously, of course we will publish data on the test and trace system and will work with the UK Statistics Authority on the best way to do that. I spoke to David Norgrove earlier today about that and how our teams should work together to make sure we can publish it in the right and appropriate way.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I welcome the progress that has been made on testing, but I have a specific case of a care home in my constituency that caters for people with disabilities. Because the residents are typically

under 65 and do not have dementia, they do not have access to testing in the same way those in other care homes do. Could the Secretary of State look into this case?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course, and I will get back to my hon. Friend.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know of the exceptionally high rate of infection in the north-west and he will also be aware that local authorities such as mine say that the peak of demand for social care has not yet been reached and will actually hit later in the summer. In order to facilitate transparent information to the public and good capacity for local planning, will he commit to regular publication of the R value on a regional basis?

Matt Hancock: We regularly publish the R value on a national basis and are increasing the scope of our surveillance testing regime to be able to increase the detail around that—that is one of the key tasks for the weeks ahead.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): With track and tracing now being rolled out, if there happens to be localised increases again in the rates of infection—localised second waves—at what level would the Secretary of State recommend bringing back localised restrictions? Would it be at a county level, a town level, a council level, a village level, or even a street level?

Matt Hancock: The answer is “needs must”: whatever is necessary to bring any local outbreak under control. We will take local action with local directors of public health using all the information we have, whether at a highly localised level, more broadly or on an institution basis—for instance, around a school, care home or hospital—if that is what it takes.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The pandemic has exacerbated mental health conditions and made it harder for people to access appropriate mental health services in many cases. This morning, I received an email from a constituent whose child has a severe psychiatric condition exacerbated by covid. The child has been in our local hospital for six weeks waiting for a specialist bed and is now hoping that there might be a bed in Birmingham—they are in north Paddington. What can the Secretary of State do to make sure that such urgent mental health conditions are responded to?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. Mental health services, especially for less severe mental ill health, have in some ways been strengthened by the crisis, because of the extent of psychiatric support online, which in some cases, we have discovered, has been more effective than face-to-face support, especially in paediatrics. That said, of course that is not the case in all areas, especially with some of the more severe conditions, such as the one she outlines, and I am happy to look into that individual case. We are doing everything we

can to restore services, in a way that is safe and covid secure, so that people can get access to the services they need.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the guidance as we move through the phases of lockdown, but can he reassure my constituents in North Devon that it is not too soon for our beaches to be used safely, provided that people are maintaining social distancing?

Matt Hancock: We have learned a lot about this virus over the past three or four months. We have learnt, for instance, that asymptomatic transmission is a very significant problem and a challenge, but one of the things that we have learned on the other side of the ledger is that transmission outside is much lower than indoors. It is not risk free, but it is much lower, and that means that we are able to do things like recommend that being on the beach is one of the lower-risk activities—but that people should still keep 2 metres apart, because that is what the guidelines say is safe.

I am delighted that the beautiful beaches of North Devon are once again providing pleasure to local families so that they can really enjoy the weather.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Secretary of State, Teagan Appleby has been in intensive care twice in the past 10 weeks because her family were unable to pay for the medical cannabis that they need to keep her alive.

The families of these epileptic children have been put on the back burner by Brexit, a general election and now covid. The sums of money we are talking about are tantamount to what the right hon. Gentleman's Department spends on paper clips. Will the Secretary of State make a call to NHS England immediately and right this wrong?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady knows, I have put significant effort into trying to resolve this matter. We have made some progress. I am sorry to hear about the conditions that she describes, and I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Health to take this forward immediately after this statement.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on getting the track and trace system up and running. In Barrow and Furness our shipyard employs about 10,000 people, but we will struggle to gain the confidence of the community and the workers as they begin to bring their workforce back unless we can demonstrate that we are tracking and isolating infections. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that his Department will be working with large employers such as mine to ensure that confidence can be built back in the community and the workforce?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. The work in Barrow and Furness is incredibly important, not least because at an earlier stage in the crisis a higher number of people tested positive. That is partly because there were so many tests in Barrow and Furness, and that itself is testament to the local health authorities that worked hard to make that happen. My hon. Friend has been an assiduous representative throughout this crisis, making sure that I am kept constantly informed of developments and the needs of Barrow and Furness.

Points of Order

1.57 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Some 25 petitions are waiting to be debated in Parliament, with more than 5 million signatures from the public represented in them. However, as you know, petitions debates were suspended when we moved to remote proceedings. This morning I received a disappointing response from the Leader of the House suggesting that Government business would be the priority while social distancing is in place, which is likely to be some time.

Petitions are a crucial means by which members of the public and Back-Bench MPs hold the Government to account, and the sacrifice in bringing us all here in person has been very real for very many people, but it cannot be entirely on the Government's own terms. So can you, Mr Speaker, advise the House what more we can do to ensure that this vital route of scrutiny for the public is resumed as soon as possible?

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Lady knows, that is not a matter for the Chair. The business of the House is for the Chamber to decide. No doubt today there will be an opportunity to raise the matter, and I would have thought that Business Questions on Thursday would be a good place to raise it with the Leader of the House. That will allow him to tell us what measures he will be putting in place, if any.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Where did you come from, Mr Bryant? You were not there a minute ago. Come on then.

Chris Bryant: This is the new normal, Mr Speaker.

As you know, you, as Speaker, are defender of the liberties and freedoms of MPs— Government Members and Back Benchers, everybody equally. One of the historic liberties that the Speaker has always sought is not only freedom of speech but the freedom to attend and participate, which is why the House in the 14th century, 16th century, 17th century and at many other times has insisted that no Member of Parliament can be arrested by the Crown, except on indictable offences, and thereby prevented from attending Parliament.

The law at the moment requires—not just advises, but requires—those who are shielding or who have shielding responsibilities not to leave their home and

therefore not to be able to come to Parliament if they are Members of Parliament. Mr Speaker, I just wonder what your feeling is about the liberties of this House if significant numbers of our Members are prevented from participating in debate or in Divisions by virtue of the decisions of the Government.

Mr Speaker: I will say that my sympathy is with those people who are shielding or who are of a certain age who cannot attend the House. I have been very clear and have put that on the record, but the business of the House is a matter for the Government, as we well know. They set the agenda. What I would say is that I hope those conversations are taking place now to try to come to an arrangement. I hope that those conversations will be very fruitful and done as quickly as possible, but there is a decision for the House to take, the House can take control of it, and there is no better champion than the hon. Gentleman to lead that.

What I would say is, let those discussions continue. I do believe there is a way to move forward. I think there needs to be a bit of give and take from different sides in order for the House to progress and to ensure that nobody's franchise is taken away. We are working very hard to try to see how we can help with the voting system to match that as well. I am not going to take any further points of order on that; I think the House has time to deal with it later. I will now suspend the House for five minutes.

2.1 pm

Sitting suspended.

2.6 pm

On resuming—

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on (1) the Motion in the name of Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg relating to proceedings during the pandemic not later than 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order, and (2) the second reading of the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill not later than 8.00 pm; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings relating to the motion on proceedings during the pandemic and the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

Proceedings during the Pandemic

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Procedure Committee, Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: proposals for remote participation, HC 300; Second Report from the Procedure Committee, Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: remote voting in divisions, HC 335; Third Report from the Procedure Committee, Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: the Government's proposal to discontinue remote participation, HC 392; and Transcript of oral evidence on Procedure under coronavirus restrictions to the Procedure Committee from the Clerk of the House and the Clerk of the Journals on 1 June 2020, HC 300.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):

Mr Speaker has selected amendment (b) in the name of Karen Bradley and others. I will call Karen Bradley to move her amendment at the end of the debate. Once the House has come to a decision on amendment (b), I will then call Karen Bradley to move either amendment (c) if amendment (b) was agreed to, or amendment (d) if amendment (b) was disagreed to.

Mr Speaker explained in his letter to all colleagues, which went out yesterday, the basis of his decision on the method by which any Division on this motion and the selected amendments will be carried out. He also referred to the guidance that is available for Members on those arrangements for Divisions. It would be helpful if all hon. Members would please read that guidance.

There will be a further short statement before a Division is called, but let me just say that it would greatly assist with arrangements if Whips or other hon. Members gave advance notice of an intention to contest a decision, if the names of Tellers were provided in advance, and if Tellers were present in the Chamber to take their positions and start counting immediately.

I should warn hon. Members who wish to take part in this debate that there will be strict time limits applied because it is a short debate. For Back Benchers, the time limit will be four minutes. I cannot, of course, impose a time limit on hon. Members speaking from the Front Bench, but I hope that they will, out of their usual due deference and consideration for other Members, keep their remarks to a minimum.

2.9 pm

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

That the resolution of the House of 21 April (Proceedings during the pandemic) be rescinded and the following orders be made and have effect until 7 July 2020:

(1) That the following order have effect in place of Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions):

(a) If the opinion of the Speaker or the chair as to the decision on a question is challenged, the Speaker or the chair shall declare that a division shall be held.

(b) Divisions shall be conducted under arrangements made by the Speaker provided that:

- (i) Members may only participate physically within the Parliamentary estate; and
- (ii) the arrangements adhere to the guidance issued by Public Health England.

(2) Standing Order No. 40 (Division unnecessarily claimed) shall not apply.

(3) In Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions):

(a) At the end of paragraph (5)(a), insert “, provided that (i) Members may only participate physically within the Parliamentary estate; and (ii) the arrangements adhere to the guidance issued by Public Health England”.

(b) In paragraph (5)(b) delete “two and a half hours” and insert “at least two and a half hours”.

(c) In paragraph (5)(c) delete “after the expiry of the period mentioned in subparagraph (b) above”.

(4) The Speaker or chair may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any one time and Standing Orders Nos. 7 (Seats not to be taken before prayers) and 8 (Seats secured at prayers) shall not apply.

(5) Standing Orders Nos. 83J to 83X (Certification according to territorial application etc) shall not apply.

The rationale for returning to physical proceedings is a straightforward one. Parliament is the assembly of the nation. The public expect it to deliver on the mandate provided by last year's general election, and they expect it to conduct the kind of effective scrutiny that puts Ministers under real pressure. Neither expectation can be fully realised while we are not sitting physically. That is why we are returning to work safely at the first opportunity in order fully to conduct the essential business not possible from our homes. This assessment is based on the facts. The stopgap of a hybrid Parliament was a necessary compromise during the peak of the virus, but, by not being here, the House has not worked effectively on behalf of constituents. Legislating is a key function of Parliament, yet there has been no ability for legislative Committees to meet since 23 March. This means that, for 10 weeks, there has been no detailed line-by-line consideration of Bills that will affect people's lives. I remind Members that, in the week commencing Monday 11 May, we had no debates on secondary legislation, no Public Bill Committees, and no Delegated Legislation Committees. There was significantly less time for debate—just 216 minutes of debate on primary legislation compared with the example of 648 minutes in a normal sitting week—and far less flexibility to ensure proper scrutiny of the Government.

I should also like to remind Members that much of the business under the hybrid proceedings was deliberately arranged to be non-contentious. The time limits on scrutiny and substantive proceedings were also heavily restricted. This was to facilitate the smooth running of what was always a technically challenging arrangement. What was acceptable for a few short weeks would have proved unsustainable if we had allowed the hybrid proceedings to continue. This House plays an invaluable role in holding the Government to account and debating legislation, which can only properly be fulfilled when Members are here in person.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman allow?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was just about to talk about Members intervening time and again, so it is the perfect time for me to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Bryant: The Leader of the House will know, because he is an historian, that one of the ancient liberties of all Members of Parliament has been to attend. Such a liberty has been asserted even when the Crown has wanted to arrest people. The House has insisted that people should be allowed to attend, but at the moment,

[Chris Bryant]

by law, there are many MPs who are banned from attending Parliament because they are shielding either themselves or others in their household. How can it possibly be right to exclude those people? How can it be a Conservative motion to exclude those MPs and thereby disenfranchise their communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Nobody is banned from attending Parliament by law. The ancient right of MPs, which dates back to 1340, entitles Members to attend. However, I accept that, for some Members with particular health conditions, it is very difficult to attend—

Chris Bryant: They are not allowed to attend.

Mr Rees-Mogg: No law exists that stops Members from attending Parliament.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Rees-Mogg: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Elmore: I am extremely grateful to the Leader of the House for giving way. Yesterday, in the public proceedings of the Procedure Committee, the question was asked directly of the Clerk, and the Clerk confirmed that Members are bound by the law outside of the particular Act to which the Leader of the House is referring. If, for example, a county, a part of the United Kingdom, or a nation was put into lockdown, the Member of Parliament would have to abide by that law, unless they were specifically exempt within that law—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We might have gone back to having interventions, but that does not mean that we can have long interventions.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The ancient right to attend Parliament goes back to 1340, and, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) pointed out, this is something that has been used against the Crown in the past. It is a most important and long-standing right. There must always be an exemption for Members to attend Parliament. What I was going on to elaborate is that I will be bringing forward, as I promised on 20 May, a motion tomorrow to allow Members who, on medical grounds, are unable to attend to continue to appear for scrutiny—questions, urgent questions and statements—remotely. That will be brought forward tomorrow, as I promised on 20 May when we discussed these matters in response to an urgent question.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): As usual, the Leader of the House is making a strong statement, but on this particular point on voting, surely, as this is a recall of Parliament, every Member should have the right to vote today on whether to accept the new proceedings. Why, therefore, is today's vote not being done remotely?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right. Every Member does have the right to vote. Members accepted that these measures would be temporary—that they would continue until they expired. One has to deal with these matters in good faith. It was put to Members, some of whom were very reluctant to accept remote voting, to

agree to it on the basis that it was temporary. It expired, and therefore we come back automatically, without any motion, to physical voting.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that today there are low-paid clinical staff working in the NHS who are free of the surcharge as a result of this House having its voice heard? Does he therefore understand my incomprehension that Opposition Members want to continue with this “Coke Zero” Parliament for one more day, when we could resume our job of holding the Government to account?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend puts it extremely well. Lots of people are going back to work, and we have a role, as leaders within the country and within the community, to do that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House outline his intention with regard to ensuring that minority parties such as mine, the Democratic Unionist party, are able to speak directly from their constituency through the present system in this House on matters such as the upcoming debate on abortion? I would like to assume that at least some Northern Ireland MPs will be able to speak on this Northern Ireland legislation in Committee, as I understand it will be, ever mindful that this week the Northern Ireland Assembly will deliberate on this matter. Ministers, right hon. and hon. Members of this House want the Northern Ireland Assembly to make the decision, but if it has to be made in Committee here, it is important that we have an opportunity to have Northern Ireland MPs on that legislative Committee.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is not really a point for today's debate. I completely accept what the hon. Gentleman says about representation on Committees for minority parties, but that is really a matter for business questions rather than today's debate. I might add that the voice of Strangford is always heard in this House, and that is our good fortune as Members of Parliament.

Just before the hon. Member for Rhondda intervened, I was talking about having Members intervening, and we have seen in the past few minutes how that enhances, develops and evolves the debate. It ensures that Ministers are held to account, and allows the debating of amendments clause by clause in the Chamber, so that constituents' views can be represented to Ministers; then to vote physically ensures that we are here, coming together as a single Parliament.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Leader of the House is, of course, a strong advocate of the Union. He must appreciate that at the present time it is incredibly difficult and not at all straightforward for Members from Ulster to get here to the British mainland. As a result, I wonder whether he accepts that the social distancing queueing arrangements that are now to be trialled actually defeat to some degree the purpose of our having those debates, because they will eat so much into parliamentary time that we are eager to use for debate and cut and thrust.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The temporary measures that are to be used will mean that voting takes a little bit longer than using the ordinary Division Lobbies. That is true,

but it will depend to some extent on how many Divisions right hon. and hon. Members demand—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] I note a certain amount of caterwauling in the background, but I point out that a Division is not demanded on every item that comes before this House. If it were, the Budget resolutions would take a day to be passed. That is a perfectly routine matter. Members decide what they wish to vote on, and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, asked if notice could be given beforehand. Of course we will look for faster ways of providing for Divisions to take place.

Why should Divisions be physical? Why is it important for votes to be physical? It is because we are coming here together as a single Parliament and voting on things that have a major effect on people’s lives. Every piece of legislation affects people’s lives one way or another. We should not vote quietly and secretly. Some people tweeted that they were doing it while going for a walk and things like that. Is that really the way to be voting on laws?

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The principle in this House is that votes follow voices. The Leader of the House is telling us that tomorrow he will bring a motion to allow those who are medically not able to be here to have a voice. Why should they not have a vote to follow that voice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The vote following the voice is the tradition that if you shout one way, you then cannot vote the other way. That is all that means in terms of that tradition. It means that if you shout “Aye”—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will just explain this point and then of course I will give way. The votes follow the voice, in that if you have shouted “Aye”, you must not then vote No. You are allowed to move a motion and then vote against it, as long as you do not shout in favour of it. The hon. Member for Rhondda may be looking quizzical, but he might remember that the former leader of the Labour party—of Her Majesty’s Opposition—did exactly that within the past couple of years. This is a fairly routine procedure.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): What we have seen from the Leader of the House’s performance today so far is the characteristic we have seen from the Government since the start: bending the rules to fit their own purposes. Anybody watching this debate impartially will now be confused about what this means for their own behaviour. He has said that tomorrow people can enter these debates virtually. If they have a medical reason not to be here but they can be here virtually, can he say precisely what is preventing their being able to vote virtually as well?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are well-established procedures for people who cannot be here being paired, so that their opinion and that of their constituents has exactly the same effect as if they vote in person. The votes through pairing balance out, so the decision of the House remains identical.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I assure the Leader of the House that right now there are lots of voices of Scottish National party Members he cannot

hear because they are not in this Chamber and they will not be happy at all at the disenfranchisement of their constituents through what he is proposing. The Procedure Committee makes it clear that people should not have to disclose their medical condition in order to be able to participate in this House. What he is doing is embodying what people have seen as the practice of this Government in recent weeks: it is one rule for them and one rule for lots of other people.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman says that lots of SNP Members will not be happy. I have a nasty feeling that that is often the state of SNP Members, and I wish them every happiness. It is important that people follow the rules, and we are following the rules, because we said that people ought to go back to work if they cannot work effectively from home and that is exactly the position we are in.

Jim Shannon: Let me provide Members with an example. Flights for us from Northern Ireland to here are restricted. Two weeks ago, there were three flights out on a Monday but that was then reduced to two, and on other days there are no flights. Can Members have notice of when there will be debates in this House and when there will be votes in this House, because it is important that we are here to participate and actively vote when we can, and we need to know this in advance so that we can get a plane? The only plane over here for us yesterday left early in the morning, and that is to get us here for today.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Now that we are back to normal sitting hours, we will be sitting on Monday to Thursday with the usual sitting hours. A recess is scheduled, but I would not like to confirm that that date will be set in stone. It is at the end of July, so there will be plenty of notice if there is any change to it. We will have our normal sittings on Monday to Thursday. We are getting back to work. It is becoming business as normal.

The temporary Standing Orders for remote voting were only ever temporary, and I do not think they would have been agreed had the scheme been put in place for longer; many people have always been opposed to remote voting, and we got a consensus for a brief period. I do not believe I would be acting in good faith if I were to extend it beyond the time that people understood when it was first introduced. It is important that we treat decisions of the House with the importance and accord that they deserve, and the decision was to do this on a temporary basis.

Peter Kyle *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman makes another intervention, I should say that most people will not get to speak if there are lots of interventions. I will, however, allow him to make this one.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, and this will be the last time. When the right hon. Gentleman introduced the motion that delivered the virtual Parliament—the hybrid Parliament—did he know then how long the coronavirus crisis would last?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not a prophet, so I would not dream of predicting those sorts of things.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

I have taken lots of interventions. In some ways I think this is a beneficial; it partly illustrates my argument about why Parliament needs to get back, and I appreciate that in a short debate interventions are sometimes just as useful for Members to be able to get in as getting half a minute at the end. If there are interventions, I will, by the leave of the House, carry on taking them.

Every Division is important, and I would underline that. We should be confident that we are all individually doing the right thing and voting openly under the eyes of others; voting while enjoying a sunny walk or watching television does democracy an injustice. The solemn decisions we take together affect the lives of millions of people in this country. We ask Members to vote in person for a reason: because it is the heart of what Parliament is about.

It remains essential that our work in this House is carried out in line with Public Health England advice. The Palace of Westminster we have returned to today is greatly changed from early March. The House authorities have carried out a risk assessment of the parliamentary estate to ensure it is a covid-19 secure workplace, in line with PHE guidance. Both its staff and its leadership, including particularly Mr Speaker, should be thanked and congratulated for the rapid progress that has been made.

I understand the concerns of some hon. and right hon. Members about returning physically. Many Members have already passed on their views, but I want to make it clear to all those in the House, and those who are not here but are listening and maybe shielding at home, that I am always available to discuss and hear their concerns, and I will as far as possible—which is why I will be bringing forward the motion tomorrow—do what I can to help. It will be tabled today for approval tomorrow. Anyone who feels that they are required to shield because of age or medical circumstances should not feel under pressure to attend Parliament, and pairing and other mechanisms will be in place informally to facilitate this.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I agree with the Leader of the House about the nature of debate and response and making a decision at the end of that debate, but what argues against that is the practice of pairing, where the decision is taken before the debate. Many hon. Members want their constituents to know where they stand on issues. Why do we not put the pairing records on the record? [Interruption.]

Mr Rees-Mogg: I hear mutterings around the Chamber saying that that is a good idea. Unfortunately, neither the Chief Whip from the hon. Gentleman's side or from my side is in the Chamber at the moment, and I think it might be useful to consult them before I make an off-the-cuff suggestion, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman, who is a wise and experienced parliamentarian, that I will pass his views on to the Chief Whip. Perhaps he would be so kind as to do the same to his own Chief Whip, and perhaps there could be a meeting of minds in that area.

I have been working with the House authorities to see how MPs with underlying health conditions who have been told to shield or are receiving specific Government advice about their health may be able to continue to

contribute to proceedings in this House. I mentioned this on 20 May and reconfirm that I will table a further motion later today on some virtual participation by hon. Members. As it happens, for this motion I have used some of the language in the amendment tabled by the shadow Leader of the House, to whom I give my thanks, and other Opposition Members to ensure that such participation is available for Members unable to attend Westminster for medical and public health reasons related to the pandemic.

Turning to the motion itself, it may help if I briefly set out the Government's approach. Today's motion is the necessary paving step that gives the House the opportunity to signal how it wishes to conduct proceedings in the coming weeks. In response, I hope the House authorities will be able to complete the work already undertaken over the Whitsun recess, and I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will also find the explanatory note published alongside the motion helpful.

The motion updates the House's procedures relating to Divisions and attendance in the Chamber to ensure compliance with social distancing restrictions. These temporary changes to Standing Orders will be in force until 7 July 2020. The motion rescinds the resolution of 21 April, which provided an overarching framework for the temporary Standing Orders relating to hybrid proceedings. This resolution is no longer needed as the Standing Orders have now lapsed and we are returning to physical proceedings.

Paragraphs (1) to (3) of motion 2 set out an approach to Divisions. If agreed by the House, Division arrangements will be set out by the Speaker and will adhere to Public Health England guidance—and I wonder if I may, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, congratulate Mr Speaker on the work he has done to ensure and test a system for voting that meets the requirements of PHE; he has invested a lot of time in it to make sure that we have a system that will operate.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): On this rather vexed issue of voting, could further consideration perhaps be given to the use of deferred Divisions? I understand the argument about consequential votes, but that could be dealt with quite simply by allowing them to drop away, and we would avoid any scenes that might bring us into a certain degree of disrepute.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the points that he has made. I assure him that the Government will listen carefully to any ideas that come forth from the Procedure Committee and from hon. Members in relation to how things can be improved and made more fluid in these difficult circumstances.

The Government wish to ensure that the House continues to function in line with Public Health England advice. Paragraph (4) therefore ensures that the Speaker may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any given time, and disapplies the Standing Orders relating to the prayer card system. The Standing Order will be discontinued in order that the flow of Members in and out of the Chamber can be managed, but I reassure Members that Prayers themselves will take place at the start of each sitting day. Finally, paragraph (5) disapplies Standing Orders relating to English votes procedures, as double majority voting is likely to be incompatible with the arrangements for socially distanced Divisions.

Let me now turn to the amendments tabled by the Opposition parties and the Procedure Committee. I reiterate my gratitude to the Procedure Committee—particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley)—for its and her swift work, and welcome continuing discussions with that prestigious Committee. I used to be on it, which is why I think particularly highly of it; it is one of the most interesting Select Committees in the House.

I hope that my commitment to bring forward tomorrow a Government motion to allow some participation in hybrid proceedings for those who are shielding demonstrates my commitment to ensuring safe participation for as many Members as possible, and that those amendments which seek to require some hybrid participation can be withdrawn on that basis.

I have already set out the case against remote voting, but let me address the argument made by some Members that if a Member is not able to vote, they will be entirely disenfranchised. I do not accept that. There are many other ways in which MPs represent their constituents in Parliament, including through tabling written questions, writing correspondence, tabling amendments and attending hearings of Select Committees, which will continue. Select Committees can continue to meet remotely under the resolution that I brought forward in March and will continue to carry out their important work with Members participating from around the country. It is worth noting that the Liaison Committee very successfully quizzed the Prime Minister in this way, so scrutiny carries on in other ways too.

I know that there has been concern about the operation of evidence sessions for Public Bill Committees. I hope that the House will welcome the fact that some specific witnesses to the Domestic Abuse Bill have been told that they will be able to give evidence remotely on Thursday, should they wish to. I was keen to ensure that this was possible. Some had assumed that it was not, but this concern turns out to be misplaced. The House has confirmed that under existing rules, witnesses can indeed give evidence remotely to Public Bill Committees in the same way that they have long been able to with Select Committees. It can therefore happen with no changes to the Standing Orders.

I ask that the House agrees the motion today and considers the further motion that I will bring forward tomorrow. I have no doubt that the Procedure Committee will continue to keep our ways of working under review, and I welcome that. For my part, I very happily commit to continuing to do the same, in order that we can ensure that the House can continue to go about its business effectively and safely.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I apologise for not being here right at the beginning of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks, but I did not know whether I would be able to get into the Chamber. If proxy voting is acceptable for somebody on maternity leave in principle, why is proxy voting not acceptable for somebody who is shielding in this extraordinary crisis?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Procedure Committee is currently holding an inquiry into proxy voting and whether it is suitable to be extended. I am aware that the hon. Gentleman is asking me this question, but obviously this is a matter for consultation with the Procedure

Committee. The drawback of proxy voting immediately is that the temporary system that we will be having will take longer anyway, and that would be particularly complicated by proxy voting. But is it a solution that is ruled out full time? No, I would say that it is not.

It is important to emphasise that, with the hybrid Parliament, the commitments the Government made to the voters in December were clogged up. The Domestic Abuse Bill was not making progress—no Bill Committees were sitting—nor were the Fire Safety Bill, the Northern Ireland legacy Bill, the Fisheries Bill, the Trade Bill or the counter-terrorism Bill. What we do in this House is important and that we do it at a reasonable and efficient pace matters, and to do that we need to be here physically. I know, I understand and I sympathise that those Members who are shielding face difficult times. They are following advice that may prevent them from being here to vote, and that is difficult for them.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Could the right hon. Gentleman therefore confirm to me that the constituents of those MPs who have to shield are worth less and it is expected that they will be less well represented by this place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the right hon. Lady makes entirely the wrong point. Parliament meets to represent the nation as a whole. We come here together not as ambassadors representing various powers; we come here as a United Kingdom Parliament. That is the nation—the United Kingdom—that we come here to represent, and we come here together. As a collective, we are a single United Kingdom Parliament and a strong legislative body that represents the whole people of the United Kingdom, and we each participate in that in our different ways on a daily basis.

