Thursday
16 July 2020

Volume 678
No. 88

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 July 2020

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House of Commons

Thursday 16 July 2020

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 4 June).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Covid-19: UK-EU Negotiations

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the outcome of UK-EU negotiations on arrangements after the transition period will not be detrimental to the UK's ability to respond to the covid-19 pandemic. [904834]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The coronavirus is a global pandemic, and the UK is collaborating extensively with international partners, including the EU. The UK has been leading the way to find a vaccine, with the University of Oxford and Imperial College undertaking the research that will be available to the UK and the rest of the world. The UK is also seeking a deal with the EU that would facilitate continued trade in all medicinal products, but of course the United Kingdom will be ready for all scenarios after the end of the transition period.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Minister for that answer. I welcome the news out of Oxford regarding a vaccine, but the Government's border delivery plans announced on Monday bring into stark relief the extent of new barriers to trade in goods and services and movement of people across the border from 1 January. How will he ensure that during covid and in the event of future health emergencies or a second wave, that will not result in any delays to supplies reaching patients or interruption to the flow of vital machinery and equipment?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Of course, the health of citizens is the first concern of Her Majesty's Government, and we will be working with the Department of Health and Social Care and other Departments to ensure that category 1 goods, which include vital NHS supplies, can reach those on the frontline.

Covid-19: Regional Economic Growth

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional economic growth as part of the recovery from the covid-19 outbreak. [904835]

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure equal distribution of Government funding throughout the UK in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [904836]

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional economic growth as part of the recovery from the covid-19 outbreak. [904845]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling): The Government have taken unprecedented steps to support people and businesses across the country during this period. So far, we have helped 1.1 million employers across the UK through our coronavirus job retention scheme and 2.7 million self-employed individuals, and we have provided £10.5 billion in small business grants. Furthermore, the Prime Minister has set out our vision to double down on levelling up, unite the country and spread opportunity. As part of that, the plan for jobs announced by the Chancellor supports all regions through upgrades to local infrastructure, with £1 billion of investment for local projects to boost local economic recovery in the places that need it most.

Edward Timpson: In the light of the Government's avowed intent to build, build, build our way towards economic recovery, will my right hon. Friend put her full support behind key infrastructure projects in Eddisbury in the north-west, including the roll-out of full-fibre broadband and the construction of the Knights Grange women's and girls' football national centre of excellence, which will bolster Winsford's jobs and economy for many years to come?

Amanda Milling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. His constituency is one I know well, as he is my mother's MP.

The Government remain committed to delivering nationwide gigabit connectivity as soon as possible. We want to become a world leader in connectivity, increasing the UK's productivity and competitiveness and boosting the economy in the aftermath of covid-19. I welcome the Cheshire Football Association's commitment to provide a new world-class facility for women's and girls' football in Cheshire, and I am confident that the pros' centre will become an excellent sporting asset for the local community.

Darren Henry: We have a golden opportunity for much-needed investment in Broxtowe. We have a shovel-ready project: the Toton link road. Toton is the site of the new High Speed 2 east midlands hub. The road would link to houses that we are building in Chetwynd barracks and then on to the A52 and M1. The whole development area will create up to 4,500 new homes, and it is linked to an innovation campus, where we are creating up to 6,000 jobs, many in the high-value area of research and development. Will my right hon. Friend commit to explore this £30 million shovel-ready project, which will support the economic renewal of Broxtowe and help to level up the economy?

Amanda Milling: I agree with my hon. Friend that shovel-ready projects will play an important part in our economic renewal and the levelling up of the UK. I congratulate him on setting out the case for the Toton link road. I encourage him to work with his local highway authority, so that such schemes are ready to seek funding when suitable opportunities are available following the next fiscal event.

Dr Ben Spencer: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that schemes such as the River Thames scheme not only provide flood defences for Runnymede and Weybridge but will be a huge boost for the local economy and our natural environment?

Amanda Milling: I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing that issue to the attention of the House. I recognise that the proposed River Thames scheme might have the potential to better protect thousands of homes, contribute to the local economy and increase the social and environmental value of the river. I understand that the Environment Agency has offered to brief him on the progress of the scheme, and I encourage him to take up that offer.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): During the pandemic, certain sectors and regions have been disproportionately hit by this economic downturn. In many cases, this is falling on the shoulders of those who are least able to carry it. In Lancashire, 82 businesses have collapsed in May alone and almost 19,000 jobs in the county have been lost during the pandemic. A failure to provide sector-specific, regionally focused support for those most at risk could end up costing many more jobs. What steps are the Government taking to apply a regional lens to this crisis and, in particular, to provide vital investment in counties such as Lancashire?

Amanda Milling: Mr Speaker, you will know that I know Lancashire very well, having lived there for 15 years myself. We recognise that every region and community will be feeling the impact of covid-19. That is why the Government have introduced unprecedented support for businesses and workers across the country to support them through this economic crisis.

Fixed-term Parliaments Act

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What plans he has to reform the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. [904837]

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What plans he has to reform the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. [904851]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Fixed-term Parliaments Act led to parliamentary paralysis at a critical time for our country. It is for that reason that the Government made a commitment in our manifesto and in our Queen's Speech to take forward work to repeal it. An announcement about that legislation will be made in due course.

Jonathan Gullis: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. She is absolutely right to highlight the fact that the paralysis of the previous Parliament, which dithered, delayed and blocked the democratic will of the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke—who overwhelmingly voted for us to leave the EU—should never be seen again. What assurances can she give my constituents that this reform can be achieved quickly and with support from all parts of the House to ensure that the kind of Brexit-blocking Parliament we saw last year will not be seen again?

Chloe Smith: There are two points to make to my hon. Friend. The first is that repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act had cross-party support. It was in the manifestos of both the Government and the Opposition, so I hope that that gives it a good wind, but it is also the case that the policy needs to be carefully developed and well scrutinised so that we do not repeat past mistakes with an important part of our constitution.

Aaron Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer and associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). The problem we had last year was that we had a Government who were manifestly unable to get their core legislative agenda through. They did not have the confidence of the House for that, but the House voted that it had confidence in the Government. I understand that repealing the Act will not necessarily get us back to the status quo ante, so what mechanism my hon. Friend she envisage to ensure that we can never again be in that position, where the Government do not have the confidence of the House on their core legislative agenda?

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for putting his finger on a very important part of what was wrong with that scenario and what is wrong with that legislation: it divorces the issue of confidence from the issue of calling an election. One thing we want to do as we look at its repeal is to make sure that that central tenet of the constitution and of parliamentary operation can be properly functional.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I look forward to the appearance of my hon. Friend before the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee next week to discuss this matter at length. She will know that the Fixed-term Parliaments Act requires, by the end of November, a review committee to be established to review the Act in its entirety, so can she describe the arrangements for this committee and its remit?

Chloe Smith: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, and I look forward to discussing more on this subject with him and his Committee next week, because it is very important and we have already begun to identify in these exchanges some of the things that need to be put right.

Of course the Chair of the Select Committee is absolutely right in that the Prime Minister is required, between June and November this year, to make arrangements for a committee to undertake a review of the operation of the Act. Again, I look forward to bringing details about that forward in due course, and, as part of that, answering the particular points that he put about its composition and arrangements.

Covid-19: Government Contracts

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented national emergency, and Labour understands that in response there has been a need for the Government to procure goods and services at speed, but the flexibility required by extraordinary circumstances is no excuse for reducing transparency or abandoning any attempt at due diligence. How does the Minister explain reports that contracts to the value of more than £830 million have been awarded to at least 12 different companies for personal protective equipment that has never materialised; that £108 million of public funds has been handed to PestFix, a company with just £18,000 of assets; and that £830,000 for communications advice has been given without any tender process to Public First, which is owned by friends of the Prime Minister's most senior adviser, and although the payment was justified as part of the coronavirus response, it appears to relate to Brexit? How are we to believe that this Government have any kind of a grip on public spending during this crisis?

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): Authorities are allowed to procure goods and services in extreme emergencies, but that does not mean that scrutiny or value-for-money principles go out of the window, and the hon. Lady will understand that. I am shocked to hear that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster may know people in Public First; I wish further offences to be taken into account and confess that I, too, know people who work for Public First—as does every Member on the Front Bench and every Member on the Back Bench on both sides of the House, because one of Public First's associates is a much-loved former Deputy Speaker of this House. If the hon. Lady has serious concerns—other than insinuation—about any contracts, there are clear processes to go through, and I urge her to do so.

Government Planning: End of the Transition Period

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the Government's preparations for the end of the transition period. [904852]

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure business readiness for the end of the transition period. [904854]

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): What recent progress the Government has made on negotiating the UK's future relationship with the EU. [904891]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Earlier this week, we launched a communications campaign to ensure that people and businesses know what they need to do to prepare for the end of the year. Most of the actions will need to be completed whether or not we get a negotiated outcome. While a negotiated outcome remains our preference, our priority is to provide timely and comprehensive guidance on the changes that businesses and citizens will need to make in any scenario.

Bambos Charalambous: The leaked letter from the Secretary of State for International Trade demonstrates the alarm and confusion at the top of the Government. Despite Monday's announcement, the Minister cannot convince his own Cabinet that the border will be ready by 1 January. Does he recognise the concerns expressed by the Institute of Directors, which found that only one in four businesses are ready for the end of transition because

"preparing for Brexit proper is like trying to hit a moving target"?

Michael Gove: I understand the frustration that many businesses will have felt as deadlines that were set during the previous Parliament shifted as a result of votes in Parliament, but we now know that, as a result of the general election, the transition period will end on 31 December. There are many "no regrets" actions that businesses should undertake, and I had the opportunity to talk to the chief executives of a number of leading businesses yesterday to make sure that that message was put across in a collaborative way.

Felicity Buchan: The withdrawal agreement stated that both parties would endeavour to conclude equivalence decisions by June 2020. Will my right hon. Friend give the House an update?

Michael Gove: I appreciate how hard my hon. Friend works on behalf of businesses, including financial services, in her constituency. We have completed our side of the bargain—we have provided the European Union with the information that it needs for its own autonomous decision on equivalence—and we await that decision with eagerness.

Hywel Williams [V]: Universities throughout Wales and the UK are working flat out to cope with the effects of covid and Brexit. Some stability and reassurance would be provided by Horizon Europe and Erasmus. Has the Minister now secured full, rather than associate, membership of these valuable programmes?

Michael Gove: Continued participation in Erasmus is one of the negotiating requests that our team are making. We will find out from the EU the terms on which it is happy to grant continued access. We have acknowledged that we may continue to be a net contributor to schemes such as Erasmus and Horizon 2020, but it is also important that we continue to collaborate with other countries beyond the continent of Europe when it comes to education and science.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On Monday, when asked about a lorry park in Ashford, the right hon. Gentleman told the House:

"It is not the case that any specific site has been absolutely confirmed. We are in commercial negotiations with a number of sites".—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 1278.]

So can he answer a specific question: how many sites in Kent is he looking at to put infrastructure on? How many of those sites will be to check the paperwork of goods leaving the UK and how many will be to check goods coming into the UK, because, as we all know, there is no space to do that at Dover?

Michael Gove: We were looking at five sites, and yesterday the Department for Transport confirmed that a site at Ashford has been secured. These sites are there

to facilitate traffic management and the flow of goods out of the country. When it comes to the appropriate checks on goods coming into the country, at Calais the French authorities will be seeking to check export declarations.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Continuing on the theme of lorries, the Government's border operating model sets out the obstacles to trade from 1 January, but it promises jam tomorrow on support for businesses. For example, it warns:

"HGV drivers without the correct documentation risk being stopped from boarding services"

or being

"fined, or sent back to the UK"

on arrival in the EU. It also highlights the risk of long queues on the roads to UK ports. The Government's solution, the smart freight service technology, is only in development and there has been no consultation on its use in Kent. The Minister often talks about providing certainty, which is important, so can he confirm to business that the smart freight service technology will be ready in time for companies to test it and train their workers on it so that it can be operational on 1 January?

Michael Gove: That is a very good point. The smart freight technology of which the hon. Gentleman speaks does need to be tested before it goes live, but it is important to stress that it is just one piece of the range of measures we are putting in place to ensure the free flow of trade. Businesses have the information now, as a result of the border operating model, to make sure that they have all the details they need and are in compliance with the rules governing trade.

Paul Blomfield: I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman dodged giving a direct answer yet again. Ambiguity and confused messaging are becoming a trademark of this Government, and his answer certainly will not reassure the Road Haulage Association, which has said that this technology will not be much use unless it has the opportunity to test it and train its people before January.

Let me raise another issue. The NHS Confederation and others in the Brexit Health Alliance have warned of potential disruption to the supply of healthcare products. The border operating model says:

"For imports of medicines, regulatory licensing information will need to be included as part of new customs declarations".

But it goes on to say:

"The requirements for regulatory licensing information are subject to negotiations".

Recognising that we are in the middle of a global pandemic that has already put enormous pressure on existing medical supply chains, will the right hon. Gentleman say when the details of those requirements will be ready?

Michael Gove: The details of almost all requirements are, on a no-regrets basis, available, but of course the hon. Gentleman is right, in that we seek a negotiated outcome that will mean that there are neither tariffs nor quotas, and indeed that there can be a degree of confidence on the part of all businesses about exactly what they need. He talks about ambiguity and uncertainty. We had a vivid example of that in the Chamber yesterday when the Scottish National party, on its Opposition day, requested an extension to our transition period. The Government voted against it, but the Labour party was conspicuous by its absence. I am afraid that allegations of ambiguity sit ill with the Labour party's decision to be ambiguous on the biggest question this country faces.

Covid-19: Local Lockdowns

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on plans for potential further local lockdowns in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [904842]

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on cross-Government planning for a potential second wave of the covid-19 outbreak. [904849]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): The Government's recovery strategy, published on 11 May, stated that we would move from a series of national restrictions to a more targeted set of local measures. We have put in place tools to help us do that, including the Joint Biosecurity Centre.

Kate Osborne: Although areas in the Jarrow constituency are not currently at risk of going into a full lockdown, like the one that we have seen in Leicester, it is vital that the Government take proactive measures to prevent further local lockdowns. Councils are getting testing data that is sometimes nearly a fortnight old, and they have little information, which is often of little or no help. Will the Minister provide assurances that the Government will improve communications and that data from any test and trace app, when it is operational, will be shared with local authorities to enable them to respond effectively to outbreaks in local areas?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important point, and I hope that I can give her those reassurances. I gave evidence earlier this week to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, where I emphasised that sharing local data—whether on testing or other planning assumptions—with local authorities, but critically also with the local resilience forums, is vital. They are in the frontline of this fight.

Lilian Greenwood: The report on preparing for a challenging winter produced by the Academy of Medical Sciences makes for sobering reading. It warns of a reasonable worst-case scenario in which the R rate rises to 1.7 from September onwards, leading to a second wave of hospital admissions and deaths similar to or worse than that in the spring. But it also offers hope. As Professor Stephen Holgate says, with relatively low numbers of covid-19 cases at the moment, this is a critical window of opportunity to help us prepare for the worst that winter can throw at us. I am confident that the Minister will have read the report. Will the Cabinet Office and the Government grasp that opportunity and act now to implement the report's recommendations?

Penny Mordaunt: It is vital that we do prepare, and we all know the challenges that the NHS in particular faces in winter months. Clearly, with the prospect of a second wave, that will be intensified. Yes, we must

prepare, but it is also a reason why we still all need to follow the chief medical officer's advice to ensure that we minimise the chances of a serious second wave.

Northern Ireland Protocol

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What recent representations he has received from businesses on the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. [904843]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): We continue to engage intensively with business as we take forward our implementation work, and that includes the important work of the business engagement forum, which has now met seven times, most recently on 3 July.

Julian Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer. Many business sectors across Northern Ireland are extremely concerned about the challenges for their individual areas. May I urge the team over the summer to work as hard as possible to ensure sector-specific approaches to implementation so that we do not just go for a one-size-fits-all policy?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give my right hon. Friend those assurances. Departments across Whitehall will be liaising in particular with individual sectors. In addition, in the next few weeks, we will bring forward guidance on the protocol for traders, which will set out details of the extensive end-to-end support that we will offer those engaged in those new administrative processes.

SMEs: Public Contracts

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What measures he is taking to ensure SMEs are awarded public procurement contracts. [904844]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling): We are ensuring that SMEs are awarded public procurement contracts. Last year, we spent £14.2 billion with SMEs, nearly £2 billion more than the previous year. We have gone further to help to ease the procurement process by introducing a range of measures to tackle the barriers faced by SMEs, such as simplifying pre-qualification questionnaires. We now have the opportunity to make procurement even simpler for SMEs following the end of the transition period.

Henry Smith [V]: An SME in my constituency has recently redeployed to the manufacture of PPE equipment in response to the covid-19 pandemic, but it is finding it very hard to secure public contracts and, indeed, is in competition with international suppliers that actually cost more. What can be done to support SMEs that have redeployed to meet the national effort as we tackle coronavirus?

Amanda Milling: We have received an extraordinary response from people offering to supply PPE and UK manufacturers wanting to make equipment from scratch, including the firm my hon. Friend mentions, and we are hugely grateful to everyone who has come forward. As a result, we have now contracted for over 3 billion items of PPE through UK-based manufacturers alone. Although further personal protective equipment offers are not needed at the moment, we continue to invite other forms of support from industry.

Border Planning: End of Transition Period

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): What progress the Government have made on border planning for the end of the transition period. [904846]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): On Monday, I made an oral statement to the House announcing the publication of the Government's detailed border operating model, following extensive consultation. This will allow the border industry and traders to help prepare for the end of the transition period. We have also made available £705 million for upgraded border systems and infrastructure, and we have launched a new communications campaign.

James Grundy: I thank the Minister for his response. What support will the Government provide to business ahead of those new processes taking effect in order to help with the transition?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is quite right to speak up for his constituents and for the businesses that need support. That is why we have devoted £84 million to making sure that customs intermediaries can be there for businesses, small and medium-sized as well as large, to ensure the free flow of goods, so that his constituents can be certain that their efforts are rewarded in the market.

Promoting and Protecting the Union

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote and protect the Union. [904853]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): This Government will never be neutral in expressing our unequivocal support for the strength of our United Kingdom. In the summer economic update last week, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced millions of pounds of additional support for businesses across the UK through his VAT cut and other measures. We have also announced an additional £8.9 billion for devolved Administrations through the Barnett formula. The Union is stronger for the contribution that all of its four nations make, and this Government will continue to support its strength.

Robin Millar: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. He will be aware of the support on the Conservative Benches for the Union, nowhere more so, perhaps, than in north Wales, where seven of the nine Members of Parliament are from the Conservative and Unionist party. In the recent Ditchley annual lecture, my right hon. Friend said:

"We need to be more ambitious for…North Wales."

Will he agree to meet me and my colleagues in north Wales to hear just how ambitious I am for Aberconwy and they are for north Wales?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. From Ynys Môn to Wrexham, there is a team of fantastic Conservative and Unionist Members of Parliament representing the interests of north Wales with vigour and energy. I would be delighted to meet them. We need to do more to ensure that the businesses and people of north Wales get the support they need from this UK Government, working alongside the Welsh Government, to strengthen our Union.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): There is no doubt about the right hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for the Union, but perhaps he could answer me this. Why does he think that support for independence has now reached 54% among the Scottish people and reached a sustained majority in the past year?

Michael Gove: Opinion polls come and go. I am always interested in what opinion polls tell me, but I am rather more interested in real votes cast in real ballot boxes. The last time the people of Scotland were asked if they wanted to remain in the United Kingdom they decided that they did want to by a whopping 10 percentage points—facts are chiels that winna ding—and since then we have seen how the strength of the United Kingdom has supported Scotland's economy. Indeed, I was very interested to see earlier today that one of the economic advisers to the First Minister said that the support of the UK Government would be vital to Scotland's economic recovery.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman might not like opinion polls, and of course they are transitory, but let me tell him about another couple of opinion polls. Support for the Scottish National party is now at 55% and we are seeing support for independence growing month by month. He did not give an answer to my question, so I will try to answer it for him and he can tell me which one of these he agrees with. Support for independence is rising because of the Government's Brexit and the way that they are imposing on us their Brexit that, as a country, we rejected; the disrespect; the condescension; the power grab; the barely hidden contempt for our nation from his colleagues behind him on the Conservative Benches; the mistreatment of our Parliament and our democracy; and, of course, the chaotic leadership of his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Which one of those does he think is raising support for independence most?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful for that multiple-choice question from the hon. Member. It reminds me that when I sat my O-levels and multiple-choice exams when I was a schoolboy in Aberdeen, Scotland's schools were stronger than England's schools. Now, after 10 years of SNP Government, Scotland's schools have fallen behind. The record of the SNP in government, I am afraid, has been one of complacency and neglect. That is why I believe we need to have a strong UK Government working alongside MSPs from every party in order to make our United Kingdom stronger than ever.

Civil Service Reform

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make an assessment of the potential effect of reductions in civil service headcount on the ability of Government to implement its policies. [904848]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What plans his Department has to reform the civil service. [904855]

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What plans he has to relocate (a) civil service and (b) policymaker roles outside London. [904858]

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the potential effect of reductions in civil service headcount on the ability of Government to implement its policies. [904869]

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the Government's plans to reform the civil service. [904870]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government were elected with an ambitious agenda. The civil service must continue to change to deliver that agenda, which means focusing laser-like on improving citizens' lives. I was proud to be able to talk to civil servants yesterday at Civil Service Live and to be able to share with them an ambitious reform programme that has the support of public servants across the United Kingdom.

Florence Eshalomi [V]:A number of my constituents are civil servants, and they have written to me to express their understandable shock and upset about the recent announcement about their jobs, which will be cut. Given the extraordinary challenges that our public sector now faces—dealing with covid, the economic downturn and Brexit—can the Minister tell me why the Government have chosen to shrink the civil service at this crucial time, and will he commit to reviewing this decision?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that question on behalf of her constituents. We value everyone who works in the civil service. I will look at the specific cases she mentions, because we want to ensure that everyone who has talent and commitment, and who wants to serve the public, has a chance to do so. If she would be kind enough to write to me about the specific cases, I will respond as quickly as I can in support of her constituents.

Sir Edward Leigh: One of the justifications for demolishing Richmond House was that we needed extra places for civil servants working for us and generally for the national machine. Now that we have had covid and the civil service is so successfully working from home—and there are long-term plans to move to a three-day week and to allow civil servants to work two days a week—would the Minister accept that we no longer need all this office space in central London, and we can actually make some money by leasing it out to the private sector?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. People have been working more flexibly as a result of the covid pandemic, and that is something that we would like to encourage, support and facilitate. We also want to ensure that more decision making is taken closer to the people, which means more civil service jobs—particularly senior civil service jobs—being located outside London, and that does create commercial opportunities for the Government.

Martin Vickers: In his recent Ditchley speech, my right hon. Friend referred to transferring energy sector civil servants and policy makers to Humberside. Will he outline what progress he is making with that, and will he push forward and ensure that the Cleethorpes constituency plays its part?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right. I said that there were at least three possible locations for the relocation of jobs in the energy sector: Teesside, Humberside and, of course, Aberdeen. There are already civil servants in Aberdeen working in this area, but we want to ensure that more jobs are dispersed to areas at the forefront of the green energy revolution—and, of course, Cleethorpes is right at the heart of that.

Rachel Hopkins: On the important subject of civil service staff, what does it say about the Government's approach to bullying that it now appears that the director general of propriety and ethics, who investigated serious allegations about the conduct of the Home Secretary, is to be moved?

Michael Gove: I am not aware of any plans for the extremely distinguished deputy Cabinet Secretary and head of propriety and ethics to be moved. Just because the story appears in *The Guardian*, that does not sadly these days mean that it is true.

Mr Speaker: Angela Crawley is not online to ask her supplementary question.

List of Ministerial Responsibilities

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): When his Department plans to publish an updated list of ministerial responsibilities. [904857]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The list of ministerial responsibilities document was last updated in October. It is taking longer than usual to compile a new document, and that is in part because Ministers have been focused on responding to the challenges of covid-19. An update will be published when possible.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: I am grateful to the Minister for that update, but of course it is not just the booklet; the responsibilities of individual Cabinet Office Ministers have not been available on the gov.uk website, so perhaps that could be updated too. The Cabinet Office has been particularly resistant to transparency and slow to share information in recent times. It is one of the worst—performing Departments in responding to freedom of information requests, despite being responsible for FOI policy. In 2019, the Cabinet Office was the Department that was referred the most to the Information Commissioner's Office. What is the Minister doing about this?

Chloe Smith: I hope it is the case that Cabinet Office Ministers—the team here today—have accounted for ourselves and our responsibilities adequately. I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I, and all the Ministers, look forward to coming here to do exactly that, and ensuring that all our correspondence, parliamentary questions and all sorts of other things are properly answered. I hope that hon. and right hon. Members can use the contact details that are already available and those that have been updated during covid to ensure that Parliament can rightly get the information that it requires from our Department.

As for the particular issue that the hon. Gentleman refers to on transparency and freedom of information, of course the Cabinet Office proudly leads the way in assisting the rest of Government in our duties under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and other proactive transparency measures that we have put in place over the years to ensure that citizens can get the information that they need and deserve. We intend to continue leading the way, and we think it is very important to do so.

National Security Adviser: Appointment

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the recent political appointment of the National Security Adviser on their ability to carry out the full functions of that role. [904862]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): As with previous National Security Advisers, David Frost will be the principal adviser to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet on national security strategy, policy, capability and civil contingencies. He will be supported by the civil service in the same way as any other political appointee, with openness, honesty, integrity and impartiality.

Stephen Morgan: Yesterday, MPs stopped someone clearly unsuitable becoming Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. Sadly, no such mechanism exists to prevent an ill-judged political appointment to the post of National Security Adviser. When will the Government stop putting the Prime Minister's political fortunes before our national security?

Penny Mordaunt: I think that is very unfair to one of our colleagues, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on that. I know that following last night's events he tweeted that national security should always be placed ahead of politics, and he is right. On that basis, I urge him, as a fellow Portsmouth MP representing that great garrison and naval city, and as a shadow Defence Minister, to work to build a constructive relationship with the new National Security Adviser. If he actually met him, he might be pleasantly surprised. For the sake of our city and our armed forces, he owes them the opportunity to build that constructive relationship with the person who will lead the independent review.

Internal UK Market

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the proposal for an internal UK market after the transition period. [904873]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will outline the United Kingdom's White Paper on the internal market later today. Not only will this approach deliver more powers to the

devolved Administrations, as the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, but it will allow business and trade across all parts of our United Kingdom to prosper and flourish.

Stuart C. McDonald [V]: The head of the Vote Leave campaign in Scotland was quite clear about the automatic devolution of powers to Holyrood after Brexit, saying:

"Any repatriated power that isn't already explicitly denoted as 'reserved' in the Scotland Act 1998 is assumed to be the remit of the Scottish Parliament."

Why is that promise being reneged on by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, just as his own promise of migration powers for Scotland is being reneged on?

Michael Gove: No promise is being reneged on; a power surge is occurring. Scores of new powers are going to the Scottish Parliament and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) pointed out yesterday, no Scottish National party MP, MSP, councillor or activist can point to a single power currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament that is being taken away. There is no power grab; there is simply an example of SNP myth-making, which this internal market Bill finally puts to bed.

Government Supply Chains: Sustainability

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve the sustainability of Government supply chains. [904890]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling): The Government prioritise the environment at every step, investing in sustainable infrastructure to fuel economic growth and to create green jobs. Contracting authorities are already required to consider social, economic and environmental impacts of their procurement. This year we will take a step further, implementing a new social value model so that those impacts are monitored in Government procurement and our high standards are maintained through effective contract management.

Christine Jardine: I was thinking particularly of economic sustainability, which also affects the private sector, not least the Scottish whisky industry, which has suffered a 65% downturn in trade to the United States, 30% of which is because of the tariffs. Can we have some clarity from the Government on how they will protect that and make it sustainable in this trade war?

Amanda Milling: I am sure we are all aware, as many people have spoken in this House about it, of the importance of the Scottish whisky industry. I am sure we will continue to have discussions on the matter.

Topical Questions

[904894] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): As I mentioned earlier, it was a privilege to be able to join the new permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office, Alex Chisholm, yesterday for the Civil Service Live event. I had the opportunity then, and I would like to repeat it now, to thank all public and civil servants across the United Kingdom, in the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, for the amazing hard work they have put in to helping us to deal with the covid crisis. I am sure the whole House would want to take this opportunity to thank our brilliant civil service.

Mr Bone [V]: *[Inaudible.]* the Home Secretary *[Inaudible.]*. The chairman of the *[Inaudible.]* has raised concerns about its lack of *[Inaudible.]* and the Leader of the House has *[Inaudible.]* to be impartial. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Electoral Commission should be scrapped and replaced by *[Inaudible.]* that the people *[Inaudible.]*?

Mr Speaker: If you can make something of that, that would be helpful.

Michael Gove: The technology may have been faulty, but my hon. Friend's judgment is not. Questions have been raised about how the Electoral Commission operates, and those are matters that the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission will investigate with appropriate consideration.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman said in his recent Ditchley Park speech that

"Government needs to be rigorous and fearless in its evaluation of policy and projects."