Ian Paisley: The Leader of the House is absolutely correct on that point, but where it falls down is when Members are obstructed from actually getting here because there are not sufficient flights to bring Members to the House. That is where it falls down from Northern Ireland's point of view. Will steps be taken, through the Government, with the airports and the airlines to ensure that Members from Northern Ireland can get here? Frankly, the issue of shielding, as far as I am aware, does not affect the eight Members who attend from Northern Ireland.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to see the hon. Gentleman in his place, and I absolutely appreciate that it is harder for some Members to get here than for others. I am very glad to see the Westminster leader of the SNP in his place, because his constituency is particularly far away from Westminster. I think he had a 16-hour journey to get here, and I think it shows a proper commitment to our parliamentary democracy that he is here. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps he is a secret Unionist, but it is a pleasure to see him here because we bring a Parliament together to have debate on the matters that are of concern to our constituents, and I absolutely accept that it is more difficult for some than for others.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House accept that we should be an exemplar of best practice, and when we are deliberately excluding people from portions of their responsibilities

[Justin Madders]

because of their disabilities we are in no position to tell employers who breach equalities legislation that they are in the wrong?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have obviously looked at the equalities considerations in relation to this, and the Government and Parliament are completely in accordance with them, because it is necessary for us to meet here physically to do our business. That is in line with the Government's guidelines. Which Bill does the hon. Gentleman not want us to have? Does he want to give up on the Domestic Abuse Bill? Does he want to give up on the Fire Safety Bill or the Northern Ireland legacy Bill? Are we going to get these Bills through?

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): To introduce another subject, does the Leader of the House have a view about call lists during statements and urgent questions? Right now, it seems to me that they prioritise those who sit browsing MemberHub 24 hours a day, which I have to confess is not for me, to submit a request in a short window to be part of an urgent question or statement, as opposed to being here and persisting to catch the Chair's eye.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the system of catching Mr Speaker's eye is a preferable system, but needs must, because we can have only 50 Members in the Chamber at any one point. However, this is a temporary expedient, and some of the other courtesies and normalities are being suspended.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Leader of the House just said that this was a temporary expedient, and that is absolutely right; we are living through a crisis. Difficulties have been expressed by our friends from Northern Ireland, myself—from Skye—and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and we should put that in the context of our having been able to participate over the course of the last few weeks and get on with our job of representing our constituents, when our mailbags have never been fuller. The likes of myself and the right hon. Gentleman are now having to give up 30 hours to get here and go back—what a waste of time when we could be acting professionally, staying at home, doing our job and questioning the Government remotely.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The problem is that we are not doing our full job. We are doing an important part of our job in dealing with constituents' inquiries, but we are not doing the important job of legislating—of getting through the business that the Government committed to deliver in the general election. The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) says—[*Interruption.*] Don't worry, I am saving up the hon. Gentleman. The right hon. Lady says that we are getting it done, but I remind her what I said at the beginning of the debate: we have had 216 minutes of debate on primary legislation compared with 640 minutes in a normal sitting week. We have been running at a third of normal legislative capacity. The job of Parliament is to deliver for the British people, and I ask again which Bill the hon. Lady would wish to sacrifice.

Chris Bryant: The Leader of the House has a very high Stuart understanding of what Parliament is here to do, which is, it seems to me, to do the Government's bidding and legislate in the way that they want. But even the Stuarts, when King Charles II returned, in the Cavalier Parliament—of which the Leader of the House would have no doubt been a proud Member—insisted in the Treason and Seditious Practices Act that no MP should ever be denied

“their just ancient freedom and privilege in debating any matters or business which shall be propounded or debated”.

Even the Stuarts thought that there should not be anything put in our way in terms of participating. Why will he not just allow us to have remote voting until the summer recess?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Just before the Lord President answers the intervention, I am also concerned about the rights of as many Members as possible to participate this afternoon. Several Members have intervened more than once. Let us have a bit of restraint.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Sometimes the hon. Member for Rhondda makes the point for me more eloquently than I could have made it myself: there is an absolute right of Members to attend Parliament. It is a most antique right. It predates the Stuarts and, as I keep on saying, it goes back to 1340. Members may attend if they wish to.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Has the Lord President done an estimation of the number of additional Members who will be kept away from this place if, after today, one of the people in this Palace tests positive? Therefore, any one of us—maybe all of us—may have to stay away for up to two weeks. Has he done that calculation and does he have a plan for what happens in that instance?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Well, the answer to that is: look around—if you seek a monument, look around. We are sitting six feet away from each other so that we are socially distanced, and therefore, if one right hon. or hon. Member has the coronavirus, in the track-and-tracing process we would not be notifying them about the people that we are sitting six feet away from. That is the whole point of social distancing. If we look on the floor, we see it says, “Please wait here until the person in front has moved forward”, and that goes back and back at six feet intervals all the way through, so that this can be done on a socially distanced basis, in line with Public Health England guidelines. I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for pointing out how well the House service has done in setting this out in a way that can continue to ensure that Members may turn up.

Let me continue my conclusion. There are many things that make the lives of MPs difficult, and I am not trying to pretend that this is not the case, but we none the less have a duty to the country and voters to fulfil both our collective constitutional function and our individual roles. The collective of Parliament requires that we return physically so we can allow proper redress of grievance, hold the Government to account, deliver on the mandate provided at the election and pass the important Bills that I have listed. I have no doubt that there will be some teething problems with the voting system today. It may be some time until—

Liz Saville Roberts *rose*—

Mr Rees-Mogg: How can I refuse the leader of the Welsh nationalists?

Liz Saville Roberts: The Leader of the House said earlier that witnesses giving evidence to the Domestic Abuse Bill Committee could attend from afar. I have contacted the witness I invited, who told me that he could not attend from afar because he could not contribute through video, which he takes as discriminating against people who have to travel to London because he cannot stay in a hotel here. I would like the Leader of the House to be clear on what the situation is.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House authorities have made possible virtual participation in the Bill Committee's proceedings, and it is up to individual witnesses whether they wish to take that up or not. That was always available under the ordinary systems used for some time by Select Committees. It applied to Public Bill Committees as well.

As I was saying, I do expect some teething problems with the voting system today, and it will be some time before our proceedings are fully restored, but in the meantime we must act to minimise the disruption.

Chris Bryant: Have you ever been to Alton Towers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed I have—I took my sister Annunziata there many years ago. *[Interruption.]* Anyway, enough of my reminiscences. It is important that we protect, preserve and prioritise our parliamentary democracy. It has to continue, regardless of the disease that is afflicting the nation.

Mr Bone: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that it is unparliamentary for someone to filibuster, but when there is a 90-minute debate and it has taken this long—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I thank the hon. Gentleman, but I do not need his point of order. I have been trying to move the debate forward, but Members are so excited at being back here and being allowed to intervene that they are doing it far too often. No more interventions.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The interventions prove my point: we need interventions to make Parliament work properly. We need proper debate. We need to be back. We need to have a proper, full-blooded democracy, and that is what we are getting.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Leader of the House, Valerie Vaz. I trust that Members will not unnecessarily make interventions upon the right hon. Lady, because I am hoping she will not take more than five or six minutes. Otherwise, we simply will run out of time.

2.47 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for moving the motion. I note that the amendments in my name and those of other Members were not selected, so I speak in support of the amendments

in the name of the Chair of the Procedure Committee and the other Select Committee Chairs. I thank them for their deliberations and their timely reports, which have helped to inform the debate.

I do not know whether the Leader of the House is living in another universe, but the pandemic is still going on, and it is still very serious. The Government chose not to renew the temporary orders on 21 May. Those orders enabled every Member, wherever they are and whatever their responsibilities, to take part on an equal basis in all the proceedings of the House—and it worked.

I know that the Leader of the House likes to say that we need to get back to work here, but I want to pay tribute to all my colleagues on both sides of the House who have worked incredibly hard and to their staff, who have ensured that we can deal with double the casework on behalf of our constituents. We are at work, so will he please stop peddling the myth that we only work when we are physically here? Please stop it.

Where is the evidence? The Leader of the House said in the House on 20 May in response to the urgent question that there was a risk assessment, yet his article for PoliticsHome said that it was “being” done. Which is it? Has he inadvertently misled the House? If so, will he publish it for everyone to see?

The Leader of the House will know that BAME staff are found in lower-paid and operational roles, where they cannot work from home. They are most at risk. Half the catering staff who have returned today are from the BAME community. Where is the risk assessment for them? He will know that the report on covid and BAME people has now been published, and we are twice as much at risk of dying from this disease. Science advisers are adamant: we are not over the virus. This is a dangerous moment.

The Leader of the House talks about scrutiny, but Mr Speaker has always made it clear that Ministers and shadow Ministers are here in the Chamber. Hon. Members have done a fantastic job of holding Ministers to account, whether here in the Chamber or up there on the screens, so it is not about seeing the whites of Ministers' eyes—we cannot do that from the Back Benches anyway—it is about the responses we get from them. Will he please look at whether Ministers can reply to the written questions to which hon. Members say they have not received responses?

Let us turn to voting. House staff made a great effort to ensure a secure system for voting, and it worked: we had 15 minutes, we were told when to vote, we were told when we had already voted. I do not know whether the Leader of the House has done an assessment of how long it will take for us to queue all the way back to Westminster Hall, but I wonder if that is a good use of Members' time, whether it is 650, 400 or 300 of us. It is easy for the Front Benchers—we go first—but what about the rest of our colleagues? There has been some talk about the possibility of hybrid voting. I hope we can do that.

There is a fundamental flaw in the Leader of the House's argument. Can he guarantee that Members and House staff will be safe? Parliament may be covid-19 secure, but there is movement, and the rate of infection is different in different parts of the country. We are all moving around; we could be silent spreaders. His proposal

[Valerie Vaz]

is also discriminatory. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said so. If someone is able-bodied, they must come in—they have to ignore Government advice about shielding and the R factor and come in—and if, for whatever reason, someone is following the Government guidelines and cannot be here, they effectively lose their vote. A Member who pairs is not recorded as having voted. Members on maternity leave have faced torrents of abuse for not having voted, which is why we moved to proxy voting, and that is happening now. One of the Leader of the House's own colleagues, the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), is facing exactly the same thing—we congratulate her on the birth of her baby. Members are being put in an invidious position, having been told by the Government they are at risk, and now being told by the Leader of the House that they must come in or lose their vote.

In conclusion, the Government have not lifted all the restrictions and the pandemic is still here. It is not right, just or fair to all Members. Members rightly demand parity. This is staggeringly arrogant from the Leader of the House. It is the same as when he said he thought the first Prorogation was lawful. He wants to demand and instruct; right hon. and hon. Members want to co-operate, discuss and agree a way forward that treats us all the same and is fair to everyone. Scientific advisers say this is a dangerous moment. The Leader of the House has shown that he just does not care.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have to impose a time limit now of five minutes, but that will be reduced. I call the mover of the amendment and Chair of the Procedure Committee, Karen Bradley.

2.53 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I should start by declaring an interest as the Member of Parliament for Alton Towers. I am delighted that the Leader of the House has both visited my constituency and seen the expertise with which queueing can be managed, as seen at Alton Towers—other theme parks are available.

Chris Bryant: On the way to Oblivion.

Karen Bradley: Oblivion and Nemesis.

I will address amendments (b) to (d), tabled in my name and those of several right hon. and hon. Members, including 15 other Select Committee Chairs. Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you will allow me to address my remarks not just to the Chamber but to those Members who cannot be present because of the limitations on space, which you are quite properly enforcing, and who, because of the conditions caused by the pandemic, are having to follow proceedings from elsewhere.

Since the 16th century, this Chamber and its predecessors have been the absolute focus of the House's life. Our procedures are founded on the principle that everything is done in the Chamber. That is a sound principle. Members rely on face-to-face communication. The word "parliament" comes from the French "parler". The idea that the Chamber is now not available to many of us is a massive dislocation. Let me be clear: I do not want the measures that we are debating to be in place for a

second longer than they have to be to keep our colleagues, our staff and the staff of the House as safe as possible from coronavirus. I look forward to the time when the guidance is relaxed and we can all of us meet here again.

I have to say to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that this is a very uncomfortable day for me. I do not like being badged as a rebel on House business. I am determined that we will get back to a fully physical Parliament as soon as possible. The Leader of the House will recall that I tabled an amendment to slow down the introduction of remote voting on 22 April, which the Government would not accept. I am very much in the traditionalist camp and am on the record as saying that the hybrid arrangements were sub-optimal, so let me be clear: the sooner we are back to normal, whatever that is, the better, for me, but the physical Parliament that we are in today is far from optimal itself. We can have no more than 50 Members in the Chamber and, in fact, 40 Members in the choir seats, as they are called; no bobbing; long queues to vote; very little spontaneity; and so many great parliamentarians absent.

Last night I had a conversation with my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and he said that I could discuss that conversation in the Chamber. He is a great parliamentarian, a great campaigner and a great champion for his constituents. He wanted to be present today, but his doctor has advised him that he must not be, for his own health. The idea that we decide today to disenfranchise him completely seems to me to be absurd. I very much welcome what the Leader of the House said about tabling a motion to allow virtual participation, but I would like to see a copy of that motion before I make a final decision not to push to a vote amendments (b) and (c), which I tabled and which relate to virtual participation.

Kevin Brennan: Is it not a double injustice that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) is not only to be disenfranchised by the vote that will be taken today but cannot even participate in his own disenfranchisement because of the nature of that?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes exactly the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow made to me last night, and I know how frustrated he is by this situation.

Let me move on to Divisions, because we have had debates about hybrid proceedings and, as I say, I look forward to seeing the Government's motion, hopefully before the end of this debate. I am an ex-Whip; I have every sympathy with the desire to get back to fully physical voting. That is the way that Whips manage the business and the party, and it is how we Back Benchers interact with our colleagues and with Ministers. But I say to the Leader of the House that we will perhaps shortly have the chance to test the proposals that we have put forward, and I look forward to seeing what Members feel about them.

I back up the comments about deferred Divisions made by the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who is no longer in his place. I support the Government's bringing forward of changes to Standing Orders that will allow deferred Divisions on Second Reading and other debates, so that

we will not have to have so many physical Divisions. I would welcome tests of other forms of voting, but when we introduced remote voting, we did so after we had tested it and tried it; nobody has tested and tried the current proposal for physical voting. Will the Leader of the House please consider accepting the amendment to allow remote voting to continue for a short period of time? We will all work together to find a form of physical voting that we can all be happy with.

Ian Paisley: My party is minded to support amendment (d), which the right hon. Lady has tabled on behalf of her Select Committee. We take exception to the fact that Northern Ireland Members face a double restriction: fortunately, as far as I know, none of them are shielding, but not being able to get here denies them the fundamental right that is at stake, which is for them to be able to get on the record in respect of the vital issues that affect their constituents and on which their constituents expect them to be on record. Resolving the voting issue would go a long way. Members can be denied the chance to speak but not to vote.

Karen Bradley: I understand exactly the points the hon. Gentleman makes. He will know that in the past I had personal experience of enjoying that journey very, very frequently.

The Procedure Committee has worked long and hard to find arrangements that we think are in the interests of the whole House. We received an unprecedented level of feedback on our work and I thank all colleagues who have taken an interest in it. As one of my hon. Friends observed to me, “Perhaps the Procedure Committee really is the most interesting Committee after all.”

There has been a certain amount of discussion about how the hybrid arrangements have delayed the Government’s legislative programme. Let me be clear. On 21 April the House brought in hybrid arrangements for the Chamber. There was no requirement for the Bill Committees to operate in hybrid form. A great deal of work was done to prepare for hybrid or virtual Bill Committees in case the Government wanted to use them, but there has been absolutely no bar, in the weeks since 21 April, on the Government arranging for wholly physical Bill Committees to meet in the rooms large enough to take them. They are: Committee Rooms 10 and 14, the Grand Committee Room and the Boothroyd Room. Members should take any suggestion to the contrary with a large pinch of salt.

Let me make one other thing absolutely clear. I was elected by the House to Chair a Committee to advise the House on its procedure and practice. I was also elected to this House as a Conservative on an ambitious manifesto to get Brexit done. I make a personal commitment to the Leader of the House that that is what I am determined to see we deliver. Nobody on the Conservative Benches is trying, in any way, to stop that happening.

The Procedure Committee is concerned that we make sure all Members of the House have their say. A very distinguished Conservative Lord Chancellor, when in Opposition, once described the constitutional arrangements in the UK as “elective dictatorship”. I hope the Leader of the House will listen and remember that what is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call Mr Blackford, I should warn hon. Members that the time limit after Mr Blackford will be three minutes. I call Ian Blackford.

3.1 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate and to follow the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley). I implore her to move her amendments this afternoon. They are important amendments. They are about the rights of all Members to participate in the process of Parliament, both in debating, speaking and holding the Government to account and, of course, in voting. The shadow Leader of the House is correct. We must remember that we are living in the middle of a pandemic. It is the responsibility we have as a Parliament, and our responsibility to all the nations we represent, to make sure all our constituents are not disenfranchised.

I rise today in the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who, because of the pandemic, cannot be here. I have to say that it is a considerable privilege to do so. The Leader of the House and I have known each other for a long time. I hold him in high esteem as a political opponent, but I have to say to him that on this matter I believe him to be wholly wrong. The decision by the UK Government to return Parliament has put parliamentarians in an impossible situation. A small number of us on the SNP Benches are here today—reluctantly—in order to ensure that the Government are held to account.

I have to ask the question: why were we forced to come here? Why were we forced to come here today? Reference has been made to the journey I have made. I do not wish this to be about me, but I had to drive to Inverness and then get a sleeper train, because there are no flights from the highlands to London. As has been referenced, it is a 16-hour journey. I know the same is true for the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael).

Mr Carmichael: Eighteen.

Ian Blackford: Eighteen hours for the right hon. Gentleman. Is the Leader of the House really suggesting that parliamentarians should spend over 30 hours a week travelling to have the privilege of representing their constituents, when over the course of the past few weeks we have had the opportunity and the ability to do our jobs of challenging the Government remotely and effectively? The shadow Leader of the House is correct. With the post bag we have had, the thousands of emails we have received, and the need and desire to be able to assist our constituents—we have had the time to do that—we are going to lose countless hours simply because the Leader of the House determines that on the basis of tradition we should be here—. Nothing to do with the circumstances we are in and the risks to our constituents in this pandemic.

Mr Carmichael: I am not going to spend 30 hours a week travelling. Not only is it logistically challenging, but it would be downright irresponsible for me to return to my community now. So I am down here now at the behest of the Leader of the House and I will be staying here until it is safe to go home.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The issue of safety is of paramount importance. We must go about our duties able to determine that not just all of us but our staff members and our constituents will be safe.

The right hon. Gentleman may be making a personal choice to stay down here, but just think about that. The Leader of the House indicated that we may not go into recess towards the end of July, so it might well be that the right hon. Gentleman and others are committing themselves to being away from home—away from their families—for a prolonged period. Why? Why, when we know that the hybrid facilities, in the main, work?

On this nonsense—and I have to say that it is nonsense—that Bill Committees have not sat, it is in the gift of the Government to bring forward a set of circumstances that will allow Bill Committees to meet. I must say to the Leader of the House that there is a responsibility on us to arrive at a consensus on these matters. This is not about the Government; this is about Parliament.

It is fair to say that the Opposition parties, as well as a considerable number of Government Members, are strongly opposed to what the Government propose. I implore the Leader of the House on reflection to accept the amendments that have been tabled, which would allow us collectively to deal with the situation we are in and get to a set of circumstances in which Parliament can do its job. I am in the situation that very few of my Members are here today, because we did not want to expose more Members than necessary to the kinds of risks that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to. I pose the question again: why should we be in this situation?

If I may say so, this is not just about Members of Parliament who have health concerns. Even if we arrived at a situation, as has been suggested, in which they could be excused or paired, anyone in that category would have been identified as having particular health circumstances. Is that right? But this is not just about Members of Parliament who have their own health concerns; it is about Members of Parliament who may have family members who are shielding. We are talking about a considerable number of Members of Parliament who risk being disadvantaged.

Of course, in Scotland—it was the case in England as well—the public advice was to stay at home, to protect the NHS and to save lives. The Government's official line was that if people could work from home, they should. Well, we can work from home. We should work from home, because that is the right thing to do, not just for Parliament but for our families, our colleagues and our constituents. We have asked employers to be flexible; the Commons should be too.

MPs were working effectively. The hybrid system, though not perfect, was more efficient than the system we now have in place. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands reflected on that. Look at the number of people who can be in the Chamber, and contrast that with those who could participate in our hybrid proceedings. The whole point about the hybrid proceedings is that Members who, for their own reasons, choose to come here can continue to do so, but those who need to, want to and should participate on a hybrid basis are not disenfranchised. Many colleagues across the House cannot come into work—Members who are

shielding; Members who cannot travel—and the UK Government are willingly disenfranchising them and their constituents.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Government get away with this today, we will be left with a situation where, although all MPs will be nominally equal, some will be more equal than others? Is not that very much a reflection of the pattern we saw last week, when the Government displayed such a cavalier attitude to that core principle of the rule of law, equal treatment before the law?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. I agree with my hon. and learned Friend. I say to the Government that there are real questions that we as Opposition parties wish to put, but at the same time there is a recognition that we are in a real crisis. We are in a health crisis and we have an economic crisis on the back of that. Where appropriate, we must work together. There must be generosity of spirit from the Government in dealing with these issues.

I have been prompted to speed up, so I will.

Plans to shut down virtual participation in Parliament are a shambles. They are unworkable, unsustainable and are unravelling further by the day. For votes to take place, a queue of more than a kilometre would be needed through the building. Can Members imagine how the public must look upon this? We will be queuing right out of this place and we will be taking a considerable period of time.

The Leader of the House raised the issue of how many times we might be voting, but there are times when we have multiple votes. We will be losing hours a day if we are to determine our right. *[Interruption.]* It is a bit ridiculous that Members on the Government Benches think that this is funny. Do they really think this is funny? This is serious. We are talking about the lives of our constituents.

Andrew Griffith: If this is serious, would the right hon. Gentleman like to give way?

Ian Blackford: No, I will not. You have lost your right to do that.

The proposal for voting is ludicrous and a waste of our time. I am sure our constituents would wish us to use our time more effectively. The House of Lords will soon have a remote voting system in place where Members can vote via smartphone or tablet. For what reason is that the case for one Chamber but not the other?

We know that asymptomatic carriers of covid-19 are the silent spreaders in the pandemic, and that the virus can spread on contact and lasts for hours, if not days, on hard surfaces. What efforts have been made to ensure that these Benches are cleaned between sittings? That is an important matter, because we know from evidence from Singapore that there was significant—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I can answer the right hon. Gentleman. Mr Speaker has taken care of that.

Ian Blackford: Well—*[Interruption.]* I can hear Members saying “Move on.” Really? I have to say that I find the attitude of some Members on the Government Benches

quite deplorable. What I was going on to talk about was the situation in Singapore, where there is public evidence of people going into churches the day after other people—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I implore the right hon. Gentleman to talk about this Chamber, because we have little time left. There is plenty of other time for Singapore. Will he please conclude his remarks quite soon?

Ian Blackford: I am afraid I am going to take my time to ensure that I am putting the case of Members of the Scottish National party. The reason I mention Singapore is because people were going into church and getting covid-19 from people who had been there in the days before. These are serious matters and they deserve to be properly aired.

The UK Parliament's Select Committee on Procedure has called for remote voting and participation to remain an option for as long as the pandemic continues, and that should be the position we adopt. The Committee has outlined significant deficiencies in the plans and concluded that virtual participation should be allowed to continue while coronavirus restrictions are in place to allow MPs who are not able to come to Westminster, because of the continuing restrictions caused by the pandemic, to contribute to debates and represent their constituents.

The Government's decision to ignore the cross-party consensus to retain hybrid proceedings and to plough ahead with plans to force hundreds of MPs to physically return to Parliament was widely criticised. The Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents security, catering and support staff in Parliament, said that the part-virtual system had worked well. General secretary Mark Serwotka said that it was

“strange why the government is in a rush to change course when a second covid spike is such a strong possibility”.

The Electoral Reform Society branded moves for MPs to vote in Parliament “beyond a farce”. The Leader of the House argued that democracy would once again flourish, having been curtailed under the hybrid system. That is simply wrong. *[Interruption.]* I am getting a bit fed up with remarks from Conservative Members about this being “self-indulgent”. I will tell them what is self-indulgent: MPs being dragged here when we know that the hybrid system works, and MPs being disenfranchised by the Government. That is self-indulgent.

While MPs are shielding and unable to travel to Parliament, we are experiencing a democratic deficit imposed by the UK Government. It is wholly wrong that we are in this position. I hope that we can achieve a resolution that will see us return to a hybrid Parliament that allows all our colleagues to participate in questions, statements, debates and voting from the security of their homes. We should be in a position whereby we can do our jobs and protect everyone else by staying at home and doing the right thing.

3.15 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I begin by expressing my embarrassment on your behalf, Madam Deputy Speaker, that all your entreaties to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) fell on deaf ears. I think he shows little respect for you in the Chair.

I wish to participate in the debate because I am a member of the Procedure Committee and I have a slight difference with my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee. Although I agree with the Committee's plea for people to be able participate in the proceedings as far as possible, and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will table a motion tomorrow, I do not believe that remote voting is necessary.

In normal times, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) would be sitting here. He cannot be here today on medical advice. Ever since I was first elected to this House in 1983, no person who is away from the House on medical advice has been able to do anything other than get a pair. That system worked well in the 1983 and 1987 Parliaments. When I raised that in the Procedure Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) said that the genie was out of the bottle and it was no longer possible to persuade members of the public that, if we were not physically present to vote and we were paired, we were going about our business. I think we have a big education job to do to explain to our constituents and the public that we can do a really good job as Members of Parliament without physically being here to vote every time. When Ministers go on trips or Select Committee members meet outside this place, they are often paired.

There is something to be said for making that pairing arrangement more transparent, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) suggested earlier, but let us not demean ourselves by saying that pairing is a second-best arrangement. Pairing is a fair way of ensuring that people who are ill and unable to attend the House can have their votes counted. Under a pairing system, one person's vote on one side is cancelled out by someone else on the other side. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has been in the House almost as long as me and he knows that the system works well for those who are ill. It would be wrong to change it now. The Procedure Committee has an inquiry on the matter, but we cannot resolve that today. Let us therefore proceed with the motion in the name of the Leader of the House and allow ourselves to have real voting here. For those who cannot get here to vote, let us encourage pairing, while perhaps making the system more transparent.

3.18 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I speak as a traditionalist. I am a Whip. My right hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell) have constructed my DNA in this institution. I am therefore very much a traditionalist. However, the system does not work. The Mogg conga, as it is now being deemed, through the House into Westminster Hall, is the result of the Government's not tabling the relevant motion before the recess. It is the responsibility of the Leader of the House, no one else. According to some who have been briefing, even No. 10 did not realise what the Leader of the House was doing on the day before the recess. It would be helpful to know the right hon. Gentleman's view on that because No. 10 does not seem to know what is going on.

The point is that this is about disenfranchisement. There are Members who have to shield but who are not vulnerable. Most Members I know who are shielding

[Chris Elmore]

are far from vulnerable; they are honourable, hard-working, decent people, but like many people in this country, they are taking the advice of their clinicians. It is also a fact that some Members are the partners of key workers who no longer have childcare and who therefore have to be at home to look after their children. This is about the Leader of the House introducing a system that is no longer equal, and that is deeply unfair.

I want to use my remaining minute and a half to bust some of the myths mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley). I pay tribute to her as the Chair of the Select Committee, of which I am proudly the minority ranking member—I think that is how some people think of it—as the vice-Chair. [Interruption.] I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) that that was just a joke. He never normally likes my jokes. I want to bust a myth for the Leader of the House: there has been no delay in bringing forward Bills for Public Bill Committees. There are four rooms in the House that could be used, and there is a maximum of four or five Bills currently being debated on the Floor of the House that will go through to Committee. It is the Government who have prevented the Bills from going into Committee, not the Opposition Whips Office.

Karen Bradley: I thank the vice-Chair for giving way; it is very generous of him. May I also make the point not only that Public Bill Committees have been able to meet since 21 April—nothing has stopped that—but that they could meet for more than their normal two days a week? They could meet on every sitting day for very long hours to ensure that business was delivered, and I am sure that Members would support that.

Chris Elmore: I quite agree with the right hon. Lady. One Committee that is going to the Programme Sub-Committee today will be meeting for three days a week with two sessions a day, and it has the option to do four days if it so wishes. That is at the request of the Government. The Government have delayed the start of this process, not the official Opposition or the smaller parties. It is for the Government to put forward a Bill Committee, and they have no one to blame but themselves. The rooms are available, and I would further add that testing was undertaken for hybrid Bill Committees. The Clerk of the House and Officers of the House were asked to undertake the testing of the hybrid version, and I understand that it worked perfectly well, including taking evidence from witnesses. I would never wish to suggest that a Member has misled the House, except maybe inadvertently, but it simply is not correct to say that anyone was blocking Public Bill Committees from sitting. It simply is not true. The Opposition were able to put forward Members to go on to the Committees, and the Government were able to do the same. Those debates could take place. As the Leader of the House knows, some Bills, such as the Finance Bill, do not need to have witness sessions. They just involve line-by-line scrutiny, so they could easily have been done. I ask the Leader of the House to clarify that matter when he comes back to respond. I support the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands—in fact, I have added my name to them—and I will proudly vote for them on the basis that this is

about fairness and about true equality for all Members of this House, no matter what their reason for not being able to attend.

3.22 pm

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore). I entirely agree with the Government that remote scrutiny is inferior to Members of Parliament being here to do it directly. That is no criticism of those who have worked very hard to make a virtual Parliament work at all, but it is the reality of the ways in which Bills and Ministers are most effectively scrutinised. It is also to the Government's credit that they are seeking to restore the most effective scrutiny of themselves. In relation to those of us who can do so, I understand their preference that we conduct our scrutiny from here, but this debate and the amendments to the Government's motion are really about those colleagues who cannot be here, and specifically those who cannot be here because the Government have, for good and sensible reasons, told them that they should not be. For those colleagues, there is a strong case for preserving some means of virtual participation in our proceedings. I am grateful to have heard what the Leader of the House has already said about that, but I look forward to hearing more.

Surely the most fundamental part of our job is casting our votes. In that regard we should be most concerned with the most fundamental principles, and surely the most fundamental principle of all is that our votes in this place count equally, in our roles as representatives of our constituents. It cannot be right to exclude from decision making any Member against their will, unless it is done for reasons of principle or because it is unavoidable. Excluding those who would be here, were it not for the Government's instruction, cannot be right on principle. This is not the House taking disciplinary action against those who have broken rules—quite the reverse—and neither it seems to me is it unavoidable. Imperfect though of course it is, we do have a system of remote voting that we have tested and used over the past few weeks. Of course, it should be used only for this period of restriction, but while that period continues it remains the only way that those excluded from this place can vote. I do not believe, I am afraid, that the Government's solution is satisfactory. Pairing and slipping are exclusions from voting for which a Member has volunteered in most cases. The Members we are talking about today are not all volunteering to be excluded and to exclude their constituents from the process of legislative decision making. They are being excluded through no fault or wish of their own.

Karen Bradley: I apologise for intervening again, but my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) referred to me earlier as letting the genie out of the bottle. My point was that the public expect us to vote. The public expect us to be here. The public are looking at our voting record. We will be judged on our voting record. To say, "I took the decision at that point to allow myself to be paired" or that, "I was not able to do anything else other than be paired because of my medical condition," will probably not be sufficient for many of our voters.

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I understand my right hon. Friend's point, and I was going to go on to say that, although I understand the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), we are not, of course, as has just been said in the debate, dealing only with those who are ill. Some people are not ill but are being required—again I stress—by Government instruction to keep themselves away from this place. For those reasons, and with considerable regret, I cannot support the Government's approach on voting, and I will support the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley).

3.27 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Any right hon. or hon. Member who was in this House during our lengthy debates on our membership of the European Union after the referendum will be in no doubt that minds and votes were changed during those debates. I know that because, once or twice, mine were changed after a debate—sometimes with discussion. A Conservative Member who proposed an amendment actually voted against it after a debate. I suspect that there was a little arm twisting by the Whips. At the present time, we have, in this country, some of the most authoritarian legislation that we have ever had for reasons that are both understandable and credible. That means that, as a House, we have not been having that thorough full-blooded debate where people can change their mind and vote at the end of the debate. That means that the whole House has not been doing its job properly on this matter.

It has been suggested that Members want their constituents to know which way they have voted. If they have not been part of the debate, I do not really see the distinction between pairing and voting via an iPhone. The only distinction at the moment is whether it is recorded in *Hansard*. I take the point of the Leader of the House that he will discuss this with the Whips. If a pairing is recorded in *Hansard*, there is really no difference: constituents know where Members stand on the issue, even though it is not the exact equivalent of a vote.

The other matter I wish to raise in the brief time allowed is the number of people in the Chamber. The Government have said that they are following the science and the advice. Science is universal. The World Health Organisation recommends a distance of 1 metre. Other countries recommend 1.5 metres. We, together with a small number of countries, recommend 2 metres. There has been very little study on covid. The studies that lead to those distances, which are not universal, are on previous viruses, not this one. I urge the Government, partly for the sake of democracy and partly for the sake of getting the health issues right, to consider again and look to moving towards the recommendations of the World Health Organisation.

3.29 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I have a great deal of support for the view of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that debates held in this place without intervention are sterile and that we are failing to scrutinise the Government adequately. However, as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I have to endorse the comments of the shadow Leader of the House: these measures do not just look discriminatory—they are discriminatory.

Instantly, a number of groups with protected characteristics are excluded. Those who are pregnant or new mothers, or older Members, might be advised not to come here via public transport. The underlying health conditions of either Members or their families are, to be frank, none of our business, but they will be excluded, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) has been. I appreciate the lengths to which Mr Speaker has gone to ensure that we have adequate arrangements for queuing, but how suitable are they for people with disabilities, including hidden disabilities?

Covid has too often been described as a great leveller, in that anyone can catch it—we saw that from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—but its unequal impact is well documented. Older people, men, those from BAME backgrounds and those with underlying health conditions now have a very stark choice: stay at home and play no part in proceedings, losing your right to cast your vote on legislation, or come here and expose yourself and your family to greater risk.

I absolutely accept that this House is not our employer, but good employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that workers with disabilities and health conditions are not substantially disadvantaged. By taking away the ability to vote remotely, we are substantially disadvantaging those people. I would argue that the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) are, in fact, a reasonable adjustment, and for that reason I will be supporting them this afternoon.

3.31 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Leader of the House, in introducing the debate, suggested that we should deal in some facts, so for the benefit of the record, I want to state a few facts of my own. In order for me to get here today, it required a journey of 18 hours, starting with an aeroplane, a taxi, a normal train and four hours in Edinburgh waiting for a sleeper train that I picked up at 1 o'clock this morning to arrive at Euston at 8 am. I cannot and will not do that every week. Apart from anything else, the return journey will be 26 hours long and would require me then to go into self-isolation for 14 days—the only responsible way to live in a community such as mine. Having come here, I am here for the duration, because I cannot go back until it is safe to my family and my community for me to do so.

I do not tell the House that because I look for any sort of sympathy. After 19 years as a Member of Parliament, I have learned better than that by now. I am telling the House because I think it is important that this House should be a Parliament for the whole of the United Kingdom, and every part of the United Kingdom should be able to participate here. What the Leader of the House brings to us today is a recipe for us being a Parliament essentially of people who live within driving distance of London, and that is simply as unacceptable as it is dangerous. It is a downright disgrace for the Leader of the House, who sits in the interests of the supposed Conservative and Unionist party, to bring forward a measure of this sort.

I accept that there were real difficulties with the hybrid process and the stilted nature of the debate that we had in the virtual Parliament. But believe me, the

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

difficulties of the virtual Parliament are absolutely nothing compared with the difficulties that will come from the two classes of Member of Parliament that we will have as a consequence of the measures before us. When digital was the default option, it did not matter who was shielding. It did not matter who was able to move. Now it will become very obvious.

We know that it is only a matter of time before somebody who ought to be shielding and should not be here will find that there is some big incident in their constituency, and they will want to be here articulating the case of their constituents, because that is what we do. Inevitably, they will end up coming here when they should not, putting themselves, their family and their community at risk. It is not too late. The amendments tabled by the Chair of the Procedure Committee are good and sensible, and I entreat the House to accept them.

3.34 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Listening to the debate, I have to say that I have a new-found affection for the virtues of brevity, so I will keep my points very brief. I very much welcome the commitment of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to bring forward a motion ensuring that people can take part in scrutiny measures. However, I implore him to look at proxy voting for people because that seems to cover and resolve quite a few of the voting issues we have been discussing today.

3.35 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Some of the most respected Members of this House have been silenced by their inability to be here. I have spoken to some of them and asked for words to share so that their voices are heard in this debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) says:

“I was first elected to this House in 1974 and have always tried to maintain my attendance and voting record. Under ordinary circumstances I would have wanted to take part in the boundaries vote. I am appalled that it is the rules of this House that are preventing me from doing so.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) says:

“As shadow minister for disabled people, it’s outrageous that I can’t raise the important issues they face with Covid 19. They’ve felt like an after thought throughout this crisis, and this exclusion of my right to participate does nothing to dispel this belief.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) says:

“As the longest continuous serving MP on the opposition benches I am deeply disappointed that I am being denied the democratic opportunity to intervene in the debate and to cast my vote.”

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) says:

“I have been a loyal servant to my electorate and I am desperately disappointed that the House is stopping me from voting on behalf of my constituents. There is no need for this and it is deeply undemocratic.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) says:

“I cannot believe that colleagues from across the House with whom I have worked closely down the years are going to vote to

deny me and many other members of this House the democratic right to vote during this pandemic. The House should never discriminate against and disenfranchise colleagues in this”—

deliberate—

“way. It’s not fair to us and it’s not fair to our constituents.”

These Members—

3.36 pm

Ninety minutes having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the business of the House motion, the Speaker put the Questions necessary to dispose of the proceedings.

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes the debate and I am required to put the Question, but I have a short statement to make. As I said in my letter to colleagues last week, the House simply cannot conduct Divisions safely via the Lobbies. Any suggestion to the contrary, from whatever quarter, directly contradicts the best professional advice from Public Health England. The House is faced with a choice before it and must decide on it because the House has chosen to allow the remote Divisions and temporary orders to lapse. The Government alone control the Order Paper. If the House agrees to the motion as it stands, the voting method being used today will continue in use because it is the only method that is compatible both with the requirements set by the Government in their motion and with public health requirements.

I now call Karen Bradley to move the first selected amendment formally.

Amendment proposed: (d), leave out from “rescinded” to end and add:

“and:

(a) That the following order (Conduct of divisions) be made and have effect either until the Speaker states that the ordinary conduct of divisions and deferred divisions is consistent with relevant public health guidance and advice and with the legal duties of the House of Commons Commission and the Corporate Officer, or until the House otherwise orders:

Conduct of divisions

(1) Standing Orders Nos. 38, 40 and 41A (save as provided for in the temporary order of 22 April (Conduct of remote divisions)) shall not have effect;

(2) If the opinion of the Speaker or the chair as to the decision of a question is challenged, they shall direct that a remote division or, as the case may be, a remote deferred division, take place;

(3) Paragraph 1 and paragraphs 3 to 9 of the temporary order of 22 April (Conduct of remote divisions) shall have effect, and and

(b) That the following order (Participation in proceedings) be made and have effect from the hour the House sits tomorrow until 7 July 2020:

Participation in proceedings

(1) The Speaker may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any one time.

(2) Standing Order No. 7 (Seats not to be taken before prayers), No. 8 (Seats secured at prayers) and Nos. Standing Orders Nos. 83J to 83X shall not have effect.

(3) The provisions of Standing Orders No. 6 (Time for taking the oath), No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in bills etc), No. 57 (Presentation and first reading of public bills) and No. 154 (Time and manner of presenting petitions) shall have effect so far as the Speaker determines them to be consistent with the relevant

public health guidance; and the Speaker may order the practice of the House in respect of those orders to be varied to ensure compliance with the relevant guidance.

(4) Standing Order No. 24 (1) (Emergency debates) shall have effect with the omission of the words “the assent of not fewer than forty Members who shall thereupon rise in their places to support the motion, or, if fewer than forty Members and not fewer than ten shall thereupon rise in their places.”—(*Karen Bradley*.)

Mr Speaker: I am about to put the Question, That amendment (d) be made. My expectation is that this will give rise to a Division. When I have put the Question, if my decision is challenged, I will announce that the Division period has started. All hon. Members other than the Front Benchers and Tellers should leave the Chamber by the doors behind the Chair. I will not give the instruction to lock the doors earlier than 28 minutes after I call the Division.

Once the Division period has started, I will put the Question again almost immediately thereafter and name the Tellers. I ask a Teller from each side to inform me who is telling for this Division and then to position themselves in the Officials Box and the Under Gallery, but I have now got the names.

The process whereby Members state their names and say “Aye” or “No” at the relevant Dispatch Box is a proceeding and, like swearing in, will be broadcast. Members should not say anything else, and Members near the front of the queue should be aware that what they say may be picked up on the microphones.

I will not allow points of order to be raised while the voting and counting is in progress, as they will delay the Division. When a Division is complete, I will ask one of the Tellers from the winning side to announce the result from the ministerial Dispatch Box. If the second Division is expected immediately after the first, I will suspend the House for five minutes. Finally, I urge all hon. Members to be patient during the process and, in particular, to observe the requirements of social distancing.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 185, Noes 242.

Division No. 51]

[3.40 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Cadbury, Ruth
Ali, Rushanara	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Ali, Tahir	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Amesbury, Mike	Carter, Andy
Anderson, Fleur	Chamberlain, Wendy
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Charalambous, Bambos
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cherry, Joanna
Baldwin, Harriett	Clark, Feryal
Benn, rh Hilary	Clark, rh Greg
Blackford, rh Ian	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Blake, Olivia	Collins, Damian
Blomfield, Paul	Cooper, Daisy
Blunt, Crispin	Cooper, rh Yvette
Bone, Mr Peter	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Brabin, Tracy	Coyle, Neil
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Creasy, Stella (<i>Proxy vote cast by Peter Kyle</i>)
Brennan, Kevin	Crouch, Tracey
Brine, Steve	Cruddas, Jon
Brown, Ms Lyn	Cummins, Judith
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Cunningham, Alex
Buck, Ms Karen	Davey, rh Sir Edward
Byrne, Ian	David, Wayne
Byrne, rh Liam	

Davies-Jones, Alex	Mills, Nigel (<i>Proxy vote cast by David Rutley</i>)
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Moran, Layla
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Morden, Jessica
Doughty, Stephen	Morgan, Mr Stephen
Eagle, Ms Angela	Morris, Anne Marie
Eagle, Maria	Murray, Ian
Efford, Clive	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Elmore, Chris	Nandy, Lisa
Eshalomi, Florence	Neill, Sir Robert
Evans, Chris	Newlands, Gavin
Fletcher, Colleen	Nichols, Charlotte
Foy, Mary Kelly	Nokes, rh Caroline
Fuller, Richard	Norris, Alex
Furniss, Gill	Olney, Sarah
Gardiner, Barry	Onwurah, Chi
Garnier, Mark	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Osborne, Kate
Grady, Patrick	Owatemi, Taiwo
Gray, James	Owen, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Alex Norris</i>)
Green, Kate	Paisley, Ian
Greenwood, Lilian	Pawsey, Mark
Greenwood, Margaret	Pennycook, Matthew
Griffith, Nia	Percy, Andrew
Haigh, Louise	Perkins, Mr Toby
Hardy, Emma	Phillips, Jess
Harris, Carolyn	Phillipson, Bridget
Hayes, Helen	Pollard, Luke
Healey, rh John	Poulter, Dr Dan
Hendry, Drew	Powell, Lucy
Hill, Mike	Rayner, Angela
Hillier, Meg	Redwood, rh John
Hobhouse, Wera	Reed, Steve
Hollern, Kate	Reeves, Rachel
Hopkins, Rachel	Reynolds, Jonathan
Huq, Dr Rupa	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Jardine, Christine	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Johnson, Kim	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Jones, Darren	Selous, Andrew
Jones, Gerald	Shannon, Jim
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Siddiq, Tulip
Jones, Ruth	Slaughter, Andy
Jones, Sarah	Smith, Cat
Kane, Mike	Smith, Jeff
Kendall, Liz	Smith, Nick
Khan, Afzal	Sobel, Alex
Kinnock, Stephen	Spellar, rh John
Kyle, Peter	Starmer, rh Keir
Lake, Ben	Streeting, Wes
Lammy, rh Mr David	Stringer, Graham
Largan, Robert	Sultana, Sarah
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Tarry, Sam
Linden, David	Thewliss, Alison
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Lopresti, Jack	Timms, rh Stephen
Loughton, Tim	Tugendhat, Tom
Lynch, Holly	Twigg, Derek
Madders, Justin	Twist, Liz
Maskell, Rachael	Vaz, rh Valerie
Matheson, Christian	Vickers, Martin
McCabe, Steve	Watling, Giles
McCarthy, Kerry	Webbe, Claudia
McCartney, Jason	West, Catherine
McDonagh, Siobhain	Western, Matt
McDonald, Andy	Whittaker, Craig
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm	Wilson, Munira
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Winter, Beth
McGinn, Conor	Zeichner, Daniel
McGovern, Alison	
McKinnell, Catherine	
McMahon, Jim	
Mearns, Ian	
Miliband, rh Edward	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Karen Bradley and
Chris Bryant

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan (*Proxy vote cast by Eddie Hughes*)
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cartlidge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Eastwood, Mark

Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Levy, Ian

Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 Merriman, Huw
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary

Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stuart, Graham
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

**Stuart Andrew and
 Mr Marcus Jones**

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 261, Noes 163.

Division No. 52]**[4.26 pm****AYES**

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline

Argar, Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan (*Proxy vote cast by Eddie Hughes*)
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott

Bhatti, Saqib
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus

Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 Merriman, Huw
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria

Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel (*Proxy vote cast by David Rutley*)
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David

Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stuart, Graham
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stuart Andrew and
Mr Marcus Jones

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brine, Steve
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas

Buck, Ms Karen
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Kyle*)
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Davey, rh Sir Edward

David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doughty, Stephen
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Garnier, Mark
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Gray, James
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Haigh, Louise
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Mr Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast
 by Alex Norris*)
 Paisley, Ian
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, Angela
 Redwood, rh John
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Ady, Bell
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick

Timms, rh Stephen
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jeff Smith and
Chris Bryant

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the resolution of the House of 21 April (Proceedings during the pandemic) be rescinded and the following orders be made and have effect until 7 July 2020:

(1) That the following order have effect in place of Standing Order No. 38 (Procedure on divisions):

(a) If the opinion of the Speaker or the chair as to the decision on a question is challenged, the Speaker or the chair shall declare that a division shall be held.

(b) Divisions shall be conducted under arrangements made by the Speaker provided that:

(i) Members may only participate physically within the Parliamentary estate; and

(ii) the arrangements adhere to the guidance issued by Public Health England.

(2) Standing Order No. 40 (Division unnecessarily claimed) shall not apply.

(3) In Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions):

(a) At the end of paragraph (5)(a), insert “, provided that (i) Members may only participate physically within the Parliamentary estate; and (ii) the arrangements adhere to the guidance issued by Public Health England”.

(b) In paragraph (5)(b) delete “two and a half hours” and insert “at least two and a half hours”.

(c) In paragraph (5)(c) delete “after the expiry of the period mentioned in subparagraph (b) above”.

(4) The Speaker or chair may limit the number of Members present in the Chamber at any one time and Standing Orders Nos. 7 (Seats not to be taken before prayers) and 8 (Seats secured at prayers) shall not apply.

(5) Standing Orders Nos. 83J to 83X (Certification according to territorial application etc) shall not apply.

Parliamentary Constituencies Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Mr Speaker has selected the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and others. Under the provisions of the Business of the House (Today) motion, I will call a signatory of that amendment to move it at the conclusion of the debate.

5.6 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a great pleasure to open this debate. The purpose of the Bill is straightforward: to meet the Government's manifesto pledge of delivering updated and equal parliamentary boundaries, making sure that every vote counts the same. We will do so on the basis of 650 constituencies.

The principal legislative framework set out in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 remains in place. The Bill makes a small number of amendments to that in order to move us forward with some aspects of the timing and the process of future boundary reviews and, as I said, returning the number of constituencies to 650.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There is a fundamental flaw, which the Minister brought out for us in her very first paragraph. I think Ministers think that by trying to rejig the constituencies they will make every vote count equally. That is not true. The only way we can do that is by having a proportional electoral system. We could make every person count equally if we counted our boundaries not by the number of registered voters in a constituency but by the number of people, which is what every other country in the world does.

Chloe Smith: A huge chunk of what the hon. Gentleman proposes is out of the scope of the Bill, but in terms of what is in scope, I hope therefore that he will reject the Labour party's amendment, which goes against equalising the size of constituencies by arguing against the tolerance quota. I am sure he will consider that as he comes to vote tonight.

Let me pre-empt a question that might legitimately be asked: why are we doing this now, given the other challenges that are presented by the coronavirus? Of course, we absolutely rely on the electors of the UK to cast their vote and choose the Government of the day, and fundamental to that is the idea that each vote carries the same weight. We can achieve those equal votes only through a robust system of boundary reviews. They should be regular, thorough and impartial, and it is those reviews that provide us with updated and equal constituencies.

The last implemented update of Westminster constituencies was based on electoral data from the very early 2000s. That means that our current constituencies take no account of our youngest voters, and nor do they reflect nearly two decades of demographic shift, house building and migration. That cannot be right. The purpose of the Bill is to update those rules. It needs to do that so that the next review, which is due to start in early 2021, can proceed promptly and deliver, with some certainty, the updated and equal constituencies that the electorate deserves.

I will run through the main elements of the Bill. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, let me say at the outset that in doing this I have engaged extensively with interested parties, including representatives of the parliamentary parties and electoral administrators, to ensure that these proposals are as good as they can be.

As I mentioned at the start, the Bill will amend the existing legislation to ensure that we continue to have 650 parliamentary constituencies in the UK, as we do now. In order to achieve that, the Bill brings to a close the 2018 boundary review, without implementation. It removes the Government's obligation to bring those recommendations of the 2018 review into effect, because those proposals would take us down to 600 constituencies.

This is a change of policy from that adopted under the coalition Government. We have listened to views expressed across the House, including that of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and I am pleased that Opposition Members have stated their support for retaining 650 constituencies. We believe that the decision to move to 600 seats is no longer the right choice for the British public because circumstances have changed. In the past decade, the population has grown and we have, of course, left the European Union, which means that significant areas of policy and law making are coming back to all the legislatures of the Union, including the UK Parliament.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Although I welcome this damascene conversion to having 650 seats, the Minister will recall that it was not that long ago in the Committee of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill 2017-19—which was sponsored by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—that she denied that argument about powers coming back from Brussels. What has changed?

Chloe Smith: It is only a shame that we are not spending yet more time in that particular Bill Committee. I have particularly regretted the hours not spent in the company of the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who is sadly not in his place; we could have continued those most enjoyable conversations. In any case, a conversion on the road somewhere near Damascus is better than none, and it is right that we maintain that 650 constituencies. This will ensure effective representation for a growing population in the new era of self-government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that there are 1.2 million extra people on the registers across all four nations of the United Kingdom since they were done for the last boundary review; that is really good news. Given that huge increase, will she consider using the December 2019 date for the register, rather than a date in 2020, which would see the number drop because we are not able to run the canvasses across the country?

Chloe Smith: That is a really important point and a good argument. I will come to that shortly because it is, quite rightly, at the forefront of all our minds.

Let me first deal with the other two arguments that are put forward in Labour's reasoned amendment. It is a little disappointing to see those arguments, because all political parties really ought to be able to get behind

[Chloe Smith]

the Bill. It is the right thing to do and it is disappointing to see an attempt to block it, because we need to have equal and updated boundaries.

In Labour's 2019 manifesto, the party pledged to "respond objectively to future, independent boundary reviews."

The first two points in the amendment do not live up to that. The first says that the Bill concentrates power in the hands of the Executive. That is not true; the Opposition are wrong and I will go on to explain why. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has left his place, the second point in the amendment argues for less equal seats, and I cannot believe that there is a political party in this House that does not wish to see itself as following in the footsteps of the Chartists, seeking equal representation across the land.

I do not know how the Labour party does want to see itself, but it ought to reflect on what it said when it was last in government, as it agreed with the then Committee on Standards in Public Life that there was inequality of electoral quotas, which would erode equal representation. Labour did not change that, and it came to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in government later to put that right, bringing in the quota of plus or minus 5%. It is that which we maintain today in this legislation, and it is that which provides more equal seats and ought to be supported.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I agree broadly with the hon. Lady that equal representation between seats is really important, but we all know that from time to time different numbers of people register in different constituencies. When the first major boundary review took place in 1911, the boundaries were based on population census data and not on the whims of who had registered that year or not. Is there not a case now to go to that data, and then 5% possibly could be perfectly agreeable?

Chloe Smith: I understand the argument on census data, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting it, but I do not think it is the right thing to do. I am very happy to explain why, notwithstanding the perhaps obvious point that censuses are only every 10 years—they are on a different frequency to even the amended cycle we have here in front of us—so straightaway they are not suitable because of a different rhythm. There is an important point that we ought to recognise, which is that in a census a different group of people are counted. For example, censuses, naturally, count people who are not citizens and electoral registration must count those who are eligible to vote. That is an important distinction and I think it is right that we use electoral registers as the basis of the data. Another point on which we must all agree—I am confident that he does—is that we all ought to encourage everybody to be registered to vote, because that is the core answer to his point.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): When somebody from my constituency seeks my assistance, I will represent them whether they are a citizen or not and whether they are on the electoral register or not. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) makes a fair point. We represent everyone in our constituencies and surely the electoral register should be based on that number.

Chloe Smith: And so do I. And so does every single Member of Parliament in this House if they are working hard for their constituents. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman mangled his words at the end of his sentence or if he is making a different point, which is that the electoral register ought to be based on everybody whom he helps in his constituency. That could not be so, because that would, for example, put people who are not citizens of this country on the electoral register so I do not think that that is a good argument.

Let me turn to the other key changes in the Bill. It will introduce a longer boundary review cycle, with reviews taking place every eight years. We think an eight-year cycle will provide for the regular updating of constituencies, but without the disruption of constant change. The Bill will slightly shorten the timetable of the next boundary review by three months to two years and seven months. That is a one-off change which gives us the best chance of updated boundaries being in place ahead of the next general election, recognising that political parties, electoral administrators, electors and candidates need to know those boundaries in good time.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Can my hon. Friend just clarify the eight-year cycle? My concern is that with five-year Parliaments we will eventually end up with boundaries coming into effect a couple of months before an election and we will be unable to get the legal parts in place.

Chloe Smith: Yes, I am happy to do that. I think there are two points to that clarification. First, we calculate broadly that an eight-year cycle would give us a likelihood of two elections under one set of boundaries and then a third election on a changed set. It is that I to which referred when I said it gives a balance between change and continuity. It is important for constituents to know who their MP is and to do as they wish to do, which is to hold us all to account. Secondly, we operate very carefully to the Gould principle, which states that we should not make changes to electoral matters less than six months before the relevant election. That is a point of practicality. It is a pragmatic thing. It is something I always have in mind when working on elections with those behind the scenes as the Minister with responsibility for election policy. I can give my hon. Friend and the House an assurance that we want the principle to be in place here. There should always be a clear six months between changes to how elections are run and the running of elections.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Whenever the constituencies are altered, as they could well be, can the Minister give the House an assurance that constituencies will not change without the input of constituency associations, MPs and communities?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I certainly can, very straightforwardly. The public consultation elements of the legislation stay in place. We think that is very, very important, so that everybody the hon. Gentleman lists has that chance. There is ample public consultation where they will be able to put their views and help to get the right results for communities, which I think is very important.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I know this Bill is very much in its infancy and there is a long way ahead, but as I represent the largest geographical

constituency in England and Wales, it would be remiss of me not to point out that we need to consider the needs of rural communities. Our needs are stretched and our needs are different, so I urge the Minister to work closely with rural communities as we design this Bill.

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. As she rightly says, there are aspects of community that really come out when we are thinking of rural seats, just as they do in respect of urban and suburban seats. I know that all such arguments will be brought out to the Boundary Commissions as they undertake their work after this legislation passes. I can also reassure her that a specific point in the factors the Boundary Commissions have to use deals with particularly large constituencies, and that one remains the same. She may have it mind, although I do not think her neck of the woods gets quite to that size, but she will know the one I am referring to.