On that we agree. During the covid crisis, the Government have published details of outsourced contracts worth about £3 billion, while the true figure is likely to be many multiples of that. Today I have written to the National Audit Office, asking it to review the Government's approach to public procurement during this pandemic. Will the right hon. Gentleman, to ensure the rigour that he desires, join me in asking the National Audit Office to take a look and to help the Government to ensure value for money and the very best possible public services?

Michael Gove: Absolutely.

Rachel Reeves: That is the best answer I have had from the Minister so far. I welcome his support, and I hope he will follow up with the National Audit Office and encourage it to do that work, particularly to help us if we face a second wave or more local lockdowns. On the theme of the privilege of public service, can he inform the House when the report the conduct of the Home Secretary will be published, following the resignation of the permanent secretary, citing a culture of bullying?

Can the right hon. Gentleman also explain or justify the decision of his party to withdraw the Whip from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), a Conservative MP for 23 years, former Royal Navy reservist and Chair of the Defence Committee, for the crime of being elected Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee? Losing the Whip used to be the result of serious misdemeanour, not independent thought. What does this say about the Government's approach to expertise and scrutiny?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady asks about two very important matters. On the first, the inquiry is quite properly independent, and Ministers such as myself

have no role or oversight. It is the case that the deputy Cabinet Secretary, the director general of propriety and ethics, with the help of the Prime Minister's external adviser on the Ministerial Code, will be conducting the conversations required. I am afraid I can say no more, because I know no more.

On the second question, the Intelligence and Security Committee's membership was chosen by this House and an election has appropriately taken place, but whipping matters are quite properly matters for the respective Whips Offices of our parties and not for those who, like myself, exercise a different constitutional role.

[904895] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: Over 73% of my constituents voted to leave the EU and four years later we are finally going to have control of our own destiny. What can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that businesses and citizens are not only ready for the end of the transition period, but ready to embrace the new relationship with the rest of the world with hope, optimism and determination to succeed, in the same way as my constituents?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is important that we all work together. That is why throughout this week I have been talking to businesses large and small about the changes, challenges and opportunities as we leave the transition period at the end of this year. The Government's information campaign should provide all businesses with the details they need in order to get going. If more needs to be done, this Government stand ready.

[904897] **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am sure the Government understand the importance of clear and consistent messages during a pandemic, so I would therefore like to ask how the Cabinet Office will promote to the public not just the requirement for shoppers to wear face masks, but the good reasons behind the policy, too.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and when the legislation comes in on 24 July, I hope that everybody will comply with it, because one of the reasons for making sure we can have this law is to give confidence to people that they can shop in the knowledge that public health comes first.

[904896] **Dame Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: It was an honour to serve as Secretary of State for Wales, where every day I saw the benefits of the Union. Research and development in Wales is used throughout UK. Welsh businesses trade without barriers in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Indeed, even our Welsh Guards protect and defend the rights of us all in the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the value of the Union will remain at the forefront of the Government's mind? Will he ensure that after Brexit we move forward more united than ever? Will he resist any new trade barriers emerging between the four nations of the United Kingdom?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is vital that, for example, Welsh lamb can be sold across the United Kingdom. It is vital also that we recognise that the labelling requirements that relate to Welsh mineral water, which enable Welsh firms to sell a superior product with confidence across the United Kingdom, are respected as well. Making sure that we work hand in glove with the devolved Administrations strengthens the Union for all its citizens.

[904899] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): With the east midlands among the regional economies hardest hit by the pandemic, I am sure that the Secretary of State is looking at Nottingham as a potential location for additional civil service jobs and perhaps even Parliament, but what other additional support will the Government offer our region?

Michael Gove: It is a very important point. Nottingham has an outstanding university, great MPs, a superb location and much to offer, and it is the case that close to Nottingham we have world-leading companies such as Boots that play a critical role in the economy of our country. We need to ensure, as the Chancellor has, that we provide financial support and the regulatory environment for business to thrive. The Government have a role to play, and I look forward to discussing with the hon. Lady the many opportunities for relocating parts of the civil service to that beautiful city.

[904901] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State plans to announce today constitutional changes that will roll back devolution—devolution that was decided in a referendum—on the basis of debates that exclude 250 MPs who are shielding from coronavirus. Will he ensure that before those debates occur, a hybrid online democracy and equal rights for MPs are restored in accordance with an early-day motion submitted yesterday by 49 MPs?

Michael Gove: I have great affection for the hon. Gentleman, but I am not quite sure to what he refers. If he is referring to the UK internal market White Paper, there is a consultation that starts today. I thank him for the thumbs up. That consultation will take place over the summer. Arrangements in the House on how Members participate and vote are decided by the Leader of the House through the usual channels and, of course, with the blessing or not of the Speaker.

[904905] **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the announcement of unprecedented investment in our border infrastructure and security, reducing the burden on traders going forward. With our access to trade being through not only land borders but also Heathrow and Gatwick, does he agree that Runnymede and Weybridge remains one of the best places to set up a business?

Michael Gove: I absolutely do. One of the main advantages of Runnymede and Weybridge is that it is adjacent to Surrey Heath, and therefore in one of the best parts of the country to do business. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many of my constituents, like his, work in and around Heathrow, and it is absolutely vital that we do everything we can to ensure that trade flows, but also that aviation and aerospace continue to get the investment that they need.

[904902] **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: Why did the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster allow a political messaging contract worth over £800,000 to be awarded without competitive tender to the company run by his former political director of communications on 3 March, before any emergency covid legislation was actually enacted?

Michael Gove: It is difficult to know where to begin with that concatenation of invention, innuendo and mistake. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has completely the wrong end of the stick.

[904907] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I warmly welcome this Government's commitment to investing in the poorest and most disadvantaged parts of our country. Cornwall, for too long, has been seen as the poorest part of England and is set to face a very severe impact from the current crisis. Can my right hon. Friend therefore confirm that Cornwall will be a major part of this Government's levelling-up agenda?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. Cornwall has many, many attractions, but of course the reliance of a large part of the Cornish economy on tourism and on seasonal trade renders parts of it uniquely vulnerable, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer took the steps that he did in order to support hospitality, but more of course requires to be done. Cornwall has amazing people and so much to boast about. We do need to do everything we can to make sure that my hon. Friend and other Cornish MPs play a role in our economic recovery.

[904903] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: The White Paper on the UK internal market that the Government are launching this morning will have far-reaching consequences for each of the UK's nations. The Minister said earlier that he would work hand in glove with devolved nations, so why did the Government not have discussions about the White Paper with the Welsh Government or share the paper with them?

Michael Gove: The paper has been shared with the Welsh Government and with other Labour colleagues as well. One of the things that frustrated our capacity to have discussions on this area was the withdrawal of the Scottish Government from some of those discussions. However, I have had fruitful discussions and will continue to have fruitful discussions, including later today with representatives of the Welsh Government. I am sure that the hon. Lady would recognise that Newport's position on the border of England and Wales gives it, in many respects, the best of both worlds, and ensuring that her constituents continue to have unfettered access to the rest of the UK market must surely be in their interests and in hers.

[904910] **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): Blyth Valley has been largely left alone by boundary changes for 40 years, but such changes can cause anxiety and concerns within local communities. Communities are bound by a well-established sense of local identity. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that maintaining community identity is an important part of the boundary review? Will he confirm that he will do his utmost to ensure that all boundary changes are carried out in a way that is both transparent and sympathetic to the local community?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. Northumberland is a fantastic county. To my mind, the communities of Blyth and Cramlington are particularly important because the solidarity they have shown over generations is wholly admirable. Anyone who follows football cannot help but be inspired by the giant-killing achievements of Blyth Spartans. The fact that Blyth Valley has an articulate local boy here in the House of Commons as a Conservative MP is a reminder of what a fantastic part of the world it is. We must do everything possible to ensure that the community spirit, which my hon. Friend embodies, is celebrated and protected in future.

Mr Speaker: In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

10.29 am

Sitting suspended.

British Overseas Troops: Civil Liability Claims

10.32 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to update the House on the overseas operations Bill's impact on the rights of British troops serving overseas to bring civil liability claims against the Ministry of Defence and its implications for the armed forces covenant.

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): We have introduced the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill to lance the boil of lawfare and to protect our people from the relentless cycle of reinvestigations against our armed forces. Let me be absolutely clear: none of the measures will prevent the Ministry of Defence from being held to account for any wrongdoing.

To allay any further misunderstanding, let me provide some context. The Bill takes account of the uniquely challenging circumstances of overseas operations. It reassures our personnel that they will not be called on endlessly to defend against historic claims. It does that by introducing what we are calling a longstop. This restricts to an absolute maximum of six years the time limit for bringing civil claims or Human Rights Act claims for personal injury or death in connection with overseas operations.

It is simply wrong to assert that the Bill prevents service personnel, veterans or their relatives from bringing claims, because it does not change how the time limit is calculated. That will continue to be determined from either the date of the incident or date of knowledge. Conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder may not be diagnosed until much later, so the six years would start from the date of diagnosis.

The spirit of the armed forces covenant runs right through the legislation. Fairness is at its heart. We want to ensure that all claims are assessed fairly to achieve a fair outcome, yes, for veterans, but also for victims, service personnel and the taxpayer.

Yes, service personnel and veterans will still be able to bring claims against the MOD for such conditions, even if they are more than six years from the date of the incident. But also yes, this Government are going to war against lawfare. The days of veterans living in a persistent state of worry simply for having served this nation are coming to an end. Under this Prime Minister and under this Government, we will restore fairness to the process.

John Healey: This urgent question, with the summer recess next week, is the only way of getting Ministers to set the record straight and reassure veterans who have won claims against the MOD after knowing about their PTSD or their hearing loss for years, and who rightly feel and fear this Bill will block their comrades from such compensation in future. We also want to protect serving and former troops against the Minister's relentless cycle of vexatious legal claims or repeat investigations. I say to him that the Government have got important parts of this Bill badly wrong.

I asked the Minister on 6 July why he is legislating to reduce the rights of our armed forces personnel who serve overseas to bring civil claims against the Ministry of Defence if they miss this hard six-year deadline, or his longstop. He told the House:

"The Bill does not do that."—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 646.]

But of course it does, in clause 11. One week later, his written answer to me confirmed that 70 of 522 such settled claims have been

"brought more than six years after the…incident."

So he has the chance to correct the record today.

Why is the Minister legislating to deny those who put their lives on the line for our country overseas the same employer liability rights as the UK civilians they defend? Why are the Government breaching their own armed forces covenant by disadvantaging these troops, and why was the most senior military lawyer, the Judge Advocate General, not consulted on the drafting of the Bill? Is this the reason that Judge Blackett rightly says the Bill is "ill-conceived" and likely to increase prosecutions of UK service personnel in the International Criminal Court?

It is not too late to think again about the best way to protect service personnel from vexatious litigation while ensuring also that those who commit serious crimes during operations are prosecuted and punished appropriately. We are ready to assist, but Ministers have got to get a grip and they have got to get down to some serious work over the summer.

Johnny Mercer: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his interest in the Bill. I would ask him to consider for a moment, given the history I have in this place, whether I would attempt in any way to restrict the rights of service personnel to sue the Ministry of Defence or to claim for compensation after the event. I have read the Bill because I wrote the Bill, and the Bill very clearly states that it is from the point of knowledge or the point of diagnosis that that limitation comes in. We have always had limitations in this country. In the Limitation Act 1980, for example, there are limitations on various claims that are made through the tort system through the courts.

The reality is that introducing this legislation is not going to please everyone, because throughout the legal system that has thoroughly abused this process for many years, an awful lot of money has been made and the lives of our service personnel and veterans have been at the bottom of the priority list. Well, I am afraid that is changing, so I have no qualms at all about the fact that some people will disagree with elements of the Bill. But one thing that is beyond debate is that this is enhancing the quality of life and this nation's responsibility to its service people and veterans; it is not going in the other direction. If there is any genuine concern out there from any individual who can show me that this will inhibit their rights, I am more than happy to look at it. But the issue around limitation is, I am afraid, misunderstood, because it is not from the point of when the injury happened or the incident that caused the injury; it is from the point of awareness or the point of diagnosis. The Bill does not change that. As far as I am concerned, it enhances the armed forces covenant. This will be a good thing, and a tool in our efforts to lance the boil of lawfare in this country.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): As someone who chaired the armed forces covenant in the Black Country for a year, I am proud to be part of a Government who are taking veterans in Dudley and across the country seriously, listening to them and giving them the support they need. Will my hon. Friend reassure me that these changes will ensure that our troops and veterans are protected from unfair and persistent pursuit?

Johnny Mercer: The objective of this Bill is very clear. It is to restore fairness in the system for veterans, service personnel and victims, for whom this process has not worked for many years. I am afraid that veterans and their families have not been considered in a lot of these processes, and some of their experiences have been totally unacceptable. This Government were elected to change this nation's relationship with our veterans. I am very proud that we are doing that now, and the whole House should be supportive of what we are trying to do to get this right.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) on securing this urgent question. I start by declaring my interest, as my husband is a veteran.

The Government are not short of rhetoric on the importance of our armed forces, but as usual the rhetoric does not match the reality. Part 2 of the Bill is yet another attack on our personnel and veterans. Those who have risked their lives in the service of our country will now have a limited period in which to pursue a claim. I know that the Minister said this morning that the six-year limit is from the point of diagnosis, but the culture in the military means that some personnel are told that they are unable to pursue a claim while they are serving, or told by those higher up the chain of command that they do not have a valid claim. Given that many conditions, such as deafness, asbestos poisoning and the impact of radiation exposure, can get worse over the years, what protections will be in place to enable such personnel to pursue their claims? According to the Government, the rationale for these proposals is that they will be beneficial to our armed forces personnel and veterans, so will the Minister give us some real evidence and examples of how personnel and veterans will benefit from this limit?

It is also unacceptable for the Government to introduce the Bill before publishing a formal response to their consultation, so when will that response be published? Why was an impact assessment not published alongside the Bill? The Government seem to be taking advantage of the fact that they are unique in their ability to legislate to restrict legal claims against them. Is it not in fact the case that, under the guise of benefiting service personnel and veterans, the Government are simply saving money from legal claims at the expense of injured veterans?

Johnny Mercer: I hope you will forgive me, Mr Speaker. I have an enormous amount of respect for many of my colleagues, but I have never heard such a load of rubbish in all my life. This Government have done more than any before them to improve the lot of veterans in this country, bar none.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What about the questions?

Johnny Mercer: I am answering the question—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I am answering the question. When it comes to the Bill, if the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) has genuine concerns about how the rhetoric differs from this Government's actions, I would ask her to look at some of the things we have done prior to the Bill, including establishing the Office for Veterans' Affairs and the forces railcard, getting the census question in, and ensuring a guaranteed job for those in the civil service. The Government have fundamentally shifted the dial on this. Having written the Bill myself, I totally reject the idea that it reduces soldiers' ability to make claims. For example, on the radiation question, the claim starts when the condition is diagnosed, as is the case with all other claims in this area.

It is worth saying how the Bill will change people's lives. Had it been brought in prior to 2003, there would have been a 72% drop in the thousands of claims that were brought against service personnel in this country, of which none—none—were referred for prosecution. I urge hon. Members who are quick to champion and extol the values of veterans to shift from that, do something about it for once, and support the Bill.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for not only his answers, but his dedication to improving the lives of service personnel in our country. I am grateful that the Government are committed to improving the lives of our armed forces personnel. Does he agree that it is our duty to end the unfair trials of service personnel who have served their country and our country?

Johnny Mercer: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. That has been an injustice for many years. I often thought to myself, before I came to this place, "How has that process been allowed to continue whereby those who serve this country on operations are treated like that afterwards?"

It is clear to me that in this place, we are good at saying, "Aren't our veterans brilliant? Don't we owe them a huge debt?", but when it comes to doing something about it—something a bit difficult and challenging—everybody runs for the hills. Well, this Government are not going to do that. We are going to legislate to protect those people from those who want to rewrite history to line their own pockets. Those days are over. I fully expect all hon. Members to support that effort.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I agree with the Minister's intention to remove the ability to bring vexatious claims against our military personnel, which is why we have to get the detail of the Bill right and consider any possible unforeseen consequences of getting it wrong. Does he accept that there are often good and perfectly reasonable reasons why a soldier or veteran may not be able to bring a claim within six years, even if they knew about their injuries? How can we factor that in?

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that constructive point. Let me be clear: I am absolutely happy to amend the legislation on the suggestion of any hon. Member to get it right, but it has to be based on fact and reality. The armed forces compensation scheme

has a seven-year limit on it anyway. The Limitation Act 1980 also limits the time in which claims can be brought. If hon. Members want to discuss that more widely, clearly it is a broader issue. All we are doing is bringing into line our military personnel and veterans' experiences.

I will be honest and say that I cannot, off the top of my head, think why individuals would be diagnosed and choose not to do anything about it, then choose to do something about it much later. I have not come across that in all my experience in the field, but I am happy to learn. If that is the case, I am happy to change the Bill, but that is not what experience shows us. I urge hon. Members to come up with constructive criticism and debate, so that we can really work on the Bill to get it right, because we all agree that we need to do it.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I welcome the spirit of the Bill. To congratulate the Minister, I will send him a copy of my book, "Tommy This an' Tommy That: The military covenant". He has done well to bring the Bill thus far, but it is tipped to be heavily amended as it progresses through this place, not least because of Judge Jeff Blackett's remarks. I press the Minister to look again at part 2, because it seems to me that the "no disadvantage" enjoinder within the military covenant is in danger of being overlooked. I know he would not want to see that.

Johnny Mercer: I am more than happy to look at any part of the Bill, but as I am also bringing in legislation to make the armed forces covenant law and make it actually mean something, it would be quite bizarre for me to bring in another Bill that reduced it. I will, of course, look at that, but I do not accept that the Bill brings any disadvantage to those who have served.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Minister explain the rationale for six years rather than five years or, indeed, seven years, which he said was the time limit for one of the other claims? Given that these important issues obviously need independent oversight, does he think there is a role for the Intelligence and Security Committee to have that oversight?

Johnny Mercer: It is not for me to say what Committees should do. In terms of the timeframe, all this does is bring it into line with other HRA claims that can be brought forward at the moment. There is no finger in the air—"This is what we're going to go for." At the three-year point, courts will now have to consider special provisions that will have to be exceptional for a prosecutor to bring a claim, which brings this into line with other human rights legislation.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The first time I met my hon. Friend the Minister, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, both of us had somewhat smaller bellies and somewhat shorter hair. The lesson that we learnt out there about looking after the guys and girls we served with was an important one. Can my hon. Friend explain to the House what fundamental change this will make to ensure that their lives are better and that their families are not disrupted?

Johnny Mercer: That is a really good question, and I thank my hon. Friend for it. The way that this is going to change lives is by ending the uncertainty. If you have served on operations and you have not committed an offence, you will not be endlessly hounded by those who seek to bring spurious human rights claims. Let us remember how the Iraq Historic Allegations Team process started. We had Public Interest Lawyers driving around Iraq, essentially acting as legal team for the Mahdi army—it was absolutely bizarre. This will change the experience for service personnel, veterans and their families and provide certainty for them and for victims, to clear this mess up and restore fairness to the process.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It should be possible to build an easy consensus in the House on protection for those who have given service in the past, but the Bill that the Minister claims to have drafted himself does a lot more than that. A prescription and limitation on actions brought in respect of torture, crimes against humanity and war crimes is a significant departure on which he will not build a consensus and by which those who give service in our armed forces would not want people to be protected. Will he look again at that provision?

Johnny Mercer: I am happy to look at any aspect of the Bill, but let me be clear: the retrospective application of the Human Rights Act to the battlefield is inappropriate and has caused a lot of the problems that we have had. We want to restore the supremacy of the law of armed conflict in the Geneva conventions. We do a good job of holding our people to account. We are not going to allow the legislation that the right hon. Gentleman mentions to be abused and used in a way in which it was never designed to be used in order to bring claims against our service personnel and make their lives a misery.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The rules of engagement for overseas land operations are covered by what is known as Card Alpha. Could the Minister reassure the House that soldiers who pull the trigger in accordance with Card Alpha or its tri-service equivalent can get on with their lives, safe in the knowledge that they will never again be pursued by ambulance-chasing lawyers?

Johnny Mercer: For me, service in the military is very clear. You adhere to the law. If you break the law, you will be charged and prosecuted. If you do nothing wrong, you have nothing to worry about. You operate within the law of armed conflict. Those who are elected to this place to look after you will, from this point on, do their job and protect you.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has stated that fairness is at the heart of this, and I thank him for that. Does he agree that soldiers who are injured or deployed internationally in the service of Queen and country deserve the same route to civil satisfaction as the civil servants in Whitehall, who have no restrictions and no limitations on their civil liability claim ability?

Johnny Mercer: I believe that those who operate in our armed forces are entitled to the protection they deserve. This Bill protects them. That is why I struggle to understand the context, because this is all about protecting our servicemen and women from an abhorrent process that has ruined some of our finest people over

[Johnny Mercer]

the years. I am happy to look again at all aspects of the Bill, but I want to build a collegiate approach in this House to get the Bill through. We agree that this must happen—let us get it done.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): As a Northern Ireland veteran who served during the troubles, it would be remiss of me not to say this: I am very grateful for everything my hon. Friend has done to get us to this point, but now that he is the Minister, will he apologise on behalf of the MOD for the decades of harassment that our troops and veterans have faced?

Johnny Mercer: Look, there is no doubt that the prominent protagonists in this have been human rights lawyers, who have abused that system in order to make money, abusing some of the poorest people in the world in the process. But what I would say is that, yes, there are elements that the MOD could and should have done better and for some of our people, those experiences have been unacceptable—and for those, yes, I do apologise.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister now says that he is willing to look again at all aspects of the Bill, which is precisely what my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) asked him to do half an hour ago. Across the House, there is an understanding about the desire to get away from these vexatious claims, but what Members on both sides are telling him is that there are unintended consequences from the way that the Bill is currently structured. He should listen to prevent veterans being penalised while he is trying to do something that we all support.

Johnny Mercer: Veterans are not being penalised. If they were, I would not bring this legislation in. I have not said that I am going to look at all aspects of the Bill; I have made it very clear that I am happy to discuss amendments and changes that people want to make to get the Bill through, but I will also not do it on the back of things that are patently untrue.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: In my short time as MP for Bosworth, I have had veterans writing to me and coming to my surgery. They do not want to be above the law, but they do not want vexatious claims either, so these changes are well overdue. What will my hon. Friend do to make sure that the balance is preserved and that servicemen and women, both past and present, are of course held to account, but also protected?

Johnny Mercer: A huge part of my efforts in the MOD is about having a better system to hold our service people to account. There is no doubt about it: if we had had better investigations in the first place, we would not be here, so there is a twin-track approach—trying to get the balance of fairness so that those who break the law are held to account, but ultimately, if people have done nothing wrong, they can live the rest of their life in peace.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Can the Minister explain why British soldiers should have less recourse to compensation from their employer than the civilians they defend?

Johnny Mercer: They do not. The armed forces compensation scheme is out there for everybody to read. It is a good scheme. It is constantly reviewed and it has come on in leaps and bounds in the last 10 or 15 years. I am sure that there will be another review of it in the future, but I am afraid that the points that the hon. Lady makes are simply incorrect.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Brecon is a proud garrison town with a high concentration of infantry veterans. The Minister has met me a number of times to discuss my constituents' concerns, so I have seen at first hand his commitment to righting the wrongs done to our veterans. Does he agree that the closure of Brecon barracks, erasing the history of the Army in Wales, would be another such wrong?

Johnny Mercer: The closure of barracks and the footprint of the military in this country are matters that we take very seriously, but let me be clear that the defining issue in that will be the quality of life for our service personnel, and we will make sure that it is acceptable.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: The House should know that I have a brother who is a current Army officer and another brother who is a retired Army officer. I also have constituents who have waited years to have medical issues brought on by their service even recognised by the military, never mind the fight that they then have to get the correct support. Given what the Minister has said about wanting to ensure that there is no disadvantage to veterans, will he outline how exactly he will guarantee that, and guarantee that the 60-year rule will not harm injured veterans, as there is great concern among them right now?

Johnny Mercer: Again, I wonder if anybody could show me how this legislation is going to genuinely make somebody's life worse. The compensation claim starts when that illness or injury is recognised or is a point of knowledge. This does not affect that in any way.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I endorse the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) and thank the Minister for his very clear answer, which is an apology for what has happened, fundamentally. I remind him that we still have the problem of veterans in Northern Ireland, but I will not linger on that. The only point I would like to make, having listened to what people have said today, is that it seems to me that everyone in the House is up to sort out any little problem that might occur. We all want the best possible circumstances for our servicemen and women, either past or present, and for their conditions to be as good as they can be, and I think my hon. Friend would agree with that.

Johnny Mercer: I completely agree with that, but we are not going to base policy on things that are simply incorrect. This has been an issue for 40 years because people have not wanted to tackle difficult matters. This Government are going to do that, and we will bring forward legislation in September.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): We owe a great deal of gratitude to our serving armed forces personnel, and I was lucky enough to meet Luke Davison from Keighley who served in the Yorkshire Regiment. Does my hon.

Friend agree that it is our duty, through this Bill, to ensure that we get the protections the armed services need when deployed?

Johnny Mercer: My hon. Friend is right. The Bill seeks to attain the balance between justice for victims and justice for veterans. We need to restore fairness to this process, and this Government are determined to do so.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the urgent question. It might be helpful for hon. Members to be aware that I will permit the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make an important statement providing an update on coronavirus at 5 pm today. MemberHub will be open shortly for Members who wish to take part, and it will close at 1 pm.

To allow the safe exit of hon. Members who have participated in this item of business, and the safe arrival of those who wish to participate in the next debate, I will now suspend the House for a few minutes.

11.1 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before business questions, I would like to take this opportunity to put on the record our recognition of Banqueting Floor Manager Rui Duarte for his long service in the House with his team before his retirement at the end of this month. He has served this House for 44 years, starting on 28 June 1976. He has been responsible for more than 150,000 events throughout a period of eight Prime Ministers, starting with Jim Callaghan, and went through to see seven Speakers, including George Thomas at the beginning. Along with many Members of this House, I wish Rui all the very best for his well-earned retirement.

Business of the House

11.8 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 20 July will include:

Monday 20 July—Remaining stages of the Trade Bill.

Tuesday 21 July—Remaining stages of the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

Wednesday 22 July—Matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

At the conclusion of business, the House will rise for the summer recess and return on Tuesday 1 September.

The business for the week commencing 31 August will include:

Monday 31 August—The House will not be sitting.

Tuesday 1 September—Second Reading of the Fisheries Bill *[Lords]*.

Wednesday 2 September—Second reading of the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill *[Lords]*.

Thursday 3 September—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill.

Friday 4 September—The House will not be sitting.

For the convenience of the House—*[Laughter.]*—I can confirm that, following correspondence from the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I will be tabling motions on Monday's Order Paper to give the House the opportunity to agree an extension to the current proxy voting arrangements until 28 September.

In addition, I am aware of the understandable desire for Members from all parties to see the return of business to Westminster Hall. It may help if I update the House by saying that discussions are already taking place with the House authorities with a view to Westminster Hall debates resuming as soon as practicable. I understand from the House authorities that the aim is for business to resume from 5 October, if possible.

Mr Speaker: Now that we have flushed that through, we will go back to Valerie Vaz.

Valerie Vaz: I am going to stay away from the lavatory jokes.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and the first week of September. The first thing I am going to ask for is a list of updated ministerial responsibilities, please—perhaps we could have that next week.

In his response on Nazanin last week, the Leader of the House missed out Anousheh, and there was no mention of Luke Symons. None of them have done anything wrong. The Leader of the House said that Nazanin's case is a top priority, but there was also no response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who made a separate but important point about Iran.

My colleagues and I are extremely concerned that the responses from Ministers to our letters are falling somewhat below what should be expected. Ministers are obliged to provide meaningful responses. It is quite an easy phrase: "Ministers' meaningful responses"—MMR—so it would be quite good if we could give them a poke by thinking of it as an injection. Perhaps we can send copies of all the letters that we have received to the Leader of the House so that he can have a look at them. I received one from the civil servants—this is nothing to do with the civil servants—that was a generalist response and contained nothing about the case that I had raised.

The Leader of the House keeps talking about the accountability of this Government, and he ended the virtual Parliament. He wanted us to come back, he said, because it keeps Ministers accountable, so let's have it. What about the accountability for the purchase of 27 acres near Ashford in Kent, without the knowledge of the local MP and without the people who live near this lorry park even knowing it would be based there? The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster told the House that there were no plans to build a lorry park in Dover. What he failed to go on to say was that it would be in Ashford. In his statement he mentioned technology, but there were no details of the technology, how it would work or how it would be used for border checks. Can we have an urgent statement on the delivery plans for these borders and all EU-facing ports and also a statement on the border with Ireland, which the Minister said he would make later this month? Well, the House will not be sitting, so can we have an urgent statement on the plans for a border with the island of Ireland?

The Secretary of State for International Trade needs to make an updated statement, too. She has now put together a Trade and Agriculture Commission, which she announced on Sunday by press release, but not to this House. Will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be regular updates to the House? I know that the commission will be reporting to the Secretary of State, but hon. Members would also like to know what it does.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be making a statement later. I cannot ask a question, so will the Leader of the House ask him why Walsall Council cannot use its full discretionary grant for local authorities of £7.6 million? BEIS officials have capped it at £2 million and stopped it using the balance. We are the neighbour to Birmingham and we are just a tiny place, so it is really important to keep our local economy going. The head of Blue Coat School has asked why Walsall libraries are not open, so can the Leader of the House confirm that Government guidance was that pubs and libraries could open from 4 July?

Will the Leader of the House join me in commending the education service, and all hon. Members of Parliament, for their efforts on Parliament Week, which is at the beginning of November? David Clark said that 4,192 organisations have signed up for it. Last year, more than a million people took part, and there were 11,000 activities. North East Somerset came 11th and Walsall came 17th, so we are hoping to beat you this year. Congratulations to everyone—hon. Members and the Parliament team—on raising awareness of Parliament at this important time.

I have a further quick point. Depending on what happens in September and how the Procedure Committee reports on its inquiry, can the Leader of the House

think about whether we could have an Aye queue and a No queue when we are voting? It would mean that we did not need to have the Whip standing in the middle. Perhaps we could have the Aye queue out of the Members' Lobby and down those stairs, and the No queue through Central Lobby and down to St Stephen's stairs. That would mean that the queues would be separate in Westminster Hall and we would know which queue to go to.

Mr Speaker, I join you in congratulating Rui Duarte on his 44 years of service and his retirement. Every event I have attended has always run smoothly in this House. We wish him a well-deserved retirement.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I thank you, your deputies and everyone who works in this House. They have got together to use their talents, their abilities and their skills—that includes Members and our staff. We had the first virtual Parliament in the world. I want to wish everyone well, thank them all for their work, and tell them to stay safe.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right, as you are, Mr Speaker, to thank Rui Duarte for his amazing service to the House. It is illustrative of how fortunate we are as parliamentarians to have this support. There have been 150,000 functions with one man to oversee them. That is quite phenomenal. We are served so well.

As we come to the end of this Session—these are the last business questions before the end of the Session—the right hon. Lady is also right to thank the staff of this House in all sorts of areas, both seen and unseen, for the work that has been done to ensure that Parliament continued doing its job in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. This covers such a wide range of staff. It is the cleaners who have been ensuring that it was safe to come back. It is the organisation of the House that has ensured that the lines are put out so that we can sit in a covid-safe manner. It is the Doorkeepers who constantly work to ensure that everything runs smoothly and that the right number of Members are in the Chamber. I see the Clerk of the House sitting at the Table—the team he leads has done a phenomenal job under his inspired leadership, so we are very lucky.

Mr Speaker, I see your own secretary standing next to you. Her work has been absolutely invaluable in making sure that everything works well and, from the Leader of the House's Office, she is an absolute pleasure to deal with. I fear that the honourable lady is going red as I say this, but the tribute is, none the less, greatly deserved.

I wish to address the points the right hon. Lady raises on Nazanin, Anousheh, and Luke. I can reassure her that consular efforts are being made in all those cases and that support is also being given to Mr Ashoori, supporting the family. It is really important that this support is given and takes place. Consular access to British nationals in Yemen is extremely difficult, given that our embassy operations are suspended, but we continue to press the Houthis to release Luke on humanitarian grounds. The efforts are being made, and the right hon. Lady is right to raise this issue every week.

On ministerial responsibilities, the right hon. Lady knows that this list is always produced in as reasonably timely manner as can possibly be achieved, but ensuring that it is accurate and kept up to date is a complex and time-consuming process, and therefore the list will be provided in due course—in the fullness of time. She is right to raise the point about letters from Ministers; I have received complaints from across the House. Ministers are aware that it is a basic courtesy that replies come from Ministers, not from officials, and I am reminding Ministers of that. We hold the Government to account, not officials to account. That is our role, and I will remind people about that. However, on the accountability point, since we have been back accountability in the Chamber has improved enormously, with a full hour of Question Time.

The right hon. Lady complains that there was no holding to account about the buying of land in the Ashford constituency, but that is exactly what she was doing: she was raising the point and trying to hold me to account for a decision made by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. So proper accountability is taking place, and I am delighted that she is so assiduous in ensuring that we are held to account, as she is doing on the issue of the Irish border. The thing to remember on that issue is that there will be no obstacle to trade from Northern Ireland coming to Great Britain, that Great Britain and Northern Ireland remain in a single customs area, and that the UK will not be divided by any agreements made with the European Union.

As regards the trade and agricultural commission, the Agriculture Bill is in the other place, having completed its passage here. The commission will be set up, and it seems to me an extremely sensible way to proceed.

On the opening of libraries, not everything that can be opened has been opened. Some people, be they councils or businesses, have decided, for their own private reasons, not to open immediately they have been allowed to do so. The right hon. Lady will notice that in central Westminster not every restaurant has reopened since it has been allowed to do so, and that is a decision for the individual businesses.

I am delighted to discover that we in North East Somerset won the competition against Walsall South in regards to Parliament Week, but I do not think that that is a reflection on the individual Members of Parliament for those constituencies—it was merely good luck. It is a great event, and I certainly encourage participation in it this year.

Finally, on the issue of the Aye queue and No queue, I initially thought that the right hon. Lady was referring to the intelligence level of Members on her side of the House, which I think is extraordinarily high but misguided, whereas on our side of the House the level is extraordinarily high and rightly guided. However, her suggestion will be borne in mind, and I am sure that the Procedure Committee will take it up with interest.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): This Government have given unprecedented amounts of financial support to businesses and local authorities throughout the covid pandemic, but many businesses in my constituency are saying that urgent reform needs to happen on local authority parking charges, which are stopping many people coming into our town and inhibiting their shopping habits. So will my right hon. Friend commit himself to a debate in Government time on this issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. As we try to encourage people back on to our high streets, we of course want to make it as easy as

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possible for them to get there to support local businesses. Obviously, local authorities have the power to make decisions on parking charges and need to balance the interests of local people, but I am sure we agree that it would be wrong for local government to use parking charges as cash cows without considering the wider effects on local businesses. My hon. Friend may wish to return to this matter in the pre-recess Adjournment debate.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: Good morning, Mr Speaker. Those who observe these Thursday morning exchanges will know that I have tried, over the past few weeks, to secure a debate on the fiscal framework within which the devolved Administrations are constrained. It was not designed to deal with a global pandemic and it is hindering the Scottish Government's ability to respond. As I have made clear consistently, this is an argument not about the amount of money but about what can be done with it. The Leader of the House has consistently evaded my questions, referring instead to the sums involved. I think I now know the reason for that evasion: it seems that, far from enhancing the competence of the Scottish Government, the Tory Cabinet is now determined to constrain it further.

This week, there has been a three-pronged attack on devolution. An announcement on state aid made it clear that Westminster will overrule Holyrood when it comes to providing support for our businesses to recover from this crisis, and that was followed by a statement on the so-called shared prosperity fund, which made it clear that the Scottish Government will have no control over whatever funding replaces EU structural funds. The biggest assault will be announced here shortly: a Government press release tells us that the UK will seek to override and set aside decisions by the Scottish Parliament if they feel those decisions affect UK trade. Were this already in force, it could have overturned decisions on free university tuition, smoking bans or minimum alcohol pricing.

This is a major attack on devolution, taking power away from Scotland, but the details are unclear, so I have three specific questions for the Leader of the House. Is it true that the Government will establish an unelected quango to override the decisions of the Scottish Parliament? Do the UK Government intend to force this on the devolved Administrations if they do not consent? Will these measures require new legislation, and if so, when will this be introduced, and what will happen if it cannot be passed before the end of the transition period? I would appreciate straight answers to these questions, perhaps this time without personal references to my appearance or demeanour.

Finally, since this may be our last business statement before the recess, may I take this opportunity to wish you a good summer break, Mr Speaker? I am sorry we were unable to get you up to the Edinburgh Festival fringe this year as planned, but I hope we can do so in 2021.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Tommy.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, the hon. Gentleman brings a little ray of sunshine into the Chamber, and we are grateful for that. A light shineth in the darkness. To come to his point, there is a difference between a question not being answered and his being given an answer that he does not like. That does not mean the question has not been answered.

I will therefore remind the hon. Gentleman that some £4.6 billion has gone to Scotland under Barnett consequentials from the UK taxpayer. Without the UK taxpayer, the Scottish Government would find it very hard to make ends meet. That has provided support for 146,000 self-employed people, and 628,000 people have joined the furlough scheme, so a very large number of people—more than 750,000 Scottish people—have been helped because they belong to the United Kingdom, and that is something of which we should all be proud.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the devolution settlement, and it has to be said here that the position of the Scottish Government and Scottish nationalists is bizarre. They want the powers to be with Brussels. There are no powers being taken away from the devolved authorities. What is happening is that power is returning to the United Kingdom. We will have the authority to decide for ourselves these issues with regard to things that affect trade. Subsidies will be a matter for the UK Parliament rather than unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. We have the separatists in Scotland and we have their leader, who wishes to build a metaphorical wall against England and wishes to do all sorts of things that are not in the interests of the people of the United Kingdom or the people of Scotland and wishes to kowtow to Brussels. We wish to make a strong United Kingdom, which has £4.6 billion with which to help the Scottish economy.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Childhood obesity is increasing at an alarming rate. It leads to a range of long-term health conditions that adversely affect life chances and life expectancy, particularly in less affluent constituencies such as Stoke-on-Trent Central. The impact of health inequalities has been highlighted by the covid pandemic. Will my right hon. Friend be so kind as to agree to hold a debate in Government time on how we can best tackle childhood obesity and the underlying issues such as food poverty?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The relationship between obesity and other comorbidities and covid-19 has been much discussed in recent months, and the Government are looking at it closely. The Prime Minister has expressed personal interest in tackling childhood obesity. The Government have been clear that every single one of us, no matter who we are, where we live or our social circumstances, deserves the chance to lead a long and healthy life.

Public Health England has emphasised that we must do more to level up health across the country and reduce health inequalities, something that the Government have already committed to in our manifesto, and we are working closely with local authorities to enable them to do that. In addition to what we are already doing, we are keen to ensure that good health is integrated into all facets of life, including housing, transport, education, welfare and the economy, because we all know that preventing ill health—mental and physical—and improving health outcomes is about more than just healthcare.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his response to my letter, although I am afraid to say that I was a little disappointed with his

attitude towards not protecting the time for the estimates day debates. The Backbench Business Committee has 30 unaired debates on our waiting list. They range across a number of subjects, including very important ones such as redundancies in, and the future of, the aviation sector; support for the self-employed and freelance workers in the aftermath of the covid virus pandemic; support for the tourism industry; mental health support for frontline workers; and, going further afield, the plight of Rohingya, the situation in, and plight of, the people of Yemen and the situation between Israel and Palestine—and many more. I note in the Leader's response to the question about businesses that there is an intention to try to get Westminster Hall reopened, but can that not be done sooner than the beginning of October?

Given all those unaired debates, I cannot help but note that we have a general debate on restoration and renewal this afternoon. I think that the vast majority of Members on both sides of the House would say that that subject is not filling up their casework inboxes. There is also a general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. We have an awful lot of disgruntled Back Benchers with very important debates waiting to happen. I appeal again to the Leader of the House to get us some time for Back-Bench business as soon as possible after the summer recess.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman mentions protected time. It is always a difficult balance in this House to ensure that time is available, and it depends on what other Members ask for and are given, but a lot of right hon. and hon. Members value the certainty of a set end point for the day's business. I absolutely understand his concern about the 30 important issues before the Backbench Business Committee. The pre-recess Adjournment debate will provide an opportunity for Members to raise all those points, so it is an extremely useful opportunity for issues that have not been raised so far to be brought forward. The Government have ensured that the priorities of Back Benchers have been brought forward, both before and after the Backbench Business Committee was established, with supply days being made available and with time being made available to the Petitions Committee and, indeed, for restoration and renewal, a subject that is of great interest to a number of Back Benchers. Time has been facilitated as far as possible, but it is obviously my hope that we can get back to giving the Backbench Business Committee the time that it is entitled to which under Standing Orders.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May I have a statement on the public scrutiny of planning applications? Understandably, the opportunity for public meetings has been curtailed during the covid pandemic, but I have a number of controversial large housing applications, including ones at Netherthong and Netherton. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would agree that local residents must be heard when their communities will be hugely impacted by developments of that kind.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think there is not a single Member of this House who has not had, in his or her constituency, an issue raised of a planning kind that is of great importance to local constituents. It is important that local views are made known and that facilities have been kept during the coronavirus pandemic to ensure that virtual planning committees, with local planning authorities across the country, are implementing planning decisions. However, they are also still required to consult on and publicise planning applications to get the views of local communities. I think that is the right way to proceed.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I want to support the comments of the shadow Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), on the lack of accountability. Throughout this crisis I have received a very high level of casework, with many issues raised by constituents about the lack of financial support for them from Government schemes, but, having written to Ministers, I have often received template replies from correspondence officers rather than from the Ministers themselves. Those replies merely restate details of existing schemes, rather than dealing with my constituents' concerns. The Leader of the House talks of courtesy, but can he tell me what he will do to ensure that I get full responses from Ministers when I raise constituents' issues? Anything less than that is a betrayal of the democratic role we play.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right. Responses from correspondents in Departments are not the correct way to treat Members of Parliament. If I may make a brief defence of Departments that did that at the height of the pandemic, I think they were almost overwhelmed with correspondence at that time, and I had a certain sympathy with them. However, I think that time has passed and that we have a right to expect proper answers. What have I done? Well, as of yesterday I wrote to one Minister. I raised, jointly with the Leader of the House of Lords, the issue of responses to written questions with Ministers some weeks ago. I will take up, and have taken up, individual cases of poor answers for individual Members of Parliament. If the hon. Lady would like me to take up any cases on her behalf, I will happily do that. It is essential and a key part of holding the Government to account that correspondence is responded to in a timely way by a Minister.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): May I associate myself, Mr Speaker, with your kind words to Rui, and to the House staff for all they have done over the past few months?

In September, children in this country will be returning to their schools. Around the world, it is estimated that over 1 billion children have not been in school during the covid-19 crisis. The Malala Fund this week estimates that in September there will be some 10 million children, mainly girls, who will never return to school. May we have a debate in Government time in September to mark that milestone, and to talk about the Government's own pledge of 12 years of quality education for every child in the world?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very important matter. Standing up for the right of 12 years of quality education for all girls is the top development priority for this Government. The UK is a world leader in supporting girls' education around the world. Between 2015 and 2019, the Department for International Development supported 14.3 million children to gain a decent education, of whom at least 5.8 million were girls. There will be an opportunity to debate these issues in the pre-recess Adjournment debate, but the figure my hon. Friend has cited of 1 billion children losing out on

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education is one that should concern us all. It will be important to try to make up what has been lost in future months and years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There has been a significant increase in the number of individuals in Vietnam imprisoned for non-violent expression of their beliefs, with as many as 251 prisoners of conscience being held in 2019 alone, according to a new report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Many of them are Christians who have also seen a worrying increase in persecution. For example, the family of imprisoned pastor Nguyen Trung Ton was recently subject to violence and detention by Vietnamese authorities. Will the Leader of the House—he is always very helpful—agree to a statement or a debate on these ongoing developments?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is an absolute champion of freedom of conscience, and has brought before this House on a number of occasions scandals from across the world where people have not been allowed to express their views and their beliefs or have been punished for doing so. This is a matter of concern to the Government, and the Foreign Office continues to take it up. I will bring the Foreign Office's attention to the 251 prisoners of conscience held in Vietnam to whom he refers.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Alcohol addiction can not only destroy lives but end lives. Five years ago, I lost my older brother Mark to alcohol addiction. Trying to find services and help for him at the time was extremely difficult and, indeed, a postcode lottery. Will my right hon. Friend allow a debate in Government time to discuss drug and alcohol rehabilitation and addiction, and the need for a Government strategy on alcohol to help to ensure that no one else needlessly loses a loved one?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very difficult issue. It is true to say that overall alcohol consumption has fallen over the past 13 to 14 years, but the harms associated with alcohol remain too high, and every death caused by alcohol misuse is a tragedy—and a terrible family tragedy, particularly. The Government are committed to tackling health harms from alcohol and supporting the most vulnerable to risk from alcohol misuse. We do aim to publish a new UK-wide cross-Government addiction strategy that will include alcohol. We have the best health service in the world, and we need to marshal those resources to help people suffering from addiction, particularly addiction to alcohol.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders described the Government's target to ban the sale of petrol, diesel and hybrid cars by 2035 as a "date without a plan". With only 147 battery electric vehicles licensed to addresses in my constituency, we need to work faster and do more to support zero-emissions vehicles, so can the Leader of the House ensure a debate in Government time about how the required market transformation for these vehicles can take place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Huge advances are being made in the ability to provide zero-emissions cars, and market forces are coming to work. The Government have been enormously supportive of those and have set an ambitious date for the removal of petrol and diesel cars. That has been a very sensible approach, and we are seeing companies across the world developing cars that are able to operate with zero emissions.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Under current Government and parliamentary procurement rules, purchases of less than £10,000 do not require an open tendering process. This freezes out many local ceramic companies in Stoke-on-Trent, such as Steelite and Churchill China, from the possibility of supplying high-quality, English-made tableware in Government Departments or at Chequers, the countryside residence of the Prime Minister. Could my right hon. Friend advise me on how best to ensure that Stoke-on-Trent's ceramic companies get a fair crack of the whip in supplying Government with their world-beating products?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is very important that companies such as Churchill China and Steelite have the opportunity to supply the Government and to make a success of their businesses. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his question. He is a wonderful campaigner for the businesses of Stoke-on-Trent. Supporting high-quality small businesses through the procurement system is something that many Members want to see realised. As we return powers from the European Union, the Government are interested in looking at how public procurement works and how it can be improved. As regards purchases for Chequers, I think that is a matter for a private trust. However, I am sure that with his indefatigable charms, my hon. Friend will make sure that the trust that runs Chequers knows where china can come from.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The House rises next Wednesday, but just two weeks later, on 5 August, it will be one year since the Indian Government revoked article 370 of the constitution and the people of Jammu and Kashmir were locked down. Human rights were attacked, and subsequent violence has resulted in many deaths. The Backbench Business Committee had listed a debate on human rights abuses in Kashmir on 23 March, and then on 26 April, but, as the Leader of the House is aware, debates were cancelled owing to covid-19. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir is of urgent importance to many of my constituents in Luton South and those of other Members, so will he ensure that time is found early in September for a debate on human rights abuses in the region?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to ask for a debate on this issue, and I note what she says about the Backbench Business Committee's willingness to provide her with one. It will of course be possible to raise this at the pre-recess Adjournment debate, when a Minister will be answering, and I would encourage her to do that. We expect Westminster Hall to reopen from 5 October, so that will provide the opportunity for more debates. I hope that it will be possible to facilitate Backbench Business Committee debates once we are back after the recess.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I echo the call of the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), in appealing to the Leader of the House to grant more

time for Back-Bench business debates? The first debate the hon. Gentleman mentioned, on aviation and redundancies, is in my name and has been signed by more than 150 MPs from across this place. I think we all see in our inboxes a real desire from employees for MPs to stand up and give them their voice, and I would like to do so but cannot because that time has not been granted. May I please appeal to the Leader of the House, who always stood up for Back Benchers when he was sitting very close to where I am standing now, to give us more time to debate these important matters?

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Reclining.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I hear some heckling that suggests I was sometimes accused of reclining when I was sitting in that corner, but my backbone has now been stiffened by joining the Front Bench.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) phrases himself brilliantly, because he says it has been impossible to raise these issues in the House, and then raises them in the House with great panache. He is absolutely right to do so; we have all had correspondence from constituents on aviation redundancies. These companies are vital to the economy, and they are being supported in a number of ways by the Government with the time to pay scheme. The demand for debates will be met when we are fully back to normal, and we get back to normal step by step.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Conservative manifesto at the last election promised a fan-led review of governance of football. As we emerge from covid, many clubs are going to fall into financial difficulties. My local club in the royal borough of Greenwich, Charlton Athletic football club, is currently in that situation. Some dubious characters have got involved with the club, separating the ownership of the ground and the training ground, which is in my constituency, and undermining the future of the club. We need the Government to make an urgent statement about reviewing the governance of football to stop these bad actors getting into the game, and we need them to do that before the recess, because the season is going to end and many clubs are going to find themselves in difficulties—so we need that urgent statement.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman paid such close attention to the Conservative party manifesto; I hope it influenced his vote in the right direction. He is obviously right to raise the point, as other hon. Members across the House have, about the difficulties football teams face in the current environment. I refer him once again to the pre-recess debate, which is an opportunity to air this issue.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: I am very grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing the recommencing of Westminster Hall debates, but, like the Chairs of the Backbench Business and Transport Committees, I would be grateful for reconsideration and for those debates to start in September. As the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on blood cancer, I have been unsuccessful in securing Adjournment debates, and therefore would put in a request for such a debate at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point and he is right to ask for those debates. As I say, we cannot manage it before 5 October. The House authorities have been very pressed with all the commitments that they have to ensure that Select Committees are running, that Bill Committees are running and that the Chamber is running within the constraints of people's still being asked to work from home, the pressures on the broadcasting team and so on, but it is important that this comes back so that hon. Members can raise issues such as the one that he mentioned, blood cancer.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Is it not time that we had a debate on the appalling performance of the Health and Safety Executive? Cranswick Foods in Wombwell has had numerous cases of covid-19 and three deaths, yet it took the Health and Safety Executive three months to visit the factory and I am yet to receive a response to my letter. It clearly has no interest in health and no interest in safety, so will this Executive abolish the HSE and finally put workers first?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We had questions earlier about Ministers not responding to letters. I think that for public bodies to fail to respond to letters is an even greater discourtesy, because they are funded out of Parliament and they are ultimately responsible to Members of Parliament. Therefore, if the hon. Lady would like me to take this up with her and with the HSE to ensure that she gets a response, I would be more than happy to do so.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the illegal harvesting of shellfish? He will recall only too well that 21 undocumented migrants tragically lost their lives in Morecambe bay—a place where I did a charity walk, and which is very dangerous—and last year 39 people lost their lives being trafficked into Essex. Activity is going on illegally off the coast of Southend. I want to avoid another tragedy happening.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important and tragic issue. The Morecambe bay tragedy shone a light on the appalling practices in the employment of many trafficked people in this country, and is one of those disasters that will not be forgotten by anybody who was reading newspapers at that time or who heard of the terrible events that occurred there. Governments of both parties, from that time onwards, have made great progress in tackling these abuses, but I am aware there is more to be done. If my hon. Friend knows of specific instances, I would urge him to report them to the police. The legislation to tackle modern slavery is there to try to eliminate these abuses, not just in terms of shellfish, but following the recent revelations from Leicester.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: The first line of a new report warning of up to 120,000 additional coronavirus deaths this winter states:

"July and August must be a period of intense preparation"

to prevent such a scenario. Will the Government schedule an urgent debate so that the public can know if the Government are undertaking such intense preparation, and to show they have learned the lessons from their handling of this so far, which has led to one of the highest death tolls in the world?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman may want to go on to MemberHub in a moment, because he could apply to put a question to the Health Secretary who will be making a statement at 5 o'clock.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend knows how good Sedgemoor District Council is, but I do not know whether he is aware that it has just approved the imaginative plans for the Gravity site, on the M5, of 600 acres, which even Elon Musk, I believe, has been down to see. This will create 4,000 jobs. May we please have a debate in Government time on the importance of enterprise sites, of which this is one, and their role in creating opportunities for all of the United Kingdom, but especially where district councils should be praised for the imaginative work of making sure they create jobs in their areas?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is wonderful to see somebody from God's own county. The more we hear from Somerset and about Somerset, the better, and I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Sedgemoor District Council. It is actually a rare treat to have Members come in and praise their local councils; normally, it is a litany of woes where local councils are concerned. However, 4,000 jobs is a great achievement, and enterprise sites are a very good way of encouraging business. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the success of Somerset, which goes from strength to strength.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House for an update on the integrated review? In welcoming the decision to remove Huawei from our critical national infrastructure, we must brace ourselves for both covert and overt repercussions. We are now recognising that China has not matured into the global citizen that we want it to be; indeed, it is pursuing a very different and competing geopolitical agenda. We do need a full foreign policy reset on China, and the vehicle for that is the integrated review.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has said that he is having a deep dive into foreign policy in relation to China. The behaviour of the Chinese Government with regard to the joint declaration and their failure to follow that is a matter of great concern, because it is fundamentally a matter of trust. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, as a distinguished chairman of a Select Committee, will ensure that these issues are properly scrutinised and followed.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: May I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for acting as my proxy after I was lucky enough to become a mum in February?

During this pandemic, the world of work has changed for many people. This place should seize this moment as an opportunity to modernise Parliament further and to set an example to other employers. Will the Leader of the House commit himself to gathering feedback from MPs who have benefited from proxy votes for new parents and, now, from the hybrid Parliament, so that he can make this House more accessible to people from a wider range of backgrounds and circumstances, including those without a family nanny?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate the hon. Lady on the birth of her child in February? There is no greater joy than a new life coming into the world. As regards how this House operates, the Procedure Committee is looking at the issue of proxy voting for maternity and paternity leave, which seems to be a scheme that has worked well. I know that the hon. Lady gave evidence to the Procedure Committee recently on that subject. Ultimately, though, Parliament must be a coming together of Members from across the country physically, and as soon as it is safe to have it entirely physical once again, that is what we must get back to.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I make a controversial statement—that we live in a parliamentary democracy? As regards wearing face masks, I do not think that there will be time, because the order has not been laid, to have a debate. Surely the Leader of the House—and indeed, the Government—in a matter as controversial as the enforced wearing of face masks from an increasingly authoritarian Executive, know that there should be a debate here and a vote. After all, this is highly controversial and everybody in the country has a view. Up to 70 million people will be affected by it. Lincolnshire has an infection rate of 150 in 150,000, so we have natural social distancing anyway. Why can we not just have more democracy and less authoritarianism from this Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I understand it—although I will be corrected if this is not right—it is a made affirmative statutory instrument that will have to come to the House in due course, in accordance with the normal procedures. But my right hon. Friend is absolutely right; we are a parliamentary democracy, so decisions made by the Government have to be supported by this House. It is worth bearing in mind that the House passed the emergency legislation which provided the powers for these things to happen.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Further to the comments of the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, may I say to the Leader of the House that it is deeply regrettable that we will, even for the first week back, not have had an opportunity in this Chamber to discuss the proposals by Israel to annex the Occupied Palestinian Territories? It is a matter on which this House should express a view, as we have historic obligations in the region. May I gently say to him that perhaps it might have taken precedence, in terms of the time available in the Chamber, over the rating arrangements for public lavatories, which could be dealt with in Committee—for everyone's convenience?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On the issue of Israel, the Government remain committed to a two-state solution. Any moves towards annexation would be damaging to efforts to restart peace negotiations and contrary to international law. We have conveyed our opposition to Prime Minister Netanyahu on multiple occasions, and reiterated this message in a statement to the UN Security Council on 24 June.