Let me return to the things the Bill changes. It will improve the timings of the public hearings that form part of that extensive consultation process I was just referring to. The hearings will be moved to a little later in the boundary review timetable so that they can be targeted to areas where interest is greatest. That often becomes clear only as a review gets going. The Bill will also improve the way the Boundary Commissions have to consider local government boundaries. They are one factor the commissions may take account of when they develop their proposals. Currently, they may consider only those local boundaries that have been implemented at a local council election prior to the start of a review. The Bill lets the Boundary Commissions take into account not only the local boundaries that exist at the beginning of the review, but prospective boundaries—ones that have been formalised in legislation but not yet used in an election. That measure will help to keep constituency boundaries better aligned with local government boundaries, for example, by taking into account forthcoming amendments to council wards in London, Wales, Wiltshire and Cornwall, should the orders for those areas be made by the time of the review.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): In London, a lot of boundary changes are taking place in my borough of Havering, but the pandemic has meant that they have been delayed—the decision has been delayed from December until early next year. Will the Minister confirm that that will not preclude us from using the new boundaries when we look at the constituency boundaries under this review?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I can confirm exactly that. My hon. Friend illustrates the point I have just made; the intention of that improvement is indeed to allow prospective local government boundaries to be taken into account.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: On local boundaries, in Brighton our average ward size is 10,000 whereas in Birmingham some of the ward sizes go up to 20,000. The difficulty of having only a 5% variance is that inevitably in urban areas we will have seats that are cut, confusion for the electorate and MPs often having to cover three council areas. Is there not a case for allowing the Boundary Commission at least to weigh up these things on an equal standing, rather than requiring them always to be subordinate to the numbers and not to the community?

Chloe Smith: I think the hon. Gentleman will find that that remains in the legislation that is already in place. I was going to come on to that in just a moment, giving the list of factors that must be taken into account, but I can assure him he will find what he asks for in that list.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I will listen to what she says next, and I will come on to this in my speech, but I just want to get her view on it. What is the reasoning behind trying to keep the boundaries within one local authority? My constituents, for example, have no idea what the boundaries of my constituency are and whether they are within the boundaries of North Yorkshire County Council, West Yorkshire or Leeds City Council. I want to probe her on why she thinks it is important to stay within local authority boundaries.

Chloe Smith: That is not exactly what I have said. What I will make clear in just a second is that there is a list of factors that the boundary commissions must have regard to in the determination. I am not saying that any one of those factors is better than the others, and neither are the boundary commissions. There is a list of factors set out in the existing legislation dating from the 1980s, and we are simply saying that we leave that as it is. He will find the answer to his concern there.

Let me talk about how the proposed constituencies will be brought into effect. It will be done automatically by an Order in Council, without debate or approval by Parliament. I know that this is of some interest to Members. The purpose of this change is to bring certainty to the boundary review process. It is to give confidence that the recommendations of the independent boundary commissions will be brought into effect without interference or delay. There will be no change to the Government's obligation to give effect to the recommendations of the boundary commissions. In fact, as part of this measure, the Secretary of State's current ability to amend the Order in Council if rejected by Parliament will be removed. The Executive's power will, if anything, be reduced.

If this Bill does not proceed today because it is blocked, as Labour Members want to do, they will leave more power in the hands of the Executive. Of course, they used that power—or, should I even say, abused that power—in 1969, when the Labour party intentionally blocked the independent boundary review's recommendations. We do not think that that is the kind of thing that should happen.

We think that, first and foremost, the boundary commissions are independent organisations. They develop their proposals through a robust and thorough process involving extensive public consultation. It is really important that their impartial recommendations are brought into effect promptly and with certainty. That avoids wasting public time and money, and it ensures the independence of the process. Countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand use similar approaches to those proposed in the Bill with no interference.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister has mentioned several times consultation by the boundary commissions, but if their scope is limited by a plus or minus 5% variation in the size of constituencies, local communities are wasting their time invariably in putting forward those arguments. Is it not more important that people who

[Clive Efford]

have common interests and live in a common, identifiable community vote together rather than to meet these tight constraints on the size of constituencies?

Chloe Smith: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's argument, but I think it is a really bad argument. It argues against having equal sized constituencies, which is fundamental. If we want to be able to say that we have a first-past-the-post system that operates as fairly and respectably as it can—as it does in the other countries that I just named, and as it ought to in this country—we need to have equality of seats. It is incredibly disappointing that the Opposition are arguing against that, and I do not really understand why they are. It goes with the other really poor argument in their reasoned amendment, which I just finished dealing with.

Andrew Rosindell: The Minister's point is absolutely correct—we do have to have balanced boundaries—but does she agree that that can be achieved by having smaller building blocks, like polling districts, rather than huge wards that change from one constituency to another? If the boundary commissions used smaller building blocks like polling districts, it would avoid communities being broken up.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We must have short interventions. A lot of people want to speak. I am sure the Minister will be winding up fairly soon, but if everybody wants to get in, Members should bear that in mind.

Chloe Smith: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I had better make progress and take no further interventions. I will endeavour to speak as quickly as I can to cover the remainder of the important content.

Let me turn to the permitted tolerance in electoral quota, which relates to the plus or minus 5% point that we have just touched on. The rules on that have been in place since 2011, and they provide that the boundary commission has to develop proposals on the basis that all constituencies are within a 10% range of the average constituency electorate. That is known as the electoral quota. As I have been saying, that is critical to achieving equal constituencies and to votes carrying the same weight. We have systemic inequality in some of our constituencies—I could give the examples, but I will let them be seen for themselves in some of the almanacs that we normally have around us. We know that there is a problem with unequally sized constituencies.

The existing law allows a few limited exceptions to the rules, including in respect of four protected constituencies which, because of their particular geographical circumstances, may diverge from the quota. In certain circumstances, the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland may propose constituencies that fall outside the range, and that is because of the fact that Northern Ireland represents the smallest discrete grouping of constituencies, so the Boundary Commission has less capacity in Northern Ireland specifically to meet the standard tolerance. We do not intend to add to those exceptions.

We are all absolutely passionate about representing our communities and our areas, and they all have distinctive natures—we all argue that and we all know

that in our hearts in respect of the areas we represent—but I return to the central point that we are trying to achieve parity of representation for all electors across the Union and within its constituent nations. We do not think that additional exceptions are necessary, because the 10% tolerance range gives the boundary commissions the flexibility that they need to do the job, and they do that by taking into account the other factors that are set out in the existing legislation and will remain in place, to which I have referred a couple of times already. Those factors include local ties; geographical features and considerations; existing constituency and local government boundaries; and inconveniences caused by proposed changes to constituency boundaries.

We believe that the 10% tolerance will continue to allow the boundary commissions to consult openly and fully on their proposals and to adjust their recommendations in the light of the responses that they receive. The three separate consultation periods give significant opportunity to communities—as well as others in the process, such as political parties—to comment on proposals. Responses can be made in a number of ways and they really do shape the recommendations. For example, in the most recent boundary review more than 50% of the proposals for constituencies in England were adjusted in the light of feedback, so there is flexibility in the process and it is routinely used successfully.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister therefore urge the boundary commissions to use common sense? In the most recent review, for example, they did not take into account many sensible things. In the proposals, the Cardiff bay barrage in my constituency was split between three different constituencies. Previous reviews had listened sensibly to different geographical requirements, and things like the most recent proposals simply do not make sense.

Chloe Smith: I can promise you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that that is the last intervention I will take, but it does give me the chance to say that the boundary commissions will listen to the debates in Parliament and will perhaps hear at a different level of detail the arguments that right hon. and hon. Members put. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's having said that; I am sure it will be listened to by those who operate the rules that we give them through the legislation.

Let me turn to the data, which is very important. Again, we do not intend to alter the long-established practice of reviews being based on the electoral register as updated by the annual canvass. The canvass is the process by which those who are registered to vote in an area are checked and verified every 12 months. Electoral data drawn from the registers in Scotland, Wales and England is further checked by the relevant agencies—the National Records of Scotland and the Office for National Statistics—and the collated information, including on Northern Ireland, is then published centrally by the ONS, so it is a complete and current picture of the situation in all four nations. From that point on, it is used by the boundary commissions. As a general rule, the data that comes after the annual canvass represents the most up-to-date, robust and transparent information source on which to base a boundary review.

Let me turn to the impact of coronavirus on this year's annual canvass, because it is very important. This is where the reasoned amendment tabled by Opposition

Members contains a good point. To state the obvious, it relates only to the immediate next review, rather than to the principles of the Bill. I assure the House that I have been looking at the issue for some time and am considering carefully the options for the next boundary review to be based, on a one-off basis, on an alternative dataset not affected by the coronavirus pandemic. I will update the House on that in due course. I hope that reassures right hon. and hon. Members that we will be able to return to the issue during the later stages of the Bill, thereby allowing us to take the time to observe the problem and get it right as a one-off this year.

In closing, let me give a further reassurance that I am working extremely closely with what we call the electoral community.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: I am trying to close so that Back-Bench Members can speak, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to cut into that time, he is welcome to do so.

Nick Smith: I thank the Minister for giving way, but her most recent remarks about which register the next boundary review will be based on were a bit ambiguous. Is she saying that it will be based on the 2019 numbers or the 2020 numbers to come?

Chloe Smith: It is a logical question. I have said that I will update the House in due course on that. I am looking at several options to get the most complete and accurate data for us to use in the boundary review this year. I am not seeking to avoid answering the hon. Gentleman's question, but I will be in a position to bring the information forward during the Bill's later stages, when I look forward very much to completing the reassurance I am giving the House that we want to use the best data that is unaffected by the pandemic. That stands slightly separately from arguments that perhaps he or other colleagues would like to make about other types of data that should be used. I am talking specifically about how to handle coronavirus. I know that he will understand that that needs to be kept in mind.

I was about to go on to say that I am in contact with the electoral administrators throughout the sector to see, up to the very latest moment, the challenges they face and how they can be dealt with in the publication of canvass data to give the best input to the Bill and for all the other purposes for which canvass data are used—mainly helping people to register to vote.

The Bill is very important. It is technical, but its goal is simple: to ensure 650 equal and updated constituencies. The people of the UK deserve fair votes and effective representation, and to have trust in and certainty about the boundary review process that delivers those things. I commend the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesperson, I give Back Benchers notice that I will impose an immediate time limit of five minutes.

5.37 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question and add:

"this House whilst supporting the retention of 650 parliamentary constituencies declines to give a Second Reading to the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill because the Bill would disproportionately and undemocratically concentrate power over constituency sizes and boundaries in the hands of the executive, because the Bill fails to create a more flexible electoral quota allowing greater consideration to be given to local ties and community connections when drawing constituency boundaries, and because the proposed numeration date for the boundary review of 1 December 2020 risks boundaries being based on an incomplete register owing to the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the preparation of electoral registers."

Every single one of us in the House today represents a constituency that has been drawn up based on the electorate data of nearly two decades ago. Twenty years ago, our country and our communities looked very different. Some of our communities have grown and others have seen population decline. Indeed, in that time, 2 million more electors have come on to the electoral roll and it is time we counted them when it comes to the constituencies we represent.

We hope that the review can be completed before the next general election and that there will be no further delay. After two shelved boundary reviews, the public will not want more taxpayers' money to be wasted on a review that does not see the light of day. We need a boundary review, and the Opposition stand ready to work with the Government on that if it is fair and the rules are not inserted or omitted on the basis of any perceived political advantage for any party.

The Bill must proceed with the aim of delivering a fair and democratic review. We want the new boundaries to reflect the country as it is today and ensure that all communities get fair representation. Those boundaries must also take into consideration local ties and identities.

I welcome the Government's decision to reverse their previous position of reducing the number of MPs to 600. As we have left the European Union and the work of the UK's 73 MEPs falls to this House, it would have piled a heavier workload on to fewer shoulders. More importantly, it would have handed further power to the Executive, because reducing the number of MPs while refusing to cut the size of the Government payroll would create a dangerous level of Executive dominance at the expense of Parliament and our democracy.

Welcoming the return to proposing 650 MPs brings me to the last two wasted reviews on the 600 figure. With two abandoned reviews, we are in a farcical situation with boundaries. While Tory Ministers argued with their Back Benchers, public resources flooded down the drain. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been wasted. The unfinished 2013 review cost British taxpayers £7 million. It wasted the time and expertise of the boundary commissioners in working towards a target that was destined to be scrapped, and the 2018 review was equally wasteful. In a written question, the Government estimated the cost at £8 million. The Government have not provided a recent figure on that, but I have given the Minister the opportunity to do so by tabling a written parliamentary question asking just that.

However, one of the biggest concerns that the Opposition has about the Bill is the Government's decision to end parliamentary oversight of the process. It is yet another

[Cat Smith]

attempt to diminish scrutiny over executive power. Parliamentary oversight is fundamental to the democratic passing of a Bill, and this Bill is no different. The Minister says that it is to stop MPs blocking new boundaries, but in the last Parliament it was her Government who never tabled that review for a vote, so we will never know the outcome of a vote that never took place.

The process of needing MPs to vote for the final report from the commission is an important safety net, because without it we would now have just 600 MPs here today. When the Government wanted to go back to 650, it was that safety net that allowed them to do so and make that happen, but removing parliamentary scrutiny is worrying for the future integrity of our democracy. This loophole allows a power grab, with no parliamentary backstop to limit the dominance of the Executive. The Government have not shown any regard for the primacy of Parliament. Indeed, the unlawful prorogation of Parliament is a case in point.

I note the remarks that the Minister made about the enumeration date in the Bill of December 2020. I am glad that she is looking at this, and I look forward to her update to the House, because after 20 years of delay, the boundaries must reflect the electorate with the best possible accuracy. I urge her to consider ditching the 1 December 2020 register in light of the unprecedented covid-19 crisis that we are currently living through. Our councils are working flat out to support our communities at the present time, and to ask them to undertake an annual canvass at a time of social distancing when they have stretched capacity risks that register being patchy at best. So I welcome the Minister's remarks and put on record my thanks for the hard work that all our councils are doing in supporting some of our most vulnerable residents at this time.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend agree that there may be a case to always link the register to the last general election? We know that that is a credible register. Other crises might come up in the future, and the Government will always have to be changing, whereas if the register is always based on the last election we will know that it is based on a mandate that people have exercised.

Cat Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that very sensible point. What he notes, of course, is that we see a spike in voter registration when we have a general or a local election. Of course, this year there are no elections because of the coronavirus crisis, but just six months ago we had a general election in this country and we know that the December 2019 register is incredibly accurate because we saw a spike in voter registration.

We are also aware that electoral registration officers are already expressing concern about the impacts that coronavirus will have on the December 2020 registers, and the prevailing opinion is that the annual canvass is likely to be impacted in some significant way. I urge the Minister to favour using the very recent general election data of December 2019. The Office for National Statistics released that data just last week, and we saw more than 1 million people register between December 2018 and December 2019, indicating that the December 2019 register is much more accurate than the December 2020 register will potentially be.

The fact that the data was published last week demonstrates the lag in collating that data. So if, for example, the Government were to continue to use the December 2020 register, commissioners would probably be waiting until May 2021 before they had collected that data from EROs and could get on with their work. Let us help the boundary commissioners begin their important work as soon as possible by using the data published last week, which we already have, relating to December 2019 and the general election.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Member accept that one of the key issues is to ensure that the electoral officers are properly sourced, supplied and located across the various constituencies? One of the problems in the last election was that because there had been a refurbishment and, indeed, a reduction in the number of election officers, there were errors in sending out people's polling cards and some people did not know who in their household could vote. Does she agree that this is a good opportunity to ensure that electoral officers are properly supplied and in the right locations?

Cat Smith: I thank the hon. Member for giving me the opportunity to put on record my concerns about the overstretched nature of electoral returning officers in our councils right across the country. Cuts to local government have not protected electoral returning officers and the resources that they are working with.

Turning to the issue of the electoral quota, I know that Members across the House will want to highlight their concerns about the impact of this boundary review on communities in their constituencies. Community has never been stronger than during these troubling months. Right across the country, we are seeing communities come together to support vulnerable people, and now more than ever, community connections must be valued and respected. However, the restrictive 5% quota tolerance in the Bill flies in the face of protecting community ties. I know that many of my Welsh colleagues are planning to speak this afternoon, and they will highlight some of the geographical challenges the quota throws up—by which I mean mountains dividing constituencies. In Devon and Cornwall, the Government have repeatedly ignored the historic and proud identities of those counties. Boundaries based on strict numbers that ignore identities do not carry community support, as we have seen with the so-called Devonwall seats in the last review. Will the Minister ensure that there is no Devonwall seat in this Bill? I suspect that Cornish MPs might want to table an amendment to protect Cornish identity. If they were to do so, would the Minister back them?

As the Minister knows, there is consensus among respected experts such as Ron Johnston, David Rosser and Charles Pattie, who agree that the 5% rule causes significant disruption to community boundaries. Indeed, they concluded that the substantial disruption on the map of constituencies in the aborted sixth review was not entirely the result of the reduction of the number of MPs from 650 to 600; their report showed in detail that disruption was caused by the introduction of the uniform national quota and the 5% tolerance. I commend to the Minister the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which suggests a 7.5% quota. Communities across the UK will

be more representative if a wider quota is introduced. Why is the Minister refusing to accept the evidence and introduce a quota that would be better for everyone?

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Is this not an example of the prayer of St Augustine—grant me chastity and continence, but just not yet? If we are going to do this, let us do it right and let us do it now. The hon. Lady is making an argument for perpetuating inequity.

Cat Smith: I completely dispute the hon. Member's argument; that is absolutely not the case. I am very keen that the Government should be able to get on with this boundary review. I want new boundaries to be in place ahead of the next general election, because at the moment we stand in this House representing constituencies based on data that is two decades old. We should absolutely move on from the status quo, but I am saying that we should ask for a quota of 7.5%, because we could then keep community ties together and represent constituencies that actually look like the communities we stand here and claim to represent.

Alec Shelbrooke: The hon. Lady has come on to the 5%, rather than moving on from that, but the OSCE standard around the world states that there should be a variance of no more than 10% from constituency to constituency if there is to be a fair election. Would the hon. Lady like to develop her argument in relation to that international standard?

Cat Smith: The Opposition recognise the need for constituencies to be broadly as equal as possible, but anyone who stands up in this House and says that they truly believe that all constituencies should be equal should look at the data from December 2019. If we were to take that data on how the electorate looked and say that every constituency had to be exactly equal, every constituency would have to have an electorate of 72,613. Not 72,614 or 72,612—those figures would be outside the quota. There will always need to be a variance, and it is a question of striking a balance between having constituencies that are broadly equal and constituencies that represent their community ties.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): The amendment does not mention 7.5%. If that is Labour party policy, would it not lead to a situation where there could be two constituencies side by side with a 15% difference in their numbers, thereby totally undermining the argument that every vote should have equal weight?

Cat Smith: The 7.5% I drew attention to is in the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), so if the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) wants to know where the figure comes from, I suggest he speaks to his hon. Friend.

I am conscious that you want to get all Back Benchers into this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are many aspects of the Bill that make sense and that we welcome—for example, giving the boundary commissioners more flexibility to use local government and ward boundaries that are yet to come into force. We also welcome the move to hold reviews every eight years. The longer cycle will limit the disruption caused to parliamentary constituencies, potentially resulting in savings, but ensuring that MPs remain accountable to

their constituents, so that we are not elected to this place and our constituents are never given a chance to hold us to account in a further election.

I look forward to hearing the contributions from all Members to this important debate. It is time for a democratic boundary review, and the Labour party will not stand in the way of that. However, the Bill must not strengthen the power of the Executive at the expense of Parliament. I hope the Minister will consider changing the numeration date, given the extraordinary circumstances of covid-19.

5.51 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am aware that boundary changes can make a difference to MPs and their prospects. When the boundary changes came in before the 1997 election, the ones proposed in my former seat were the best possible for me, but adverse—I would have stood and lost.

At the last moment, there was a deal between the Tory leader of Greenwich Council and the Labour leader to bring in the worst possible ones, so there was a major boundary change that allowed the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) to be elected, having not succeeded the previous time—although there is a rumour that in the previous election he held a victory party at 10 o'clock and then had to come and hear my victory speech.

The self-interest when people consider these matters is epitomised by the background paper written by the Liberal Democrats in 1982. They wanted to have multi-member constituencies, with the exception of the Orkneys and Shetland, Isle of Wight, and probably Isle of Ely as well—all three Liberal-held constituencies.

In the same way, people look at the article by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, published in *Parliamentary Affairs*, volume 47, issue 3, in July 1994, in which they describe very calmly what the Labour Government tried to do in 1969, which was put through primary legislation to avoid the boundary commission proposal being implemented.

When the House of Lords blocked that, the Government were not going to take any action at all until court action forced the then Home Secretary, James Callaghan, to put it to the House of Commons; and then they had a three-line Whip on Labour Members to vote against the boundary changes. I regard that as showing that some people look at these matters in the light of self-interest.

If we had made the change to 600 MPs, the Worthing constituencies—that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and my own—would not have changed; we had the right number of electors. I would be disappointed if, with 650, there had to be changes, but I doubt they would be very significant.

However, the next time we have a Bill like this one, the Government may want to consider whether they really want to say to the Electoral Commission that the number has to be exactly 650 or 600-and-something, or whether they could allow a margin of appreciation if that would help to solve a particular problem. Last time, the Isle of Wight argument resulted in two proposed seats; that sort of flexibility could be useful. I am not saying that we should change the Bill now, but when we consider what to do in the future, we should do that.

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

My last point is perhaps the most important one. We ought to use the electoral register as the Government propose, but much, much more effort should go in to making that register full.

I have attended various discussions over the years in which people say we should use mobile phone records and other ways of checking and double checking, and actually inviting people to come on to the register, and saying that if they do not, they are not complying with the regulations and the law.

I hope that people will realise that going on the electoral register is right, necessary and helpful. Then, we will not have to face the argument that we ought to use a previous general election register, which with five-year Parliaments or anything like that would be three, four of five years out of date, instead of being as up-to date as possible.

Each of us has a great relationship with our constituents and our constituencies, I would like to mention an NHS hero, the Reverend Father Dr Biji, who for many years was the vicar of the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox church in Harold Hill in Romford, who was also a hospital chaplain on the south coast, and who has sadly died. In his memory, I use the words on his church website, which come from John 10:11:

“The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep”.

5.55 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am glad to see that the Lord President of the Council is back in his place, because I want to put this on the record in relation to this afternoon’s conduct. We were told we were coming back to the House so that we would have more time for parliamentary and legislative scrutiny, but rather ironically the time we have for this debate has been curtailed by chewing up the best part of two hours to vote. I want to let the Leader of the House reflect on that.

Coming into the Chamber today gave me a sense of déjà vu. That is not because it is the first time I have been back in Parliament since lockdown started, but because I feel that we have been debating boundaries for many years now.

It is genuinely a delight to be Front-Benching today alongside the Minister and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), because in the last Parliament the three of us spent what felt like a huge portion of our lives on the Public Bill Committee that considered the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, which was brought forward by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). I would be willing to wager that it is the only Bill in parliamentary history where all three Front Benchers went away and had children during the consideration of the Bill. However, little Rosamund, Eli and Jessica now have the dubious title of being children of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill.

While the Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton fell during not one, but two Prorogations—one of which was deemed unlawful—it was certainly helpful in setting down a marker for where we are at today. His Bill sought valiantly to fight off plans from the Government to reduce the number of seats in this House from 650 to 600. As many of us argued back then, reducing the number of MPs, particularly with new legislative powers

coming back from Brussels, would have been a bonkers proposal and flies in the face of the argument about cutting the cost of politics, particularly given the ever-expanding House of peers along the corridor.

I genuinely welcome the U-turn made by the Government to stick to 650 seats, although I say again to the Government that if they are genuinely interested in constitutional reform and want to slim down the size of the UK legislature, some of us would be very glad to see 59 fewer seats in the House when Scotland becomes independent.

I am glad that the Government have seen sense and abandoned the proposal to cut the number of MPs with the implementation of new boundaries. The boundaries do need reviewing and on that the Minister will find cross-party support. Indeed, my current constituency boundaries have been in place since I was 15 years old, and the constituency has seen significant house building since then. One street in my constituency—Sword Street—has three Members of Parliament. Like the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, I disagree profusely with elements of the Bill, and for that reason the SNP will support the reasoned amendment in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

My first and immediate concern with the Bill relates to Scottish representation in the House. As I alluded to earlier, Scotland currently is entitled to 59 seats in Parliament. Although many of us would not wish to see Scotland being governed from London at all, that is the current constitutional reality for now. Based on the proposed electoral quotas, we would probably see Scotland going down by two or three seats to the advantage of England, which strikes me as being wholly unfair.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the electoral quotas proposed in the Bill risk reducing representation in rural Scotland even further, particularly in the highlands? I already face a 110-mile round trip to conduct my advice surgeries. My colleagues have to travel on small boats and go to overnight stays to conduct their duties in their constituencies. The quota proposals are a real risk for the representation of people in Scotland, particularly in rural areas.

David Linden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. He has put that on record, and it rather serves to reinforce the view that when legislation is drafted up in the Cabinet Office by Ministers, they take no cognizance at all of the situation in rural Scotland, from where Members of Parliament, such as him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), have had to travel for probably the best part of a day to get here—some of that just within their own constituencies. It is a point well made and something that the Government would do well to reflect upon.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): When the hon. Gentleman speaks about constituencies and large areas, he will obviously be aware of the Scottish Parliament, where regional Members in the Highlands and Islands represent 44% of the landmass of Scotland, which is bigger than Belgium. The Parliament he is so keen that all Scottish representatives should go to currently has a system that is represented by MSPs covering large geographical areas.

David Linden: I am afraid that on this one the hon. Gentleman is at risk of comparing not just apples and oranges, but apples and avocados. He knows quite well that the Scottish Parliament has a system whereby there are constituency Members of the Scottish Parliament and regional Members of the Scottish Parliament. I am afraid that he is conflating two issues, and perhaps doing so deliberately.

As I say, based on the current electoral quotas, we would probably see Scotland going down by two or three seats. That would be to the advantage of other parts of the UK, which seems wholly unfair. It certainly does not ring true with what people in Scotland were told in 2014, during the independence referendum. Back then, we were told that we should lead the United Kingdom in the event of a no vote. On the contrary, we have probably never felt more excluded, more isolated and ignored in the UK, as has certainly been highlighted by the Brexit process.

To be clear to the Minister, we must remain with 59 seats in Scotland. I think any Member of Parliament who represents Scotland in this House should be getting behind that argument, regardless of party. However, the Government are not guaranteeing that at the moment, so I will seek to push this by way of amendment when the Bill goes upstairs to the Committee corridor.

Secondly, I want to turn to clause 7 of the Bill, and in particular the enumeration date, which causes difficulties for us. The registration numbers are clearly a little off at the moment, and I would expect registration in Scotland to increase next year as we approach a Scottish Parliament election, so I am concerned about the cut-off date of December 2020. I appreciate what the Minister has said about going back and reviewing that. We will certainly hold the Government's feet to the fire on that in the Public Bill Committee.

Thirdly and finally, I am deeply concerned about the provision in clause 2(3), which I believe is a power grab, removing the role of both Houses of Parliament. It was not that long ago that Ministers, including the Lord President of the Council, spent huge amounts of time talking about the sovereignty of Parliament, saying that Parliament is sovereign and Parliament has taken back control, yet clause 2(3) specifically removes the role of both Houses of Parliament. Frankly, it is alarming to see the Executive trying to grab power over boundaries, which has led in places such as America to nonsensical partisan electoral maps. Any Members who want to do a bit more research on that should just look at the 4th congressional district of Illinois, which is frankly gerrymandering on steroids.

The Government's explanatory notes for the Bill gloss over the fact that boundaries will "no longer be subject to any parliamentary procedure or approval", instead being in the gift of the Cabinet Office and its Ministers. That is fundamentally an Executive power grab.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I am listening carefully to the points the hon. Gentleman is making powerfully, but does he not accept that with our parliamentary system, in which the governing party will normally have an overall majority, this is the reverse of that? It is moving power away from the Government-controlled House of Commons and giving it to an independent Boundary Commission. Personally, I have

confidence in it: I have not had problems with its proposals in the past, even when they have disadvantaged my party.

David Linden: The one flaw in that argument is that in the last Parliament the Government started with a majority, and the majority disappeared. I do not think it happens to be a bad thing that we put things in front of Parliament, and if Parliament does not want them, it rejects them. I think all of us who served in the last Parliament remember the inconvenience of that and the stress that it caused the Government. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman, who I understand is a Brexiteer, cannot have his cake and eat it. He cannot say that Parliament is sovereign and Parliament should be taking back control, and then bring forward legislation that removes the role of Parliament. That, I am afraid, is a massive contradiction.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way once again. Under these proposals, the reviews will only be carried out every eight years. That would take no account of cities such as Inverness, which I represent, where we have had exponential growth in the estimated total of population. It is now sitting at 64,000, and only today it has been highlighted in *The Inverness Courier* as the fastest growing city in Scotland. If that is given away, there is no ability to adjust those things.

David Linden: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Again, the Government must go back and look at this matter.