The remaining stages of the Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill—without making any more puns on that issue—have to be taken on the Floor of the House. Report stage and Third Reading need to be completed as well as Committee stage, although I do not imagine that proceedings in Committee will take up a great deal of time.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Yesterday the Intelligence and Security Committee elected my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) as its Chair. He is exceptionally well qualified and will do an excellent job. However, some in No. 10 seem to be having a huge hissy fit about the decision. Will the Leader of the House confirm that he will not bring forward a motion to remove my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East from the ISC?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) was playing ducks and drakes with the Labour party, and that is why the Whip has been withdrawn.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is with deep sadness that my work over the last few weeks has exposed the significant risks of covid-19 to those in care homes in York: no PPE; no family visits; no GP visits; no Care Quality Commission inspections; agency staff not knowing residents; and poor oversight by the local authority. This has exposed and exacerbated the risk to the most vulnerable members of our community, increasing infection and mortality, which is very serious. Can we have a debate in Government time, before the recess, about social care during the pandemic, including a review of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and, most urgently, the way in which deaths are reported and recorded?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There will obviously be an opportunity for the hon. Lady to raise this matter during the Adjournment debate pre-recess, but with regard to care homes it is worth reiterating that every death from this virus is a tragedy. Care homes have worked incredibly hard under very difficult circumstances. The Government have set out their comprehensive plan to support adult social care in England throughout the coronavirus outbreak. They have provided £3.7 billion to local authorities in un-ring-fenced form, plus £600 million for infection control. They have overhauled how PPE is delivered to care homes. Considerable efforts have been made under difficult circumstances to help the people running care homes, who have done incredibly well in the most trying circumstances.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: The Cumberlege review said that the Primodos drug should have been taken off the market in 1967, that the harm caused to the victim was "avoidable" and that a discretionary financial scheme should be set up for all three affected groups to help them cope with life, so imagine my disappointment when the Minister, whenever she was asked about Primodos last week, quoted legal privilege. The Government can set up a discretionary scheme, with a clear caveat that that does not constitute an admission of liability. Will the Leader of the House ask the Minister to come back to the House to make a statement as to why she has taken that view and why a discretionary scheme cannot be set up? The Leader of the House knows I am not giving up on this.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady gives me the opportunity to congratulate her personally, or as personally as one can in this virtual setting, on the work she did in regard to Primodos and the Cumberlege review, and the comfort she has brought to thousands of families across the country, who knew that something had gone wrong and now have a report that accepts that what they were saying was true and that it should have been known by the powers that be. The work she has done is admirable and a model of how an MP should hold Parliament to account. She knows of my sympathy with her, because I served on her all-party parliamentary group. I will therefore more than happily take the matter up directly with the Minister and try to get her a fuller response.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Leader of the House did not answer the question from the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who asked whether it was his intention to bring forward a motion to remove the newly elected Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee from that Committee. What is the answer?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I announced the business forthcoming at the beginning of the statement.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be only too aware of the recent Turkish ruling that Hagia Sophia, that Byzantine masterpiece inscribed on the UNESCO world heritage list, should be turned into a mosque. This architectural wonder was built by Justinian the Great, then turned into a mosque and finally dedicated as a secular museum by the great reformer Atatürk. It now risks having its beautiful murals, mosaics and frescoes damaged or destroyed. That would be a loss to the whole world and, furthermore, would exacerbate community tensions. Will my right hon. Friend hold a debate in Government time on Turkey's actions, UNESCO's response and the protection of this important world heritage site?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have noted President Erdoğan's decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque, and while that has caused concern internationally—I particularly note the comments of the Holy Father—the Government regard this as a sovereign matter for Turkey. However, we would expect that Hagia Sophia, as part of a UNESCO world heritage site, remains accessible to all, as a testament to Turkey's rich and diverse historical and cultural legacy, and that its precious artefacts are preserved. We therefore welcome the public statements by Turkish leaders that this historic building will continue to be accessible to people of all faiths and nationalities, which is consistent with the Turkish constitution's provision for freedom of conscience and religion for all.

It is for states party to the world heritage convention to ensure that their designated world heritage sites comply with the terms of the convention. We work closely with UNESCO, its advisory body and partner Governments to promote the highest standards of heritage protection. That will ensure that designated sites are protected effectively for the whole of humanity and for future generations.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: "Business needs certainty" appears to be the Government's default response when they have nothing of substance or clarity to offer. Despite the Paymaster General's recent assurances that answers would be made available soon, businesses in my constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and elsewhere still lack any certainty on tariffs, regulations, customs processes, cross-border arrangements or the recognition of professional qualifications such as the validity of pilots' licences

[Neale Hanvey]

from next January. This matter was brought sharply into focus by the International Trade Secretary's assessment that current plans could lead to smuggling—

Mr Speaker: Order. Leader of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Government are still in negotiations with the European Union about how things will work out after 1 January, but businesses should naturally prepare themselves for a variety of eventualities.

Mr Speaker: I want to get through the list. If we speed up, we will get through it.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Our key workers have kept the nation going throughout lockdown and I want to see local and national celebration of that. In Harrogate, a local electrical firm and a private donor have paid for a set of rainbow-coloured lights on the side of the Stray parkland to be a permanent tribute. May we have a debate on how we can celebrate key workers, both locally and nationally?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by commending the local electrical firm for doing that? I wholeheartedly agree that we should pay tribute to all those people who helped keep the country running throughout the peak of the crisis, from doctors and nurses to police officers, bus drivers, cleaners, caterers and, of course, supermarket workers. Those people, along with millions of others, deserve our respect and heartfelt thanks.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: British Airways has treated its workers disgracefully, threatening to fire all 42,000 and rehire around two thirds on terms and pay that will set people back decades. It is frustrating that the Prime Minister has not yet made clear what consequences BA will face, including for its favourable landing slot allocation. Will the Leader of the House therefore invite the Prime Minister to make a statement to the House before the recess on exactly what action the Government will take to halt BA's shocking behaviour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That ties in with the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about a debate on the aviation industry more generally. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman raises the matter in the pre-recess Adjournment debate.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Our pilots and cabin crew have been through a difficult number of months, but many have focused their efforts on helping others, including Moray-based Captain Emma Henderson, the co-founder of Project Wingman. That sees thousands of cabin crew, in hospitals across the UK including Dr Gray's Hospital in Moray, helping our dedicated NHS staff by giving them a first-class experience. May we have a debate in Parliament to congratulate Emma Henderson, Dave Fielding and everyone involved with Project Wingman?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend has managed to convey congratulations. He is right to do so. I hope he will give the people he mentioned a framed copy of *Hansard* showing how much the House of Commons appreciates the work that they have done.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Government sat on the Dame Mary Ney review of the funding oversight of our further education colleges for nine months. The written statement that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills provided could have been written in nine minutes. May we have a proper debate and statement on the findings of that review, which exposes how the job cuts throughout the civil service in the Education and Skills Funding Agency have prevented the Government from having proper oversight of our further education sector?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Chancellor made announcements with regard to the additional funding that will be made available to further education. The Government have shown their absolute commitment to ensuring that further education is as good as it can possibly be and to improving standards. I say to the hon. Gentleman, as I have said to others, that there will be an opportunity to raise such matters specifically in the pre-recess Adjournment debate.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: May we have a statement from a Minister in the Department for Transport on the operation of local transport schemes? Harrow Council intends to close several roads, which will severely inconvenience the residents who live in those areas and force them to travel on congested roads, and blames the Government for making it happen. If we can clarify the matter through a statement, everyone will be clear about whose responsibility this is.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a crucial question. Local authorities have changed their traffic rules, and some may have worked, but others have caused real irritation, annoyance and increased congestion. The Department for Transport published statutory guidance to local authorities, providing advice on the changes the Government expect them to make to their road layouts to give more space to cyclists and pedestrians, but it is important that motorists' interests are not ignored.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): We said that others would follow if action was not taken following the British Airways fire and rehire announcement, and so it has proven, with Centrica, easyJet and Menzies Aviation all engaging in that disgraceful behaviour. My Employment (Dismissal and Re-employment) Bill has been delayed, so will the Leader of the House help to facilitate a meeting between me and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy so we can work together to improve employment and employment law and protect workers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: One of my roles is always to try to facilitate meetings between Members of this House and Ministers. If the hon. Gentleman has not done so already, I urge him to start the process by correspondence, but if that does not achieve the result he requires, then if he comes to my office, I will do what I can.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: My constituents are starting to get a little impatient because some key public services are not reopening and there is no set date for them to do so—for example, for interviews for new passports. Could the Leader of the House find time for a statement before the recess so we can have a road map of when everything will reopen, as long as the virus stays under control?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Things are reopening in a staged way to try to ensure that they can reopen in a way that does not take any unnecessary risks. We see that across the country. My hon. Friend is right to say that there is more to be done, but I am sure that announcements will be made in the normal way as more things open up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Leader of the House. The House is suspended.

12.6 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Internal Market: White Paper

12.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): For centuries, the United Kingdom's internal market has been the bedrock of our shared prosperity, with people, products, ideas and investment moving seamlessly between our nations, safeguarding livelihoods and businesses and demonstrating that, as a union, our country is greater than the sum of its parts.

Today, I am publishing a White Paper on the Government's plans to preserve the UK internal market after the transition period. Since the Acts of Union, the UK internal market has been the source of unhindered and open trade across the country, one which pulls us together as a united country. I know that the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) cares as much about our precious union as I do.

Since 1973, EU law has acted as the cohering force for the UK internal market. In 2016, the British people voted to repeal that legislation, allowing us now to articulate the continued functioning of the internal market. The Union's economic strength is unrivalled. Since the Acts of Union, the size of our economy has multiplied over 170-fold. Successive UK Governments have legislated to share this prosperity and protect workers' rights—for example, through the introduction of the national minimum wage and now the national living wage, and by providing for more generous holiday and maternity leave than required by the EU. Today we are announcing plans to continue this hugely successful economic Union. We will legislate for an internal market in UK law, as we leave the transition period and the EU's single market. Our approach will give businesses the regulatory clarity and certainty they want. It will ensure that the cost of doing business in the UK stays as low as possible.

But let me be clear: preserving the coherence of the UK internal market will be done in a manner that respects and upholds the devolution settlements. On 1 January 2021, hundreds of powers previously held by the EU will rightly flow directly back to devolved Administrations in the United Kingdom. For the first time, because of our approach, the devolved Administrations will be able to legislate on a whole range of policy areas. Each nation that makes up our United Kingdom will hold an unprecedented level of powers after the transition period.

To respect devolution and uphold our internal market, we propose to legislate this year. Businesses across the UK will be given a market access commitment. That will be underpinned by the principles of mutual recognition and non-discrimination, which will guarantee that goods and services from one part of the United Kingdom can always be sold into another. The simple principle at the heart of this approach is a continuation of our centuries-old position that there should be no economic barriers to trading within the United Kingdom.

The economies of our four nations, within one United Kingdom, are strongly integrated. At the time of the last census, 170,000 workers commuted daily from one part of the UK to another. Scotland makes over £50 billion of sales per year to the rest of the UK, accounting for over 60% of all exports. Indeed, Scotland sells three times more to the rest of the UK than to the whole

[Alok Sharma]

EU put together. About 50% of Northern Ireland's sales are to Great Britain, and 75% of exports of Welsh final goods and services are consumed in other parts of the UK. In some parts of Wales, over a quarter of workers commute across the border. It is in the clear economic interest of the whole United Kingdom that its internal market continues to function successfully and seamlessly, as it has done for centuries.

As part of our proposals, we will also clarify in law the position that subsidy control is a reserved matter for the whole United Kingdom. This has never been a devolved matter. The Government have been clear that, after the end of the transition period, the UK will have its own domestic subsidy control regime. We will develop our policy proposals on this in due course, consulting widely.

We will only recover from covid by working together. Just over two weeks ago, the Prime Minister set out how we would strengthen the incredible partnership between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland through our economic recovery. That will be underpinned by a strong UK internal market and avoid the damaging uncertainty for businesses of a fractured economy. It will provide the unquestionable advantages of continued open trade. It will benefit businesses, workers and consumers across the country by lowering trading costs and allowing different regions to specialise in sectors where they enjoy a comparative advantage.

Our proposals are designed for co-operation between all four nations. We invite all devolved Administrations to work together and to agree common approaches to cross-cutting issues such as regulatory standards.

The UK economy has some of the highest standards in the world. We go beyond EU rules in many areas, including health and safety in the workplace, workers' rights, food, health and animal welfare, consumer protections, household goods, net zero and the environment. We will maintain our commitment to high standards as we negotiate trade agreements that will provide jobs and growth to the United Kingdom. Through our common frameworks approach, we will support regulatory consistency across our internal market, so if the devolved Administrations seek to agree standards across the UK economy, I say simply this: come and work with us.

The UK internal market is a historic achievement for the United Kingdom, which for 300 years has supported unrivalled economic growth and innovation within our great Union. That has underpinned the best of our United Kingdom's innovation and prosperity: the Scottish enlightenment, the steam engine, the world's first vaccine, the telephone, the electric tramway, penicillin, radar, pneumatic tyres, the breaking of the Enigma code, the sequencing of DNA, and the world wide web. As we rebuild and recover from covid, we will work together as one United Kingdom to support jobs and livelihoods across our whole country. We will maintain high standards for consumers, and deliver our commitment to devolution by giving more power to the devolved legislatures. I commend this statement to the House.

12.16 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We support the principle of maintaining the UK's internal market, which is vital for trade, jobs, and prosperity across the whole United Kingdom. The way the Government go about that has profound implications for whether we drive up standards across the UK or drive them down, and for whether that issue becomes a source of tension across the four nations of the UK. We believe in our United Kingdom, and there is a big responsibility on the Government to seek to build consensus and ensure that we do not drive a wedge between our nations, or give an excuse to those who wish to do so.

By those standards, there are significant problems in the announcement. On the process, for example, the Welsh Government were promised a draft of this White Paper last March, yet when I talked to the Welsh First Minister yesterday afternoon, the Government had still not shared it with him. That approach does the Secretary of State and the Government no good. On the substance, we should be honest that there is a real challenge regarding how we maintain an internal market without barriers in the UK as we leave the European Union, while at the same time respecting devolution when issues such as food standards and labelling, animal welfare, and other important environmental issues are devolved.

For the past 40 years, including 20 years of devolution, that has been achieved by the EU setting minimum standards, which all four nations had to abide by. The crucial question is not whether we have an internal market, which we need, but how we now set minimum standards to ensure that each nation has a proper voice in doing so, and a means of resolving any disputes that arise. By answering those questions, we can do what we need to do, which is both keep the internal market and respect devolution. Unfortunately, despite the warm words from the Secretary of State, the approach of the White Paper as presented for England, Scotland and Wales appears to be simply to legislate that the lowest standard chosen by one Parliament must become the minimum standard for all.

The risk is that one legislature would be able to lower its food safety standards and animal welfare standards, and force the other nations, which would have no recourse, to accept goods and services produced on that basis—in other words, a race to the bottom. The Secretary of State talks about levelling up, but there is a real risk of levelling down. That is not in the interests of consumers, workers or businesses, and it does not adequately respect devolution. For Northern Ireland, if standards in the UK diverge significantly below those of the EU, there is a real risk that checks on food and other products going from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would increase in parallel.

The Secretary of State must, in the course of this consultation, provide better answers to how we avoid that race to the bottom, so let me ask him four specific questions. First, will he explain what is the mechanism, if any, by which the four nations of the UK will agree minimum standards that respect the voice of each nation? He mentions the common frameworks process and an ongoing process of dialogue, but he must realise that that is superseded by the White Paper, which simply states that the lowest standard among the nations wins. If the framework process is to prevent that danger, how will it be incorporated into legislation?

Secondly, there needs to be a means of resolving disputes that can command confidence. The White Paper states:

"The Government will consider tasking an independent, advisory body to report to the UK Parliament".

That is far too weak. Surely the Secretary of State must recognise that any independent body, if it is to respect devolution, must be accountable to all four nations, with its functions agreed by all four nations.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State must understand that the anxiety caused by the White Paper is partly due to the gap between the Government's warm words about raising standards—we heard them again today—and their deeds. They had a chance in the Agriculture Bill to agree that no trade deal would be signed that lowered animal welfare, environmental protection or food safety standards, through an amendment tabled by their own side, but they refused to do so. The spectre of a Trump trade deal that would drive down standards and be imposed on the whole of the UK hangs over this White Paper. For years the Government have denied that their real agenda is a bonfire of much-needed standards. Great, but if they do not plan to lower standards, why cannot the Secretary of State agree to legally binding commitments?

Fourthly, the state aid rules need to be in place in just five months' time, but even after this White Paper we still do not know any details about how they will work. Will the Secretary of State tell us when we will get the Government's plans?

I want to end by saying to the right hon. Gentleman that we absolutely need to maintain the internal market from 1 January, but it is time the Government showed—in deeds, not just in words—their commitment to levelling up, not levelling down. It is time, too, that they showed a desire to build constitutional consensus, rather than risking constitutional conflict, and the White Paper is not a good start. The Secretary of State and the Government must do better in the weeks and months ahead.

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his support for the principle of the UK internal market. I hope that that is something we will hear echoed across the House as we open up to questions. Let me address some of the points that he has raised.

The first thing worth noting is that the right hon. Gentleman talked about anxiety. The real issue at the moment is giving certainty to businesses, so that they know from day one that they are able to operate as they do now within a coherent, seamless internal market. That is what this White Paper proposal absolutely gives them. I have spoken, as I am sure he will have done, to business representatives and organisations over the last 24 hours, and they have told me that this is one big issue off the risk register of companies.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about standards. I would point out to him once again that the UK has some of the highest standards in the world across a whole range of areas. I have listed issues around maternity and paternity pay, around the exclusions and around zero-hour contracts. I say to him once again—I am sure that this issue will be raised by others as well—that we are not going to be compromising our high environmental standards, our high animal welfare standards or, indeed, our high food safety standards in the deals that we do.

The right hon. Gentleman then raised the issue about working together. He will know that the common frameworks programme has been running for some time, and we have had consultations and discussions about that. If colleagues in the devolved Administrations want to have a discussion about standards, that is absolutely the right forum in which to do it. He also mentioned the state aid rules. I know that he will understand the reason that we want to continue to have this as a reserved matter. We want to ensure that there is effectively equality across the whole of the UK and that there are no distortions. I understand his desire for us to set out the details on this, and that will come.

The White Paper gives certainty to businesses. It is about protecting jobs and livelihoods, and about supporting businesses in making their investment decisions. That is good for consumers as well. It is about underpinning our recovery from covid as we seek to work together. I say to all colleagues that this is about businesses and people, not about politicians, and I hope that that is the spirit in which we will conduct the rest of this debate.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Nothing is currently more important for our whole United Kingdom than the protection of public health and support for our economic recovery. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the proposals in the White Paper will ensure that all four nations—indeed, all four corners—of our United Kingdom can overcome this crisis by working together and promoting good co-operation between Westminster and the devolved Administrations?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is precisely what I want to do. This is a consultation; we are consulting and we want to get people's views. My door is very much open to a dialogue and discussion with anyone who wants to come forward.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

What we have seen put forward by the Tory Government is the biggest assault on devolution since the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999. It is clear that the Government either do not get Scotland or cannot even be bothered to get it, so let me remind those on the Government Benches that in 1997 more than 75% of Scots voted to establish the Scottish Parliament. The Tories at the time were hostile to the establishment of that Scottish Parliament; they were out of step with Scotland. Plus ça change. Today, the Tories want to strip our Scottish Parliament of its powers.

Let us myth-bust some of the lies that have been circulated this morning. Scotland is not getting 70 new powers. The UK Government say that new powers are coming on animal welfare, energy efficiency and land use. Has the Secretary of State not heard? The Scottish Parliament already has those powers. Just last month it passed a Bill on animal welfare; last year it passed a Bill on forestry; and energy efficiency was part of the Climate Change (Scotland Bill) in 2009, more than a decade ago. We have these powers.

The Secretary of State's proposal will impose what is being called a mutual recognition regime. The only recognition here is that it is a plan for a race to the bottom on standards. It will mean a reduction in standards in one part of the UK driving down standards elsewhere, even if that is in direct contradiction of the devolved Administrations and their rights and powers.

We all know how desperate this Tory Government are to sell out food standards in return for a US trade deal. There we have it: no new powers and a plan to destroy Scotland's world-class food and drink standards—not a Parliament in Edinburgh of equals, but one where we

[Ian Blackford]

legislate only with the approval of Westminster. I have to say to the Secretary of State: this is not a good look. Will he guarantee to the House that these plans will not be imposed on Scotland and that he and his Government will respect, as the Prime Minister often says, the Scottish Parliament's decisions on them as those of an equal?

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman talks about understanding Scotland; the one thing that is clear from the statements he has just made is that he certainly does not understand business in Scotland and he certainly does not understand the people of Scotland on this issue. The UK internal market—*[Interruption.]* The UK internal market is about—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Blackford, I can hear what you are shouting. Please, desist.

Alok Sharma: The UK internal market is about preserving jobs across the United Kingdom. It is about making sure that investment can come in, confident in the knowledge that we have a level playing field—an internal market in which businesses can sell services and products across the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the powers that will be coming back at the end of this year—at the end of the transition period. It will be the biggest transfer of powers in the history of devolution. I do, though, agree with him that it is not going to be 70 powers coming back to Scotland; I think it is closer to 111. His colleagues in the Scottish Parliament will have an opportunity to set rules and regulations. The problem, of course, is that SNP Members are not interested in that—they are not interested in taking control; they are interested in being ruled by the European Union. The right hon. Gentleman should spend more time talking to businesses and to people whose jobs would be at risk if we did not have this seamless internal market in the United Kingdom.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talks about standards. I have already explained to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) that we have some of the highest standards in the world, and we are not going to compromise on that. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) talks about wanting to have a dialogue. I respectfully remind him that it was the Scottish Government who walked away from the discussion that we were having on the UK internal market last year, so, in the spirit of co-operation, I hold out my hand to him and say, "Let us talk. Let us continue the discussion. Come back to us on the consultation and continue to work with us on the common frameworks programme."

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland will also see more powers coming back to them as a result of these proposals when the transition period ends?

Alok Sharma: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: powers will flow back to all the devolved Administrations—around 70 to Wales and around 150 to Northern Ireland.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): This talk of powers being returned disguises the fact that the Government are denying all of us here a much more important power—that of scrutinising the trade deals that are struck in our name. The British people used to have this power through their elected representatives in Brussels, but the Trade Bill comes back to the House on Monday and there is no provision in it for this Parliament to have scrutiny of the trade deals that are being struck in our name. Will the Secretary of State accept that trade flows throughout the United Kingdom can best be secured by the instituting of a robust and respected dispute resolution process, and will he confirm that implementing such a mechanism will be a priority as he progresses his plans?

Alok Sharma: I say respectfully to the hon. Lady that she needs to move on. The British people decided that we were leaving the European Union in 2016, and we are implementing that vote.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Scotland sells more to the rest of the UK than it does to the rest of the world put together. Does my right hon. Friend agree that preserving the UK's internal market is vital to protecting jobs, businesses and livelihoods in all four nations of the UK?

Alok Sharma: I could not agree more. Modelling shows that Scotland would suffer a GDP loss four times greater perhaps than that of the UK as a whole from unmitigated differences in regulations.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): When the UK Government seek to strike trade deals with the rest of the world, they need to be able to speak with one voice for the whole United Kingdom, so will the Secretary of State commit himself, in the Bill that he brings forward, to making sure that arrangements are in place for proper consultation with all the devolved Administrations and proper scrutiny by this Parliament and the elected representatives of the British people?

Alok Sharma: I have just said that the White Paper is indeed a consultation, and the hon. Gentleman along with everyone else in our country, is able to set out his views.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): On 17 March, the Chancellor said that companies such as Square One in Leighton Buzzard in the events industry "that have business properties will be eligible"—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 964.]—for business rates relief. Local authorities do not seem to have got that message, so will the Business Secretary stick up for the events industry and make sure that what the Chancellor said should happen will happen?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know that this is a very difficult time for very many businesses up and down the country, and that is why we have supported them with a whole range of measures, including grants and loans that they have been able to get. He will also know that I set out a £617 million discretionary grant fund for local authorities. I hope that local authorities will have used that discretion to support local businesses, but I am happy to take up that individual case if he would like.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is that there are lots of people who have been excluded from all those. There are about 3 million people who have recently become self-employed or are directors of small limited companies—people who have not received a single penny from the Government—and their business has really suffered. I just hope that the Government still have something more to say about those people, because they are in real financial trouble and they need support now. My local authority still needs £2.5 million to make sure that Tylorstown tip does not fall further into the river, and that is the responsibility of the Westminster Government. Will the Secretary of State please guarantee that that money happens now?

Alok Sharma: I completely understand that, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and the hon. Gentleman have said, some businesses and individuals are facing real difficulties at this point. We have provided £160 billion-worth of support in the past few months and the Chancellor announced another £30 billion. I say to the hon. Gentleman that through the self-employed scheme we have supported about 2.6 million individuals, and of course businesses are able to get bounce-back loans, more than 1 million of which have been approved. Again, if he has individual cases to raise, I am happy to look at them.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Secretary of State's statement on the internal market, but may I press him to ensure that protecting the interests of small food producers, particularly those in Lancashire, is given equal weighting to all these additional powers that have been given to the Scottish Parliament, because we do not want any part of the United Kingdom to be left behind?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right to say that we do not want any part of the UK, or indeed any business across the UK, to be left behind, which is precisely why we have set out our proposals on mutual recognition and non-discrimination.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: Words such as "mutual recognition regime" sound benign, yet some 1 million people have signed a National Farmers Union petition, and organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Compassion in World Farming have expressed their fears, so why should my constituents believe the Minister's promises of munificence? To paraphrase the old adage, should we beware this time not Greeks but the British bearing gifts, less than a Trojan horse, but this time for Trump's America?

Alok Sharma: I am not sure how to respond to all that, except to say that the proposal we are putting forward is about protecting businesses and jobs across the whole UK.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. Does he agree that these proposals will maintain current economic freedoms, which are vital to ensure that all our nations survive and thrive post covid? This is good news for business and for job security, and, fundamentally, it enables us to level up across our great United Kingdom.

Alok Sharma: Absolutely. As ever, my hon. Friend speaks a great deal of sense. This is about levelling up and making sure there is an equal opportunity for businesses across our country to be able to sell and trade.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State talked about the economic recovery after coronavirus, about which my constituents and I have immediate concerns. In the past week alone, more than 8,000 jobs have been lost in the west midlands—manufacturing and higher education sectors have been particularly hit—and in Coventry we fear an unemployment tsunami when the furlough scheme ends. Will the Government extend the furlough scheme on a sectoral basis, invest in green manufacturing in the west midlands, and provide a plan for higher education that protects jobs and funding?

Alok Sharma: The Chancellor set out the position on the furlough scheme clearly. As the hon. Lady knows, he announced the job retention bonus. She will also know that in his summer statement he announced an extra £3 billion for energy efficiency in homes and in public buildings, and that will support about 140,000 green jobs.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): This White Paper, in ensuring the seamless internal market within the UK that this Government are delivering, is an excellent thing, particularly given that we are delivering the democratic will of the people in leaving the EU. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is particularly good for small and microbusinesses in vast rural constituencies such as mine, where 97% of businesses are small or micro-sized?

Alok Sharma: Yes, indeed, because if there were regulatory barriers, for instance, if there were even small differences in things such as food labelling requirements, costs would of course be raised for small businesses, which they might ultimately pass on to consumers. Therefore what we are proposing is good not only for businesses of all sizes, but for consumers.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): These structural arrangements are enormously important, but they go only so far, because so are political culture and drive to ensure that we get Britain back to work. Yet Government purchasing rules and practice still grovel to so-called EU rules—unlike, incidentally, those in most other EU countries. Now the Government are free of those rules, when are they going to actively back British business and British workers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? There are no more EU excuses. Act now!

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman, for whom I have enormous respect, as ever makes his case very forcefully. He talks about public procurement, and I look forward to his thoughts as part of the consultation.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. The internal market could not be more important to my constituents. Their businesses and jobs and, crucially, our economic recovery from covid depend on seamless trade throughout the UK, particularly because of the border we share with England. Will my right hon. Friend ignore any

[Fay Jones]

hysteria from the Labour party in Wales and press full steam ahead with the Bill, because my constituents will welcome it?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She will also know that almost three times as many intermediate inputs used by businesses in Wales come from the rest of the UK as from the rest of the world put together. That is why it is important that we continue with a seamless internal market, which is good news for her constituents. I would also just say to her that I am not prone to hysteria.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The European Parliament, the European Court of Justice and the European Commission have 60 years of jurisprudence with which to deal with these issues. The reality is that under the proposals every single power, budget and competence, not just of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and the Northern Ireland Assembly but of local government in each of those countries, will be subject to a politically appointed panel that has no jurisprudence whatever. What will be the rights of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly to put people on to that panel, and what dispute resolution mechanisms will they use? If this is not a fair and impartial arbiter, it is a power grab over every single competence that we have.

Alok Sharma: Perhaps I can clarify once more, in case it has not been clear enough, that there is no power grab; this is a power surge. We are ensuring that all devolved policy areas stay devolved, and additional powers are returning to the devolved Administrations.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and welcome the White Paper. Like thousands of my constituents, my dad and brother work in the building sector and travel to their jobs in England every day. I implore my right hon. Friend to ignore the attempts by the Welsh Labour Government to hold our Union and constitution hostage over political points, and to crack on with building the single market that is essential to my Welsh constituency.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend speaks a great deal of sense. As I said at the start of the statement, I want to work co-operatively with colleagues across the devolved Administrations. That is precisely what we have been seeking to do over the past period, and we will continue to do that. I look forward to their representations as part of the consultation.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It has been eight weeks since the Prime Minister of this country bothered to contact the First Minister of Wales—eight weeks during a global pandemic that for many has felt like a lifetime. It has been a lifetime for the hundreds of workers at General Electric in Nantgarw in my constituency, who have just been served redundancy notices due to the lack of support from this UK Tory Government. The 2019 Conservative and Unionist party manifesto stated that the Conservatives were committed to strengthening the Union between all four nations of the UK, but we have actually seen this UK Tory Government ride roughshod through devolution. The White Paper is yet another assault on Welsh powers. Could the Secretary of State tell the House precisely when the White Paper was presented to the Welsh First Minister?

Alok Sharma: May I just say to the hon. Lady that I want to work collaboratively with all colleagues across all the devolved Administrations? She talks about the First Minister of Wales, and I can tell her that the Secretary of State for Wales has tried on two occasions recently to arrange a meeting. I think that one was due to take place in the last 24 hours, but unfortunately did not. There may be perfectly good reasons why that did not happen, but my commitment is to speak to my counterparts in Wales—for us, from a UK Government perspective, to speak to our counterparts—and there is a consultation. The hon. Lady should look at the document and then respond.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): For centuries, the internal market has ensured that the British people have the right to sell their wares and move freely between any nations in our United Kingdom. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that we must do everything in our power to protect the status quo and those ancient rights? There must be no border at Berwick. Welsh lamb should be sold in Scotland. English barley should supply Scotch whisky.

Alok Sharma: Quite simply, yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why we are putting forward proposals to ensure that we continue with our seamless internal market in the United Kingdom.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Since I was elected, many of my constituents have written to me about their concerns for food standards, whether they are just people who eat food, or even the 20 or so members of the National Farmers Union in my constituency who produce it. In the White Paper, the Government make several references to past action on standards, but the future-focused language is extremely weak. Will the Secretary of State commit to minimum standards, which people can improve on but not go below?

Alok Sharma: As I have noted, and as a matter of fact, we have had very high standards when it comes to food safety and animal welfare in the United Kingdom. The best way to ensure that we have the same standards across the United Kingdom is to work together to the common frameworks programme, which is what I would like us all to do.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): In this Chamber over the past few weeks, I have heard Members on both sides talking about the need to preserve and create jobs as we recover from covid. There are financial barriers, but there are also regulatory barriers, and these proposals ensure that they do not arise as a result of our leaving the European Union. Does the Business Secretary agree that his proposals will help to preserve jobs throughout every nation in the United Kingdom, and that any approach that seeks to fragment our internal market—largely due to ideological obsessions of members of the Scottish National party—would make our jobs recovery after covid harder, not easier?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right. This is not about ideology; it is about pragmatism and about supporting businesses, supporting jobs and supporting livelihoods. That is why we have put forward these proposals.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Many of us are alarmed at the prospect of standards being lowered to allow things such as chlorine-washed chicken to come into our market, particularly as the requirement to wash chicken in chlorine comes from the fact that sometimes the meat is marinated in the animal's own guano. Some of us would rather avoid the risk of buying such products, so will the Secretary of State ensure that the devolved powers include the right to label food so that we can be warned about the prospects of buying those sorts of products?

Alok Sharma: Let me address the point that the hon. Gentleman raises about chicken. He refers to chlorine-washed chicken: as he knows, it is illegal in the United Kingdom, and as a Government—as I have said earlier—we have been very clear that we will not sign up to trade deals that would compromise our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food safety standards. We are a world leader in those areas, and that is not going to change.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that uncertainty is the enemy of investment, of employment and of consumer confidence? He should be pleased to know that the businesswomen and men that I have been speaking to today have welcomed today's certainty that goods and services from one part of the kingdom can continue to be sold in another and that employers in one part can continue to provide jobs to residents in another.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend has had a glittering career in business, and more than some Opposition Members, he understands what uncertainty means for businesses. It means that they do not employ people and they do not invest, and at the end of the day that impacts on the growth of our economy. What these proposals give is that certainty and clarity that businesses want.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The unelected body that the UK Government plan to establish will determine whether Bills passed in the Scottish Parliament meet a new test before they can be considered competent. The Minister has described this, in Orwellian fashion, as a devolved power surge. Had this situation existed earlier, it would have prevented Scotland's smoking ban, minimum unit pricing of alcohol and free tuition. Can he explain why he thinks it is a good idea for a Government whom Scotland has rejected to seek to diminish the powers of Scotland's democratically elected Parliament?

Alok Sharma: Let me emphasise once more that all devolved policy areas are going to stay devolved. What is going to happen at the end of this year—the end of the transition period—is that powers will flow back to the devolved Administrations. The hon. Lady talks about minimum alcohol pricing. She will know that the Scottish Government had to fight in the courts to get that through. Under our proposals, they would have been able to make that change.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: Vauxhall in Luton proudly produces one of the best-selling vans in all regions and nations in the UK—part of the £10.5 billion-worth of goods that are imported into Northern Ireland from Great Britain each year. All this is reliant on frictionless trade. Does the Secretary of State agree that the commitment to frictionless trade across the UK, as set out in the White Paper, is essentially meaningless given that the Government have admitted that the protocol will introduce new requirements on trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Alok Sharma: We published our Command Paper in May, as the hon. Lady knows, and in it we said in that that there would be unfettered access for goods from Northern Ireland to GB. Certainly, the discussions that I have had suggest that businesses understand that the proposals in the White Paper give them further certainty.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. It is patently obvious that a Unionist and a nationalist cannot agree on a constitutional settlement, but it is none the less perfectly possible to have constructive conversations and good working relationships through proper channels. With that in mind, will he undertake to speak to his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that Lord Dunlop's review is published?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The review conducted by Lord Dunlop is, I understand, set to come to the Prime Minister in the autumn. I am sure that we will consider it and, we look forward to it with some interest.[1]

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): The internal market has long been a cornerstone of our shared prosperity. Does the Secretary of State agree that we are stronger together, and that we need to take steps to ensure that Peak district hill farmers can still sell their world-class lamb to all four corners of the United Kingdom?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend, who speaks up at all times for businesses in his constituency. I agree with him: we are absolutely stronger together as one United Kingdom.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The White Paper states the Government's intention to develop a replacement for the EU state aid regime. Can the Secretary of State confirm when legislation will be brought forward with regard to state aid, and whether it will be primary or secondary legislation? Does he accept that this needs to provide confidence to the devolved nations by being administered through an independent body, as opposed to his own Department?

Alok Sharma: I can confirm to the hon. Lady that the new domestic subsidy control regime will be a modern system that will be there to support British businesses in a way that benefits all within the United Kingdom. I know that she is interested in further details on this, and we will share those in due course.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Businesses in Runnymede and Weybridge benefit from access to areas across the UK by plane, road and rail. Does my right hon. Friend agree that while much focus

1. *[Official Report, 20 July 2020, Vol. 678, c. 11MC.]*

[Dr Ben Spencer]

is given to international trade, seamless internal trade is crucial for our ongoing prosperity across all four nations of the UK?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When companies are looking to invest in the United Kingdom, the fact that we will continue with a seamless UK internal market will give them significant confidence.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The 70 so-called new powers for Scotland are in areas that are already devolved. They include matters such as food safety, public procurement and environmental standards, all of which are at the very core of devolution. With Scottish Parliament elections scheduled for next year, does the Secretary of State not agree that it would be a democratic abomination for Scots to have to vote for parties whose policies could only be enacted subject to the provisions of the latest UK race-to-the-bottom trade deal?

Alok Sharma: I really do suggest that the hon. Gentleman gets out and talks more to businesses in his constituency. I think they will tell him that having a unified coherent UK internal market is good news for them and good news for their workers.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I warmly welcome the White Paper. The self-employed are some of the main drivers of economic growth in the United Kingdom, including in Carshalton and Wallington. Some, such as directors of small limited companies, have had concerns throughout the pandemic. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give that the self-employed will continue to be able to thrive and drive economic growth in the internal market?

Alok Sharma: As I said in response to an earlier question, we have provided support to 2.6 million people through the self-employment income support scheme, and businesses have been able to make use of the bounce back loan scheme and the other loan schemes that the Government have made available. Small businesses have also been able to take advantage of the £10,000 to £25,000 grants that have been offered.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): South Yorkshire has nearly 1.5 million residents, so what discussions have taken place with local and regional leaders across England to ensure that their concerns about covid-19 support are addressed?

Alok Sharma: I do not know whether the hon. Lady asks that in relation to the White Paper but, as she will know, we have been speaking informally to businesses for a period about the UK internal market. Of course, there is now an opportunity for people to respond more formally to the consultation.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement. Does he agree that stimulating growth and development across our regions is vital to a well-functioning, highly productive economy? Will he work with me and others to see how a north midlands manufacturing corridor could be established to bring the region together and open up greater opportunities for businesses?

Alok Sharma: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and other colleagues in her region to discuss how it can benefit from the support that the Government have to offer.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As Liberal Democrats, we welcome the announcement about internal trade and protecting the market, and protecting those who survive in that internal market. However, I ask the Secretary of State to be sure that there is consultation with each of the devolved Administrations and that we have a dispute resolution mechanism for when there cannot be agreement. More than anything else, however, may I please caution the Government that any mistake on this, any suggestion that this is being imposed on the devolved Administrations, will be seized on by our colleagues on the nationalist Benches? That will do damage to the Union rather than protecting and strengthening it, so will he please bear it in mind?

Alok Sharma: I hope that the proposals we are putting forward will strengthen the Union and strengthen support for business across the United Kingdom. The hon. Lady talks about consultation. The White Paper is of course a consultation document, and I would welcome her thoughts.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I welcome the White Paper. As my right hon. Friend said, our internal markets, which have existed for hundreds of years, support countless jobs across the four nations. Financial services and professional services are a very important sector in my constituency. How does my right hon. Friend see the City of London, in particular, being able to support millions of jobs across the four nations within the internal market?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend will know that professional qualifications will be covered under mutual recognition, which is good news for service sectors across the United Kingdom, but particularly in the City of London.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: Thirty-five years ago, in 1985, the then Tory European Commissioner's White Paper detailed 300 legislative proposals to complete the European single market, and that was with a seven-year deadline. On the UK internal market, this Tory Government are giving a four-week consultation over the summer. That is persuasive evidence, were it needed, that the UK internal market is first and foremost a convenient headline—a veneer lacking detail or a legal basis. Will the Secretary of State concede that the only certainty is that this Bill is a power grab retaining—yes, retaining—vast powers over devolved areas to Tory Ministers?

Alok Sharma: No, this is not a power grab. As I have said, this is a power surge to the devolved Administrations. The hon. Gentleman talks about the consultation. I can tell him that the consultation follows the principles for a Government consultation. Yes, it is for a four-week period, but very many people and, in particular, businesses do not routinely close down over the summer. I would say to him that there is an opportunity for him and

others to feed into this consultation. I know this will be important for him, and he will do it in a far shorter period than four weeks.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the nationalist narrative of a power grab has been well and truly burst when not a single nationalist can name a single power that Scotland will lose as a result of this? Indeed, hundreds of powers—more than 100—will flow to Scotland on day one. Therefore, does the Business Secretary agree that this is not a constitutional issue, but an economic issue, and that anyone standing in the way of this legislation is risking jobs, harming businesses and threatening the economy of our country?

Alok Sharma: I could not have put it better myself. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about protecting jobs, protecting businesses and, ultimately, protecting livelihoods. That is why businesses across our country—across the United Kingdom—will welcome these proposals.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

Point of Order

1.1 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise to seek your advice, because it was my understanding that the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee is duly democratically elected by right hon. Members in that Committee, rather than, as in some third-world country, right hon. Members in that Committee being coerced, intimidated or threatened with having the Whip removed by the Prime Minister and his special adviser. I appreciate that the Prime Minister and his special adviser may feel that they are in some way above the law, as was demonstrated when the Prime Minister's special adviser decided to drive halfway up the country in the midst of a pandemic, having brazenly flouted the Government guidance, and then went for another long drive purportedly to test his own eyesight, but no one should be above the law. What powers are vested in your good self, Mr Deputy Speaker, to ensure that hon. Members are not bullied by members of this Government?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As I understand it, the Committee met yesterday and it elected its own Chair by the rules—as he understands and as I understand—that are set down. As far as I am concerned, it has done things in line with the normal procedures. I thank the hon. Member for that point of order.

I will now suspend the House for three minutes.

1.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 4 June).

Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill

Second Reading

1.7 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Government recognise the vital role that public lavatories play in our communities and the economy. Ensuring access to public toilets and hand-washing facilities is critical in maintaining a high level of public hygiene as the lockdown continues to ease across the country. More generally, our ability to work or to enjoy leisure time often depends on the availability of appropriate toilet facilities. This is especially important for essential workers such as taxi or delivery drivers who do not work in fixed locations and who often rely on public facilities, and it will be important for all of us as more and more people begin making use of our public spaces again as lockdown eases.

Given how vital these facilities are, it is understandable that there has been significant public concern about the potential reduction in available lavatories. Members of this House have also raised valid concerns about the provision of toilet facilities in their own constituencies. At Budget 2018, the Government responded to calls from local councils and the public and committed to introducing a business rates relief for public lavatories. This Bill delivers on that commitment, supporting those who provide public lavatories, both publicly and privately run, by reducing one of the most significant running costs for toilets and making it easier for them to be kept open.

Today also marks an opportunity to thank colleagues in this House who have campaigned long and hard for the Bill's introduction, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who is in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), as well as a number of others. Furthermore, I thank the National Association of Local Councils for supporting the Bill. I am pleased to say that, in line with the announcement at Budget 2020 by the Chancellor, the Bill will, subject to Royal Assent, apply retrospectively from April 2020. That will mean that, for eligible properties, the relief will be backdated to the start of this financial year.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing forward the Bill. Does he share with me the relief felt by key workers across my constituency, such as ambulance drivers and the police, who, in rural areas, often work very long shifts and, as a result of the efficiency of putting those workers on the frontline, no longer benefit from physical facilities themselves?

Mr Clarke: That is a well made point. It is precisely because so many people rely on these facilities that it is important that we do this. Although it is not necessarily the kind of legislation that people will talk about in 100 years' time, it is of real, practical value.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): They should.

Mr Clarke: As the hon. Lady says, they should—because this legislation does something of lasting benefit. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), and I also commend the hard work of our emergency services throughout the current crisis.

I am aware that, as we emerge from lockdown restrictions, there has been concern about the reopening of public toilet facilities that may have been closed because of covid-19. Although decisions on reopening public lavatories are rightly for councils, the Government have been clear that we encourage them to open wherever possible. Indeed, I wrote to councils in June to say just this and to refer them to the Government's advice on measures that can be taken to open toilets safely. I am grateful to councils for their efforts in reopening these facilities and hope that today's Bill will come as welcome news.

I extend my general gratitude to the local authorities, town and parish councils up and down the country that work hard to provide public lavatories in their areas and to keep them open. I also pay tribute to the councils, associations and businesses that have launched innovative local initiatives to provide further lavatory access to the public—for example, the community toilet scheme devised by the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames that is now used by local authorities across the country. This enables local businesses to work together with councils to widen lavatory access so that the public can use their facilities without making a purchase. I recognise that that may be more challenging in the current circumstances, but it is an innovative and helpful approach that I commend, and which will become important as more and more businesses reopen.

I highlight the excellent work of the British Toilet Association and its national campaign—imaginatively called "Use Our Loos"—which encourages businesses to join these community schemes and open their toilets to the public. Participating lavatories are shown on a map called the Great British public toilet map, so that visitors to an area always know the location of available facilities.

For some people, medical or other conditions may mean that they are particularly likely to need access to toilet facilities at short notice, so I very much welcome the introduction of the "Can't Wait" card, which is now widely accepted by businesses, even when they do not offer public facilities. I am sure that Members across the House will join me in commending such initiatives, which are already making a huge difference to people's lives.

For people with special access requirements, it is about not just having any facilities available, but having the right facilities. That is why there has been a strong cross-Government drive to provide more Changing Places lavatories to help maintain the dignity of people with special lavatory requirements when they are away from home. The Department for Transport's inclusive transport strategy includes £2 million to improve the provision of Changing Places toilets in motorway service areas, and the Department of Health and Social Care has made £2 million available to install over 100 Changing Places toilets in NHS hospitals throughout England.

In May 2019, we launched a consultation on proposals for the increased provision of Changing Places toilets in new and refurbished buildings. Following that consultation, the Government have committed to changing building

regulations guidance to mandate the provision of Changing Places toilets in new public buildings. At Budget 2020, the Chancellor confirmed that the Government will launch a £30 million Changing Places fund. This will allow the Government to work with the Changing Places Consortium and others to identify the sectors where we most need to accelerate the provision of such facilities in existing buildings.

Although the focus of today's Bill and this debate is public toilets, I recognise that the Bill comes at a time of unprecedented challenges for business, when business rates may be at the forefront of concern for those who occupy non-domestic properties. That is why the Government are taking unprecedented steps to help businesses that are most affected. As a result of the Government's expanded retail, hospitality and leisure relief, eligible businesses are expected to receive almost £10 billion in business rates relief as part of the Government's wider support for the economy during the pandemic. Combined with existing measures, this means that a total of 1.1 million ratepayers—over half of all ratepayers—will pay no business rates at all in 2020-21. Our economic response is one of the most generous globally, and the Government are working urgently to deliver vital schemes such as the expanded retail discount as quickly as possible. I would like to use today's debate to pay tribute to local authorities for working hard to implement these measures right across the country.

This is only a short, four-clause Bill, but one that is important because it will reduce running costs and help keep these vital public facilities open. The Government have been listening to and addressing issues surrounding the provision of public toilets for some time. A measure to enable local authorities to give business rates relief to public toilets through the discretionary relief system was included as part of the Local Government Finance Bill in 2017, and concerns were raised that a discretionary relief not fully funded by central Government would not be widely used. The Government have listened. This Bill will provide 100% mandatory relief. Specifically, the Bill provides 100% mandatory business rates relief to properties in England and Wales that are used wholly or mainly as public lavatories. Local authorities will be responsible for implementing the relief and will be fully compensated by central Government for any loss of local income resulting from the measure. Subject to the safe passage of the Bill, it will have retrospective effect from 1 April just gone, in line with the Chancellor's commitment at Budget.

The Welsh Government have worked with the UK Government to ensure that public lavatories in Wales will also benefit from this measure. That will help the Welsh Government to deliver their commitment to provide access to public toilets for public use under part 8 of the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017.

A business rates relief for public toilets has been called for by councils and health and disability charities for some time and has wide-ranging public support. The Government have responded. This small but important Bill will make a real difference to many people's lives, including essential workers, as lockdown eases. The savings will assist councils. Removing the additional costs of business rates could make the difference in helping to keep these vital facilities open, while supporting high standards of public hygiene as we emerge from the virus. I hope that Members across the House will agree that this is a positive step and support the Bill's passage. I commend it to the House.

1.17 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I do not know where to start—after so many weeks away from this place, it is extraordinary to come back to this Bill, which is incredibly important.

On the east coast of India, in a town called Pondicherry, on the seafront, beside a broad walkway, underneath coconut trees and opposite a massive statue of Gandhi, there is a large public sign. It has a map of the town on it, and all public lavatories are clearly marked. There are pictures and diagrams clearly illustrating activities that may be carried out in them, and importantly, there are also pictures and diagrams illustrating equally clearly where those activities should not be carried out. There is information about the public health consequences of carrying out these exercises other than in lavatories. It requires no app and no internet. The sign is replicated in other public meeting spots around the town, and I love it—I love it so much that I have a picture of it on my phone. I have followed the toilet trail around the town, and I can vouch for every one.

On a serious note, the message from the sign is clear, and it is one that we need to reflect on as we consider this Bill. Across the globe, public health requires that there are public toilets and that people can use them with confidence, know where they are and trust that they will be available, safe and clean for use. I salute that wonderful town and all the others across the world that understand the need to promote public lavatories and, importantly, to break down taboos about talking about them, because we definitely need to do that.

It is absurd to think that people will leave their homes for leisure, pleasure or the many jobs that take us out and about and suspend their need for a lavatory. Urination, defecation, menstruation and changing babies' nappies are all natural bodily functions, even if we do not enjoy talking about them, and they all require toilets. The absence of toilets does not remove those bodily functions. Instead, it removes people's freedom to enjoy public space. It affects their health or, unfortunately, prompts the unsavoury use of public space as a lavatory. The Bill recognises that, in part, and we will be supporting it. Since it helps to address some of the problems of financing the upkeep of a public lavatory, we will not stand in its way.

I want to place on record my appreciation of the House of Commons Library research staff, who turned around a briefing for my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) and me in quick time to help us to prepare for this debate, and of the Royal Society for Public Health and the British Toilet Association. Their contributions inform our scrutiny and will help us to make suggestions for improvements, which I hope Ministers will consider in the autumn. I also thank the Clerks in advance for their help.

We will support the Bill, but we have concerns. First, there is the lack of help with lavatories in other public buildings, such as a library or a community hall. Secondly, the Bill does not redress the overall damage done by the past 10 years of cuts to local authority funding, which have resulted in councils' unwillingly taking difficult

[Thangam Debbonaire]

decisions to remove loos or restrict their use. I am concerned that the funding that the Bill provides, though welcome, will not be sufficient to remedy the gaps, and I want to ensure that the Government are aware of the strain that local authorities are under at the moment in any case.

Thirdly, there is no recognition of the consequent inequality of access to public space, particularly for elderly, sick or disabled people, parents of young children, and women and girls. Nor does the Bill recognise the consequences for all of us when some people end up using the public space. Fourthly—I know the Bill was originally planned before covid, as the Minister also mentioned, but here we are—there is nothing I can see that would help struggling local councils to restore and to provide additional cleaning and staffing during this crisis, at a time when we all want to encourage people to feel confident about going out and about. The Minister mentioned the covid importance, but I have not yet seen anything that deals with those increased costs, and I hope we can return to that at a later date.

I would like each hon. Member here to imagine the loo map of their own constituency. They have probably all checked, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I hope you have too. It is a fascinating subject. Has the map been made public? Is it in plain view? Can it be found in a place that people naturally head to for information? Can someone who does not have a smartphone easily find out where the loo is while they are out and about? Will it be close, open, safe and—ideally—free?

To anyone listening to our debate who says they never use public loos—I do, by the way—I encourage them to consider what it is like to have a bladder infection, to be in that early stage of pregnancy where the baby is causing urgent needs, to be elderly and not able to sprint to a lav, or not to have the confidence to go into a café and say, "I have a medical condition and I need to use your loo."

Many councils, towns and cities, including Bristol, do have the schemes that the Minister has mentioned to use loos in private property, but many people do not know about those schemes. That includes the Can't Wait card; the Minister quite rightly commended businesses for that, but I fear that many people still do not know about it or do not have the confidence to use it, and of course at the moment many businesses are shut.

If there are not sufficient facilities, we all suffer. There are the social and economic consequences, and there are consequences for us all, with the smells, health and hygiene problems, if people choose to or feel forced to urinate or defecate in public. The Royal Society for Public Health recently published a fantastic report called "Taking the P***"—one can fill in the asterisks for oneself, Mr Deputy Speaker. The subtitle, and the subject, is "The decline of the great British toilet". It is a most educational report, and I urge everyone who has a problem discussing the subject of loos to take a read and consider what life would be like if we did not have public toilets, and what it is already like when there are not enough.

More than half of the public apparently restrict their intake of fluids before and during a trip out, at the risk of dehydration and other health consequences. One in five operate on a toilet leash, not allowing themselves to go further than they can nip back home from to use the loo; the number rises to more than two in five for those who have medical conditions. That has economic as well as social consequences.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will be greatly relieved that there is a general consensus on this public lavatories Bill. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while there should be adequate provision in council budgets and they should be supported in the provision of public lavatories, those lavatories must also be accessible, and it is not good enough for us to allocate space for public toilets if they are not accessible, especially to those with special needs?

Thangam Debbonaire: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; it is as if he has read my speech, which says that the lack of public toilets disproportionately affects people with ill health or disability, the elderly, and also women—I mentioned menstruation—outdoor workers and homeless people.

Health conditions that require frequent trips and often privacy that a cubicle alone can provide include bowel cancer; stroke; multiple sclerosis; use of a stoma; urinary incontinence, which can happen for all sorts of reasons, including family history, and at all ages; inflammatory bowel disease such as Crohn's or ulcerative colitis; and conditions that damage the nerves that control the bowels or bottom, which can include stroke, spina bifida, recent surgery and childbirth. One in 637 people has Crohn's; one in 417 has ulcerative colitis; one in 500 people lives with a stoma; and one in 526 has multiple sclerosis. Every single right hon. and hon. Member in this House will have constituents who are thus affected.

Women need the loo more often when pregnant, menstruating or out with small children, or after childbirth. Differences in clothing and anatomy mean that it takes longer for women, which results in queues and waits, which in turn causes problems for women's health. People's whose job keeps them out and about have real problems if they cannot find a loo. I am sure that the Minister is aware of this, but I wish to add to his list of concerns rough sleepers and other homeless people: even if they have accommodation in a night shelter, they still need somewhere to go by day. We cannot expect them simply to stop functioning, and they may struggle to use options such as shopping centres or cafés. That is a lot of people I have listed.

The "Taking the P***" report rightly points out that we have a taboo about talking about natural bodily functions and, as a result, public loos and their role in assisting with hygiene, hydration, exercise and participation in public life are not recognised sufficiently as the public health resource that they truly are—I think I have become somewhat passionate about the subject of public loos. The British Toilet Association raised with me problems of public fouling, which has consequences for health, hygiene and enjoyment of public space. There is also a risk of covid transmission through human faeces. Fouling in parks and on beaches has particular risks for children, and that has been compounded during the crisis by the closure of many public loos.

The British Toilet Association also raised the fact that access to a public toilet is a human right under the UN sustainable development goals, and in particular that women and girls need somewhere private to change

sanitary products. Closing public loos does not stop people needing them; it just stops some people going about their daily lives and causes others to do things that have health consequences for us all.

The Bill helps only the finances of buildings that are solely or mainly loos—so far so good—but it will do nothing to reverse the decline in numbers and will not help with the running costs of loos in other buildings. The Royal Society for Public Health estimates that the running costs of public toilets vary between £15,000 and £60,000 per year, depending on size and staffing. In 2018, the BBC's "Reality Check" used freedom of information requests to obtain information from most councils, and concluded that at least 673 public toilets had closed between 2010 and 2018. By my calculations—the Minister may have a better calculator than me—that means that it will cost between £10 million, give or take, and £40 million, give or take, to replace those lost lavs. Given the consequences of those reductions in numbers for public health and people's lives, will the Government at least check my workings and use their good offices to come to a more accurate figure that we can at least debate when we come to the next stages of the Bill?

As I said, we will not oppose the Bill, but we will seek to amend it at later stages. As a favour to the Minister, I shall outline the ways in which we might do that. Will the Government assess the number of public lavatories in buildings that would not qualify for the provisions in the Bill, and the opportunity cost of not giving them that same support, as well as the actual financial cost? We can then debate on a more informed basis whether we need to increase the Bill's reach to include those lavatories. Will the Government assess the cost of replacing them all? Will they assess the need for increased capacity to meet the specific needs of parents with young children, people with relevant illnesses or disabilities, women and girls, and older people? That would mean an equality impact assessment. Will they use the Bill to create provisions for emergency temporary additional financial support for local councils to help with the costs of operating, cleaning and staffing public toilets during the continuing covid crisis?

I hope that by now the House will have heard my enthusiasm for reforming the provision of public loos, my urging of the Government to push the Bill further, and my utter lack of toilet puns, which frankly I need to be commended for—there may have been accidental ones, but I promise that I did not intend them—but I cannot close my speech without remarking that although this is a chronic and serious problem, it does not carry the urgency of other issues within the purview of the Department for which it could, and arguably should, have used this parliamentary time before the recess. Those issues include the renters' rights Bill promised in the Queen's Speech and the building safety Bill—legislation that covers urgent needs that are going to become apparent over the summer. That is particularly true of the renters' rights Bill, what with the temporary ban on evictions set to end in August.

We would have helped the Government to get emergency temporary legislation across the line in time for the temporary evictions ban to make sure there was provision for those who felt the need to be protected by the Secretary of State's good words back in March, when he said that nobody should be made homeless because of coronavirus, of which there is a real risk. That time has now gone. I am also concerned about the buildings safety Bill. It is obviously around—whispers have come to my ears—but we have not yet seen it, and three years on from Grenfell, people have spent the lockdown living in unsafe buildings and often paying for the cost of the waking watch.

All in all, the Bill is needed, although a curious priority compared with other urgent needs. Given that it is before us, however, we are disappointed that the Government have failed to seize the opportunity to restore public loos, help millions of people to enjoy daily life and redress the damage done over the last 10 years, but we will return to all of this in September, when the Bill returns for its remaining Commons stages.

1.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am sure that the Bill, with its title, "Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill", is not, for most people, the most exciting or inspiring Bill that will come before the House, but for me it marks the culmination of an eight-year personal mission. In 2012, I was the cabinet member for Cornwall Council with responsibility for public lavatories. At that point, this newly formed unitary council was running—if I remember correctly—272 sets of public lavatories across the whole of Cornwall, and had made the sensible decision that this was not something that a unitary authority covering the whole of Cornwall should have responsibility for and devolved it, wherever possible, to town and parish councils.

I spent the summer of 2012 touring the public lavatories of Cornwall, from Bude to St Keverne, from Torpoint to Penzance, and many places in between, and consulting the local parish councils about whether they would take on their running. In many cases, I found they were keen to do so, and rightly, because these facilities can be run much more effectively and efficiently locally, where they can be managed to meet the particular needs of the local community, rather than centrally.

One of the biggest barriers, however, to small parish councils taking on these facilities was the cost of the business rates. I was shocked that public lavatories were even liable for business rates. It seemed nonsensical. I wrote to the then Secretary of State, who is now Lord Pickles, and suggested that public lavatories be exempted from non-domestic rates. He wrote back saying he thought it was a very good idea and he would look into it. Three years later, I was elected to this place.

Coincidentally—I checked my diary—it was five years ago this very day that the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, came to Cornwall. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and I had dinner with him that evening and put to him the case that public toilets should be exempted from business rates. He was equally shocked that they were even liable for business rates, and he agreed with us and said that the Government would do something about it. Well, it has taken five years to get from the then Prime Minister agreeing to do this to the Bill at last coming before the House. For me, then, this is a very important day and, as I said, the culmination of an eight-year mission.