I want to come back to that point about the size of constituencies, because the Bill does not address the fact that it still allows for constituencies of up to 12,000 square kilometres. That is about eight times the size of Greater London, which has 73 MPs, with much more challenging transport links. We will seek to amend that in Committee. I hope the Government will not just use their majority to ram the Bill through, because a majority in Parliament does not mean a monopoly on wisdom.

This Second Reading debate provides an opportunity to comment on the principles of the Bill, which I have now dealt with, but, while we are on this topic, I want to speak more broadly about electoral reform. We have the opportunity now to look again at some of the injustices within our political and electoral system—perhaps we could even call it levelling things up. A new Parliament means another opportunity to test the will of the House on votes at 16, leaving behind the broken first-past-the-post voting system, which, although it has benefited me, is morally wrong and something that we need to look at again. We also need to look at abolishing the tainted House of Lords. These are issues that fall within the remit of the Minister at the Dispatch Box, for whom I have great personal respect. Although we have had disagreements about the merits of reducing the number of seats from 650 to 600, I genuinely believe that she is someone who listens and considers an argument on merit. When she had clearly done that, she came back to the House with a revised number of 650 seats.

Although I accept that the Bill will probably pass Second Reading, I very much hope that, when it goes upstairs to Committee, we can make the necessary changes to ensure that Scotland has proper representation and sensible, up-to-date boundaries that are fit for purpose for so long as we need to be here.

6.6 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and I also welcome the Bill. As the Minister will know, Northern Ireland currently has 18 parliamentary constituencies and it is our view that that should continue to be the case. If one looks at the 2019 register used for the general election, they will see that, certainly, 18 seats are justified on the basis of a UK-wide quota. Indeed, the previous Bill introduced in the last Parliament proposed that Northern Ireland should continue to have 18 seats. Therefore, the main purpose of a Boundary Commission in Northern Ireland at this time will be to examine the disconnect between the local government ward boundaries, which were reviewed under the reform of local government in Northern Ireland and which have been in place now for the past couple of Parliaments, and the current parliamentary boundaries in Northern Ireland, which are based on the previous local government ward boundaries. In my constituency, for example, the village of Dunmurry is in the Lagan Valley constituency but it is also part of the new ward in Belfast City Council. Therefore there is a disconnect between the local government ward and the parliamentary ward, which causes confusion for people when they are voting at two elections, as often happens in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: It is very important that the constituencies are named, and named correctly, so that people can recognise those constituencies in terms of who they represent. In Northern Ireland, we are very blessed to have 18 constituencies, which our constituents seem to understand and recognise. Does he agree that the naming of the constituencies, wherever they may be across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is very important so that they can be recognised by people?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I dare anyone to try to change the name of the Strangford constituency, because they will incur the wrath of my hon. Friend in at least 10 Adjournment debate interventions.

There are indeed some variations in the electoral quota of constituencies in Northern Ireland, which will need to be corrected. The largest constituency in Northern Ireland in terms of electorate is Upper Bann, with a current electorate of 82,887. The smallest constituency is that of East Antrim, with an electorate of 64,830. There is a disparity between the two electorates of almost 20,000. It is with good reason that Northern Ireland continues to enjoy the added flexibility of the 10% variation on the quota, given our distinct geographical circumstances and given the fact that there are limitations to what changes you can make in a place such as Northern Ireland, which has a land frontier with another country. Therefore, we welcome the Government's commitment to maintain that added flexibility for Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the need to bring more constituencies within that 10% tolerance. Almost half the seats in Northern Ireland are within the 5% tolerance of the UK quota, and a further five are within 10%, so it is only six of the 18 seats that are currently outside the 10% tolerance that will need to be brought back into line.

Andrew Rosindell: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that to keep within that tolerance, it is sometimes better to use small building blocks, such as polling

districts, rather than wards? In that way, it can be done much more successfully than creating bigger areas and will help to keep communities together.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and the interest he takes in Northern Ireland. He will be interested to know that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland seems to have conspired to create polling stations that are almost exclusively a single ward anyway, and that we no longer really have polling districts that are different from the wards, in terms of where people vote, and the division and subdivision of wards. That is the nature of our local government electoral system. However, I take his point and it brings me on to my next point, which has been mentioned by other right hon. and hon. Members, and it concerns the importance of ensuring that communities have an affinity with the constituency that they represent. We really do not want to see a boundary commission splitting villages between two constituencies. That is entirely wrong. It goes to the heart of our parliamentary democracy that communities have an affinity with their constituency and their Member of Parliament, and I hope that that kind of flexibility can be included within the arrangements.

We also welcome the fact that the next boundary review, following the completion of this one, will be eight years on. I think that that is a good thing. It gives us a degree of continuity and ensures that we have approximately two Parliaments between boundary reviews. It is a sensible arrangement that we support.

I note what the Minister said in relation to datasets in Northern Ireland. Our canvass has been postponed to 2021, and our view is that the general election datasets are the most accurate, because more people register in Northern Ireland—as I am sure is the case across the UK—for a general election. Therefore, the December 2019 dataset is very accurate. I commend that to the Minister's thinking as she considers the options available to her. I echo the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made earlier that we should consider making that the norm for datasets and looking to the previous general election, unless there is some exceptional reason why we would not.

The new boundaries in Northern Ireland will also apply to the Northern Ireland Assembly because, of course, our electoral system means that in each of the parliamentary constituencies, we elect five Members of the Assembly by proportional representation. On the current timeframe for the review, it is unlikely that the changes will be in force in time for the next Assembly election scheduled for 2022, but it is worth bearing in mind that this is relevant not only to parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland, but to an Assembly election.

Finally, I say again that we welcome the retention of 650 seats for the UK. Given the extra responsibilities that this Parliament will have post Brexit, we believe that that is the right approach and it is one that we fully support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do not want to stop the cut and thrust of debate, but I remind right hon and hon. Members that interventions possibly have the effect of stopping not only others, but oneself from speaking, because there are a lot of people who want to get in on the debate. That is just a gentle reminder.

6.13 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I rise to speak on behalf of the people of Moray. I am very attached to my constituency, which is coterminous currently with the Moray Council boundary, which is a council that I represented originally from 2007 until 2017 and then subsequently for three more years on my election to this place. I also accept that two decades is a long time to go without any discussion, debate or consultation on the boundary of Moray and the other 649 seats represented in this Parliament. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said that he was 15 when the last boundary changes were made in his seat. While I was not 15, I was not old enough to vote in Moray the last time the boundaries were changed, so I think this is important. We have heard so far in this debate, and I am sure we will continue to hear, cross-party support for the need to look at the boundaries.

I listened intently, and I will look at amendments tabled by the hon. Gentleman in the Bill Committee on maintaining the 59 seats in Scotland, but we cannot ignore the fact that the average Scottish constituency has 67,200 electors, which is 5,000 fewer than the average English constituency has. It is important that there is equality across the whole of the United Kingdom—

David Linden *rose*—

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman wants to come in, and I will allow the intervention but will not use the time that is added on for me.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman will know that there are particular constituencies in Scotland, namely Orkney and Shetland, and the Western Isles, where there is a reason why there are smaller numbers. The figure he has quoted is therefore perhaps inaccurate; it is artificially different because of those island constituencies.

Douglas Ross: I accept that point, and it is therefore important that the Government proposal respects the two constituencies that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned—Orkney and Shetland, and Na h-Eileanan an Iar. In supporting this Bill on Second Reading and throughout the process, it is important that we recognise the geographical implications of those island communities that are represented here.

However, since the hon. Gentleman makes the point of comparing constituencies, I add that his Glasgow East constituency has an electorate of just over 67,000, yet my Moray constituency has an electorate of over 71,000, so there are variances in constituencies within Scotland as well, and it is important that we look at that going forward.

I welcome the fact that these boundaries will be reviewed on an eight-yearly basis. As I have said, the last review was two decades ago, which is a long time. Given my own circumstances in the past seven days and my own movement throughout politics in this Chamber and in this Government, I have come to consider the phrase “a week is a long time in politics” a lot; if a week is a long time in politics, two decades—20 years—is a lifetime, and I do not think it is right that we continue to represent constituencies that were made up before I could vote and certainly before the hon. Member for Glasgow East could.

I want to praise a group of people who are often unsung heroes in each of our constituencies: our local election staff. They do a power of work, and not just on elections—and sometimes elections that are not timed at the best time of year for many people. In Moray, we have an outstanding team, with our returning officer Denise Whitworth and our elections team headed up by Moira Patrick and Alison Davidson. They work all year round to ensure that the democratic decision of people in Moray and in constituencies across the country is heard. It is right that we recognise that they put in a lot of work not just during an election campaign and the count, which is always important to us, but all year round. Whether in by-elections, in updating registers, or in ensuring that people have a voice and continue to be heard, the work they do is crucial.

I was encouraged to hear the point made by the Minister—who has done an outstanding job on the Bill so far, and I am sure will continue to do so—about the improved timing of the public hearings. I have been involved in public hearings for boundary commissions, and they may not be the sexiest thing for people to go along to, but people are engaged; they are very connected with their local constituencies. Whether it is a constituency's name, a constituency's boundaries or the fact that a line drawn somewhere pleases some and displeases others, it is right that they have the opportunity to express their views. While they may not be happy with the final outcome, they feel franchised and involved in the process up to that point.

I welcome the cross-party support we have heard so far during the debate, but I am left confused by the Labour position. Although the shadow Minister made a good speech, having listened to it I am unsure what the Opposition are calling for in the reasoned amendment they will be pressing to a Division. Are they calling for 7.5% tolerance, because that is in the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)? In response to an intervention, the shadow Minister could not tell us if that was the Labour party position. The 7.5% figure has been proposed from the Dispatch Box but they are not saying whether that is the Labour party position. I hope that during the course of the debate, and perhaps in summing up, we get more information on that, because whether it is 5% or 7.5%, or, as others have said, the international standard of 10%, we are always drawing a line somewhere and people will not be happy just over or under one side of that line. It is important that we have that clarification from the Opposition, because that point was left hanging in the opening remarks.

I was keen to get involved in this debate because it was another opportunity to mention Moray. In some way or another, Moray will continue after the next boundary change. It is important that we can all take this Bill forward and support it on Second Reading, and I look forward to seeing its future progress through the House.

6.20 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for her vital work in persuading the Government to U-turn on the vital issue of how many MPs there should be. It is absolutely right that we should remain at 650. Reducing the number to 600 would have

[Stephen Kinnock]

reduced MPs' ability to properly fight our constituents' causes, particularly at a time when Brexit will increase the amount of legislative work that we do in this place; it would have created a significant and unfair advantage for the Conservative party, given how the new borders would probably have fallen; and it would have driven a coach and horses through the geographical logic of dozens of constituencies. I am proud of my party and our Front Benchers for securing that vital U-turn.

Nevertheless, I have a number of serious concerns about the Bill, which is why I will vote for the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. First, I have grave reservations about the proposal that the variance should be limited to 5% higher or 5% lower than the average constituency size of 72,600. That gives the boundary commissions a ridiculously small amount of leeway, which will inevitably lead to some ludicrous consequences. The unnecessarily narrow margin will split long-established communities from one another, erode local identities and divide neighbourhoods.

Many of our constituencies are built on strong local bonds. If they were not, we might as well name every constituency from one to 650 and be done with it. My constituency is a case in point. The valleys villages are linked to town hubs by local transport routes. For instance, the Afan valley connects directly to Port Talbot, while the Neath valley links with Neath town centre. A boundary change would split either of those pairings, with the geography of the area meaning that a constituent may have to travel miles to see their MP and may not know which of the two local MPs to contact about a particular issue.

This kind of painting by numbers approach to the boundary review would erode trust in our democratic processes. Polling shows that trust in politicians and politics is worryingly low, so breaking our historic communities up along artificial lines would be utterly self-defeating. I therefore urge the Government to increase the electoral tolerance from plus/minus 5% to either 7.5% or 10%. I think this issue needs to be hammered out in Committee—I would like to see detailed proposals on it—but plus/minus 5% is clearly too low.

My second concern is about parliamentary oversight. If we want to protect our democracy, why will the Government not allow the boundary commissions' changes to be brought back to Parliament for it to scrutinise? This is nothing short of a constitutional outrage, but it should come as no surprise; we have seen how the Prime Minister likes to play fast and loose with democratic principles. We saw his Prorogation of Parliament last year—not once but twice. The first was deemed illegal, and during the second he misled not only Parliament but the Queen. We also saw his reluctance to allow scientific advisers to answer perfectly legitimate questions at the 5 pm press conference last Tuesday.

There is the potential for gerrymandering. The process is too opaque, and there are concerns and scepticism about the possibility of pressure being applied by the Government on the boundary commissions. If the Government have confidence in this process, why will they not allow Parliament to scrutinise the final proposals?

The final point I would like to make is about which electoral register will be used to reshape the constituencies. The Government say that they will use the register as it

stands from 1 December 2020, but there is a danger, with the pandemic and the recovery absorbing so much focus, that people may drop off—particularly students—and the lists may not be an accurate representation of numbers. It would make far more sense, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood made clear, to use the electoral register from the 2019 general election, to have more accurate data.

I hope the Government will heed the concerns of myself and others. We cannot allow arbitrary lines to divide our communities. We must complete this process in a truly democratic manner by debating the final changes in both Houses, as is customary, and we must use the most accurate data available.

6.25 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): We all know that boundary changes are long overdue. We have all heard about the anomalies around the country, with some seats knocking on 80,000 to 90,000 electors, and others having only 40,000 to 50,000 electors. That cannot be right. The debate should be about what will happen later, when we are rowing with the boundary commission about its recommendations for our particular area, rather than the principle of changing the boundaries. This is all about fairness. It is about ensuring that, when you go to a polling station on election day, your vote is as worthy as that of somebody else in a neighbouring constituency. That seems to be the basic principle behind this.

I very much agree with what the shadow Minister said about the principle of changing from 600 seats to 650 seats. It is a welcome measure, because since that policy was introduced by the coalition Government, we have had the Brexit referendum, when it was decided that we were going to be leaving the European Union. As a consequence, more laws will be dealt with here, requiring more scrutiny in this House, as opposed to the European Parliament. It would seem odd to have fewer MPs here trying to scrutinise more legislation.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Surely keeping 650 seats will make it easier to keep communities together, rather than split them up. One of the problems with the proposal of 600 seats was that communities were split up, and communities are the basis of our constituencies.

Gareth Johnson: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point, because having 650 Members of Parliament means that we represent fewer constituents.

The Labour party manifesto had only one clear commitment about boundary changes, and that was to have 650 seats. They have got that, and yet still they want to refuse to give the Bill a Second Reading, even when they have been successful on the main policy in their manifesto on boundary changes.

I agree with the Labour party that, had we stuck with the original policy and gone back to 600 MPs, we would have seen a decrease in the size of the legislature, but the Executive would have stayed the same size. That is a valid argument for saying that there would be a disproportionate impact on the House if we went back to 600 seats. But that is not happening, and I therefore find it slightly odd that we are not seeing some support from the Labour party.

We have been accused of not paying enough interest in local communities by not having an electoral quota of plus or minus 7.5% or 10%—I am not quite sure what the Labour party policy is on that. If that were the case, we could have simply taken the electorate of the whole country and divided it by 650, and that is what the boundary commissions would have had to implement. That is far from what we are doing. What we are doing is recognising that in three separate areas of the country, there are particular circumstances which mean that they do not have to comply with that leeway, but around the rest of the country, there is the ability to have plus or minus 5%.

The Labour party should be following us through the Lobby—after an hour or so—and supporting us in this. We should be together on this, because I think we can all support the general principle that each person's vote has equal weight. I accept that MPs are naturally nervous when it comes to boundary changes. Nobody likes them, and we should not have them too often. We work very hard to try to get to know towns, villages and individuals, to build the important bond that exists between a Member of Parliament and his or her constituents. That is a fundamental principle of British politics. Every time that we have a boundary change, we can lose whole communities with the stroke of a pen. It is therefore only natural that we should be very nervous about the whole process. But those arguments come later down the road, when the recommendations come from the Boundary Commission. The commission is, by the way, an independent organisation that is chaired by Mr Speaker, whose deputies are judges who will scrutinise the whole process. It is a non-political process that is entirely independent and free from this House. We should be proud of the system that we have in this country, as it cannot be gerrymandered easily.

I ask the Labour party to reconsider its position. It has got what it said it wanted in its manifesto; that is now the policy of the Government. There is nothing in the Labour manifesto or its official policy about plus or minus 7.5%. The only thing that the amendment specifies is the number 650, and we have got that. The rest of it is platitudes and generalisations that we can argue about in Committee and so on. The basic principle—that we need boundary changes in this country because we are 20 years and counting behind—remains. That is a general principle that the Labour party should be able to get behind.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There have been a number of interventions, which are putting pressure on other speakers. I will therefore reduce the time limit to four minutes after the next speaker.

6.31 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I enjoyed the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). If he had been here in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, he would have heard many of the arguments that he has made today in the debate then.

We heard from the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett). I presume that back in 2010, in spite of what Labour was telling him, he voted for the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, which proposed reducing the number of seats down

to 600, and he now says that it was actually that reduction which meant that communities got split up. But actually, from looking at each individual region in the Boundary Commission's proposals, it was very clear where it had started its work and where it had finished. The work at one end of the region was quite neat, but by the time the commission had got to the last few seats there were really odd constituency boundaries, because of the narrowness of that plus and minus 5%.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) spoke about the importance of every vote being equal. He ought to be careful; the way he was talking, he sounded like a bit of a proponent of proportional representation, and I am sure that that was not quite what he meant. There is a reason why some of us are against that, and it is that precious constituency link. All of us who have been Members of Parliament and have gone back to ask for votes on second and subsequent occasions—and know how important the work that we have done for our constituents has been in that regard—will recognise the importance of the link between a voter and the place that the Member seeks to represent.

I am very lucky. I am the Member of Parliament for Chesterfield, and what Chesterfield is very clear. The vast majority of people in my constituency are in the Chesterfield borough. Two wards of the Chesterfield borough are in the North East Derbyshire constituency, but most people in my constituency are very clear about where they are from. There are many other constituencies where it is much more opaque, and the more narrowly we draw the plus and minus tolerance level, the more difficult it is for the Boundary Commission to put together proposals that take those things into account.

When we remove the parliamentary scrutiny, many of the people who are speaking up for absolutely the right reasons now may come back and say, "I still think I was right to vote for that Bill, but it is the Boundary Commission that has come up with these proposals. If only they had done it different in my constituency and given me this ward, it would all have been okay." But it is the domino effect of all the other different constituencies that makes this very difficult to achieve. Members of Parliament are taking their constituencies and communities in their hands when they propose and vote for this narrow tolerance level, alongside the removal of any element of parliamentary scrutiny.

The hon. Member for Dartford said a few moments ago that there should not be any disagreement about the overall principle that we need boundary changes, and of course there absolutely is not. I recognise that boundary changes are an integral part of reflecting the fact that our communities change in size and that there is population shift over any period of time, so I absolutely recognise that the process needs to happen. It is all about how narrow the constituencies are, so that we retain the importance of that constituency link, and how regular the boundary changes are, because if voters move into different constituencies from one election to the next, it takes quite a long time to educate people about who their new Member of Parliament is and for Members to build up a relationship with new communities and to understand the issues in those communities. The principle of whether we have boundary changes is not at stake; what is at stake is how we operate. If many of the things that the Labour party argued for when we discussed parliamentary constituencies in the 2010 Parliament

[Mr Toby Perkins]

had been supported, the Government would have got the boundary changes they wanted, rather than finding 10 years on that they were never actually introduced. That should disappoint all of us who believe in democracy.

I shall make one final point. The likely outcome of the Bill will be that a city like London, where we have seen huge growth in population size but which has a transient population that is less likely to register than the population in some other areas, is likely to see a reduction in its number of seats. That cannot be right in a democracy if we actually want constituencies to reflect the number of voters. I would really like the Government to consider that issue in Committee.

6.36 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): As one of the new intake of MPs from the 2019 general election, I was not able to contribute to the debate when the Boundary Commission published its previous proposals, but I do know that those proposals impacted heavily on the Jarrow constituency—from gaining more wards from the neighbouring Gateshead area to losing the Cleadon and East Boldon ward to the neighbouring constituency of South Shields. I am immensely proud to represent the Jarrow constituency, and with that in mind I will closely monitor the Bill as it proceeds through the House and see what proposals are introduced. I assure my constituents that if any proposals would have a negative impact on the Jarrow constituency, I will dispute them every step of the way.

My constituents are proud of their history but, as with large parts of the north-east, they will never forgive prior Conservative Governments for decimating their proud industries and Conservative Governments to this day always leaving the north-east behind. I believe that the north-east is one of the regions that will be most negatively impacted by the boundary review, although I hope that I am proved to be wrong. Our local councils have been stretched to breaking point throughout this pandemic. How do the Government expect local authorities to provide the up-to-date electoral information necessary for a boundary review when they are working on the frontline of this crisis, providing vital support to our communities? I will closely scrutinise any future boundary review proposals, because all proposals must benefit our democracy and not just the Conservative party.

I am pleased that the Government have agreed to Labour's call to scrap plans to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600. The previous plans to remove 50 MPs would have weakened Parliament's role. With MPs' workload set to increase after Brexit and the current global health crisis, it would have been wrong to go ahead with such changes. A reduction in the number of MPs is quite simply a threat to Government accountability.

However, I certainly will not support the Government's undemocratic proposals to remove any parliamentary scrutiny from the boundary review process. Parliament has always had the final say over such crucial legislation, and the removal of parliamentary scrutiny is worrying for the future integrity of our democracy. The proposals from the most recent boundary review, based on 600 seats, did not go ahead because they did not command a majority in Parliament. Had the 600-seat review been in

this Bill, it would have passed with ease. I remind the House that this is the same Government who prorogued Parliament illegally, so we know all about what they are capable of. We cannot assume that the Government will not use the lack of parliamentary oversight to push through detrimental changes to the number of MPs. We will and must resist any attempt to gerrymander the electoral map, but if the Government force the changes through, they can be sure that I will fight any negative proposals against my constituency of Jarrow every step of the way.

6.40 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): It seems that this afternoon in some of the debate we are dancing on the head of a pin. We all seem to be in favour, and we are now down to whether the variance should be 5% or 7.5%. I come back to the point I made earlier. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe international standards recommend a variance of 10%.

It is clear from the debate so far that people are worried about the splitting of communities. A lot of that is because the Boundary Commission takes the approach of building on wards. I probed the Minister on this earlier, and was grateful for the analysis that she gave. As she said, the Boundary Commission is following the rules that have been set down. What needs to change is the idea of following county boundaries and local authority boundaries. You know what? Our constituents really do not care whether their MP happens to have in other parts of the constituency council areas from another authority. Today constituents just tap in their address to find out who their MP or councillor is. I doubt that people in the south of my constituency know the small villages in the north of it.

In fact, many of my constituents are surprised at the size of my constituency in the city of Leeds. There are eight constituencies in the city. One seat is a third of the geographical area. So it is difficult to see where the argument lies for the Boundary Commission saying, "We must keep constituencies within a local authority because it confuses people if we don't." It does not. People are only interested in who their MP is and who empties their bins. They really do not care which other bits of the constituency might have other bits in it.

On that basis, by far and away the most sensible thing that the Boundary Commission can do in this electoral review is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has said several times, to build on polling districts, which are much smaller. To put that into perspective, in the city of Leeds the wards are simply too big to build at 650 seats, even with plus or minus 7.5%. The commission has to split wards. Oddly, I have a polling district in my constituency, not just a ward, that is split between me and the Leeds East constituency.

The reality is that we all love our constituencies. I absolutely adore my constituency. It is my home, my community. I am into my third decade of living in my constituency. It is a matter of huge pride and honour every day I come into this place that I represent my home area and people. It is breaking my heart to lose any of my constituency. No one wants to say, "Well it is time to lose this bit here"; the reality is that my constituency is too big. It will have to have areas chopped off it. That breaks my heart because I love every single part of my

constituency, from the mining heritage to the farming heritage to all the areas around. I have seen how it has grown in the years I have lived there—decades, now. It is very important to me, and I represented it on Leeds City Council before I was honoured to become its MP.

If we build on polling districts, a great number of constituencies will not have to have huge changes made to them. We may be able to keep the majority of the seats as they are and take just some areas out and put them in other constituencies. The vast majority of constituencies may be able to stay the same. That is important, because for me it is a matter of huge pride, honour and love for every single one of my constituents. It will be deeply upsetting to lose some of them, but it is going to have to happen. If we build on polling districts, we can limit the impact that the boundary review will have.

6.44 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I must confess that when I heard the Labour Front-Bench spokesman begin her remarks my heart soared. It sounded as though there had been an outbreak of agreement and peace across both sides of the aisle that we have to get on with this; that was wonderful. We all agree on the number of MPs we are going to have. That is also wonderful. Then, rather like my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), I started to think, “Hang on a second, if we agree on so much, how come there is a reasoned amendment?” I come back to a point that I made earlier in an intervention. I just worry that people looking into this place from outside will see a bunch of MPs arguing their own book and not being honest about it. It is the point that the Father of the House made when he said that it is very difficult for any Parliament—this one or any previous one—to talk about boundaries without seeming to be mired in self-interest. It is extremely difficult to do and it is noticeable that the process comes unstuck when either the proposals of the independent boundary commission are so contrary to the views of the Government of the day that they start looking for excuses not to pass them, or the Government of the day do not have enough of a majority, as happened repeatedly in the past couple of years, to get the proposals through and the majority of the House’s self-interest beyond the Government operates to stop a statutory instrument going through. None of that makes our democracy, MPs or Parliament look good.

There is an old saying about the difference between a hedgehog and a fox. The hedgehog knows one big thing and the fox knows many small things. We need to be more like the hedgehog and remember that there is one big thing that matters above all: fairness and equal weight of votes. It is all very well to say, “Yes, but there are all these other technical problems”, and there are—there are definitely technical problems with getting enough people to register on time and stay registered and we need to fix those—but it is not good enough for us to stand here and claim that as an excuse for not having fairness and equal votes. To use that as an excuse is like the prayer of St Augustine:

“Give me chastity and continency—but not yet.”

It is time—it is past time. We need to do this now. We need to lock it in to ensure that future Parliaments, no matter who is in Government, cannot act out of self-interest to scupper this fundamental point about

our democracy. If we do not get this right, our democracy’s credibility, fundamental fairness and underpinnings are fatally weakened and undermined.

We have gone on too long without fixing the problem. I will therefore support Second Reading. I urge Labour Members to reconsider their position and cleave to this idea, while at the same time, as the Father of the House said, it is up to Government Members to accept that there are other—less important but still crucial—points about trying to ensure that we get our registration process right and better voting rolls. If we can do both those things, we will have a democracy that works and of which we can be proud. We do not accept that there is a trade-off between security and accuracy when we do online banking. We should not do it when we vote at the polling booth.

6.47 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I start by echoing a point that the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made about today’s proceedings and pay tribute to the House and parliamentary staff who ensured that we were able to do what we have done today. Whatever our views, they have done a fantastic job in ensuring that while we are back here, we can participate as we need to.

Equal-sized constituencies with one Member, one vote and all Members being equal has been a core tenet of our democracy for nearly 200 years. I am proud of the fact that the communities I represent were at the heart of that battle 200 years ago to ensure that every individual had their voice heard, no matter where they came from, how much money they had in their wallet or how much property they owned. The likes of the chartist council at Princes End, the chartist council in Wednesbury, John Wilkes from Tipton Green, Richard Cooper from Princes End, George Browning from Wednesbury, and later Black Country suffragettes such as Hilda Burkett and Emma Sproson led the fight to ensure that a working class lad from a council house, who was told that he would amount to nothing, can stand here today in this Parliament and represent those people’s descendants.

I want to ensure that that chartist and suffragette legacy is carried on. I am proud of the fact that in my constituency, community groups such as the WMA community centre in Tipton Green and Q3 Academy in Tipton ensure that our young people can continue to access democracy. I believe that the Bill honours that tradition. If we look at what it tries to resolve, we need to ask ourselves some fundamental questions.

Is it right that in town A, half as many people can vote for an MP as those in next-door town B? Is it right that the difference between the 20 smallest and the 20 largest constituencies in this country is 675,000, which I believe, looking at my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), is about the size of the city of Leeds. Is it right that 27 million people are reportedly being under-represented because they live in constituencies where they are above the average threshold?