I want to place on the record my thanks to those who have helped get us to this point: to the Minister today, who has at last brought the Bill before us, after many years of frustration for me, to previous local government Ministers, including my hon. Friend the Member for

[Steve Double]

Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and the current Chancellor when he was a local government Minister and worked with me to get this through, and to the previous Chancellor, Philip Hammond, who first committed the Government to doing this in the 2018 Budget. It has been a team effort. I should also pay tribute to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall, who has worked with me since those days in 2012 to get to this point.

Public toilets are essential, especially in rural and coastal areas, where people can find themselves many miles from other facilities. They are essential in supporting our tourist industry. As has rightly been pointed out by the Minister and the shadow Minister, they are very important for the elderly and for people with health conditions that mean they need the lavatory more often, and, as has also been pointed out, to many workers, delivery drivers and some of our other key workers who need to use the toilet during the day. It is important that everything possible is done to maintain the facility that public lavatories provide, particularly in rural areas.

Let me place on the record my thanks to the many town and parish councils across Cornwall that I worked with back then, and particularly now in the constituency I represent. They have not only taken on the running of public lavatories, but over the past few weeks they have worked incredibly hard to reopen them, despite the challenges they face. At the risk of leaving some out, I will name a few. Newquay Town Council has worked particularly hard, as have St Austell Town Council, Mevagissey Parish Council, Gorran Haven Parish Council, and many others, I am sure, which, have gone out of their way to ensure that public lavatories stay open during this pandemic.

I believe the total cost of these measures to the Treasury is around £8 million, which in the current scheme of things, and given all the costs we are facing, does not seem a huge amount of money. To small parish councils, however, whose total precept may be only £20,000, that can represent a significant sum in reducing the costs that they incur in running public toilets. This Bill is important in the overall scheme of things to many parish councils.

Many parish councils currently face huge pressures. Many have lost income, perhaps because they run car parks, and they face additional costs. Many have gone out of their way to provide incredible support to communities, and to ensure that elderly and vulnerable people are looked after during the pandemic. The fact that this measure will be backdated to April will be of significant help to many parish councils in reducing costs this year, and helping them with the pressures they face. What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that those parish councils that might already have started to pay business rates on these facilities get a rebate in a timely manner? If they have paid out and are due a rebate, it is important that that happens as quickly as possible.

Although the Government have made funding available to primary authorities—in our case Cornwall County Council—to support small town and parish councils, the council has not as yet passed on that support. It has refused to do that, which is concerning because many of our parish councils are struggling. Even though the Government have made funding available to Cornwall County Council, it has declined or refused to pass that funding on. What more can the Government do to ensure that where funding has been made available through primary councils to support our town and parish councils, the money gets to where it should go? Parish councils are doing an incredible job in supporting their communities, and where the Government have made funding available, it is important that that money gets to them.

I welcome the Minister's comments about Changing Places toilets and the work that the Government are doing—another issue that I have pushed for a number of years. It is increasingly important in our communities for Changing Places toilets to be widely available, and I applaud the Government for the steps they are taking to ensure that that happens. I welcome the Bill. In the overall scheme of everything that we as a country have to face it may not seem that big a deal, but for someone like me who has been waiting a long time for such a Bill to come before the House, it is incredibly welcome. The Government are taking an important and sensible step, and I am pleased to give them my support.

1.39 pm

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who made an excellent speech and who has done so much to make this change happen. It was also a pleasure to listen to the enthusiastic speech of the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire); I really enjoyed listening to it. She made some brilliant points, particularly on maps and public information about where toilet facilities are, which is often overlooked.

This is an incredibly welcome Bill that I have long campaigned for. As has been said by other hon. Members, it is not the most exciting or glamorous piece of legislation, but it will make a real, tangible difference to people's lives. When I first started talking about the need to improve public toilet facilities in Buxton a couple of years ago, it was a source of amusement to many people locally. A particularly charming Labour activist gave me the new nickname Mr Toilet Flusher—not the most amusing of the nicknames that they have given me over the years. Although that might have seemed quite funny to the High Peak Labour party, public toilet facilities are no laughing matter to many people with hidden disabilities and medical conditions, pregnant women, the elderly and those suffering from conditions such as prostate cancer, so the Bill is an important step forward.

Even before the global pandemic, high streets were struggling badly. We need to do more to make it easier and more enjoyable for people to come and shop in our town centres and support our fantastic local businesses, which involves making it easier to park and get in by public transport or by cycling. It is also important to maintain the things that make our high streets unique and such enjoyable places to come to. At the same time, that means making sure that there are proper public toilet facilities.

The Bill is a small step, but giving 100% business rate relief to public toilets will make a huge difference, as has already been said, particularly to local councils, and will make it that bit easier to provide public toilet facilities. It is a positive move that will be a boost for high streets across High Peak in places such as Buxton, New Mills, Whaley Bridge, Glossop and Chapel-en-le-Frith.

I very much welcome the Bill, but it should not be the end of the conversation. We need to talk an awful lot more about the issue, we need to end the taboos around public toilet facilities, and we need to do more to help our high streets, particularly when it comes to supporting future high street fund bids—an excellent one has been submitted for Buxton.

1.41 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Robert Largan) on a subject close to my heart. As an MP who has worked closely with local towns and parishes since becoming elected, as a former Cornwall councillor and as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on local democracy, I am pleased that the whole House welcomes the Bill today, and I thank Ministers for introducing it.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for championing the cause in Cornwall and bringing the issue to the House. The Bill was thwarted last year by the tumultuous parliamentary timetable and again earlier this year by covid, but I am pleased to see it here today. It shows the Government's commitment to the issue.

If ever there was a time to provide much-needed assistance to our towns, local councils and parish councils in Cornwall and across the country, it is now. Those hard-working, lower-tier councils have been the backbone of our communities during the pandemic, and were the frontline of the volunteer response. I cannot thank them enough.

Because of the pandemic, those lower-tier councils are now facing real financial issues. In Cornwall, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay mentioned, they have not received any direct funding from the Government. If the Minister had further discussions with me on that, I would very much welcome it. I do not believe that means dishing out yet more money, but it might mean rethinking how it is distributed in Cornwall.

Public toilets are a public service, not a business. As has already been mentioned, Cornwall Council transferred the ownership and management of more than 200 public toilets throughout Cornwall to towns and villages across the county, including the beautiful waterside village of—wait for it—Flushing in my constituency.

Public toilets are vital to our coastal communities in Cornwall. It is one thing to have a small child who is desperate for the loo, but what does a distressed elderly lady who cannot find the right facilities open do? It does not seem right that our lower-tier councils are burdened with significant business rate fees for a public service that they provide to the benefit of the local community and tourists alike. They are often cleaned by volunteers just to keep them open and usable.

In my constituency, the two town councils between them spend just shy of £30,000 a year on business rates to run the public toilets in Truro and Falmouth. For a local council, that is a substantial amount of money. Often at the back end of devolution deals, we should do everything we can to support local communities, and I am pleased that the Bill does that.

It is this Government who introduced the Bill, and this compassionate Conservative party that wants to empower local communities, let them have the money to improve their local areas and allow precept payers to see the improvements on the ground in their towns and parishes. That can only be good news. To that end, I welcome this long overdue Bill, and I am sure that town and parish councils in my constituency will also welcome it.

The Bill represents good progress, and could open up a wider debate about business rates on other community facilities in our high streets. I have libraries particularly in mind. I would welcome an opportunity to talk to the Minister about how that might work. Often, publicly run facilities are the only ones on the high street that do not run as a business but do not benefit from any business rate relief. That should be looked at and I hope we can do that in future.

I welcome the Bill and the debate, and I look forward to the money being put back in the pockets of hard-working local councils so that we can keep the loos open for locals and tourists throughout Cornwall.

1.45 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory). I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on their good work in bringing about the Bill.

I am pleased to speak in the debate on a Bill that sees the Government recognising the vital role that public lavatories play in our communities. Town centres, visitor attractions and local hubs rely on good access to those facilities. My constituency relies heavily on tourism and attracts people from wide and far. Whether they come to visit the beautiful spa town of Ilkley or the home of the Brontë sisters in Haworth, or to take a ride on our famous heritage railway line, the Keighley and Worth Valley railway, access to public toilets is vital. It is a must.

People's ability to work, shop and enjoy their leisure time depends on appropriate toilet facilities being available. Of course, such access is important to those with particular health needs, as well as individuals who work in emergency services, refuse collectors and taxi and delivery drivers, who all work from no fixed location. Public toilets are a necessity, and more widely, adequate lavatory provision helps with public health and improves the local environment, particularly through street cleanliness and disease control.

Given how vital those facilities are, it is understandable that there has been public concern for many years, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay said, that many of them have unfortunately closed. Closures have happened across my constituency, and I am sure that applies to other Members' constituencies too. It is understandable when the facilities are no longer suitable or required, but reduction in overall coverage is undoubtedly an inconvenience to the public.

The Bill is therefore welcome, and I am pleased that this Conservative Government are taking action to reduce the overhead costs of public toilets, which will make it easier to keep them open and help guarantee their future for much longer. A review of the whole business rate structure is long overdue, but for these vital facilities, I am glad that the Bill is working its way through the House. It is a small but vital measure.

[Robbie Moore]

The Bill is a significant step, which introduces 100% relief for our public lavatories—important financial assistance from central Government to those that provide the facilities, such as Bradford Council or the many parish councils across my constituency. I want our public toilets in Keighley and Ilkley to remain open, and I would love to see more open across my patch so that visitors, residents and those working in my constituency from no fixed location can still have access to those facilities. The Bill provides that support, and helps to ensure that much-needed facilities can remain in place.

1.49 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). The pandemic has thrust the importance of public toilets forward in so many unexpected ways. I had not anticipated spending so much of my first few months as an MP discussing toilets with my local councils, colleagues and constituents alike. We are working to level up the country and, indeed, toilets are a great leveller. Their necessity is hopefully something on which all in the House can agree.

In tourist-dependent hotspots, such as my beautiful North Devon constituency, people can be miles from any facilities, and public toilets are invaluable. How can someone enjoy a day on the beach or a hike across the moors without being able to visit a toilet at least once? The alternative on occasions has created its own public health issues in tourist destinations as we have emerged from lockdown.

Pre-pandemic, the cost of running public toilets in North Devon alone was approaching half a million pounds. With pubs, restaurants and shops closed and their facilities unavailable, we have had to rely upon public lavatories. Indeed, it is an immense inconvenience when one cannot find a public convenience.

Getting public toilets reopened rapidly was a big challenge for small councils and, indeed, a great expense. It is currently costing an additional £1,500 a week in North Devon for the extra cleaning of toilets. That is a 50% increase. While that extra cost is currently being covered by the covid-19 funding, the manner in which that funding is withdrawn is important if this vital public service is to be retained, and cleaned in the manner now considered important to help stem the spread of the coronavirus.

The absurdity of local councils paying business rates for public facilities from which they realistically gain no revenue has been raised by councillors across North Devon and by colleagues here, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for many years. The Bill is warmly welcomed by councils in North Devon, where small parish, town and district councils have been paying business rates totalling almost £40,000. That may not sound much, but it is a lot of pennies to pay just to spend a penny. The Bill will save my parish and town councils approaching £15,000, which in turn becomes lost revenue for my district council, which itself on balance will ultimately save by not paying rates on the toilets it is responsible for. That highlights how over-complex and multi-layered local government is back home in Devon.

Our councils have been passing around their toilet responsibilities for years, trying to find the most efficient way to maintain public toilets or, on occasion, washing their hands of them and closing them down. Indeed, our district council only passed responsibility for toilets to our parish and town councils because it could not afford to pay the business rates itself. The reassurances in the Bill that councils will not be out of pocket will hopefully mean that these vital public facilities will remain open and free to use. I take this opportunity to thank my local councils in North Devon for the work they have done to safely reopen our public conveniences, and thank the Department for ensuring that we do not lose our public loos.

1.52 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I declare an interest as the co-chair, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), of the all-party parliamentary group on local democracy, which has been behind a lot of the campaigning on this matter.

Just to reassure those on the Government Front Bench, who seem fearful that this might not be a piece of legislation that is talked about in 100 years' time, when I questioned the Leader of the House about it last week and asked when the decision was coming forward, he mentioned that the taxation of toilets had been introduced by the Emperor Vespasian 2,000 years ago, so I think those on the Front Bench today are making a mark in history.

I particularly pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who brought this matter to the public's attention many years ago and have been campaigning on it ever since. I am particularly delighted, as I think the Bill will be welcome news to Justin and the team at the National Association of Local Councils, who have been campaigning on this issue for a long time. I especially welcome the Government's announcement that the relief will be backdated to April this year.

In a recent conversation with town and parish councils, including St Austell Town Council, they mentioned the extra costs they have had during the covid crisis, providing support for their communities, of about £50 million. So the fact that £8 million a year will be going to help those councils and will be backdated is really helpful.

Members from all parts of the House have already made the points that I would like to make about how the Bill helps people with hidden disabilities, and particularly helps women and girls and those with children: if someone is trying to find somewhere to change them or something like that, toilets are useful facilities to have at hand.

It is a real benefit to our local authorities. Wolsingham, in my constituency, spends between 1% and 2% of its annual budget just on rates for public loos. I know how important the issue is for that local authority and for those in other tourist areas, and I know just how vital it is for the Cornish MPs who have been campaigning on it as well. Let me flag up the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore): the financial impact of the Bill will really benefit local authorities. This issue has been a burden on them for far too long, and it is right that we are now making that change.

Let me also flag up the importance of regional news. My local regional broadcaster in the north-east, Richard Moss, who is from the political team there, came out and did an interview with me on this very subject when I became co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth. I give another shout out to that team, who are under threat at the moment from the BBC centrally. Campaigning local MPs can make a difference, and those regional news channels are very important in order for us to highlight the campaigns that we are pushing.

I thank Front Benchers very much for introducing the Bill. I know that it is just before the summer, but it is a great thing to get over the line now. I really hope that by reducing the cost of public toilets we will be able to see more of them open across the country in the years ahead.

1.56 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) for her in-depth research and the passion with which she spoke about public loos. I am very pleased that the Minister recognises the vital role that public lavatories play in our communities, our town centres, our parks and our community centres. People's ability to work, shop or enjoy their leisure time depends on appropriate toilet facilities. That can be especially important for those with health needs. More widely, adequate provision contributes to public health and improves the local environment, particularly in terms of street cleanliness and disease control.

Given how vital such facilities are, it is understandable, as the Minister accepts, that there is real public concern about the reduction in available public lavatories. More than 50% have closed in the past decade, and virtually every council has had to close some of its public loos. Of course, a reduction in the overall coverage of public conveniences is an inconvenience to the public, and to people with special access requirements. It is not just about having any facilities available; it is about having the right facilities.

The lack of provision of public toilets is a major but largely ignored issue that significantly restricts lives. It therefore deserves even greater exposure than the narrow focus of the Bill. The Government's proposal in the Bill to provide 100% business rate relief for stand-alone public loos is most welcome, but is the Minister aware that business rates currently payable on such premises are a small element compared with the running costs of staffing, security and cleaning?

As I said earlier, some councils now run no public loos at all. In those parts the closure of all public loos means just that: there may be nowhere to go, no matter how inconvenient. The Bill does nothing to address the lack of those facilities. It gives welcome relief to local authorities, but if the Government are serious about extending and improving access to public toilets, including, as one Government Member highlighted, the need for ambulance drivers and police in rural areas, we need to look at extending it to other publicly funded buildings. My concern is whether giving this mandatory relief will achieve the desired effect, and whether councils can start opening public toilets and at least trying to get back to the levels of 2010.

Like the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), I would like to see more public toilets that are more accessible. This measure is a small step in the right direction, and I would like to see it extended. For example, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council has to pay £170,000 in business rates for its libraries and museums. That money could be spent on making our toilets more accessible. If the Government can apply rate relief to pubs, private hospitals and private schools, why can they not do it for libraries, museums and community centres?

I am happy to support the Bill, but it does not go far enough and the House needs to further explore Bill can improved. I look forward to working with the Minister to make these improvements, for the benefit of the public.

2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): May I start by thanking the Opposition Front-Bench team for the constructive tone with which they approached this important debate?

This is a vital Bill, and we have heard excellent contributions from Members from across the House about the importance of the issue. I completely agree with those who said that we should be talking about it more and should not be afraid of talking about the importance of public toilets to people in our community. The Bill recognises that importance, and when the Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), opened the debate he made the point that when we emerge from the lockdown it is going to be more crucial than ever that people have access to appropriate toilet and hand—washing facilities. Members from across the House will know from discussions with their own constituents that the provision of appropriate facilities is vital, and can make a huge difference to people's ability to leave their homes to go out to see friends and family and to do shopping. That makes a huge difference to people's quality of life and their mental health, which is a huge part of why this Bill is so important. We have been hugely grateful for the contributions today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for his tireless work in championing this change. He talked powerfully about the fact that he has been campaigning for it for eight years since he was made the cabinet member at Cornwall Council, and that he has taken this to Secretaries of State and Prime Ministers to secure agreement. It has taken his drive, and that of other hon. Members, to push this forward. I also thank him for the points he made about the importance of public toilets to rural and coastal communities, and the tourism industry—he was right to highlight that. Let me also take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to the town and parish councils in Cornwall that he mentioned, because of course we recognise the point he made about the significant costs placed on such councils.

My hon. Friend also made an interesting and important point about what more we can do to make sure that money is reaching the right places in town and parish councils. That is exactly why my hon. Friend the Minister of State has made it clear in his communications that money should be being passed down to those councils to manage these important facilities.

[Luke Hall]

We are happy to keep speaking to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay as this Bill progresses to see what more can be done to make sure that money is getting to the right places. We have stressed the importance of that time and again, but he was right to raise it in the House again today.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), a west of England neighbour of mine, rightly gave a passionate speech about this issue. I have lived in Bristol, and I know we are both aware of the issues associated with the occasional lack of availability, so she is right to address them in the way she has. She made important points about the additional cleaning and covid pressures that can come with running these sorts of public facilities. She asked a number of questions which I hope to address throughout my remarks. She asked whether there was something we could do during the passage of this Bill to check her calculations and work with her to make sure we are bringing forward appropriate information to inform the debate. My colleagues will be happy to work with her to make that happen, and to look at that throughout the Bill's passage.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Robert Largan) rightly and powerfully talked about the need for toilets and public facilities to be available for all. A number of Members talked about the importance of making sure that toilets are available for all, including those with special access requirements. It is important to note that the Bill will help with that. The 100% relief applies equally to all facilities, including accessible facilities. But of course we want to go further to support increased provision, in particular Changing Places toilets that are fully accessible to those with the most significant needs who may need assistance to use the toilet. Following our consultation last year, we have committed to change building regulations guidance to mandate the provision of Changing Places toilets in new public buildings. We expect that this provision will come into effect in early 2021.

Additionally, at Budget this year, we confirmed that we would be launching a £30 million Changing Places fund, and would be working closely with the Changing Places Consortium, stakeholders and Members of this House to help to accelerate the provision of accessible facilities in existing buildings. My ministerial colleague mentioned the important £2 million investment from the Department for Transport in its inclusive transport strategy and the £2 million made available by the Department of Health and Social Care in order to install over 100 Changing Places toilets in NHS hospitals throughout England. These measures will make a real difference in maintaining the dignity of people with special access requirements when they are away from home.

We also heard points about the safe reopening of toilets as we come out of lockdown. That is of the utmost importance as we ensure that access to public toilets can happen in a safe way. It is for councils to decide to reopen their facilities as we come out of lockdown, but we have been strongly encouraging them to open public lavatories wherever possible, as has been noted a number of times in the debate. We wrote to local authorities to encourage them to do that. We thank them for their work in making sure that public lavatories can now open in a safe and timely way. We are sincerely grateful for all their work to help to make that happen.

The Opposition asked what extra support is going to be available for public lavatories during covid. I would put on record the extra £3.7 billion that we have supported councils with over the past few months as they deal with a very difficult set of circumstances—reduced income and increasing costs—throughout the course of this pandemic. That was on top of a good local government finance settlement this year, with a 4.4% real-terms rise in core spending power—another £2.9 billion.

The Opposition also highlighted a concern about toilets in other public buildings. They are right to raise that issue. We want to be clear that the relief will apply to properties that are wholly or mainly used as public toilets. In general, it will not apply to toilets within shopping centres, for instance, as was highlighted, or public libraries. We have wanted to target the relief to best support the provision of public lavatories. In particular, we want to support facilities that exist where there are unlikely to be other publicly available toilets or where removing the additional costs of business rates could make a real difference to their ability to stay open. Of course, we are happy to work with the Opposition throughout the course of the Bill's passage.

This Bill will benefit the public and reduce costs for councils and others that are seeking to ensure facilities can stay open. It has wide-ranging support in this House, and we look forward to working with colleagues as it progresses. I want to put on record my thanks to the businesses, charities and local authorities who have been so important in the management of these facilities.

The Bill will support the provision of facilities for those individuals for whom access to toilets is particularly important, whether for health reasons or because of the nature of their work. It complements our wider efforts around the provision of more Changing Places toilets. We are very grateful for all the thoughtful contributions from Members across the House as we look to deliver this vital change for our local authorities. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PUBLIC LAVATORIES) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(David T. C. Davies.)*

Question agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I suspend the House for two minutes.

2.9 pm

Sitting suspended.

Restoration and Renewal

2.11 pm

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

That this House has considered Restoration and Renewal.

The Palace of Westminster is a magnificent building, which must be saved for future generations. Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin's creation is a triumph of neo-Gothic architecture, recognised the world over. Within these walls, our history, architecture and politics are entwined together. It is a place that inspires us as politicians, just as it inspires the many schoolchildren who visit Westminster. On the Palace walls, the history of their nation is writ large: from the exploits of King Alfred to the stonework damaged by Nazi bombs, left unrepaired as a reminder that this House stood firm against tyranny; from the great Tudor portraits in the Prince's Gallery to representations of both sides of the civil war, and to the great statesmen—Walpole, Pitt, Burke—who graced St Stephen's with their rhetoric.

Then we have Westminster Hall—a space that has been at the heart of our national life for nearly a millennium. Built by William Rufus, its hammer-beam roof completed by Richard II, it was the one part of the building that the firemen fought to save as the rest of the Palace succumbed to the flames in 1834. There were the trials of Thomas More, Thomas Wentworth, Charles I—so many great events took place in Westminster Hall. It was the centre of justice and the seat of wisdom for centuries. I want the children and grandchildren of the 1 million pupils who have visited us in recent years to be able to come here and learn about their nation's history. I want them to be as inspired as I was when I first visited here as a child and won a prize—a biro—for knowing more parliamentary facts than any of my fellow pupils at that time.

The prize we are now seeking is the Palace of Westminster itself. This is a building that must remain part of our national heritage for centuries to come, but it is also a building which, if we fail to act, risks being lost to history forever. Over the years, the Palace has become an increasingly complex and flawed proposition for those tasked with its preservation. Like the barnacled encrustations on the hull of a noble ship, layer upon layer of incremental changes have been built up over the years, just as the challenges of managing an ageing building have built up, too.

Since 2017, over 40,000 problems have been reported and the Palace is now deteriorating faster than it can be repaired. Anyone who ventures into the basement will see for themselves why. Steam pipes run alongside electric cables. Hundreds of miles of cabling are now in need of replacement. A sewage ejector, installed in 1888, is still in use today. In short, there is a meandering multiplicity of multifarious materials all in need of urgent attention and all increasing the vulnerability of the building. Those who want to know what 150 years of patch and mend looks like are advised to descend into the depths of the Palace and see for themselves.

When I returned to the basement yesterday, I was pleased to find a newly installed system, which will fill the space with a fine mist in the event of a fire. That is among the remedial but temporary measures put in place in recent years to address the possibility that the building might be imperilled by a serious blaze. I am advised that steps such as extra emergency lighting, the

[Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg]

installation of new alarms, day and night fire patrols and so on ensure that life will be safe. What cannot be guaranteed is that our historic palace can be saved from destruction in the event of a serious fire. We have known for a long time that, if a blaze were to take hold, the lack of compartmentation would endanger the entire building, so it is a matter of some frustration that comprehensive fire safety alterations have not begun because we have been waiting for the main R&R programme.

Fortunately, we are now moving towards the historic moment when this House is asked to approve a motion allowing the works to commence in the mid-2020s as planned. Such a decision, involving billions of pounds of public funds, taxpayers' money, which would ideally be spent elsewhere, cannot be taken on a whim, so three requirements must be met if the restoration and renewal programme is to command the confidence of the House and of taxpayers. First, the proposal must be robust and evidence-based; secondly, it must give value for money and we must cut out unnecessary spending; and thirdly, the plans need to be up to date.

No one here today will forget for a moment that we are discussing this matter in the midst of a global pandemic, which is placing great strain on the nation's purse strings. Today's debate is a chance to set out our expectations in this context, and this should be a limited project to replace failing mechanical and engineering equipment, not an opportunity to create a second Versailles.

The debate also gives us an opportunity to note how far we have come since Deloitte produced its independent options appraisal in 2015. The Joint Committee's report of September 2016 was followed by the motion of January 2018, which led in turn to the passage of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019. This legislation addressed the first of our three requirements—that the proposals must be robust and evidence-based—by adopting the governance structures used to deliver major infrastructure projects such as the 2012 Olympic games. The Sponsor Body will act as the client on behalf of Parliament and oversee the delivery of the works, which will be entrusted to a Delivery Authority equipped with the expertise needed to keep costs down and to manage a project of this complexity.

The Delivery Authority is already showing the value of its professionalism by getting on with the basics, undertaking detailed investigations of the palace's condition. Once these surveys are completed, it will then move on to preparing detailed proposals in the form of an outline business case. There can be no blank cheque for this work, which is why it is so important that the outline business case will be fully costed. This will be the first time that we have had a proposition that we can assess in value-for-money terms, which is the second essential requirement before Members are asked to make their decision. Rather than hurrying along in an over-hasty fashion—*[Laughter.]* I am glad that I am creating such hilarity on such a serious subject. It is crucial that we take the time and accept the expense required to get this right—the right price to pay for the assurances we need that the project will be delivered on time and on budget.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I appreciate what my right hon. Friend is saying about the cost. Obviously, this marvellous palace is in the heart of my constituency, so it is a very precious place for me. None the less, at a time when we are spending billions of pounds in the economy following the covid-19 crisis and beyond, does he agree that we must be very careful about how much we spend on this project, because the public will expect us to be very careful about how we spend money on ourselves?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must ensure value for money. I was going to refer to the example of the refurbishment of the Elizabeth Tower, because we have to know what we are going into. The refurbishment of the Elizabeth Tower offers a cautionary tale in this respect. Such is the nation's affection for Big Ben that I have no doubt we would not have objected to spending £80 million on its refurbishment, if that had been the initial price tag placed on it. The mistake that was made was in initially releasing the figure of £29 million, which was little more than a guess. That is why it is right to spend the time and money on developing a business plan so that we know what we are going into.

It is with this in mind that I advise the House in the strongest possible terms to disregard the endlessly quoted estimates drawn from the Deloitte report of June 2015. Those numbers were merely comparisons with other options at that time and before any detailed scoping could take place. We cannot know how much the programme will cost in reality until the outline business case is published, but we can be assured that we now have the programme and the infrastructural professionals, drawn from industry, who will be able to produce the comprehensive plans we need.

The Delivery Authority is making good progress, but it needs further clarity on what is expected of it, and that stands to reason. As both the National Audit Office and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority have highlighted, the cost estimates or ranges cannot be set out before the scope and requirements of what is needed are fully understood. Doing that means ensuring that the proposals are fully up to date, which is our third and final requirement.

So much has changed since the Deloitte report of 2015, not least the pandemic, which is having an enormous effect on our way of life, our way of working and economic activity more generally. That is why it is quite proper for the Sponsor Body to conduct a strategic review to consider whether the basis for options developed over previous years has changed significantly enough to warrant a change in strategy. The review should determine how the various options should be assessed. Timelines for delivery, heritage benefits, fire safety and cost must all be considered in the round, and the views of parliamentarians on all this matter greatly. It comes down to a simple question: how much inconvenience are we prepared to accept?

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I completely agree with that last point. To take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), we should not be spending enormous amounts on ourselves, but this proposal does not necessarily mean that. We are spending money for future generations, and actually honouring the past, which I think is our duty as well. However, that does not mean that, with the crisis we are in at the moment, we

should not be as flexible as possible. We are asking our constituents and our businesses to adapt enormously to very trying circumstances. Surely, given the times we are in, we should do everything we can to adapt, and there are many alternative proposals to the Richmond House move. Even if it means some inconvenience to us, we should do what we can to adapt. Even if it takes longer and even if we have to put up with some noise, surely we should be adaptable in these times.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with my hon. Friend in both regards. This Palace, these Houses of Parliament are the most wonderful testament to our belief in democracy. It is so magnificent to walk along the passageway from here to the House of Lords and see on either side the representation of our history and the pride that our forebears took in our nation's story because they believed that the democracy and the constitution we have are precious, worth preserving and worth symbolising in stone. To do that, it is worth spending the money to ensure this Palace is secure. However, yes, we must play our part and accept that there is a degree of inconvenience that we can tolerate, because currently we accept remarkably little. Under current rules, work in the Palace of Westminster can be halted on the say-so of a single MP. I am not sure that all MPs realise that each of their gentle and politely worded requests to keep noise down triggers an automatic downing of tools.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): They do now.

Mr Rees-Mogg: They do—well, those who are paying attention do—and I am glad the right hon. Gentleman is paying such strict attention. It is important that we do accept that we may have to compromise in what we expect in this Palace.

Then there is the question of a temporary decant location, and I look forward to hearing Members' views about what scale and requirements are thought necessary. The Prime Minister has written to the chief executive of the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority making it clear that costs should be kept to a minimum. He is quite right that putting a severe downward pressure on cost is vital in the face of phrases such as "scope creep" and "gold-plating", which are words that should make any right-thinking politician break out in a cold sweat. Our goal should be a narrow, simple one—to save the Palace of Westminster without spending more than is necessary. That is the only way we will be able to look our constituents in the eye and explain the steps being taken.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I have been listening carefully to what my right hon. Friend has been saying, and he has laid great emphasis on saving the building of the Palace of Westminster, but can he clarify whether it is the Government's policy that it should be saved so that it should be the home of our national Parliament permanently?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that my hon. Friend may be alluding to the mention of York in the Prime Minister's letter. I would remind my hon. Friend that between 1301 and 1325 Parliament met in York 11 times, but when Edward IV tried to get it to move to York, he was unsuccessful. It will end up being a matter for parliamentarians where this House sits, though strictly speaking the meeting of Parliament is called by the sovereign to her palace at Westminster. That, I think, is something that would be highly unlikely to change without the acceptance of parliamentarians. I hope that answers my hon. Friend's question.

I want to conclude by quoting Caroline Shenton's book about the construction of the Palace a century and a half ago. She raised the question of the difficulty faced by Barry and Pugin when she wrote:

> "But who should be given the upper hand? The government… funded by the Treasury? Parliament as an institution made up of two legislatures occupying a single building… Or—most difficult of all—over a thousand MPs and Peers"—

this must be referring to peers rather than MPs, but never mind—

> "fractious, opinionated…partisan, and…with as many individual views on how the work should progress as there were members? Deciding who was the real client at any particular moment would prove to be a mind-bending task for Barry over the next four and twenty years."

I am a great admirer of much that was achieved by our Victorian forebears, but in this instance, this one instance, I believe the 21st century may—and I sense the shock around the Chamber—have the edge over the 19th century.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): You should write a book about the Victorians.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I did. It is still available, probably heavily discounted, in all second-hand bookshops.

For once, we have truly, in that most tiresome of clichés, learned the lesson of history. We have our client, which is the Sponsor Body. Its strategic review is setting the scope for the programme, and then the Delivery Authority will draw up fully costed proposals for us to consider. At that point, we will arrive at the moment we have been steadily working towards for some years, when we will be able to decide how to do so in a way that offers the consistent political support the programme needs.

The last Parliament set us on the path of action over inaction, but it is this Parliament that will act, meeting our collective responsibility of protecting this building, the throne, the palace of our democracy.

2.28 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): What a lovely performance. It is hard to believe that restoration and renewal, commonly known as R&R—nothing to do with rest and relaxation—was first established in 2013 by both Houses. Imagine if we had actually started the work then: it might even have been completed by now.

I can see why the Leader of the House wanted to schedule this debate. We could have debated the redundancies at British Airways, something that he did not even find time for us to debate next Wednesday, but he chose to do this now. Of the current Cabinet, only two members voted for a full decant, seven did not vote and 15, including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House, voted against a full decant.

I hope that this debate is not about revisiting the project. Everyone accepts that work must be done on this building, not least because it is not accessible, and it is a heritage building. From seeing pictures or visiting the basement, it is clear that work must be done for safety reasons underground and to the stonework outside.

[Valerie Vaz]

It all needs to be looked at, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime project and it will keep us going for the next few —maybe hundred—years.

I want to make a few points. First, we agreed a process in May 2019, when the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill was introduced, and it then received Royal Assent on 8 October 2019. The House agreed that, using the successful model of the Olympics, we would have a Sponsor Body and a Delivery Authority. Those are made up of experts, but there is parliamentary oversight. They became substantive bodies in April this year, and we in this House have tasked those experts with dealing with this important programme. I want to thank the parliamentarians who are serving on the Sponsor Body: the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who has been involved in this project for a long time—he has seen it all, right from the beginning—the hon. Members for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), Lord Best, Lord Carter, Lord Deighton and Baroness Scott. They are all on the Sponsor Body, so both Houses of Parliament have oversight of the project.

Secondly, the Leader of the House alluded to costs. At all stages, the National Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General are involved, and their job is clearly set out: to certify that Departments and any other bodies have used resources efficiently, effectively and with economy; and so long as they report regularly, costs can be kept in check. We are not dealing with repairs that could result in even more eye-watering figures; we are dealing with keeping this building safe. I want to put it on record that at no stage are Members or anybody visiting the building unsafe. Yes, there may be fires, but there is a team of people who put those fires out practically every day. The Clerk of the House would be absolving himself of his responsibility if he let Members in here when the building was unsafe. The case for a full decant is strong. We do not need noises off raising the prospect of alternative sites. Inevitably, there will be costs as yet uncosted.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The right hon. Lady says that the case for a full decant is strong. I do not want to get into that argument. I want to ask her about her attitude to whether it is necessary to demolish the listed Richmond House. If she wants a full decant, could we not move into a temporary, rather than permanent, Chamber in the courtyard of Richmond House, as has been fully costed and scoped by the heritage organisation SAVE?

Valerie Vaz: I will come on to Richmond House, but it is not my opinion—it is an opinion that this House has taken to transfer authority for doing that to the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority. As I said, we are not the experts; they are the experts, and they will be able to undertake that.

The case for a full decant is strong. The Prime Minister has written a letter about moving to York. I do not know whether that has been costed—perhaps the Leader of the House could tell us what costs are associated with moving there. The costings of the building work and moving to York or anywhere else is a matter for the Sponsor Body to look at. This House will not be able to continue with a patch-and-mend approach or a quick fix; that will not do. Any delays will exacerbate the problem, probably making it cost more as some of the systems reach the end of their shelf life.

The Northern Estate programme is for improvements to the buildings in Norman Shaw North and South and Derby Gate, and it is progressing. Plans to house a temporary Chamber were part of the programme. Concerns were expressed about the heritage of Richmond House, but in fact it is only 33 years old. I am pleased that the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) intervened on me, because he has been in the House for 37 years, so he will remember when Richmond House was not even there—it did not exist. We now have a strategic review, in which Members are encouraged to take part, and they have until 7 August.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the right hon. Lady clarify the review being conducted by the Sponsor Body? Presumably, the Sponsor Body is allowed to conclude that the full decant is no longer regarded as the most cost-effective option, or is she serving notice that because the House voted it through by, I think, a mere 14 votes some time ago, that option is closed to it? Presumably, that option is open to it.

Valerie Vaz: I am a lot of things but I am not a prophet, and I cannot see into the future. I cannot see into the minds of the Sponsor Body, much as I would like to, because I am sure I would be of great help to the House. I am just coming on to that in a second.

There is the challenge panel, which is interesting. I have a list of the hon. Members and various people on the challenge panel, but I cannot see on it a single member from the Opposition parties. We have a strategic adviser to the Prime Minister and various other people, but I cannot see where Opposition Members—any of the Opposition—can have their view heard on the challenge panel. It is good that Sir David Higgins is there, because he ran a very successful campaign to deliver the Olympics. I had the privilege of interviewing him when I was on the House Governance Committee and I know that he is very conscious of how to have an end to a project. He talked about Gantt charts and proper schedules. It was different with the Olympic Delivery Authority because there was an end date, but I am sure the Sponsor Body can come to some conclusion on how we come to the end of this project.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. Is not the important point about the exchange that has just taken place that the Sponsor Body should be completely free to come up with a number of totally good options, from full decant to no decant at all, and then, as a result of that, come up with a properly costed project that Parliament can either accept or reject in a vote in 2022?

Valerie Vaz: As with any body of the House, the Sponsor Body will listen to what hon. Members say in the debate today and make up its own mind. I cannot tell it what to do. I do not even have a voice on the Sponsor Body, but other people do and, as they have set out very clearly, they will listen to Members' views until 7 August. Right hon. and hon. Members should feed into that.

The review will enable us to continue with progress, and the Sponsor Body is in the process of updating the costings. The costings were undertaken some time ago, so it is right that it should do that. Before the work, we will vote on the outline business case, as the Leader of the House said, but that has already been pushed back to 2022.

As right hon. and hon. Members have said in previous debates, and in the debate in which we voted for a full decant, the project will be about the whole country benefiting from the heritage, and from utilising the skills and crafts of the whole country. There will be no blacklisting, and there will be an upskilling of our diverse workforce. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will see that this is preserving the home of our democracy for over 1,000 years and for generations to come.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, there is great demand for this extremely important debate. It would be appreciated, I am sure, if hon. and right hon. Members could limit their remarks to about seven or eight minutes.

2.38 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I am very grateful that time has been found before the recess for this important debate. I should mention that, as the shadow Leader of the House said, I am—along with the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms)—I am one of the four Members of Parliament on the Sponsor Body.

The works to the Houses of Parliament remain critical, but clearly a lot else has changed. It is prudent to review the current approach at this stage, reaffirming the commitment to taxpayer value. This is obviously our workplace, but actually about three quarters of the people working in the Houses of Parliament are neither Members of Parliament nor peers. There are 650 of us, but approximately 1 million people visit this place every year. This place is the focal point of our constitution and, for the wider world, a permanent symbol of liberal democracy. The Houses of Parliament form a democratic asset that we hold in trust.

The median tenure of an MP in modern times—notwithstanding my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh)—is around 13 years, and of those 13 years, the median current Member has already had about five. Even on the very shortest scenario for restoration and renewal, it would be something like a decade before the works were completed, so the sobering reality is that many current MPs just will not be around to see them finished. On the longer scenarios, hardly any current MPs would be around. So this is not about us. We are trustees of this place, and we clearly have to do what is right, not what happens to be convenient for us, as its current temporary occupants.

The current patch-and-mend approach is failing. According to the National Audit Office, Parliament spent £369 million in the past three years on projects to keep the buildings in use, and there is still a repairs backlog of £1 billion.

Chris Bryant: When I was on the Joint Committee and chair of the Finance Committee, we wanted additional work to be done now because that was clearly important—for instance, on the cloisters, which are among the most beautiful parts of the whole estate—but we constantly found that there simply was not enough physical capacity on the estate to allow us to get the work done now. Is there not a danger that further delay will result in the backlog getting bigger and bigger?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is undeniably right about the effect of the passage of time, and of course that is all reflected in the outline business case. The fire at Notre—Dame was a stark reminder of the importance of protecting the world's most treasured historic buildings. Here, the risk of fire is so acute that fire wardens patrol 24 hours a day. This House rightly recognised the significance of that terrible event and passed the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 shortly afterwards. Colleagues will know that a vast amount of work is also needed to replace all the heating, ventilation, water, drainage and electrical systems.

It has been almost five years since the plan was drawn up, and much has changed since that change includes two general elections, our leaving the European Union and, of course, the pandemic, which is not only illustrating the possibility of different ways of working but placing severe new demands on the public purse. There is also more evidence now about the state of the buildings, through extensive modelling and surveys, and more is known about the cost and the challenge of building like-for-like temporary Chambers. As the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House mentioned, the bodies charged with overseeing and delivering this work have become substantive in the last few months, and it is now appropriate to review where we are and how we should proceed.

There have always been the same three overall pivotal questions that affect the length and cost of the works involved. The first relates to the balance between restoration and renewal—in other words, the extent to which the project goes beyond just fixing the buildings and embarks on improving things. Examples include disability access, which is currently woeful, and various other enhancements. The second relates to pace: should we proceed at a slow speed, estimated at some 30 years, working around current operations with the extended disruption and risks that that entails, or should we move out, in whole or in part, for a period? That would expedite the project and could lower the overall cost, but it would bring that cost forward. The third relates to how closely, during any decant period, Parliament's physical layout and function has to be replicated and to what extent the location has to be kept close to the Government Departments we are here to scrutinise and hold to account.

Value for money and affordability have always been vital, but they have become even more pressing as the full economic impact of the post-covid environment becomes more evident. Of course, we can all say what we want to see retained and what we want to see enhanced, and that is important, but for this review to be effective in delivering value for money—assuming that we decant somewhere—we also need to say what we could do without. There are some factors that could make a material difference, and I encourage hon. Members,

[Damian Hinds]

in this debate and when making submissions to the review, to consider these factors in particular when thinking about the decant.

First, while in-person voting is a long-standing feature of our system, how sacred is the exact system and the layout of our Lobbies? Seeking to replicate the current Lobby configuration is a significant factor in the space requirements for a temporary Chamber. Secondly, what flexibilities could there be in the numbers of MPs' staff who have to be accommodated on the estate? More flexibility on that could mean lower costs.

Yesterday's letter from the Prime Minister to the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority, which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House mentioned, called for the full range of options to be looked at, from a minimum safe viable product to fundamental refurbishment, and the different possibilities of full decant, partial decant and remaining in situ—all, of course, with costs kept to a minimum. These different approaches have already been analysed, and will be re-evaluated in the light of what more we now know. I reassure colleagues that that does not mean only looking at one decant option. The suggestion to examine decant locations beyond Westminster has not been part of the programme's mandate to date, and the programme bodies will of course be discussing this further with Mr Speaker and the Lord Speaker.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if we keep opening up all these other options and look at starting from first basics on new ones, we will simply delay the work, and the cost of doing that alone will be enormous?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Member makes a good point, which does not surprise me given her position on the Public Accounts Committee. She is right, of course, about some of the trade-offs, but the timetable for the review is quite an aggressive one. For analysis to be effective and for realistic options to be presented back, it will be necessary iteratively to narrow down those options in a very short time.

I stress that the views of Members are very important to the process. Today's debate is a big and central part of that, and beyond this I encourage colleagues to make a submission to the review—in fuller detail, if they wish—by 7 August. The review team will be working through the summer, will be subject to challenge by an independent panel, as was mentioned previously, and plan to report back in the autumn.

2.46 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). I agree with many of his remarks about the Division Lobbies. The Scottish National party's thoughts on how we vote in this place are well on the record, and I am glad to see that we are inching ever so slightly into the 21st century.

As I was listening to the illuminating opening speech by the Leader of the House, I felt as if I was having some kind of out-of-body experience, because when the UK economy is in freefall and experiencing a global pandemic, this debate does feel a bit like fiddling while Rome burns. But it takes place in the context of spending choices made here in London, so I wish to offer a few brief thoughts from the perspective of the Scottish National party.

I will start with the issue of costings. Astonishingly, the £4 billion price tag for the restoration and renewal project is only £1 billion less than the total economic package announced for the post-covid recovery. If this project was a shocking waste of taxpayers' money before the pandemic, it now looks even more hopelessly out of touch because spending billions of pounds upgrading a crumbling palace following a decade of austerity is one of the reasons why the public talk about Westminster being out of touch and not chiming with everyday life. With an entire generation now facing an economic Armageddon and the deficit set to rise to double what it was during the financial crisis, this decision really could not look more crass.

The reality is that the final price tag will likely be much higher. The National Audit Office has called the £4 billion a median figure, and suggested that £6 billion might be more realistic. Looking, for example, at the Government's handling of the High Speed 2 project, a spiralling price tag is not difficult to imagine. In fact, in February this year the cost of the work that has already started on the Elizabeth Tower was reported to have risen to £18.6 million. Part of the additional cost was owing to the realisation, two years after the project had started, that the job could require a specialist clock expert—something that it took a survey to establish.

The lack of transparency around the scale and cost of the project has further exacerbated public concern. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) originally confirmed to the Commons Finance Committee that the full cost of the restoration and the length of the works would not be revealed until 2021, while the deliberately loose language in the Act that vaguely requires the sponsor body to

"have regard to…the need to ensure that the Parliamentary building works represent good value for money"

is an invitation for financial irresponsibility.

The SNP has been consistent on this issue: the Palace of Westminster is falling down. The necessary safety work should be performed as quickly and cost-efficiently as possible. However, to put it bluntly, Westminster is a hazard risk. We have seen just in recent weeks parts of masonry falling off the building and entrances and exits being closed off. It is not fit for purpose as a modern Parliament. We should not commit ourselves to working in a UNESCO world heritage site in perpetuity.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) *rose—*

David Linden: I am happy to give way to the right hon. Gentleman who would have been the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about this being a UNESCO world heritage site. The weakness in his argument is that we have a legal duty to maintain in decent order a UNESCO world heritage site. Surely he is not suggesting that the mother of Parliaments should break the law.

David Linden: I take issue with the right hon. Gentleman's quoting "the mother of Parliaments", which is often misquoted in this place. He has put his point on the

record; I know he is perhaps having quite a difficult week, so I am glad to have had the opportunity to let him do that.

The SNP has no intention of being around Westminster when this tortuous project finally grinds to its long, eye-wateringly expensive conclusion. We on these Benches urge this place to consider what it is proposing to spend against the current economic backdrop and to think carefully about the message that it sends to the public. Safety assessments have pointed out serious problems with the mechanical and electrical engineering system, and a substantial amount of asbestos is present in the building, where normally thousands of people work every day. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire is right: the fire at Notre-Dame in 2019 was an obvious example of the risks that exist with these historic buildings and why they should not be used to host a modern Parliament with an intense working environment.

When the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill passed through this place in 2019, the SNP secured an amendment to ensure that the money would be spent in a way that benefited the whole of the UK. Whatever decision is taken on the next steps, that principle must remain.

Whatever decision is taken, there is now a chance to ensure that we work in a building fit to hold a modern Parliament with modern working practices. The recent pandemic has seen Westminster forced to adopt practices—such as e-voting and virtual proceedings—that are commonplace elsewhere around the world. The cries of protest have been deafening as the Leader of the House desperately tries to drag Parliament back into its 19th-century comfort zone. Meanwhile, the Commons Chamber can seat barely half of all MPs, and Public Health England needed to look at the Palace of Westminster only once to determine that it was not fit to be used in its current form during a health emergency.

With workplaces throughout the country now required to be covid secure in addition to observing normal health and safety standards, Westminster can be no exception and must modernise for the benefit of all Members, but most importantly for staff. This could start by having parliamentarians in a Chamber that can seat all Members, rather than being some place overstuffed to promote conflict. As this debate started, I was reflecting on the number of Tories who have had to move to the other side of the Chamber, because today, bizarrely, the Chamber is hoaching with Tories who are desperate to talk about restoration and renewal. I sometimes wish they would show that concern when it comes to, for example, universal credit.

While we need to be here, the SNP will prioritise safety and sensible public spending in respect of the Palace of Westminster's future. However, I very much hope that the Government will reflect on the current financial crisis and health and safety concerns and perhaps refocus their priorities. I can tell the Leader of the House that my constituents are not crying out for eye-watering restoration and renewal costs at Westminster; they have other priorities, and so should this Government.

2.53 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will remember the film "Groundhog Day"; as I stand here today, I have that strange feeling of déjà vu, and that is incredibly frustrating. Two and a half years ago, Members in this Chamber had a very fraught debate about what should happen to the Palace of Westminster, and now, to my regret, here we are again, revisiting that very same topic.

In preparing my remarks for today, I looked in *Hansard* at the debate that we held on 31 January 2018, and I wish to remind the House of a few of the key points that I made as Leader of the House at the time. First, I said that 24/7 fire patrols carried out by teams of officers were necessary for Parliament to maintain its fire safety licence. With 7,500 people working in the Palace and more than 1 million visitors a year, the risks were immense. I said:

"Over the past 10 years, 60 incidents have had the potential to cause a serious fire."

I went on:

"Secondly, there is a huge amount of asbestos packed into the walls"—

used to lag ancient pipes—

"that needs to be carefully and expensively removed"

before repairs can begin.

Thirdly, I said that many pipes and cables that are stuffed into the basement and throughout the Palace were literally

"decades past their lifespan, with some now being impossible to access. The likelihood of a major failure"

of sewerage, burst water pipes or critical systems grows the longer the vast backlog of repairs and maintenance "are left unaddressed."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 880-881.]

Fourthly, on several occasions in recent months, falling masonry has forced parts of the Palace to be closed off, and it is only by sheer luck that no one has been injured or killed.

It is not a case of whether we fancy moving out or staying here. If we do not move out, all the evidence points to a disaster that will force us to move out. If and when that happens, as I pointed out in 2018, the contingency arrangement for a catastrophic failure in the Palace is a temporary Chamber in a building in Parliament Square using curtains and temporary wiring that are designed to last for a few weeks at most. That is the truth about the current situation, and that is why, in January 2018, the House agreed that we need to take action.

The Palace of Westminster is a UNESCO world heritage site, it is one of the most famous buildings in the world, and it is the seat of our democracy. Even if we cared not a jot for any of those facts, we still would not have the option to walk out and, as the SNP would like, simply hand the keys back to the Queen. It is our duty to maintain this iconic Palace for the more than 1 million visitors each year from around the world.

About 75% of the cost is for non-cosmetic work on the Palace. The money will be spent dealing with mechanical and engineering works, aimed at preserving essential services for future generations. It is not about carpets, curtains and wallpaper.

When I first looked at the issue of restoration and renewal, I started out with a healthy degree of scepticism, as many hon. Members will have today. I was told, "Let's use the Lords Chamber while ours is repaired," "Let's build a Chamber in Westminster Hall," "Let's have a floating Chamber on the Thames," and, "Let's move into Church House," which was last used for Parliament in world war two. They are all excellent ideas, and each one has been painstakingly and seriously considered.

[Andrea Leadsom]

Then came the horrific murder of PC Keith Palmer, and a major review of security that concluded that elected Members of Parliament should in future be secured within the Palace perimeter to keep us and, vitally, those who protect us safe from harm. That fact, combined with the obvious need for a permanent contingency plan for future generations, clearly pointed to establishing a permanent and alternative contingency venue for the Commons to meet and work within the Palace perimeter wall.

Sir Edward Leigh: Although of course we have now proven that we can work virtually if we have to.

Andrea Leadsom: Indeed we have, and we have also shown that at least some of us need to be in this place so that we can continue to do our work properly. I absolutely share the concerns of hon. Members that we must get the best value for taxpayers' money, so I certainly welcome the Sponsor Body's review of the plans to move to a rebuilt Richmond House, but I urge hon. Members who are lobbying for us to stay in the Palace with no contingency arrangements and allow the vital work to go on all around us to accept that that is not realistic.

The day I first visited the basement, a sewage pipe had just burst—I was sure that they had done it deliberately. I could not walk through because there was a stinking spray right along the passageway. It visibly demonstrated the challenge that our engineers are up against. Don't get me started on the asbestos snots that are all over the walls down there as a result of old pipe lagging—who knew? It is horrible; there is so much to repair. I am pleased to report to the House, however, that I no longer have a rat in my bin. I have moved office to Portcullis House and that rat has also moved on.

The last time the Palace was restored it was because it had burned down. Those who believe that we should not spend the money should consider the cost of rebuilding from the ashes. We have seen the devastation that happened at Notre-Dame, and it would be unforgivable to allow a similar disaster to happen here because we cannot be bothered to move out.

On the hugely positive side—the sunlit uplands—the restoration and renewal of this magnificent palace will create employment, training opportunities, apprenticeships and economic growth for small businesses and craftsmen and women across the UK. It will showcase UK creativity and ingenuity, spotlighting the best of British. It will provide work for thousands of individuals who, in a post-covid world, will surely need it. This programme should rightly form a part of the palace's historic legacy, and its place in the world for future generations to come to.

3 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): As a number of right hon. and hon. Members have said, I am a member of the Sponsor Body—indeed, I think I have served on every committee that has considered this matter. This matter was also the subject of my one Front-Bench speaking engagement in 19 years, although hopefully that will not be repeated. [Hon. Members: "Aw!"] Well, certainly not for the people who were there at the time.

It seems a long time ago that the Joint Committee produced the report that recommended a full decant, using Richmond House as the best option for the safety and security of everybody who works here, with the House of Lords moving to the Queen Elizabeth II centre. We came to that decision after much thought, discussion and debate, and we considered every alternative put before us. That proposal was approved by both Houses, and as a number of Members have said, a Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority were established, based on the experience of the London Olympics. The legislation included a clear provision that when the work was finished, Members would return to this House. I remember that at the time, a rumour was going around that none of us would come back, and that some hideous plot was in place and we would never return.

At the moment, a planning application is lodged with Westminster City Council to demolish and rebuild much of Richmond House, while retaining the front and side facades. That is in line with the House's stated desire to replicate much of what already exists here over there. That would give us a very usable building that would also have a legacy for alternative uses.

As we have heard, the Sponsor Body is carrying out a review of the current proposals, which I fully support. The covid crisis has shown us that we can work in ways that were dismissed as unworkable in the past. The vast majority of House and MPs' staff are working successfully from home. This House has virtual questions, and we even manage to vote virtually, which I am afraid we dismissed previously—I do not know why, because it actually works.

The review may return to the option of a reduced intervention in Richmond House—I do not know, and I do not want to pre-empt that—but one thing we could do is have just one voting Lobby. I remember that at the time, the Leader of the House saw that as the end of the world, but I remind him that only in 1836—a year I am sure he remembers fondly—were plans drawn up for a second Lobby, at an eye-watering cost of £600, and an extra two weeks to construct. Those were the days. If we are prepared to compromise, we can cap costs and, importantly, cut time. I do not think we will end up with such a great building at the end of the process, but that is something we might have to accept.

In truth, however, a lot of Members want to undermine R&R and do not want it to go ahead—we need to say that. They want to stay here come what may, ignore the decision that we took, and embark on a 35 to 40-year maintenance programme. Parliament would be a building site covered in scaffolding and we would no doubt have to evacuate the building every so often, given the asbestos and safety fears.

Asbestos has been mentioned, but it is not in nice, solid sheets, wrapped around piping or in solid boards. It has crumbled and it is in the dust; it is throughout the building in the plasterwork and it is a real safety threat, which we cannot ignore.

If we go down the road of being a building site for 30 years, what sort of advert is that for this country? What are we really saying we can do? However, if that is what the Government want and they believe the House will support it, they should introduce legislation to that effect and not just rely on anonymous briefings about the current proposals to undermine them. Members now openly say, "R&R isn't happening. It's been cancelled, apparently." Yesterday, we had the Prime Minister's letter, which seems to say that it is vital to do something because the place could burn down, but we should also open everything up again for consideration, including the possibility of moving to York, presumably—I hope—on

a temporary basis. What about the thousands of staff? Are they to move to York for a period? Was that considered when the option was put forward?

We have options, but let us be sensible. In the light of the Prime Minister's letter, I hope that the Leader of the House will confirm that any proposal to decant Members and staff from the northern estate to Richmond House, which could delay R&R by up to three years, will not be considered at least until the report has been published, hopefully in October.

We have been kicking the can down the road for more than 70 years. This building is not a safe working environment. As has been said, in the past few weeks, we have had a fire and a collapse of scaffolding. We need to think about everyone who works in this building and act accordingly.

3.6 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). It is a bit like a reunion of the Joint Committee today. Many of us served on it—

Mark Tami: Bring the band back together!

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. Many of us served on the Joint Committee back in 2015-16, when we looked at all the issues exhaustively. We considered all the ideas that were submitted to us, some partially credible that did not understand the nuances of this place and some frankly less credible, but I want to make the point to everybody, particularly new Members, that this is not something we have an option about. We have got to do this. When I became Leader of the House in 2015, two things happened in quick succession that brought that home to me, one here and one elsewhere.

First, we nearly had to close the Chamber indefinitely within a few days of my becoming Leader of the House because asbestos was discovered up in the ventilation shafts. If it had become dislodged, or if it were to be dislodged in future, we would have no choice but to immediately close the Chamber indefinitely. What would happen then? The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside is right: the building has huge amounts of asbestos. It is a genuine health hazard, which can bite us at any time. That alone is a reason to do the work.

The second thing that happened had nothing to do with Notre-Dame. A few days after I became Leader of the House, Kingsway caught fire. Kingsway is a road and the wiring under it caught fire and burned for days. I advise all those who have not been down into the basement here to do so. Apart from the sewerage system that was mentioned and the asbestos, the basement contains a jumble of wiring, some very old, that could do just the same—catch fire and burn for days.