I am slightly confused by the Opposition’s position on this matter. My hon. Friends have touched on the history of the Labour party in trying to block this levelling up of our electoral system. The Minister mentioned the 1969 Labour Government’s attempt to block the

[Shaun Bailey]

independent boundary review, and in 1982 Labour tried to take things to the courts but failed. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is not in his place, but he made the good point that common sense needs to be applied to this at all times. I totally agree on that, but I wish to address some of the comments the Labour party has made. For example, Labour Members say that this Bill is an Executive power grab, but the basis of this is an independent, judicial-led Boundary Commission; this is taken out of the power of the Executive and given to an independent body. In addition, this is primary legislation and Parliament can of course amend or abolish it at any time. It is a basic principle of our parliamentary democracy that we, as Members, can do that if we need to, so I must disagree with the Labour party on that point.

I am conscious of the time and I wish to allow colleagues to speak, so I will just make the point that the last time the boundaries in my constituency were amended I was five years old. A lot has changed since then. Many of us have changed, with some probably changing more than others. It is time that we get this done. I say to right hon. and hon. Members from across this Chamber that if we truly believe that everyone's vote is equal and we truly believe in ensuring that our democracy continues to grow and thrive, we must pass this legislation.

6.51 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I would like to talk briefly about the last boundary review process and the failings I believe occurred regarding the Bradford constituencies. I am not criticising the commission, as I think it did an excellent job within the constraints of the rules that were set out in the previous legislation. I do, however, want to propose some changes that will improve the process.

The initial proposals of that review were extremely unsatisfactory for Bradford, producing constituencies that did not reflect the communities of our area. For example, they split my constituency across four local authorities—Leeds, Calderdale, Kirklees, and Bradford. The commissioners noted a

“strong depth of feeling against our initial proposals and a distinct ‘Bradfordian’ identity”.

Their report also said:

“Our assistant commissioners, faced...what they considered was an exceptionally challenging task in constructing constituencies in Bradford that would be acceptable to local respondents”—

and—

“that did not cause split wards.”

Their final recommendations accepted many of the arguments put forward by my constituents, and the commissioners moved a considerable way within the constraints that had been set for them. I have learnt from that experience the value that people place on their constituencies matching in the closest possible way their established community identities. That is why I believe this Bill must be used to improve the process that draws up our next set of constituency boundaries.

The commission faced two major constraints in creating constituencies that voters can readily identify with. The first was the use of whole wards as the building blocks

for constituencies. In some large metropolitan authorities, these building blocks are far too big for this purpose. In Leeds, for instance, wards can contain more than 17,000 voters, and both Bradford and Kirklees have wards in excess of 13,000 electors. Working with building blocks of this size within the electoral tolerance of 5% made it impossible to create constituencies that people felt strongly attached to. I believe that local authority boundaries and people's sense of place should take precedence over ward boundaries. To achieve this, the commission should be allowed to make use of split wards in drawing up new boundaries. The second constraint is having such a small electoral tolerance. As I have said, a 5% tolerance does not give the necessary flexibility to the commissioners. I urge the Government to give the commissioners the wider discretion of using a 10% tolerance where necessary.

Finally, I too am concerned about the impact of covid-19 on the process. Under the legislation, the boundary redrawing will be based on the electoral register from 1 December 2020. Given the Minister's opening remarks, I say to her that there is no better time than today's debate to update the House more fully on that point and to get on the record the options she is considering.

The Bill should give the Electoral Commission the tools it needs to produce constituencies of approximately equal size that, crucially, keep communities together within coherent boundaries. I believe the measures I have referred to would improve the Bill and produce a more democratic process for all.

6.55 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I rise to support the Bill knowing that I may well be a turkey voting for Christmas. I am a new MP, but I am reliably informed by my predecessor that when the boundary commission previously turned its attention to my seat, of its various proposals, none helped. Perhaps that enhances the force of my support for the Bill, because I give it without much to gain.

In the six months I have been a Member of this House, I have thought carefully about what it means to represent and what it means to be represented. Before consideration of this Bill, I had not been fully aware of the extent of the population disparity between the various seats. It is striking how closely the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) resemble my own. I did not know that the seat of Ashford, with its 90,000 constituents had more than double the constituents of the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross seat. I acknowledge the sensible remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) that there are important geographical considerations, but we cannot avoid the fact that a vote in Caithness has twice the value of a vote in Ashford, and to me that distorts representation. When he wrote “Of true and false democracy”, John Stuart Mill said that in a “really equal democracy” every community is represented in equal proportion. Without this, he added, there are those

“whose fair...share of influence in the representation is withheld from them...contrary to the principle of democracy, which professes equality at its very root”.

For that reason, it seems right to me that we equalise seats based on number and that the margin for variation is deliberately circumscribed.

My second point relates to the retention of 650 seats, rather than the reduction to 600. All the way through, three issues concerned me. First, I had grave concerns about whether the new super-constituencies could offer the sort of quality of representation that people deserve, just at the time we were losing the Members of the European Parliament. I was glad to see that reflected in the impact assessment prepared on 4 May. Secondly, one thing I knew about my own seat is that the 600 seats proposal lacerated some of our communities, cleaving villages from towns that had deep historical links. I hope—I will make submissions as the Bill proceeds—that we can use the preservation of 650 seats to put that right.

Thirdly, I welcomed the coalition Government's intention to manage the cost of Parliament, but I felt it was directed at the wrong Chamber. The other Chamber comprises 783 Members and costs the taxpayer less but almost as much as our Chamber. If the Members of this House spoke honestly to their constituents and asked them how many Members of the Upper Chamber they could name, they might find that some could name none at all. I know that some Members of that Chamber are brilliant and bring expertise; I know that some of them serve in the Government and in the shadow Cabinet, and are very active in that Chamber; and I know that the vast majority adhere to the highest standards of professional conduct. But when they fall short—and some do—there is absolutely nothing the public can do, and to me that conflicts with the whole principle of parliamentary democracy.

As Ted Heath once said, those who have been appointed to or inherited seats have done in the main

“a tremendous task and we owe them a great deal”,—[*Official Report*, 2 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 761.]

but I hope that in this Parliament, we will make the move—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am terribly sorry, but we have to move on to the next speaker.

6.59 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to say a few words in this important debate. I have been privileged to be involved in Bexley borough since 1983, as the MP for Erith and Crayford until 1987 and for Bexleyheath and Crayford since 2005. I have seen many boundary changes, and I know how difficult they are for communities and for Members of Parliament, as well as how difficult they are administratively.

Our 2019 Conservative party manifesto pledged to ensure that

“we have updated and equal Parliamentary boundaries, making sure that every vote counts the same”.

That is surely a cornerstone of our democracy, and frankly, we need to get on with this. I welcome the fact that the Government are delivering on their promise, and this Bill has my strong support. It is necessary, it is sensible, and it is important. I was disappointed with the comments from Labour Members, because there are basic principles that they support. They can discuss and debate some minor areas of the Bill in Committee, but I was disappointed that they could not give their total support to the principle.

The last boundary review proposed reducing the number of seats to 600. I believe that that was arbitrary tokenism, rather than valuable to democracy. With Britain now thankfully having come out of the European Union, we have more work to do as Members of Parliament. The Government's decision to maintain 650 seats is therefore a good one, and I strongly support it.

A reduction in the number of seats would also have meant that communities were split up, as I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), which is not good for representation. My constituency in the Borough of Bexley is a collection of small towns—Bexleyheath, Welling, Crayford, Erith and Slade Green. Those communities are valued and supported by residents, local businesses and community activists. Historical and community ties matter. The boundary commissions must make those a top priority, because together with the numbers, the community interest is so important.

I welcome the fact that there will be an electoral quota. Whether it is 5% or 7.5% is something we need to discuss, and I am sure the Leader of the House will take that on board when the Bill goes into Committee. I think 5% is fine, but we can debate these things. I also believe that we need to have the most up-to-date electorate possible, to ensure that we are not looking at out-of-date registers for the size of constituencies, as we have too often in the past. That is sensible.

In terms of the review process and what the Minister said about the initial consultation period, it is good that the public hearings will be after the second proposals, which gives more time for constituents, community groups and other organisations to give feedback to the commissions before the final recommendations.

This is a good Bill, and we need to get on with it. It is a Bill that improves democracy. Change is often difficult for all of us, but it is important that this Bill goes through, that we get down to some business and that we implement our manifesto commitment. I give this Bill my wholehearted support and look forward to its passage through the House.

7.3 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate, as electoral boundaries have a special place in my heart—not just as a newly elected MP, but as someone whose career prior to being elected to Parliament included a thoroughly enjoyable stint some 20 years ago working for the Local Government Commission for England on periodic electoral reviews of local government boundaries. I am still friends with many of the other boundary geeks who worked there, and it is right that I declare an interest in that some of those friends and colleagues moved on to work more recently for the Boundary Commission for England on parliamentary reviews.

It would be remiss of me not to mention or thank all the hard-working electoral administrators working across our local authorities. Good democracy requires good administration, and it is important to recognise the immense efforts that many of these officers continue to make to ensure that all our constituents are accurately and appropriately registered to vote and that elections are well run and within the law—all against a backdrop of ever diminishing council budgets during the decade of austerity.

[Rachel Hopkins]

I speak in this debate with some experience of the process of making boundaries and an understanding of the public's response to both well made and poor boundaries, and as a politician with a keen eye on the outcome of any boundary changes for the length of time I may have to serve in this place. However, I want to focus on the first two points in supporting the reasoned amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith). First, the legitimacy of our democracy rests on public confidence in the process as much as in the outcome. As part of that, the process of making boundaries must be as transparent as possible so that the public can have as much ownership of the structures of elections as of the outcome. For this reason, I believe that the removal of parliamentary approval from the process is a backward step. Parliamentary scrutiny of any proposals ensures transparency of the process within the public domain and avoids any perceptions, right or wrong, of power grabs by the Executive.

Secondly, I welcome the Minister's comments about the proposed enumeration date being set at 1 December 2020, but I recognise that the annual canvass for the electoral register this year in late summer or autumn is likely to be significantly impacted by coronavirus. If the electoral register for December 2019 is to be looked at, she might also want to look at the ONS figures, which stated that almost 500,000 people joined the register between 1 December and 12 December, so it will be really important to get accurate data.

My final point is about the variance from the electoral quota. This can have a detrimental impact on the representation of communities and on effective administration, as has already been said. If the number of MPs is fixed and the electoral quota is fixed, the only element of flexibility to support community identity and community connections is the percentage variance from the quota. That can be reflected in whether it is moved further away to 7.5% or 10%, which is something that can be debated. It can also reflect the topography in more rural areas, and it can help to better reflect the community connections in urban areas. The numbers are quite small when we look at them in the round. Finger in the air, if the quota is around 73,000, a 5% variance would give around 3,500 electors. A 7.5% variance would be around 5,500 electors. That is not much of a difference. In fact, people in this Chamber have smaller majorities than that. Maybe that is why they want to stick with the 5%. Some would say "if it ain't broke, don't fix it", but I would suggest that greater flexibility in the quota helps to create better constituencies by providing for better community identity and connections with constituencies, and by ensuring greater public buy-in to any proposals.

7.7 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The imperative to review our boundaries is absolutely essential now. We are talking about an electoral register of 20 years ago. I know that every Member of the House will agree that it is time to get this job done, and I commend the Government for moving forward on this as fast as possible. The Bill will create a new political map for the United Kingdom that will see us through at least the next two general elections, but there is one area that needs to change, and I will focus my remarks on that.

We have an opportunity to create not only 650 constituencies based on equal numbers, but ones that are based around actual towns, communities and places of genuine social, historical, geographical and cultural connections, giving greater recognition to local ties, which unfortunately the current system often prevents. The cause of this is simple. It is the lack of flexibility that results from rigidly using whole local government wards as the main building blocks, when smaller building blocks such as polling districts could be used instead. I commend the Boundary Commission for its independence, but apart from a few exceptions, its unwillingness to divert from using entire wards instead of smaller areas such as polling districts leads to unnecessary changes and upheavals, mass confusion and people who are accustomed to being in one constituency suddenly finding themselves being transferred to an area with which they have much less or no connection. We often see communities divided as a result, and a loss of local identity.

The dismay people feel when they are shunted from their traditional constituency into another one, from which they feel totally disconnected, is damaging to our democracy, as is the failure to have continuity of elected representation. I therefore say to the Lord President of the Council, who is in his place, that I hope the Boundary Commission will be willing to include parts of wards and make smaller, incremental changes that still meet the requirements of the Bill, but make larger changes much less likely and allow communities to unite within one constituency.

It is wrong to force communities to go through massive upheavals when small changes can satisfy the numbers within the scope of the Bill, and prevent a radical and unwelcome change for both constituents and the Member of Parliament, who may have spent many years looking after a community and become familiar to local people. I could provide many examples of that. In the Rush Green community in my constituency, 3,000 people from a polling district could have been moved into the area. Instead, the Boundary Commission chose to bring in an entire ward, dividing up other communities. That approach has to change.

The Boundary Commission needs to review the way it does things to make them more sensible and more community-orientated, while keeping within the numbers set out by the Government in the Bill. This really does matter. I hope the Government will use their influence to ensure that a more flexible approach is used and mandate the Boundary Commission to alter its criteria to allow judgments based on local ties, using smaller areas, polling districts or even a road or a house if it means a smaller area being moved to meet the criteria. It could ensure that we avoid communities being broken up and avoid the radical upheavals that have caused so much unnecessary division in previous boundary reviews.

One final request: one more MP, for Gibraltar, please. They have asked for it. Let us have one more MP.

7.11 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Contrary to what we are hearing from Government Members, I warmly welcome the Bill and its main provision, which is the reversion back to 650 Members of Parliament—as, I think, do many colleagues on the Opposition Benches. It is a misrepresentation to suggest that we are opposing the Bill tonight. The Opposition are entirely within

their right to put down a reasoned amendment that suggests areas where we would like to see improvement. We will not be opposing the Bill on Second Reading, although we do have concerns.

I have to say that I am also a bit frustrated to hear Government Members saying that we need to get on with the process. We could have been getting on with the process two years ago, with the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). It was the Government, with the lack of a money resolution, who held that process up, so we will have no more of that in the debate.

I absolutely support the idea of an independent Boundary Commission that will work independently. We do have confidence in the Boundary Commission. What is not independent, however, is the instructions that are given to the Boundary Commission. That is where the manipulation by the governing party comes in, and that is why the Opposition are right to question the judgment being made tonight. The obvious example is the strict adherence to the numbers and the primacy of the numbers over every other consideration, such as communities of interest or geographical size. That strict adherence will give distorted constituencies, especially with a tight variant from the national average. We will lose community cohesion. We will have very large geographical areas that make it extremely difficult for hon. Members to represent them. That is why—I think the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) touched on this—there has to be some disparity in the numbers to take into account other factors.

We talked about the December 2020 cut-off date being far too late and said that people will fall off the register. At this stage, I was going to talk about other areas where I believe the Conservative party, the governing party, has introduced measures of voter suppression to stop people from getting on to the register or voting. However, the Minister made a significant concession, almost, or recognition—she is not in her place now—about the possibility of having to use the 2019 snapshot, which is the most up-to-date, accurate snapshot we have. It has been published only this week, because that is how long it takes. I welcome what the Minister said, and I hope we can work with her on that.

I am suspicious of anything that removes Parliament from these processes—from any process, frankly. Parliamentary scrutiny is absolutely essential. I do not like the idea of Parliament being sidelined, even when we are discussing matters concerning our boundaries, because these matters are central to our democracy. If Parliament had been removed from the issue of boundaries, then in my area we would now have the notorious Mersey Banks constituency—it was one of those constituencies where we would have had to go out of the constituency, through another, and back into it—because the proposals would not have been able to have been challenged in this House.

I want to raise one final issue: the future of the Union. It is imperative that the Government do not allow us to get into a situation where Wales and Scotland, because of their geographical sizes and the rurality of some of their areas, take a bigger hit than England in terms of reduction in constituencies. The Union matters to me, and I believe that it matters to many Members in this House—it certainly matters to Members on the Labour Benches. If we have fewer Welsh MPs and fewer

Scottish MPs, the strength of the Union will be damaged. That may be an unintended consequence, but it is a consequence that Ministers must bear in mind.

7.15 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is great to have the opportunity to take part in this debate and I very much welcome the Bill, but, following on from what the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said in relation to adherence to numbers, and I agree with him on that, may I also raise the issue of the 650 figure being absolutely set in stone? The jigsaw that we are trying to put together is very complex. If we gave the Boundary Commission a bit of flexibility, we might find that the jigsaw fits together perfectly with 652 seats or 648 seats. Giving it a bit of discretion—perhaps five or six seats either way—might make a big difference.

I think that that what would also impact on the points that were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and others about community identity. Too often, the numbers have taken priority over identity. My own seat has within it the seat of Great Grimsby: the Grimsby seat is an island in my constituency; it can get the extra 10,000 votes that it needs to reach the quota only by making inroads into my own seat. That also means that my seat of Cleethorpes will have to move further out. And we have a problem—this is the main point that I want to get across—with the regional boundaries, which were supposedly abolished. In actual fact, the two unitary councils in the north of Lincolnshire are part of the Yorkshire and Humberside region, and Greater Lincolnshire, the older Lincolnshire County Council and the districts, are in the east midlands. A great number of the suburbs of the Grimsby and Cleethorpes metropolis are actually in a different region. In the past two reviews, that has prevented the Boundary Commission from looking at some of the villages, which clearly identify with the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area, but which are not able to be considered because the Boundary Commission, which, understandably, has to have a template to work to, has used the regions as a boundary. There are now moves within Greater Lincolnshire towards more devolution and combined authorities. All sorts of things are being talked about, but, basically, the point is that the two unitaries and the county council area are coming closer together in terms of policy and economics.

The discretion that I spoke of earlier would give more ability to follow local identities. I mentioned Grimsby and Cleethorpes because, obviously, that is my area. There are streets in Grimsby where the footpath is in Grimsby and the road is in Cleethorpes. Woe betide anybody on one side of the road if they tell someone that they live in Grimsby or Cleethorpes. They have a distinct identity and they want to relate to the town. Grimsby is an ancient borough. Its first charter was granted by King John. It is one of those seats that has not changed its boundaries since world war two and now it will have to be judged, quite reasonably, because we have to balance the numbers, which is important.

I agree with the comments that have been made about the final decision not coming back to this House. Too often we are faced with decisions by outside bodies— independent commissions, agencies and so on—where we are told, “You, as an MP, know that the Government or Parliament have no say. We cannot overturn that.” This matter should eventually come back to Parliament.

7.19 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on a topic that I know elicits strong feelings on both sides of the House.

Colleagues will be aware that I have only recently become a Member of this place—although it feels like much longer—and since the election the coronavirus pandemic has rightly been at the forefront for us all. As I continue to receive hundreds of emails every day—some relating to coronavirus, some on local issues, many on the movements of a certain special adviser—I am reminded of just how important it is that the voices across the UK are fairly represented in this place.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) in welcoming the Government's decision to agree to the Opposition calls to scrap the plans to reduce the number of MPs to 600. I will be voting on the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. It is clear that the current proposals will see a reduction in representation in Welsh constituencies. The Government claim that the people of all four nations in the UK will have equal representation in Parliament, but I disagree, and the situation in Wales is murky to say the least.

In Wales, the proposals are likely to see a reduction to about 31 seats, with many of Wales's losses being added to England's total. The Electoral Reform Society Cymru has been critical of the proposals, and I share its concerns that a cut in the number of Welsh MPs puts additional pressure on the already overstretched Senedd. The Senedd has faced a decade of cuts, thanks to this Tory UK Government and the coalition that came before.

It is also clear that the Barnett consequential funding formula for devolved nations such as Wales is hugely outdated and leaves Wales without its fair share. I genuinely struggle to see how Members representing seats in Wales on the Benches opposite me here can actively support and encourage a Bill that will weaken Wales's voice in this Chamber. From a Conservative party that places so much focus on defending the Union, I am disappointed and dismayed to see Wales's voice undermined in the Bill.

On a logistical point, a cut in representation will have a real impact on the work that MPs and their staff can take on. Tory social security cuts over the past decade, coupled with a cut in the number of representatives for Wales, will only further stretch the ability of MPs to assist constituents with pressing casework issues, including welfare support and immigration matters. A cut in the number of representatives will put pressure on many of our caseworkers, who are already overstretched.

As an MP proud to be representing my home town, I stand in this place today as a proud Unionist. The Welsh Labour Government have made excellent advances on devolved issues and protecting our close relationship with the whole of the Union across the UK. The various responses to the coronavirus crisis offer a key example of the divergence that our devolved nations can take on a particular issue. I am sure that Welsh colleagues on both sides of the House will agree that a reduction in parliamentary constituencies in the devolved nations and an increase in seats in England will only put further strain on the integrity of the Union. It is crucial,

essentially and especially given our recent departure from the EU, that our democracy continues to effectively represent the Union that still exists across the UK. I am clear that Wales's voice should not be left behind here in Westminster.

7.22 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Although I listened carefully to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), there does seem to be the common theme that both Labour Governments and Labour in opposition seek to put up smokescreens for more and more delay, whether in getting Brexit done or indeed updating our boundaries. They are determined to delay, and one does have to wonder why.

Our seats across this nation have changed a lot since the last boundary changes over 20 years ago, and it will take a Conservative Government once again to bring about fairness and equality for the people who have put their trust in us. We see such a disproportionate size-balance across constituencies, and our electors need fair representation; it is simply not fair that some seats have as few as a few tens of thousands of electors, yet others have well over 100,000, with both just having one Member representing each group.

Dudley has just shy of 62,000 electors and last saw a marginal change in 2010, following a bigger change in 1997. I appreciate that my seat, should I—as I hope, obviously—retain it at the next election, will need to increase in size by approximately 10,000.

It would also make sense for constituencies to align more closely with local government boundaries. For example, at present, I have a single lone ward that sits with an MP in Wolverhampton, while it sits in fact in Dudley. We should be keeping communities together, and that would of course help and make sense.

Finally, the covid-19 pandemic will have had an impact on our local communities well above and beyond the awful, tragic loss of life, but the proposed review presents an opportunity to take full consideration of every aspect that the virus could have had an impact on.

7.25 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. However, I believe that basing the review on the number of registered electors as of 1 December 2020 will not provide an accurate or up-to-date picture of our current electorate and will have huge implications for cities such as mine with universities. The 1 December 2020 register is the enumeration date for the review, meaning that the size of the electorate on 1 December will be used throughout the new boundary review as the officially recognised size of the current electorate. I believe that that will cause many issues, as the electoral register is likely to be severely impacted by the current crisis. The coronavirus is likely to have a significant effect on the annual canvass, meaning that the registers will be less accurate and complete than other recent registers.

The constituency that I represent—Liverpool, Riverside—has an electorate of almost 73,500 and three universities, with an estimated 70,000 students living in the city. The data proposed is two decades old, but it is estimated that the electorate has increased by at least 2 million since the last boundary changes. There are also widespread concerns that, due to the coronavirus, many students

will not return to their universities by December 2020, meaning that thousands of students from across the country will not be registered to vote. This will significantly skew the electoral size of university towns, where the student population is dense. As a result, constituency boundaries will not reflect the true size or make-up of the constituency under normal circumstances.

To conclude, I urge the Government to consider using the December 2019 electoral register as the enumeration date for the review. This would capture a highly representative snapshot of the electorate in the run-up to the 2019 general election. That date would also prevent any delay to the review, thereby allowing new boundaries to be in place for the next general election.

7.27 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I start by outlining my great support for the Government's position, in terms of increasing the number to 650. My predecessor and many Welsh MPs have been labouring that point ever since the initial policy of reducing the number to 600 came out, and now we are leaving the European Union and the tier of politicians that once were MEPs in this country is being removed, the fact is that we need more Members of Parliament covering devolved areas, in terms of seats.

I have listened to a lot of people contributing to the debate. At the outset, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on the points that they made, in particular, about the Union and communities being built up from the bottom. Most of my wards are a lot smaller than their polling districts. That is the nature of local government in Wales, so I certainly appreciate that. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) was a little unkind to say that Wales needs to retain the 40 seats, given that some constituencies are under 40,000 electors in Wales. Clearly, there needs to be some review, especially given the fact that we now have our own Welsh Parliament. There is no need for constituencies of 40,000; that needs to be addressed within this.

I am in a privileged position, having represented one of the smallest geographical constituencies with the highest electorate, and now representing one of the largest geographical constituencies with the smallest electorate. I will put a steer into the Boundary Commission about Montgomeryshire. It was formed in 1542 by the royal charter of Henry VIII, which gives Montgomeryshire some legs in this Chamber. The point I want to make to Government Front Benchers is about the variance and the geographical challenges, as well as population. Montgomeryshire is, for the initiated farmer, 537,000 acres big. For the uninitiated, that is a large constituency, so it involves a lot of travel. That is a challenge, as are large electorates and populations.

The 5% variance could do with a little kick. I have heard that the norm internationally is 10%; I would push for 7.5%, and I hope we go into that matter in some detail in Committee.

I have alluded to the point made by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) about the Union. Some thought has to be given to how the Bill interacts with the constituencies of our nation in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland. In Wales, we have two forms of electing Assembly Members—the next time, they will

be Members of the Senedd—as there are regional and constituency Members. Crossing first-past-the-post constituencies with the regions in Wales will cause even more confusion than currently exists, and I implore the Boundary Commission to look at that.

I will end, Mr Deputy Speaker—I want to allow colleagues to come in and I can see that you will be up on your feet shortly—with a plea about Montgomeryshire and other rural constituencies. This contribution could be considered as the first submission to the Boundary Commission, but we must look at the huge geographical areas, variance and the freedom to protect those communities and constituents who find it hard to relate when Members are travelling for close to two hours. It is easier to attend this Chamber in London than to get to the south of my county council area. To get from the top of Montgomeryshire to the bottom at Brecon and Radnor takes several hours.

7.31 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Government's general election manifesto made the following commitment:

“making sure that every vote counts the same – a cornerstone of democracy.”

The Government are right. Our votes do not count the same. In December, it took 33 times as many votes to elect a Green MP as to elect an SNP MP—33 to one. That is a staggering inequality right at the heart of our electoral system, so I am very much in favour of making each vote carry the same weight. It seems that Members across the House agree that democratic equality is a matter of importance. To combat that properly, the only response is electoral reform, but I will leave that debate until my time with the Minister next week.

What the Government really mean by making every vote count the same is tightening the boundaries so that each constituency has the same number of potential voters. In principle, that sounds like it makes sense, but the Government's plans do not achieve that. They propose to base the boundaries on the number of people on the electoral roll. That is not the same as the number of potential electors. Indeed, the Electoral Commission estimates that up to 9 million potential electors are not currently on the electoral roll. As we know, that marginalises groups for whom there are structural difficulties in getting on to the electoral roll. I am hopeful that the Government will consider using the December 2019 electoral roll. We should take advantage of the fact that the upcoming electoral event encouraged people to register and be enfranchised. We should promote that engagement with our process. An obvious solution to all this is automatic voter registration. I do not see why the Government refuse to pursue it. Perhaps they are following their instincts.

The single most important argument for first past the post—I think this is why many Members fail to look at electoral reform in the way that I do—is that Members represent identifiable local communities. I think that Members would agree that if we cannot achieve a sense of local representation, the idea of a one-Member constituency is undermined.

As someone who advocates a proportional voting system, were I to design a flaw in first past the post, it would be this: creating rules so stringent that MPs represent random chunks of the country and so delicately responsive

[Wendy Chamberlain]

that a tiny change in one part of the country will lead to a ripple effect spreading from constituency to constituency, with completely new boundaries every eight years. I agree that basing the building blocks of seats on wards leads to shotgun constituencies. My own constituency boundary splits the high street in Leven in North East Fife, but at least it is all under Fife Council. During the covid pandemic, I have hugely valued engagement with NHS Fife and Fife Council, as have my constituents.

One of the Government's manifesto promises is to abolish the 15-year rule on the eligibility of overseas electors, and presumably legislation will be brought forward over the coming Session. They will be able to vote in the next general election, but whether the date of the electoral register used for the boundary review is this year or last, they will not be on it. My colleague, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, has tabled written questions asking the Government to estimate the number of overseas electors, and there is no estimate. We are walking blind into this. We are putting restrictive percentages in place now and then adding in an unknown number of voters at a later point, completely undermining what the Government are trying to achieve. As I touched upon earlier, the incredibly sensitive flexibility conditions will create further upheaval.

I return to where I started: the "Protect our democracy" section of the Conservative manifesto. There are a number of commitments in that section. The Bill represents the first brick in the wall, but clearly, as the issue with overseas voters illustrates, there are foreseeable problems in terms of what comes after. This may be the first brick, but the wall will end up being unstable.

7.35 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I commend the Minister for her powerful speech in presenting the Bill to the House. We all come here with equal power vested in us by our communities, but my voice represents a constituency of 83,000 people, while the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) represents a constituency of 61,000 people. It is difficult for us to explain to our constituents why that inequity is there. I hope that all of us here would agree that that is not right, and that we should have in our democratic system an inherent equity between Members of Parliament in terms of the number of people who are able to vote for them.

I fully support the Government's move to automaticity, if that is the right word—to bring in boundary changes without Members of Parliament having to get involved. Indeed, the 5% tolerance ensures that equality will be ingrained in the future and moves us away from having to have these debates on a regular basis. We should all just come clean: this is a difficult issue for Members of Parliament. We have an inherent interest in the outcome of boundary reviews, which makes it difficult. My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) made the point incredibly well. We need to put those decisions outside this place to be made.

One thing that has not been discussed is that new Office for National Statistics data estimates that six new constituencies will be generated in the south-east region of this country. This place needs to give some thought to how those new constituencies should be constructed. Constituencies should have a sense of purpose. They should have a sense of history and a sense of community.

When my constituency was first part of a boundary review, back in the 1940s, just 13,000 people were living in Basingstoke. There are now 83,000 people living in my constituency, and Basingstoke sprawls across four constituencies. My challenge to the Boundary Commission is simple, and I think the Minister needs to help it with this. Constituencies should not just be numerical constructs; they should be constructed for communities first and foremost, and we should construct them for the future, not simply salami-slice away what has gone before. That is the right thing for us to think about now, because this boundary review will be seismic in some areas of the country, and we need to ensure that we grasp the opportunity.

At the moment, the provisions in schedule 2 of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 are very sparse in terms of the directions they give to the Boundary Commission. They talk notionally about local ties, and those often figure large in the consultations that follow, but is there an opportunity here to give more direction to the Boundary Commission about their importance for constituencies, and about the importance of mid-sized market towns such as Basingstoke, which saw significant boundary changes in 2010? We have done the right thing and built new houses, but we have been rewarded with a fragmentation of our constituency, which is not necessarily healthy for the future.

Why are towns in certain parts of the country split east-west and north-south, and others simply salami-sliced away? We need a better approach to constructing our constituencies for the future.

7.39 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I think I win the prize for patience this evening. Many of my points have already been made, but I make no apology for reiterating them because this Bill will have an important impact on all of us in this House.

The onset of the covid-19 pandemic and its continued impacts in Newport West and across the United Kingdom—indeed, across our whole world—has shown now more than ever that strong and constructive scrutiny of the Government is vital. That is how we must approach this Bill, and this debate, as it works its way through the House. As such, I am pleased that the Government's plans to cut the number of MPs has been scrapped, because this is not the time to engage in less democracy. As we leave the EU, it is even more vital that the increased workload of MPs is reflected in the make-up of our national Parliament and the design of its constituencies.

I am concerned about the removal of parliamentary approval and scrutiny from the process. Under the current rules, Parliament has the ultimate authority to accept or deny boundary changes. The draft boundaries order must be agreed by both Houses of Parliament before being approved by Her Majesty at a meeting of the Privy Council. However, the measures contained in the new Bill will remove Parliament from the process, which means that Parliament will no longer be required to approve the draft order before it is made by Her Majesty at the meeting of the Privy Council. We all remember what happened the last time the Government attempted to bypass Parliament as they sought to illegally prorogue Parliament, and this is not a good way to go.

Another key part of the Bill is the fact that the review will be based on the number of registered voters on 30 December 2020. This means that the size of the electorate on 30 December 2020 will be used throughout the new boundary review as the officially recognised size of the current electorate. We know the pressures that will be triggered by Brexit and covid-19, and we know about the uncertain housing situation at the moment. This risks the data on which these major changes will be based being flawed and incomplete. We all remember what we were doing in December 2019 and can testify to the obvious fact that a general election acts as a major driver of registering to vote. As has already been said, we see huge spikes in voter registration during national elections and during local elections, too. We now know that there will be no election between today and 1 December 2020, so we will lose that ability to ensure that the voter roll accurately reflects those entitled to vote. Let us stick to the December 2019 data.

My final point is that we must take account of geography, not just numbers of voters. Mountains and valleys, rivers and reservoirs make a difference, and I urge the Minister to remember this. I will not be opposing the Second Reading today and I am pleased the Government have made some concessions, but I caution them to take the politics out of this process, and to give the people of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the House of Commons they need and deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The wind-ups will be at 7.44 pm. I call Lee Rowley.

7.42 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I shall try my best to fit what I have into the minute and a half or so that I have.

I welcome the Bill, and I am glad to see that it has been brought forward. It has been a long time coming, even for those of us who are relatively new in this place. It provides clarity on a national level, or will do, and it also provides clarity on a local level for constituencies and seats, such as mine, that have been moved around in the proposals over the past 10 years or so. It will be good to get a final, clear view about what is going to happen and when.

If I may, I will make two brief points before the wind-ups begin. First, I support the principle of equalisation. One person one vote is important, but so is the representation of those people being equal in this place. As competent, as capable and as excellent as my colleagues are in other parts of Derbyshire, it cannot be right that one Member of Parliament in Derbyshire has 10,000 people less than me and another Member of Parliament has nearly 9,000 people more than me. That variation does raise questions about how we represent our constituencies in this place. It is why I am not convinced by some of the arguments that have been made in this Chamber on this matter, including, unfortunately, by the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones).

Secondly, it is vital that we have up-to-date information and data on this. While the data itself came later, the processes for starting the data in the fifth periodic review, on which I was elected in December, were done before I even became eligible to vote. Since then, I have voted in six general elections, I have stood in three of them and I have had the privilege of being elected in

two. It cannot be the case that we continue to use data that is that far out of date. It undermines the legitimacy of this place, and I look forward to its being corrected in the Bill when it goes through the House.

7.44 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I would like to thank all the hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate this afternoon. My particular thanks go to my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for their speeches, which demonstrated their depth of commitment both to democratic representation and to the communities they serve, and raised important issues about the detail of this Bill.

Several Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for City of Chester and for Pontypridd, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), raised important points about the impact of this legislation on representation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Strong devolved representation within the nations is critical to the integrity of our United Kingdom. A Bill that reduces the number of parliamentary constituencies in the devolved nations while increasing the number of English seats risks putting further strain on the integrity of the Union. I hope that the Leader of the House will address that point directly when he responds to the debate.

Members from all parties agree that the periodic review of constituency boundaries is a vital part of our representative democracy, and that this review is long overdue. It is our constituencies that give shape and meaning to our democratic process, and they ensure that the concerns of each part of our diverse United Kingdom are given voice and representation. For that reason, it is crucial that long-held community ties form the basis of constituency boundaries, bringing together communities that share common interests and needs. That point was made well by a number of hon. Members who spoke of the risk of villages being split or severed from the towns that they rely on. These things matter to our communities. It is therefore extremely disappointing that the Government have again refused to compromise on the issue of the 5% electoral tolerance. What response can the Leader of the House provide to the apolitical academic experts who have highlighted the restrictive and damaging impact that the 5% quota will have on constituency boundaries? Just a slight widening of the electoral quota to 7.5%, as supported by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire, will vastly improve the geographic and community coherence of new boundaries and as a result ensure better representation for communities.

When the Government introduced the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill in 2010, a pre-legislative inquiry heard evidence from several witnesses that the proposed number of 600 constituencies chosen by the Government was not based on clear evidence. The Hansard Society told the Committee that the number had been

“plucked from thin air—600 simply being a neat number.”

[Helen Hayes]

The Government have now made a U-turn on that arbitrary number but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) mentioned, the 2013 review based on 600 constituencies cost the taxpayer in the region of £700 million, and the 2018 review is likely to have a cost of upwards of £8 million. Does the Leader of the House accept that the Government's political indecision has been a waste of taxpayers' money? Will he clarify for the record how much the 2018 boundary review cost?

Many Members have raised the issue of the alarming removal of parliamentary oversight from the process. Parliament has an important role to play as an emergency backstop to prevent power grabs by the Executive, but the Tories are attempting to remove that backstop, thereby threatening serious unforeseen consequences for the future of our democratic process. Such a move is of deep concern for the integrity of our parliamentary democracy. In response to concerns, the Government assert that removing Parliament from the process will ensure that the boundary commissions' reports will be implemented without interference from either Government or Parliament, but that is not strictly true. The Government make the legislation that instructs the boundary review process, and Ministers have already taken political advantage of the process by creating a loophole in the Bill. Without parliamentary oversight, the handbrake that previously prevented the Tories from removing 50 MPs on an entirely arbitrary basis no longer exists. If passed, the new legislation will allow the Tories to force through reductions to the number of MPs without any backstop in place to prevent it.

We are talking about a Government found by the highest court in this land to have unlawfully shut down Parliament, suspending democratic accountability and attempting to gag democratic opposition. This is not hyperbole or idle speculation; it happened just last year. In such a context, there can be no guarantee that Ministers will not take advantage of the silencing of Parliament in favour of strengthening their own Executive power. Will the Leader of the House take this opportunity to confirm that the Government will not simply use the loophole to force through a reduction in the number of constituencies, or any other changes that are not included in the Bill, further down the line?

My final point is about the electoral registration dataset on which this review will be based. We are currently facing exceptional circumstances. I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that the 2020 electoral register will be heavily affected by the current coronavirus crisis, but this is still the enumeration date set out on the face of the Bill. We cannot expect local councils to do the proactive outreach work that is needed to maintain an up-to-date and fully accurate register while providing an emergency response to a global pandemic. The costs of fighting coronavirus have taken an immense financial toll on councils, and they now face a £10 billion funding gap, which the Government are unwilling to fill. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will accept an amendment to the enumeration date to December 2019? This pragmatic change—in the context of a review for which we have waited 20 years, taking place in unprecedented circumstances—will avoid the new constituency boundaries being based on an incomplete and potentially unrepresentative register.

The Labour party supports the democratic principle of the boundary review, but the Government must consider the implications of the restrictive 5% tolerance along with the 1 December 2020 enumeration date. We remain deeply concerned about the removal of parliamentary oversight from a process that has always had this scrutiny. I encourage Members from across the House to support the reasoned amendment and to reject the continued centralisation of power in the hands of the Executive at the expense of Parliament.

7.51 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): May I begin by thanking all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed, particularly the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), for opening the debate? It is a pleasure to wind up. I also apologise to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for missing part of her speech because I had to go out for other Government business.

This is a key Bill, which will update and equalise parliamentary boundaries, and ensure that every vote counts the same on the basis of 650 constituencies. I am pleased that there has been widespread support from across the House for key elements of the Bill, including from the Opposition, although that does not mean that they are not opposed to some elements of it. There was also support for improvements of the review process, such as changing the times of public hearing and consultation periods.

I am particularly grateful for the support from my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the Father of the House, who said that it was very hard for the House to be judge in its own interest, which is a fundamental point. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who thanked local election staff and agreed with our proposal for eight-yearly reviews.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) emphasised the equality of votes and thought that the 5% leeway was plenty. My right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) reminded us all of the enormous personal affection that we have for our constituencies. It is always true of boundary changes that, however much we recognise that the general principle is right, when a village or street is suggested to be excised from our constituency, we always find it disagreeable. That is one of the key reasons that the Boundary Commission has to be so independent.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who told us that we should all be hedgehogs. I am not sure that I am that prickly, but his point that fairness is at the heart of this matter is a fundamental one. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) quoted the Chartists, and I thought I saw Opposition Members blush. Perhaps my spectacles need cleaning, but I thought that they must have blushed at that point because the Chartists, of course, were all in favour of equalising electorates.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) rather splendidly warned that she might be abolishing herself, which I hope turns out not to be the case, and

made a spirited defence of the Bill on that basis, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett), who I am glad to say gave his wholehearted support to the measures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I am sorry to say, rather dangerously made points that I made when I was a Back Bencher and the legislation was going through the first time in 2010-11, but which are not necessarily Government policy nowadays. I am afraid that I have repented the errors of my ways, but sadly he has not yet repented his, although I hope that that will come.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) spoke about the importance of communities, and that is a general point. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) spoke about smaller units and, of course, there being a seat for Gibraltar, which he has said in the House once or twice before. The Boundary Commission has the power to look at smaller units. That is something people can raise as it goes through its processes and is an important safeguard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) said that his seat has existed since 1542. I am very jealous, because mine has only existed since 2010, and I like seats with a long continuity and history. He made a very fair point about large rural seats, which I am aware of.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) made the point so clearly that she summed up the debate in her opening sentence, when she said that her seat has 83,000 voters within it, and the seat of the Member who spoke before her, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), has 61,000. There is an obvious unfairness in that, which is being put right.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is slightly subject to speaking as if he were on “Just a Minute”, managed to make the key point about variations being too big, which is being addressed by the Bill.

I am very grateful for all the points that have been made in support of the Bill, but I am sorry about the reasoned amendment put down by the Opposition. I ought to point out to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who said that he was going to support the Bill by voting for the reasoned amendment, that that is not how reasoned amendments work. Reasoned amendments are only orderly and selectable if they are fatal to the passage of the Bill, so anybody who votes for the amendment is voting against the whole Bill and cannot cover the nakedness of what they are doing by saying that they are supporting the Bill. *[Interruption.]* I am not going to give way, partly because I gave way so many times earlier on in the day, but also because time is short.

The changes should give people confidence. I must confess that the hon. Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) really did get it wrong on the matter of automaticity. In the 1832 Reform Bill, every single constituency that was being changed was listed in an annex to the Bill, if I remember rightly, and that was decided by Parliament—it decided what the size of each constituency would be. We have increasingly handed that over to make it more independent because of the fundamental point that

nobody should be a judge in his own cause, and we should not be a judge in our own cause. We should allow it to be done by an independent body.

The hon. Member Dulwich and West Norwood said that the Government make legislation. No, they do not—Parliament makes the legislation, which is then implemented. It is implemented in such a way that there is no ability for the Government to alter the recommendations of the Boundary Commission and they have a duty to present it to the Privy Council for its approval by the sovereign. Automaticity means what it says. It is automatic, without the Executive having the ability to stop it, the House of Commons having the ability to stop it or, even worse, the House of Lords having the ability to stop it undemocratically because they do not like the results and are worried about what might happen. Automaticity improves impartiality and the fairness and independence of this proposal. Although Parliament will not play a role in making the order, nor will Her Majesty’s Government.

Another key point made in the debate was on the Union. We heard from a number of Members about the impact of the tolerance level and equalisation on parts of the Union. The Bill does not change the tolerance level, which was put in place by Parliament in 2011. We must bear in mind that it is plus or minus 5%, so it is effectively a total of 10%. It is about 7,000 voters, if we take the total swathe from the central point. That means that the independent boundary commissioners will give a fair review, and it is worth noting that the two specific protected seats which are very small are Scottish seats. I am very glad that one of them is Na h-Eileanan an Iar, because I think the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is a national treasure, and it would be a great pity if he did not maintain his seat. That is being done to benefit the Union.

David Linden: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is too late, I am sorry to say.

That is to the benefit of the Union, and it is fair that every vote across our United Kingdom should have the same weight. That is the fundamental point. That underpins everything that is being done. Eight years is the right amount of time. It means that communities can be reasonably stable. It means that communities can carry on. It means that MPs can build up that association with their communities, so I urge Members to support the Bill and reject the amendment.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 137, Noes 265.

Division No. 53]

[7.59 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Ali, Tahir	Bryant, Chris
Amesbury, Mike	Buck, Ms Karen
Anderson, Fleur	Byrne, Ian
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Byrne, rh Liam
Benn, rh Hilary	Cadbury, Ruth
Blackford, rh Ian	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Blake, Olivia	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Blomfield, Paul	Chamberlain, Wendy
Brabin, Tracy	Charalambous, Bambos
Brennan, Kevin	Cherry, Joanna
Brown, Ms Lyn	Clark, Feryal

Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella (*Proxy vote cast by Peter Kyle*)
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Doughty, Stephen
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Grady, Patrick
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy

McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Mr Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Alex Norris*)
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Winter, Beth
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Jeff Smith and
 Colleen Fletcher**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee

Argar, Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan (*Proxy vote cast by Eddie Hughes*)
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett

Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky

Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Largon, Robert
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott

Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Merriman, Huw
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel (*Proxy vote cast by David Rutley*)
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob

Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stuart, Graham
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Stuart Andrew and
Mr Marcus Jones

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 2 July 2020.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Eddie Hughes.)

Question agreed to.

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Eddie Hughes.)*

Question agreed to.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am afraid there are three parts to this, the first of which relates to the voting we have already done. I was a Teller in one of the earlier Divisions this afternoon. It is up to others to judge quite how ludicrous the whole process looks to the outside world, but to my mind it looks preposterous. I feel that one of the oldest Parliaments in the world should be the best and most able to adapt to modern circumstances, not the worst, but that is a battle for another day. There were some specific order issues during those Divisions, with one being that the Speaker adopted a new version of what we had to wear when voting. I just wonder whether we could have some clarity on that for the future, as, historically, people, including some Whips, have been able to vote in the Lobby when they have been to the gym.

Secondly, one Member tried, during one of the Divisions, to vote in both directions. I know that historically that has not been allowed, but the Member is certainly under the belief that that was recorded. As I understand it—I was one of the Tellers—we were not including that as one of the votes on either side, so it would be good to have some clarity on that.

The other point is that the Leader of the House said earlier in today's debate that we were going to have a motion on the Order Paper tomorrow for us to debate enabling some Members of the House to participate not, I think, in debates, but in urgent questions, questions and statements. Obviously, I would welcome that, but as I understand it the Government have not so far announced what kind of debate it will be, whether any

[Chris Bryant]

time will be allocated for it tomorrow, whether it is expected that this should be agreed to on nod or nothing, whether we are able to table amendments, or whether we have to submit to be able to take part in that debate. There are many of us who feel deeply concerned that the Government have tabled a motion that suggests the only people who will be able to participate are those who self-certify as having a medical need. I do not think that disabled people, or people who are shielding or have shielding responsibilities for others, should be treated in that way. I do not think that they should have to justify themselves for wanting to participate from a distance. In particular, parents who have childcare responsibilities should certainly not have to claim that there is some kind of medical reason. Some of us would therefore like to have a full debate.

I am sorry that that is a long point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, but you are a very indulgent man.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you very much, Mr Bryant. As far as the first point is concerned, you said it was a battle for another day and clearly it will be. On the dress code during a Division, you are absolutely right. In the past, people have come straight from the gym and worn what they were in when the Division Bell rang. I will ensure that that gets raised tomorrow, so that clarity is brought to how people should dress when there is a Division, as I will on voting both ways. We do not have the opportunity to abstain or, for whatever reason—we can only hazard a guess as to why people do it—vote both ways.

As far as the motion tomorrow is concerned, I have not seen that motion yet, but you have raised several points as to why people would want to at least make known their anger, one way or another, as to what may or may not happen in that motion. I hope that Members will get an opportunity to at least express their views, however that motion is brought forward. I hope that is okay. [Interruption.] Thank you very much, Mr Bryant. The thumbs up will do me fine.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (CORPORATE INSOLVENCY AND GOVERNANCE BILL)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That, in respect of the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—(Eddie Hughes.)

Question agreed to.

SENTENCING (PRE-CONSOLIDATION AMENDMENTS) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill [Lords], now standing committed to a Public Bill Committee, be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—(Eddie Hughes.) *Question agreed to.*

Private Car Parks

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

8.38 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It feels like groundhog day. This debate has been scheduled, I believe, perhaps as many as four times, but events repeatedly knocked it off course. Today, however, we are finally back in the Chamber physically with a full day of debate, and I have the chance to finally bring to the Floor of the House the long and tortuous case of a single parking ticket.

My hon. Friend the Minister need not look panicked that I am expecting him to do something about a specific parking ticket—the matter is now resolved—but I wish to draw to his attention the fact that my constituent, Mr Guy Hindle, was bullied by a succession of organisations over a period of some 20-plus months over a six-minute transgression. As Mr Hindle happily agrees, this is not about his experience. He is a resilient individual—very much so—and he eventually negotiated a payment of just £15, when at one point £247.62 was being demanded from him. It is about shining a light on what he refers to as the sharp practices of the wild west of parking services. It is not just my constituent who refers to private parking as the wild west. He is in great company. I tracked down some commentary from my hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he was a Minister at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; he referred to it—private parking, not the Department—as the wild west, too.

This case is a litany of bad behaviour. My constituent parked for a mere six minutes outside Vets for Pets in Southampton and did not see any signage regarding the charge for parking, so he was surprised to receive a penalty charge notice. He informed the company, Premier Park, that he intended to defend himself, preferably in court proceedings, because he regarded the £60 charge for a six-minute stop as unreasonable. He heard nothing more until June the following year—2019—by which time the matter had been passed to Premier Park’s legal representatives. Remember the original offence, if one can call it that, happened in March 2018. Then followed a succession of increasingly threatening letters mentioning county court judgments, and each letter and every telephone call my constituent made to Premier Park or their legal representatives made it clear that there would be many more letters—and so it proved. All along, my constituent was responding, “Take me to court. I have amassed a dossier of evidence. I am prepared to defend myself. I believe I have a good case.”

Finally, in January this year, my constituent received confirmation that Premier Park would commence court proceedings unless my constituent was happy to agree to mediation. This was the first time that mediation had been mentioned. The original offence was in March 2018, and here he was, in January 2020, and suddenly the offer of mediation was made.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on bringing this case to the House. She is not the only one who has had run-ins with private car park firms. Indeed, the one she talks about ranks high in my mind. I fought a number of cases against it, and I have to say that ultimately I won them all. Does she

agree that in the times we are facing, the privately run car park sector should show the same flexibility as our council car parks by removing charges and forestalling following through on any contraventions until we are past this very difficult time? Now is not the time for anyone or any private car park to profiteer or take advantage. We have to help our constituents and those individuals who have been held to be in the wrong for these contraventions.

Caroline Nokes: I will make two points in response to the hon. Gentleman. First, I have a most excellent staffer who for the last 10 years has described herself as my office expert on parking charges. She cringes somewhat when into the email inbox pops yet another case, but as I tell her, she has a 100% track record so far and we are very proud of her.

On the points the hon. Gentleman made about private parking charges at the moment, I am conscious that in Test Valley borough, half of which I represent as the Member for Romsey and Southampton North, the borough council waived parking charges right at the beginning of the pandemic and has since extended the free parking period. There are some challenging questions ahead, because as we move forward post pandemic, we want to see our high streets recover and to assist that recovery. I think the Chancellor and the Department have come up with some amazing and really important packages, but I have no doubt that the income from parking that councils have forgone has been a huge cost to them. They will need to find ways to make up that loss, but my plea to them is to show a spirit of tolerance and support for the shopkeepers and to allow our high streets to recover gently from this difficult period. The immediate reimposition of parking charges as lockdown ends would be a retrograde step. I was delighted to see the Minister nodding during that intervention, in which a really important point was made.

As my constituent said to me, had mediation been offered to him early in the proceedings, he would have taken it—it would have been the sensible thing to do. Instead, however, he kept responding to Premier Park, “No. I’ll see you in court.” The company kept responding, “We’ll take you to court,” or rather, “We’ll send you more letters threatening to take you to court. We’ll get increasingly aggressive. The charges will go up and up. We’ll employ a succession of different legal representatives until you don’t know which one you’re trying to deal with.” But two years on, the offer of mediation was made, my constituent accepted it and they settled on a sum of 15 quid, which I do not think is bad going.

What worries my constituent and me is the repeated bullying tactics: the threats of legal action, which are then not followed up for many months—in this case 20 months—the alarming threat of county court judgments, which we know have a devastating impact on people’s credit rating, and the threatening assertion that there will be lots more letters like that one.

I am conscious of the most excellent piece of legislation introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), which came into force in March 2019 and paved the way for a single code of practice for private parking, giving drivers greater protection through a new appeals service. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, when he was at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local

Government and occupying a similar portfolio to the Minister, championed the issue on behalf of the Government. This sort of code could have made my constituent’s life much less of a misery.

More recently, back in November 2019 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government appointed the British Standards Institution to work with consumer groups and industry to write the first ever compulsory code of practice for private parking firms to

“restore common sense to the way parking fines are handed out...crack down on dodgy operators”

and

“introduce a new independent appeals service”.

I know that is correct, because I lifted it from the press release I found on gov.uk. The code was also to ensure that a mandatory 10-minute grace period, which already applies to local authority car parks, be extended to all private parking services.

I take my hon. Friend the Minister back to the precise period my constituent parked for: six minutes, which is four minutes less than the minimum grace period suggested. I am prepared to concede that my constituent’s supposed six-minute transgression happened before the excellent private Member’s Bill and before the Secretary of State appointed the British Standards Institution to write the new compulsory code, so maybe it is not reasonable to expect a member of the British Parking Association to apply 2019 standards to a 2018 offence—notwithstanding the fact that it was Premier Park itself that dragged the whole matter out for 20 long months—except that the British Parking Association voluntary code of practice already referenced a 10-minute grace period.

Returning to the crux of the matter, the previous Minister with this responsibility, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), in response to a written question indicated that the British Standards Institution was contracted in December 2019 to develop the new code. It was tasked with convening a group of key stakeholders to write it, and there was to be a full public consultation within six months. The final code would be developed this year.

I do not wish to hassle the Minister and try to hurry the process along, and I absolutely acknowledge that covid has got in the way of many things, but this year is ticking by very quickly. My constituent and, indeed, those of other hon. and right hon. Members who have returned to this Chamber time and again to discuss private parking services need the code. I argue that the parking industry also needs it, and it is more than a year since the excellent private Member’s Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire.

Will the Minister this evening in this much delayed debate therefore please give us an update on progress and an absolute commitment that, exactly as was said in February, the code will be developed this year and introduced? Will he reassure me and my constituent that the 10-minute grace period or transaction period, which allows a driver to enter a car park, establish the charges and then decide whether he wishes to pay them or whether they are far too high for his taste and he wishes to leave and go elsewhere, will be included? That could have saved my constituent 20 months of harassment and pain.

[Caroline Nokes]

That grace period should be a crucial part of enabling drivers to make informed choices in future. That is what this is all about: allowing drivers to make informed choices and giving them a bit of leeway so that they can decide whether that is actually where they wish to park. I learned from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire that there might be many good reasons why parking charges are not advertised outside a car park, such as it being in a conservation area where there might be restrictions on signage. We should give drivers the opportunity to go into a car park, have a look and then potentially leave.

I conclude by asking the Minister to make that assurance, to give us an update on when this code is coming and when the public consultation will happen or whether it has already happened and to give us a sense of progress and a sense that this matter is in hand and will be dealt with.

8.49 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for raising this issue and I congratulate her on securing this much-delayed debate. I also want to thank her and indeed, hon. Members across the House because this is an issue that I receive a lot of representations about on a daily basis. It is something that I am keenly aware needs resolving, and Members across the House are firm in their view that action is necessary on the regulation of the private parking industry.

Too often, our constituents are treated poorly at the hands of parking firms, and I know that many of my constituents in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland feel the same. The clear cross-party support for the Parking (Code Of Practice) Act 2019 was therefore hugely encouraging, and I am pleased that, through the Act the Government are giving motorists greater protection against bogus parking fines and clamping down on rogue operators.

Self-regulation in the private parking sector has led to some undesirable practices, including misleading or confusing signage, aggressive debt collection, spiralling fees and opaque appeals services, and we heard some of that in the case of my right hon. Friend's constituent, Mr Hindle. Members see in our postbags the effect that these poor practices have on people in our communities. They include the motorist who made a genuine and minor error entering their vehicle registration number into a machine and received £100 fine in the post; the driver who entered a car park on a busy day and could not park due to lack of spaces but got a ticket regardless because the camera assumed they had parked; the car park with signs that are impossible to read, subject to terms and conditions which are difficult to understand or which change without proper notice. Letters from motorists and even from MPs have gone unanswered by parking companies, although it does sound as though the hon. Lady has a staffer who will not be defeated by such tactics.

These practices are unfair and not good enough. The private parking industry plays a crucial role in our transport infrastructure, from facilitating commutes every

morning to making our high streets accessible for shoppers and those accessing vital services. It employs thousands of people and serves millions of customers every day in normal times. We understand its importance, and that is why this Government are taking action to crack down on rogue firms, protect motorists and raise standards across the sector. With that in mind, I am pleased to update Members on the progress of our action after the passing of the Parking (Code Of Practice) Act, which was introduced thanks to the hard work of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), and we are actively delivering on our 2017 manifesto commitment to tackle rogue parking operators.

The Act provided for the creation of an independent code of practice for private parking companies and a one-stop shop for parking appeals, and our new code will ensure that enforcement and appeal processes are fair and proportionate. It will bring consistency, creating a level playing field across the industry, and it will benefit motorists, operators and landowners alike. If a parking company were to repeatedly break the code, its access to DVLA data could be blocked, and this data includes information on the vehicle keeper, so a company blocked from accessing it would be effectively unable to pursue parking charges. Blocking rogue operators in this manner will grant motorists greater protection against companies not delivering the standards that the Government and the public would expect.

We have taken steps to ensure that the code is not only reflective of the issues that we want to address but is informed by outside experts. On 3 November last year, the Government announced that the British Standards Institution would write the code in consultation with consumer and industry groups and carry out a full consultation once the draft was ready. The BSI is widely regarded as expert in regulatory delivery and has a proven track record of working with Government. Developing the code of practice as a British standard is thus a guarantee that the new regulation will be robust and of the highest quality, and the Government's choice of BSI also delivers on our promise to listen to industry and consumers and involve them in the design of the new regulation. BSI's process for developing new British standards involves reaching a consensus for a range of key stakeholders and seeking a wide array of views through a full public consultation. That will help to ensure that the code is entirely comprehensive.

I assure my right hon. Friend that, working in conjunction with the BSI, it is a priority to ensure that this code addresses the most significant and recurring issues that consumers deal with.

Jim Shannon: I welcome what the Minister has outlined for the right hon. Lady. I think it is exactly what we want to hear in this House, but when it comes to monitoring and checking, will the changes in the pipeline be enforced by locals councils, the police or another independent body?

Mr Clarke: It would not be an Adjournment debate without an intervention from the hon. Gentleman. In this case, he raises a really significant point. We need to make sure that these regulations have teeth. The deterrent lies in the fact that repeat offenders will find themselves unable to access the DVLA database and so it will in effect be self-policing.

In November, we announced that the Government would propose that the code considers a mandatory requirement to give all drivers the 10 minute grace period, which my right hon. Friend referred to, after their tickets expire. This will be a common-sense measure to ensure that drivers are not unfairly penalised for trying to do the right thing.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He was very specific then about a 10-minute grace period after a ticket had expired. Will it also include a 10-minute grace period in the circumstance that he himself identified where somebody perhaps drives into a car park and finds that there are no spaces, or that it is too expensive?

Mr Clarke: I confess that, given the code is in draft, I do not know the answer to that question, but I will write to my right hon. Friend, as she would expect, to clarify. I suspect that it will make good sense for it to do so in practice, but I will not presume to prejudge what the independent regulation may eventually come up with.

I also want to address issues raised about debt collection, because it cannot be fair that a hard-working family is prevented from obtaining a mortgage because a small breach of a car park's terms and conditions led to a county court judgment that, as my right hon. Friend refers to, can have such serious consequences, especially if it is sent to an old address. I have seen constituency cases of that nature. We are proposing that the code considers new protections for consumers, and looks at extra measures to crack down on intimidating and aggressive debt collection practices. We will also look at the appeals system, because this is a particularly significant issue. There are two appeals services in the private parking sector. Both have their own processes and procedures and different rates at which parking charges are overturned at appeal. Which appeals service a motorist has access to depends not on their choice or the nature of the alleged breach of contract, but simply on which trade association the operator happens to belong to. That cannot be fair and is at odds with natural justice, which is why it is the Government's stated position that we intend to appoint a single appeals service for the entire industry, giving motorists the ability to challenge unfair charges.

Finally, we are actively exploring ways to combat unfairly issued tickets from automatic number plate recognition technology. There is a widespread sense from motorists that this technology does not function as it should. I have heard of motorists entering and leaving a car park yet still having a ticket issued, and that is obviously a real concern. We want a private parking sector that works fairly in that regard.

Turning to the substantive issue of timing, I am pleased to update the House that work with the BSI commenced in December, and it has now convened a group of key stakeholders to write the code. This group comprises representatives from the parking industry, consumer groups, standards bodies and, recognising the key role that parking plays in supporting our high streets, the retail sector.

I can also update the House that we have appointed Steve Gooding, the director of the RAC Foundation, as our technical author, and he has now produced the first draft of the code. The RAC Foundation is a well-respected

transport policy and research organisation and Mr Gooding is a former director-general of the Roads Traffic and Local Group at the Department for Transport, so he will bring real knowledge, experience and expertise to bear on his work. This is only a first draft and, as I have said, the final draft will be worked up in close consultation with key stakeholders, and there will be plenty of opportunity for everyone to have their voice heard in this process.

In the context of this debate, I would like to put it on record that the Government are doing all they can to utilise our parking infrastructure to best serve our collective response to the coronavirus. I am sure that the measures that we have announced to support frontline workers and volunteers have been welcomed by both the House and the British public. We are offering free parking for NHS workers, volunteers and social care workers in council-owned on-street spaces and car parks. In conjunction with NHS England, the parking sector and local government, we have produced a free parking pass to allow those workers to park in council spaces, worry free. We have pledged to cover the costs of providing free car parking to NHS staff working in hospitals during this unprecedented time. Our aim is to alleviate any unnecessary pressures on those workers by removing any fears that they may have about fees or fines while they carry out what is by common consent truly heroic work.

As we take the first steps towards recovery, we want to offer alternatives to public transport, but we are of course wary of an increase in the numbers of people taking end-to-end car journeys. To ease parking capacity, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has announced that the Government will seek to repurpose underused parking facilities outside town centres, made possible by close collaboration with local authorities and private operators. Those who live too far from town centres to cycle or walk can therefore park on the outskirts and finish their journeys on foot, bike or even—excitingly—an e-scooter.

Individual businesses are also playing a hugely positive role. Many private operators have been offering parking spaces to NHS workers during the coronavirus crisis. I commend such efforts and reiterate the Government's appreciation for them.

I recognise the need to progress the new code at pace, and across Government we recognise the urgency of this issue. It is crucial to get the regulations right and, as my right hon. Friend said, the coronavirus situation has had an impact, but we have committed to developing the final code this year. Prior to that, a public consultation will take place to give the parking industry, the public and other interested parties the opportunity to have their say.

The 2019 Act builds on action that the Government have already taken to tackle rogue private parking firms, including the banning of wheel clamping and towing and the stopping of over-zealous parking enforcement by councils and parking wardens. Beyond our work on the private car parking sector, the Government are taking decisive action to improve public and private car parking throughout the country.

The Government are taking determined steps to protect motorists across the country. The Act will tackle an issue that our figures show affects literally millions of motorists every year. We will ensure that the private parking industry works to the high standards that motorists

[Mr Simon Clarke]

can reasonably expect, and we will tackle the rogue operators and their unfair practices. It will be an industry that will deliver for everybody.

I thank my right hon. Friend again for raising the issue of Mr Hindle, and I put on record my own tribute to Mr Hindle for his persistence in showing a certain British doggedness in refusing to accept a fundamentally

unfair situation. I thank my right hon. Friend for the opportunity to update the House on the work that we are doing to improve the sector. I of course look forward to returning to the Dispatch Box to give further updates when the final code is ready.

Question put and agreed to.

9.2 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 2 June 2020

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act: Documents Required

The Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body Spokesperson (Damian Hinds): I wish to inform the House regarding certain documents that have been agreed by virtue of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 (“the Act”).

On 8 April the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body was established as a corporate body by section 2 of the Act with overall responsibility for the parliamentary building works. As required by section 3 of the Act, the Sponsor Body established the R and R Delivery Authority to carry out the works.

Section 4 of the Act requires the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority to enter into a programme delivery agreement (PDA) regarding the arrangements for the definition, development and delivery of the works. The PDA was approved by the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority Boards on 18 May and it will be reviewed after six months.

Section 5 of the Act requires the Sponsor Body to prepare a strategy for consulting Members of both Houses in relation to the works, which must be published by 3 June. The Sponsor Body Board approved the strategy on 23 April and the Commissions of both Houses took note of the strategy in May. The Act requires the strategy to be kept under review with subsequent versions published accordingly.

Section 6 of the Act requires the Corporate Officers of both Houses to enter into a parliamentary relationship agreement (PRA) with the Sponsor Body. The PRA sets out the arrangements for how both Houses and the Sponsor Body will work together during the works, including their respective roles and responsibilities, and what they should expect of each other across a wide range of areas. The Commissions of both Houses and the Sponsor Body Board approved the PRA in April and it will be reviewed after six months.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-06-02/HCWS254/>.

[HCWS254]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Historic Royal Palaces: Contingent Liabilities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned:

To present a departmental Minute to Parliament, giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances: and

To refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the Minute, except in the cases of special urgency.

The departmental Minute I lay today is in respect of two matters:

First, to provide the House with notice that Historic Royal Palaces' previously approved £4 million overdraft facility, whereby Government act as a guarantor, has now been called upon and thus the guarantee has been activated as a result of COVID-19.

Secondly, to provide the House with retrospective notice of a new contingent liability of up to £20.8 million created by my Department. This is in relation to a new borrowing facility of up to £26 million for Historic Royal Palaces whereby Government provides the lender with a guarantee of 80% against the outstanding balance of the finance.

Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) is a charity established by Royal Charter. By virtue of a contract entered into on 1 April 1998, it carries out the functions of the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport under Section 21 of the Crown Lands Act 1851 of managing the unoccupied Royal Palaces.

The £4 million guarantee was originally placed in 2002 and was intended to safeguard HRP's business from a sudden and serious decline in economic conditions affecting HRP's admissions income. Since that date, the guarantee has been extended on a rolling basis. Following the laying of a departmental Minute and written ministerial statement by the then Heritage Minister on 15 September 2016, the £4 million guarantee was last renewed for a period of five years.

As a result of covid-19, HRP closed all of the palaces in its care on 20 March 2020. As HRP receive no grant-in-aid from Government and are entirely dependent on admissions, visitor related spend and events, they have therefore lost their main sources of income. While HRP currently have reserves of c.£33 million, the use of these reserves before they mature would not be cost effective and lead to financial penalties being incurred. The £4 million overdraft facility with Barclays Bank has therefore been put in place to meet their immediate cash flow requirements in April and thus the £4 million guarantee has been activated.

HRP expects that the current crisis will exhaust all of their reserves within the current financial year. The new guaranteed borrowing facility of up to an additional £26 million will enable HRP to allow their reserves to mature and invest in the business. The guarantee will be available for a period of two years and HRP will only enter into borrowing facilities at such times and within such monetary limits as the Department shall agree.

HRP's cash flow estimates showed that by the end of May they would have exhausted the existing £4 million overdraft facility and be in urgent need of c.£1.4 million to make payments due.

Therefore, due to the urgency involved, the Department has authorised HRP to immediately draw down £4 million from the additional £26 million facility to meet HRP's immediate cashflow needs.

I am placing today a copy of the departmental Minute in the Library of the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-06-02/HCWS256/>.

[HCWS256]

EDUCATION

Reopening Schools

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson):

This week, we have been able to take the first, cautious step towards getting children and young people back in education. In line with many other countries this is being done with a phased approach. As the Prime Minister confirmed on 28 May, the Government's five tests are being met and all nations in the UK are beginning to ease the lockdown restrictions.

Based on all the evidence, in England this means that nurseries and other early years providers, including childminders, are now able to welcome back children of all ages. Primary schools are able to welcome back pupils in reception, year 1 and year 6, in smaller class sizes, alongside children of critical workers and vulnerable children of all ages who will continue to be able to attend.

We recognise that schools and nurseries need time to plan and to implement the strict protective measures we have asked them to put in place. We are continuing to work with the sector to ensure any schools experiencing difficulties are supported to welcome more children and young people back as soon as possible.

From 15 June, secondary schools and further education providers are being asked to provide face-to-face support for years 10 and 12, and 16-to-19 learners in the first year of a two-year study programme, who are due to take key exams next year. This support will supplement their remote education, which will continue to be their main method of education during this term. As the scientific evidence indicates numbers need to continue to be limited, we are asking that only a quarter of this cohort should attend at any one time to limit the risk of transmission. Children of critical workers and vulnerable children in all year groups will continue to be able to attend full time.

The Department for Education has published detailed guidance for settings on how to prepare.

We continue to follow the best scientific advice and believe that this cautious, phased return is the most sensible course of action to take. As the Prime Minister has set out, the Government will continue to monitor the rate of transmission carefully and will not hesitate to reintroduce restrictions on a local or regional basis if required.

I continue to be immensely grateful for the response of all those in working in education, childcare and children's social care during this challenging time.

[HCWS258]

Higher Education Stabilisation Package Draft Regulations

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): On 4 May 2020, the Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson) announced a package of measures to protect students and higher education providers, in response to the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic. This package was designed to stabilise university finances, including tuition fee income resulting from admissions, and to support our world-class higher education system to continue to deliver for all students and the wider economy.

One of the measures announced was temporary student number controls (SNCs) designed to prevent recruitment by providers taking a form which would be against the interests of students and the sector, yet still allow students who want to go to university, and meet their entry requirements, to access higher education.

I announced on 4 May that SNCs would be linked to the student finance system. I can confirm that I will be laying draft regulations before Parliament which provide that, where an SNC is exceeded in academic year 2020-21, providers in England which are subject to a tuition fee limit will have that limit reduced in the subsequent academic year. In the case of institutions in the devolved administrations which attract student loans for students from England, the maximum loan amount will be reduced in academic year 2021-22 where they exceed their SNC in academic year 2020-21.

These number controls are a response to the financial threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic. They aim to prevent large swings in the number of students between providers, with much higher levels of recruitment at some providers potentially leaving others in financial difficulty. They also aim to prevent recruitment practices which are against students' best interests because they may encourage them to accept an offer from a provider that is not best suited to their needs.

On 1 June we published a policy statement setting out the detail of the SNCs. These will allow higher education providers to recruit, without the financial consequences referred to above, fulltime, undergraduate, UK-EU domiciled students (with certain exemptions) up to a set level, based on 2019-20 numbers and provider growth forecasts, and which allow additional growth of up to 5% in the next academic year.

In addition, providers can also apply for additional places, following the process set out in the policy statement. The Government will allocate an additional 10,000 places for strategically important subjects, with 5,000 of these ring-fenced for nursing, midwifery or allied health courses to support the country's vital public services.

In the event that a provider does not abide by its student number controls, the Government will address the consequences for the stability and the sustainability of the higher education sector by reducing the sums available to the provider through the student finance system in the subsequent academic year. This will be through the introduction of lower fee limits in the academic year from 1 August 2021 for providers that recruit more students than their individual SNCs. Maximum tuition fee loan amounts available to English-domiciled

students starting full-time courses at institutions in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales are also reduced in the same circumstances.

The Government therefore intend to lay draft regulations (the higher education (fee limits and student support) (England) (coronavirus) regulations 2020) before Parliament for their approval. These regulations will amend the legislation which prescribes tuition fee limits and tuition fee loan amounts.

These SNCs are in the best interests of the financial health of the higher education sector overall, and will help to ensure we can continue to look after the best interests of students, allowing them make well-informed choices that give them the best prospects for success in their lives and careers.

[HCWS252]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Test and Trace

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 28 May the NHS Test And Trace service was introduced across England. This forms a central part of the Government's covid-19 recovery strategy to help as many people as possible return to life as close to normal as possible, in a way that is safe and protects our NHS and social care.

The objective of the NHS Test And Trace service is to push down and keep low the rate of reproduction (R) of covid-19 and reduce the total number of infected people by catching cases before they spread the virus. It brings together testing, contact tracing and outbreak management into an end-to-end service.

The roll-out of the NHS Test And Trace service has been made possible by the rapid expansion of testing. The largest network of diagnostic testing facilities in British history has been created and now has the capacity to carry out 200,000 tests a day. This includes 50 drive-through sites, more than 100 mobile testing units and three mega laboratories. Everyone in England is now eligible for a test if they have covid-19 symptoms. These symptoms are: a new, continuous cough; or a high temperature; or a loss of, or change in, normal sense of smell or taste.

The NHS Test And Trace service uses a combination of 25,000 dedicated contact tracing staff, local public health experts and an online service to trace the contacts of anyone who tests positive for covid-19. The NHS covid-19 app, which will further extend the speed and reach of contact tracing, will be rolled out nationally in the coming weeks as part of the NHS Test And Trace service.

On 22 May we announced £300 million of new funding for local authorities in England to work with NHS Test And Trace to develop local outbreak control plans. These plans will focus on identifying and containing potential outbreaks in places such as workplaces, housing complexes, care homes and schools, ensuring testing

capacity is deployed effectively and helping vulnerable people who are self-isolating access essential services in their area.

Anyone who tests positive for coronavirus is contacted by NHS Test and Trace and asked to share information about their recent interactions. This could include household members and people with whom they have been in direct contact or within 2 metres for more than 15 minutes. People identified as having been in close contact with someone who has had a positive test must stay at home for 14 days, even if they do not have symptoms, to stop unknowingly spreading the virus.

Those who need to self-isolate will be informed about local support networks if they need practical, social or emotional support. They will also have access to the same financial support available to those who have to self-isolate because they or another member of their household have symptoms or have tested positive for covid-19. This includes access to statutory sick pay, subject to normal eligibility conditions.

The public will have a key role to play in making this service a success. They will need to report covid-19 symptoms, book tests, help to identify recent close contacts, and self-isolate for at least seven days if they have covid-19, and for 14 days after they were in contact with the person who tested positive for covid-19 if they are identified as a close contact by NHS Test and Trace.

We have put in place a comprehensive media campaign to increase public awareness of the NHS Test and Trace service, what it is, why it is important and what the public need to do. This includes TV, radio, video on demand, posters, digital display and social media.

We are working closely with the devolved Administrations and public health agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure an aligned approach to testing and tracing across the United Kingdom where possible.

[HCWS255]

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendments) (No.3) Regulations

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 26 March 2020, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 came into force, imposing restrictions on people's movements and gatherings, and requiring the closure of certain retail and public premises, in the interest of public health in light of the coronavirus pandemic. A review of these regulations must take place at least every 21 days to ensure the restrictions remain necessary. I completed the third review as required on 28 May 2020.

Taking into account scientific advice and taking into consideration the Government's assessment against the five conditions required for change, we can proceed with some limited and cautious amendments to the regulations to ease the restrictions as announced by the Prime Minister on 28 May 2020.

The changes coming into effect include allowing for increased social contact outdoors (both public and private places) in groups of up to six people from different households and opening some outdoor retail

(e.g. vehicle showrooms and outdoor markets). Those from different households should continue strictly to observe social distancing guidance.

In order to provide greater clarity and certainty to the public, businesses and police, we are confirming in law what people cannot do rather than the reasons for which someone can leave the home.

The changes generally follow the principle that outdoor environments, while not zero-risk, have a lower risk of transmission than indoor.

Additionally, to ensure that we are making future decisions about the lockdown at the right time, the maximum review period will change from 21 days to 28 days. This will allow decisions to align more closely with the period of time necessary to assess the impact of previous changes on key data feeds, including the R rate. The Government will also keep all the measures under continual review and will account to Parliament on an ongoing basis.

Publicly available Government guidance on www.gov.uk is being updated to ensure it fully corresponds with the amended regulations. These remain strict measures, but they are measures that we must take in order to protect our NHS and to save lives.

[HCWS253]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower: Phase 1 Report Next Steps

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): On 30 October 2019 phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, which focused on how the fire started and spread and the emergency response, concluded with the publication of the phase 1 report. In January 2020 the Government reaffirmed the acceptance, first given on the day of publication, to accept in principle all the recommendations that Sir Martin Moore-Bick made for central Government in that report.

Six months on from the publication of the Government response to the phase 1 report, I would like to update Parliament on Government progress at turning our commitments into real and lasting change to building and fire safety.

The Grenfell fire was an unimaginable tragedy that must never be allowed to happen again. Even in these unprecedented times, the Government commitment to implementing the inquiry's recommendations, as a priority, remains unchanged. As does the Government commitment to ensuring those most affected, the bereaved and survivors—who have displayed such remarkable courage, resilience and dignity—continue to be engaged in discussions about policy development.

Ban on the use of combustible materials

The inquiry's report was clear that the use of aluminium composite material (ACM) rainscreen cladding and combustible insulation on the exterior of the tower was the defining factor in the rapid spread of the fire. The Government introduced regulations in December 2018 that banned the use of combustible materials in and on the external walls of specific types of new high-rise buildings. A public consultation was held between January and May 2020, to further explore and refine the scope

of that ban, including a proposal to ban the use of ACM with unmodified polyethylene core and similar materials on all buildings in England. We are analysing feedback and will be publishing a response in due course.

Remediation

Since the Grenfell Tower fire, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Home Office (HO) have identified over 450 buildings with unsafe ACM cladding, and we have worked with local authorities and fire and rescue authorities to ensure that appropriate interim safety measures are in place, while these buildings undergo remediation.

In March this year the Government announced that they will provide £1 billion to fund the removal and replacement of unsafe non-ACM cladding systems. This is in addition to the £600 million which Government have made available for remediation of the highest risk ACM cladding. The prospectus for this fund was launched last month and sets out the buildings and non-ACM cladding systems that are eligible for funding; and registration is now open for potential applicants, in advance of the full application process opening by the end of July 2020. More information on the fund prospectus can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/remediation-of-non-acm-buildings#prospectus%E2%80%94outlining-eligibility-for-the-fund>.

This fund will meet the cost of remediating unsafe non-ACM cladding systems where building owners or other entities legally responsible for making buildings safe, are unable to do so. Government are also providing additional, specialist project management capability to building owners or managing agents to speed up the development and implementation of building plans.

The fire protection board

The Government have also established a fire protection board, chaired by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), to provide greater assurance to central Government of fire and rescue service protection activity. The board is leading a building risk review programme, supported by Government funding to ensure that all high-rise residential buildings of 18 metres or above are inspected or reviewed by the end of 2021. We are also using a proportion of the additional £20 million secured for fire and rescue services in the recent Budget to further support an uplift in protection capability.

Stay put

At the end of last year, a joint HO and MHCLG steering group was set up to support a technical review of stay put. There are three strands to this work: an evidence review, assessing academic evidence on methods of evacuation; operational research to test evacuation strategies; and building design research. The first stage of this work has been commissioned and is underway while preliminary work is being carried out on the other strands.

Building safety

At the heart of the Government radical reforms of building safety is the new building safety regulator, which we are establishing within the Health and Safety Executive. The Government set out plans in our response to the "Building a Safer Future" consultation for the biggest change in building safety for a generation.

The new regulator will be responsible for implementing and enforcing a more stringent regulatory regime for higher-risk buildings, as well as providing wider and stronger oversight of safety and performance across all buildings and increasing the competence of those working on building safety. This work complements the establishment of a new construction products regulatory role to strengthen national oversight and effectively enforce the new regulatory regime.

The Government will soon be publishing the draft Building Safety Bill for scrutiny before it is introduced in Parliament. This Bill will put in place this new and enhanced regulatory regimes for building safety and construction products, and ensure residents have a stronger voice.

In April, the Government published a workplan detailing the next steps for the wider review of approved document B, following the technical review that was started in December 2018. Research will be carried out in areas such as means of escape, compartmentation and toxicity. This work will build on the changes we have published in an update to approved document B last month, so that sprinklers and wayfinding signage will be provided in all new blocks of flats above 11 metres. The Government are also working with the NFCC on further tests of evacuation with a view to including guidance on provision of these systems in a later update to approved document B.

Fire Safety Bill

The inquiry's phase 1 report also called for new duties on building owners and managers to share technical information with fire and rescue services and undertake regular inspections of flat entrance doors. It is our intention to take forward these recommendations for existing buildings under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 underpinned by the changes being introduced through the Fire Safety Bill.

The Fire Safety Bill, which was introduced in March and received cross-party support, clarifies that the scope of the Fire Safety Order covers external walls, including cladding and balconies, and flat entrance doors in multi-occupied residential buildings. It provides a firm foundation upon which to bring forward secondary legislation to implement the recommendations that require further changes to the law. The Bill is a significant further step to ensure better identification and management of fire safety risks in such buildings.

It is important that the Government response to the inquiry's recommendations has the support of those with experience in these matters, and those most affected by them. To ensure their views inform our response, a public consultation will be issued soon setting out the Government's proposed approach to the remaining recommendations that call for legislative change.

Fire and rescue services

Many of the recommendations within the inquiry's phase 1 report were directed at non-Government organisations that are equally committed to the reforms. The report was clear that the London Fire Brigade (LFB) must learn and change to restore public confidence. Our request for regular progress reports from the LFB setting out how it is translating the recommendations into action are a key part of retaining focus and momentum on the need for change.

There remains much to do, but the HO is already seeing a commitment to revised policy and procedures backed up by the use of better equipment and technology to support high-rise fire-fighting and fire-fighting in London more broadly. The pandemic has created many challenges, but it has not affected the LFB's commitment to implementing the inquiry's phase 1 recommendations.

It is important that the lessons from Grenfell are learned beyond London. This is why the NFCC is working to ensure that the phase 1 recommendations are implemented across all fire and rescue services. The HO is working closely with the NFCC on an improvement plan to help it drive real change across the sector.

In the three years since the Grenfell Tower fire, the Government have remained steadfast in its commitment to driving forward both cultural and legislative change so that no such tragedy can ever be allowed to happen again. Through implementation of the reforms highlighted in this statement, and wider work of Government and our stakeholders, we will move from the conditions that allowed a tragedy like the fire at Grenfell Tower to occur almost three years ago, to a system which ensures developers and building owners demonstrate greater responsibility for the safety of residents and which allows local authorities and fire and rescue authorities to enforce this. The Government are firmly committed to ensuring all residents are safe in their homes, now and in the future.

[HCWS257]

JUSTICE

Prison and Probation Service: Roadmap to Recovery (Covid-19)

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I am today announcing the Government's plans for how Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service will start to recover from the impact of covid-19.

I want to first pay tribute to the hard-working staff across the country who have continued to deliver essential services in spite of the virus. They have been striving tirelessly to make sure those in their care are safe and the public is protected.

The Government have introduced strong measures to save lives and protect the NHS, including reducing face-to-face interactions in both prison and probation, minimising transfers between establishments, shielding the vulnerable, quarantining new entrants to prison and making greater use of technology to enable family contact and supervise offenders in the community.

As a result of the success of these measures, we are formulating plans for how these restrictions can be cautiously rolled back over the coming weeks and months. This will happen within overarching frameworks for prisons and probation which have been published today. These decisions will be guided by public health advice and the best available data.

In prisons there will not be a simple easing of restrictions across the estate but national guidance will ensure there is consistency in decision making by governors. That means establishments will progress at their own speed, taking full account of their specific circumstances.

We know it will not be a straightforward return to normality. As the Prime Minister has set out, the whole country now needs to prepare for an extended period of living with and managing the threat from the virus.

But over the coming weeks and months, we will restart aspects of daily prison life, such as social visits, education and work, and face-to-face probation supervision, including unpaid work and accredited programmes, with adaptations where necessary to ensure safety.

We will continue to closely monitor the situation, and only proceed once it is safe to do so. Should restrictions need to be re-imposed to ensure the safety of staff and those in our care we will not hesitate to do this.

During this time, we will continue with measures such as providing additional temporary accommodation, and making careful use of our end of custody temporary release powers, to ensure we are able to manage the possibility of any future outbreaks.

[HCWS259]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 2 June 2020

TREASURY

Covid-19: Economic Package

The following is an extract from an Urgent Question on Covid-19: Economic Package on Tuesday 12 May 2020.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday I asked the Prime Minister about engagement with the devolved Governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. I would like to try again today, and I hope receive a more detailed response from the Chancellor. Can he please outline what specific conversations he had with the devolved Administrations about these changes and when those conversations took place?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury speaks regularly to his counterparts in the devolved Administrations, and we engage with them regularly. I am pleased to say that more than £8 billion of Barnett consequential has been provided to devolved Administrations across the UK as they have also responded to the virus, and that will continue to be the case. We will get through this as one nation, all together.

[Official Report, 12 May 2020, Vol. 676, c. 147.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Exchequer:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones).

The correct response should have been:

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury speaks regularly to his counterparts in the devolved Administrations, and we engage with them regularly. I am pleased to say that more than **£6.8 billion** of Barnett consequential has been provided to devolved Administrations across the UK as they have also responded to the virus, and that will continue to be the case. We will get through this as one nation, all together.

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