The House authorities have always said that they can get us all out and save our lives, but they cannot save the building. If we have a serious fire, this building will burn down, in the way that Clandon Park burned down and in the way that Notre-Dame burned down. That would not only be a gross dereliction of our duty as stewards of this building but a national tragedy. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people come to visit what is a world heritage site. It brings people from around the world; it is one of the world's iconic landmarks. We cannot possibly put ourselves in a position where year after year the risks increase because the wiring gets older and all the systems get older, so we are making it more likely that there will be a devastating fire and this building will be destroyed. We simply cannot do that.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—my successor as Leader of the House—rightly said, we all come to this project slightly sceptical. It is a lot of money to spend and it is not something that is going to be universally popular with constituents around the country. However, the more one delves into the subject, the clearer it becomes that we have absolutely no choice but to do this. We looked at all the alternatives. We considered whether we could put a temporary Parliament somewhere else. But even if we just went up to Horse Guards or somewhere like that, could we really, at seven o'clock on an Opposition day, have queues of MPs walking across Whitehall to come and vote? What a security risk that would be—what a target for terrorists. We have to keep Members of Parliament and, in particular, people who work for us, who are often as at risk as we are if something terrible happens, within the secure estate.

That is why and how we came to the conclusion that Richmond House was the best option. It is within the secure estate. It is a building that has flexibilities. The one bit I have a problem with is that I do not buy the argument that it is not possible to put a temporary Chamber into Richmond House without the scale of work that is being considered at the moment. We might need a compromise so that we do not need that period of time to replicate this Chamber exactly. Yes, of course we need to have a debating chamber, and yes, of course it should be consistent with the way that this Chamber works, but it does not have to be like for like—inch for inch, foot for foot identical to here. The Division Lobbies do not have to have exactly the same relationship to the Chamber. We have learned in the past few weeks that we can do things differently, and I buy that argument. We cannot just spend money willy-nilly because it keeps the environment in which we are going to be working close to what we have here now. If it changes a bit, it does not matter.

We cannot keep delaying this decision. I am frustrated that it is now 2020 and I co-chaired the Committee back in 2015—five years ago. This building is five years older. The systems are five years older. We have looked at all these options before. We looked at whether we could move the Commons to the Lords end. Actually, I am not convinced that the Lords would vote for that if they had to leave and we got to stay. But then there are fundamental issues about the services. There is one sewer that services the whole building. So fine, we move to the Lords end, the work is happening down here, and then something goes wrong—the electricity fails or the sewer fails. If the electricity fails, it is going to take the devil's own job of a time to try to work out what is wrong and how to fix it, and we stop working in the interim. If the sewer breaks, that makes the whole building unusable. It is really very difficult operationally, in a building that was designed as one with the services flowing from one end to the other, to simply say, "We'll put something down the middle; that end's fine and this end isn't."

We looked at using Westminster Hall, but there are historical reasons why that is difficult. Perhaps more than any other part of this building, we have a duty to

[Chris Grayling]

protect Westminster Hall. It is the heart of the building which, back in 1834, the fire brigade chose to protect. In the second world war, when the bomb was dropped, the fire brigade chose to protect Westminster Hall. We cannot abuse Westminster Hall because it gives us a chance to stay a bit closer to this building while the works are happening. We looked at that exhaustively and came to the conclusion that it was not possible.

I think that anyone who looks through these issues carefully and in detail will reach the same conclusion that we all reached five years ago. I commend the work of the Sponsor Body and the work that is to come from the Delivery Body. We chose to recommend that those were set up because we felt that that was the right way forward —to learn the lessons of the London Olympics, to follow a single approach to doing it, and to learn from how similar bodies made that project work effectively. My request to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and all those who are on the Sponsor Body is: please let us get on with this. With every month and every year that goes by, the risk gets greater. I do not want us, as a generation of politicians, to wake up one morning to find that we were the people who did not act in time, the building is no more, and the taxpayer now faces a much, much bigger bill to restore a landmark, as the French do with Notre-Dame. Please, I say to the Leader of the House and to all colleagues, let us get on with this as quickly as we can.

3.14 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I do wonder if our constituents will be shaking their heads in disbelief that we are devoting an afternoon to this debate when parliamentary time is so limited to discuss the severe threat to their lives and livelihoods. However, I am happy to be able to speak in this afternoon's debate and to follow some of the hon. and right hon. Members who have already invested huge amounts of time, thought and energy in devising the plans for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. I hope we will listen hard to their valuable contributions.

It feels particularly appropriate to be following the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). As the Chair of the Select Committee on Transport, I spent a great deal of time scrutinising his work as Transport Secretary and the decision making and delivery of projects to upgrade the UK's transport infrastructure, much of which, like this building, was built in Victorian times and requires urgent work if it is to meet our needs in the 21st century. There are some useful parallels to be drawn and lessons to be learnt from the experience.

The first is that our short electoral cycles can make it difficult to take decisions about long-term projects that necessarily span several Parliaments. Incoming Governments have a tendency to re-examine, and sometimes reverse, the decisions of previous ones. Even when they end up reaching the same conclusions, additional time and uncertainty have inevitably added cost. I am afraid to say that reviews are sometimes undertaken to deliberately avoid or delay difficult decisions. We cannot afford to duck or delay restoration and renewal.

However, I welcome the Sponsor Body's strategic review. It is right to re-examine how the restoration and renewal programme is carried out, especially in the light of covid-19, which has forced all of us to work in ways that some might never have thought possible and ushered in frightening economic impacts. We must ensure that the plans are the right ones, and that they are affordable and represent good value for taxpayers' money, but we cannot afford to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It has already taken many years to devise the restoration and renewal programme and to set up the organisations to deliver it. We cannot afford to go back to square one, because, as has been said, this place is falling apart faster than it can be fixed. As the House of Commons Commission said in October 2012,

"doing nothing is not an option."

Eight years on, doing something has only become more pressing.

As the Prime Minister recognised in his letter to the review yesterday, there is a need to

"move as quickly as possible, both because of the risks associated with the current state of the building and the need to provide certainty on the way forward".

As we have heard, there is a very serious risk of not only a major fire, which we know could spread rapidly through the building because of the thousands of empty ventilation voids, but flooding and falling masonry. We know that we must tackle the risks associated with the presence of asbestos; address environmental efficiency and sustainability; and transform access for disabled people, be they MPs, peers, staff or visitors. We also have a duty to preserve one of the UK's most treasured historical buildings. It is a huge responsibility and we must not shirk it.

I wish to make two final points, returning to my reflections on fixing our transport infrastructure. The first is that doing the minimum does not work—our patched and potholed roads are testimony to that. Reacting to each problem as it arises is inefficient, costly and disruptive. Long-term planned refurbishment provides better value for money and a better result. Secondly, trying to carry out substantial works without moving out of the building risks making the work much more difficult and costly, and risks serious disruption to parliamentary activities. I remember when Network Rail was upgrading Nottingham railway station in 2013 and it took the brave decision to undertake a five-week blockade to get the job done efficiently, closing the station completely, in preference to months of weekend and overnight closures. Thanks to careful planning and preparation, it was a huge success and changed the approach to upgrading the railway.

I look forward to listening to the remainder of the debate, particularly the contributions of my fellow Finance Committee members and that of my predecessor as Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has championed the work to preserve this place. I also look forward to the outcome of the strategic review in the autumn. This is vital work that will allow the House to make the right decisions for the future of the Palace of Westminster and the UK Parliament.

3.19 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am delighted to catch your eye in this debate. My remarks will be made with some trepidation, because the Chairman of the Finance Committee and the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee are in the Chamber. I have been a member

of both Committees for about a decade; I have been a long-serving member. I also draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a chartered surveyor. I lived with this problem long before it even arose, and I have seen the decaying state of the Palace of Westminster.

In his excellent speech, the Leader of the House might have made the point that we are only trustees of this place. We are here for the present generation, but, above all, we are here for future generations. Why are we here? We are here to remind everybody that this is the home of our democracy. It is our history. It needs to remind us that our forebears went to war twice to preserve our way of life and democracy. I caution colleagues about indulging in the argument that we are spending money on ourselves. We are not; we are spending money to preserve our democracy.

This is one of the most important and iconic buildings in the world and, as others have said, it is a UNESCO world heritage site, which we are legally obliged to maintain in good condition. The standard of maintenance over the past few years has got worse and worse, as everybody can see. We have only to look around the Palace to see the amount of scaffolding, large quantities of which are there because there is falling masonry. As one of the former Leaders of the House said, it is a wonder that mercifully so far nobody has been hurt or seriously injured by falling masonry. We need to do something about the maintenance of this place.

The Elizabeth Tower project has proved, largely for the reasons that the former Chair of the Finance Committee gave, that the authorities in charge of the maintenance of these buildings are not very good at planning big projects, and that is why it is absolutely right that the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Board were set up by Members of Parliament.

We must learn from history. The National Audit Office report makes it clear that the completion of renewal in 1870 was 18 years late and three times over budget. We must not make those mistakes again. The Sponsor Body started in shadow form, and then was made substantive on 8 April 2020 by the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019. It is going to produce an interim report, supposedly by the end of September, and we should not do anything to fetter any of the options. I want it completely freely to come out, with all the options and an indicative cost, and then leave Parliament, the Government and the staff in this place and everybody else to make their judgment as to what is the right thing to do.

However, there is no point doing all that unless all the stakeholders buy in to what we are doing. Part of the reason we are here, eight years after this project was originally proposed, is that the stakeholders in general—the 650 Members of Parliament, the 800 peers, the thousands of staff in this place and, above all, the public—have not yet bought fully into the project. I urge those on the Sponsor Body to extend the 8 August deadline for consultation, have wide publicity as to what we might do, and then let the Sponsor Body with all that evidence come up with the best solution. I therefore suggest that we have a longer consultation period.

Having established the optimal way of determining what we want to do, we then have to decide how we do it. As a surveyor, I have been a long-term advocate of a full decant, and I still maintain that the most economical and shortest way of doing this vast project is to fully move out. There is no question about that. However, if the political will and the impact of the covid situation on finance and what the Government want to spend have changed the situation so radically, I have another solution for the House this afternoon: do the project in two halves.

I do not mind about the sequencing, but basically the idea would be to move the House of Commons into the House of Lords and do the restoration on this half; then, when the House of Commons was complete, move us back here and start on the House of Lords. In that event, the House of Lords would move out to the Queen Elizabeth II Centre, which the Government already own. All we would have to do was compensate the contractor there. It would mean that Members of Parliament—the elected House—never actually moved out of this building. All the fears that we might never move back and all the fears that we might lose our traditions and working ways in this House would be largely unfounded, because we would remain in the building for the entire time. It also has the huge benefit that we would not need the decant centre in Richmond House. Indeed, we would not need the Northern Estate at all to do the project—we need it, of course, for Members of Parliament. Richmond House is the controversial bit in terms of planning and what we do with it, but we would not need it. At a stroke, we would save £500 million, as we would need only one decant centre.

I say to the House that we have been discussing this long enough. The Chair of the Finance Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), made a really good point: we should not be here debating this subject this afternoon. There are so many issues of national importance. I do not want to be here in another year or two's time still debating what we should do. I want to be here in 2022 voting on a precise proposal to allow the Sponsor Body to get on with the work. The time for talking is nearly over. We need action if nobody is going to be killed because of poor maintenance of the Palace.

3.25 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, wish we were debating something else. I would like to be debating, for instance, the way British Airways is treating its staff and, for that matter, its customers, but we have this debate this afternoon. I could just say, "I refer hon. Members to the speech that I made last time," or to the one before, but, unfortunately, I am not going to do that.

I do love this building. Sometimes, it is the small quirky bits of the building that I love. It is not just the obvious historical bits. When one walks through St Stephen's Hall, there is the painting of Wolsey demanding more money from Thomas More, who was Speaker at the time. That is a great moment of British history. I love it because it was painted by Vivian Forbes and his lover Glyn Philpot. The sad story is that, when the painting was finished and Glyn Philpot died, Vivian Forbes took his own life 24 hours later. There are so many different layers of history in this building—it is woven into every single aspect of our history—and I think that we need to preserve it, not in aspic, but we need to preserve it.

There are lots of things that have not changed since the last debate. The truth is—notwithstanding the comments from the SNP earlier, or, for that matter, from the Prime Minister in his letter yesterday—we are not going anywhere

[Chris Bryant]

else. As I am sure the Leader of the House will remember, when they tried to get Parliament to go to York in the1460s, there was no business to transact, so it ended up not sitting properly at all. And when Parliament met in York in the 14th century it only did so because the king was terrified of an invasion by the Scots. I do not think that that is the concern of the Prime Minister at the moment, although there are some worries about a border.

I made an important point earlier about the capacity for doing additional work here in the Palace. It seems crazy, but we emptied out the cloisters to do work immediately, we got rid of all the staff who were working there, and the cloisters are still completely empty; there is no extra space on the parliamentary estate to put extra workers to be able to get the work done. That is an increasing problem. There are projects that have been done very successfully. The cast-iron roofs have been done on time and on budget. It has been an excellent project. The inside of the roof in Westminster Hall has been attended to very well. There are projects that are going well, but we are accumulating, every year, more and more additional projects, and the backlog is getting worse.

Richmond House is still contiguous to the Northern Estate where most of our parliamentary offices are. That was one of the main reasons, when I was on the Joint Committee, that we considered using Richmond House. It diminished the security threats of crossing over to some other building across the road. It is not about the convenience of Members; it just made it possible for people to do their jobs safely.

Sir Edward Leigh: When the hon. Gentleman was on the Joint Committee, there was not a proposal to demolish the building.

Chris Bryant: Actually, there was. The memory of the right hon. Gentleman is failing him, I am afraid. There was a proposal to demolish it. The bit that I think he differs on is whether there was a proposal to demolish the staircases, which some people think are intrinsic to Richmond House. Personally, I think that they are the ugliest bit of the building. The truth is, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said earlier, it would be perfectly possible if people like the right hon. Gentleman had not been complaining that we had to have a Chamber that was identical to this Chamber—*[Interruption.]* If I am diminishing the right hon. Gentleman, my memory is different from his. If we wanted to go to a system where we slightly changed the parameters of what is in there, I am up for that, but it remains a fact that Richmond House is the only piece of land that is contiguous to the rest of the parliamentary estate and therefore safe.

As for the other things that have not changed, the building was designed as a whole, not from the very beginning, but after the fire. After 1834, one of the great, clever things that Barry and Pugin did was to amalgamate the estate into a single proposition about the British constitution, from the Commons through to the Lords and the monarch and incorporating the ancient Westminster Hall from the 11th century. That poses a real problem for those who want us to decant in part, because there is one central heating system, which is steam under high pressure; there is one electricity system; there is one drainage system; there is one water system; and there is one basement, interconnected, with a set of risers that connect it to the one attic and roof. That is the problem for the future safety of the building.

The reason I completely disagree with the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown)—it is rare for us to disagree on matters of this kind—about the idea of a partial decant, and the Commons going down to the Lords while the Lords go elsewhere, is that the Lords is not contiguous to the offices on the northern estate. So a safe passageway would be needed for votes and for people to be able to take part in debates, or people would have to walk along the pavements outside. All the advice that was given to us was that that was a security risk for us. More importantly, one of the problems with trying to keep us in the Lords—which, incidentally, is too small a Chamber with far too few seats for the House of Commons to be able to sit in—is that if we kept this building working while it was a building site, we would dramatically increase the risk of a further fire and we would increase the risk to the staff who were working in it. That was precisely the problem in Notre-Dame, and that is what led to the massive fire there.

Chris Grayling: It is probably unusual for the hon. Gentleman and me to be in strong agreement and for me to disagree with my good and hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), but I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. Of course, there is one other small factor that one has to take into account, which is, of course, that the plans need to be approved by both Houses of Parliament. There was always a slight question mark over whether the Lords would agree to be thrown out.

Chris Bryant: I do not think there was a slight question mark. It was absolutely clear that the Lords would not move out merely so as to accommodate the Commons sitting in the House of Lords.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I did make it very clear in my speech that my preferred option was a full decant, but the world has changed as a result of covid. This is a different Parliament. The political imperative is different now, and I still say, as a surveyor, that it would be possible to do it in two halves.

Chris Bryant: Well, all the advice we were given was that, as an engineering feat, it would dramatically add to the cost, it would significantly add to the risk of a catastrophic failure to the building, and it would increase the danger to the staff working either as contractors or as Clerks and others working in the building. On all three counts, the imperative still lies with the hon. Gentleman's preference, and I am right behind his preference on this.

There are some things that have not changed since the 19th century. The Leader of the House rightly referred to Caroline Shenton, who wrote two books. The first was about the fire and the second was called "Mr Barry's War". The latter makes it absolutely clear that the biggest problem for Barry and Pugin was not the River Thames or the drainage system, it was MPs and peers who stayed on site and were constantly meddling. Governments kept on changing their minds about whether it was a Government project or not, and that dramatically

added to how long it took to get the Commons back in. It was not until 1850 that the Commons was back in, and then all the MPs hated it and demanded changes, so Barry said he would never step inside the place again.

We focus on the risk, and the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) said earlier that the cost is terrible and there are risks. That is true, but there are also significant opportunities here. This building is now wholly inappropriate for anybody with any kind of disability. We often focus on those who need a wheelchair, and it is true that it is catastrophically difficult to get around the building in a wheelchair, but it is very dark as well. The most common form of disability is poor eyesight, and many people simply cannot use the building for that reason.

We need a building that is better attuned to today's democracy, so that the public can come in more readily and easily to understand our business than the present Chamber allows. The archives are very badly kept at the moment, not for lack of will from the staff working there, but simply because the Victoria Tower simply cannot accommodate the facilities that we need in the modern era. We also do not have an education space that will last beyond another couple of years, because it only has 10 years from Westminster City Council.

My final point is that we should be seeing this as a training and employment opportunity for the whole country. If this infrastructure project is to succeed, we will have to have people coming from every constituency in the land, learning trades that they have never had, whether that is in encaustic tiles or wood panelling, as well as modern technology. We should see that as an opportunity. My fear is that we will keep on shilly-shallying and call for endless reviews, more papers and more consideration. The danger is that we will fail in our duty to this building. I think that there should be an eighth deadly sin for a Government Minister: procrastination.

3.35 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who speaks with great passion about this building and great knowledge about the challenges we face. All I plead for is realism. We have a clear objective: that this great building should remain the home of our national democracy. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House did not quite say that in his response to my remarks. It may be so obvious as to be implied, but it would be good if it was explicitly the policy of the Government that they envisage staying permanently in this building—even if we decant for a period, and even if the House of Commons chooses to meet in different parts of the country at different times, with this remaining our national home.

I mentioned the need for realism. The NAO report published in April highlights an enormous number of problems with this great project, not least a confusion of boundaries about who is responsible for what. In some respects, the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority have been put in charge of a project they do not control, because of us, because of the quirks of public opinion, because of the press and because of all kinds of added political risks.

I was unambiguously in favour of decant until I went around the basement and learned that, when we took the decision to vote for decant, we did not know nearly enough. I remain open-minded about the question of decant. While we are still learning, the cost of alternative arrangements and security has risen and risen. The opportunities for modularising on an incremental basis are quite apparent, particularly in respect of mechanical services. Sometimes we get a little carried away. We should not conflate the outside of the building with the inside of the building. The outside of the building is capable of being repaired while we are in it—the roof and parts of the walls are being repaired as we speak. It is perfectly possible to deal with the external fabric.

The problem of capacity is important, and it is the capacity of the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority that we should be most concerned about. They need to develop the capacity, expertise and skill to manage a very large project, and perhaps they should cut their teeth on a series of smaller projects, to build up their track record and expertise.

I come back to the question of risk. We all want best value for money. When large projects overrun, people often say that it must be due to the incompetence of either the contractor or the people who let or manage the contract. The bigger the contract and the project, the more complexities, the bigger the budget, the more people involved and the more risk. We see that in the procurement of new buildings and of large bits of defence kit. The risks compound and concatenate, and that is what will happen with this project.

As the NAO report makes clear, there are still so many known unknowns and unknown unknowns. The lesson from many of the cost overruns on the Queen Elizabeth Tower was not just on what could have been known—for example, somebody should have worked out what the scaffolding requirement was and costed it properly, which was a very big component of the cost overrun; there were also a whole lot of unknown unknowns that inflated the cost.

We have to accept that if this is to be a single big project, it is bound to overrun on cost and time because there are so many unknown unknowns. The question is whether the Sponsor Body should be charged with doing a single great project, or whether we should let it do it in bite-size pieces and learn incrementally; whether we decant is a secondary consideration. I hear strong arguments in favour of decanting, and I remain open-minded about them, but I spent 10 years looking at major projects, as Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee and then the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and everything we learnt about major projects told us one thing: the bigger the project, the more unpredictable it is. If there is one absolute certainty, that is it; it is the law of major projects.

I will finish with one final thought. Great emphasis is placed on what is known as "the requirement". What is the requirement? Is it simply to preserve the building as it is, with a new set of mechanical services, new windows, a proper roof and without bits of masonry falling off? Or is there a very different requirement, to make this a major statement about what our national democracy is, what it should mean and how it should engage with the British people? One thinks of what the German people did with the rebuilding of the Reichstag after the reunification of Germany.

Is the country in the mood for a huge national statement about this building and our Parliament, or will that simply add to the risk? I think the British

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public want us to do a job that makes this building much more relevant to them. I had many differences with the previous Speaker, but the construction of the Education Centre was an act of genius. It has brought tens of thousands of children through here every month and has been a tremendous exercise in the education of our people about the value of our democracy, anchored in this building, which communicates so much about the values of our democracy and its permanence.

If we want this refurbishment to make that kind of statement, how is that conversation to be conducted? Will there be a competition for different proposals to see what attracts us as parliamentarians? There is a great deal about engagement with parliamentarians; there needs also to be engagement with the people. The danger is that we decide on something and then there is a great national controversy, and one party or another is driven off course as it tries to win an election, and the whole project is thrown into disarray as somebody says they will save some money by cancelling it. We have to engage with parliamentarians and the people and develop a proper vision for this building before we ask the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority to embark on what is an almost impossible job—to manage the risks of this great project.

3.43 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I do not intend to speak for long, as others have contributions to make, but it is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), especially given the question he put at the beginning of his remarks about the status of this place as a seat of UK democracy in the future, because it is on that point that I want to provoke, perhaps, a new angle to the debate.

The current crisis has put a great deal into perspective in recent months and forced us as a society to re-evaluate some of our priorities. As such, it is right that the Sponsor Body is re-examining some of the options decided upon before the pandemic, particularly if public services are expected to come under further strain in the autumn and as we tremble at the thought of a possible severe economic recession. Plaid Cymru welcomes the strategic review, therefore, and is open-minded about some of the ideas suggested recently and during this debate, including Parliament's full decant, possibly beyond Westminster.

Some Members have mentioned that we might be debating other issues today. One thing that has become very clear in recent months is that we cannot go back to the status quo ante, in all respects of that phrase. In my opinion, we cannot go back to the old status quo, where public investment and political attention have been largely concentrated in one corner of the British Isles.

Communities across Wales are already experiencing job losses, and there is the threat of more to come. At this difficult time, perhaps we should be debating ways to increase investment in our infrastructure and economic packages of support for our small businesses and industries such as tourism that will take longer to recover from this pandemic. However, as I think the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned in his speech, this is the debate that we have.

Taken in that broader context, it is right to look again at some of the strategic options that are before us. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentioned, the amounts of public spending that we are talking about are sizeable. I think that the projected cost is about £4 billion, but, as others have, said it is likely to rise. It is right that we are debating whether there are other ways in which this project can be pursued and progressed that might be more beneficial to the public purse. If I needed to labour the point, to put the £4 billion into context, the additional funding that the Welsh Government received via the Barnett formula to deal with the present public health and economic crisis has been some £2.8 billion.

We cannot deny that the Palace of Westminster is falling apart, and the staff of this place deserve better, as well as everybody else. Others have mentioned falling masonry. I remember quite vividly an occasion about a year and a half ago when a piece of masonry fell from the roof of, I think, Norman Shaw North. It mercifully did not hurt anybody, but it did destroy a car. The dangers are there, and I will not go on to discuss some of the problems with asbestos and the cellars and basements.

If restoration and return is the only route open to us then of course I will support the safest and most cost-effective option. I do think, though, that an opportunity might be missed this afternoon if the debate only reruns the old arguments of whether we move out versus whether we try to stay and work around the building works—to decant or not to decant—especially considering that every year of delay has, I think, been estimated to cost a further £100 million of public money. A full decant, I believe, is therefore necessary.

I listened with great interest to the points made by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on looking again at options to decant elsewhere, beyond Westminster. Others have mentioned the comments by the Prime Minister about the possibility of moving Parliament to York. The historical precedents to one side, I will end my comments by playfully suggesting: why stop at a temporary decant to York? Why not go further and make the move out of London permanent? This place should still be restored, but as a site of historical and world heritage importance. The phrase "build back better" has been used quite a bit in recent months. There is an opportunity in this debate for us to live up to some of the rhetoric.

3.48 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): This debate has often falsely been portrayed as a debate between pragmatic modernisers such as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who by the way I cannot help liking and respecting—I do not know why, but I do—and traditionalists who are putting their own comfort first. Actually, the arguments are far more complex. I have spent quite a lot of time over the past few years talking to architects and mechanical and electrical engineers, and I personally believe that compared with the present plans, there are greener, cheaper, faster and better solutions.

May I burnish my credentials with those who say that we have to get on with this work by saying that 25% of the space in the Palace is currently taken up by unseen historical ventilation systems? I went round some of them yesterday. There are 24-hour fire checks in many

roof and basement areas. There were four fires in 2019, eight fires in 2018 and even a small fire in the basement last month. We all accept that the work has to be got on with as quickly as possible.

My contention is that if we follow the present plans, we will face years of delay and public inquiries, because when the original Joint Committee met, it was told that it could fit a temporary Chamber into one of the courtyards of Richmond House. It was given the wrong measurements and that is how we started the whole genesis of knocking down all of Richmond House.

Mark Tami: It was not so much that the Joint Committee was given the wrong measurements; actually, the plans were different from the structure that was built, and the basement turned out to be 10% smaller. I do not know whether the builder, whoever it was, had fiddled the system, but that was the reason.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful. That points out some of the problems.

I come to the present proposal to knock down Richmond House, which is, of course, a listed building. I never thought that I would defend a building younger than myself, but I am. It was listed for a purpose—to preserve it. It is an award-winning building. The best way to be carbon neutral, actually, is not to knock down an existing building, so even if people are in favour of full decant—I do not want to repeat all the arguments—we do not need to knock down Richmond House. I have been working with SAVE, the architectural heritage association, and it is perfectly possible to build a temporary Chamber in the courtyard. If it is temporary, it may be a tiny bit uncomfortable. There will be less of a tendency, once we leave this building, for the works to drag on for five or 10 years—and it will be five or 10 years. We have seen with modern voting systems that we can vote electronically. We do not need two wide Division Lobbies, and all the rest.

I am looking now to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I think that we can very quickly probably come to a kind of consensus—that we do not need to go to the super-gold-plated option of knocking down Richmond House and exactly replicating this space, with the Division Lobbies. They have even made the Division Lobbies wide enough to have the oriel windows, but we do not need those in any temporary future Chamber.

There is a better, cheaper, faster alternative, however, and I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). I have been working with Anthony Delarue, a well-respected architect, who has a long history of working with historic buildings. It is perfectly possible to have a line of route through Westminster Hall, St Stephen's Hall and Central Lobby into the House of Lords Chamber, which could be used by the House of Commons, as it was in the second world war, perhaps with the House of Lords put in the Royal Gallery. It would be perfectly possible, according to expert opinion, to have the services taken from outside—from services in Abingdon gardens or Victoria Tower gardens—and we could start getting on with this work now.

Contrary to the horror stories that we have been told, it is possible to get on with this work—to make considerable progress with the ventilation systems, the heating systems, the electrical and mechanical systems and the asbestos systems—while we continue to work in this Palace, which is the iconic home of British democracy. As we have heard, it has 1 million visitors every year. Do we really want to close this building down? I think that it will be 10 years—I do not think it will be five years once we lose control of this process. Do we want to lose 1 million people a year times 10? That is a lot of schoolchildren who will never visit this place. At least if we can keep Westminster Hall and Central Lobby open, and if we can have visitors coming to witness our debates in the House of Lords Chamber and visiting the House of Lords in the Royal Gallery, we will be doing a service to our constituents.

I repeat this vital point. We are told again and again that it is impossible to split up the services. I have been round in the past week with a mechanical and electrical engineer and he says that that is simply not true. After all, we create, in days, pop concerts for hundreds of thousands of people, but we are told, "No, we can't do that. We can't take services from outside. It's all too difficult. We have to surrender control of the process." I simply do not buy into that. I think that it is groupthink and, frankly, that we have been bamboozled in the past four or five years. There are alternative, costed, expert opinions saying that there are cheaper, greener and better ways to do this. If there is a real fire risk, and I think there is a real fire risk, why delay this whole process for years while we seek to demolish Richmond House, while we have a public inquiry and while we build a permanent replica Chamber?

By the way, what will we actually use that Chamber for? When visitors come here in 10, 15 or 20 years' time, do they want to be visiting a replica? They will want to see this Chamber, where Winston Churchill spoke, or Jacob Rees-Mogg—that great orator of the early 21st century. They do not want to be going to see a replica. It will be the most glorious white elephant.

And do we really want to move the House of Lords to QEII, with all the security implications and losing the rent that the Government gain from it? The plans for QEII are wildly extravagant: those involved want to create a rooftop terrace, and they want to demolish the existing conference hall so that the height of the temporary House of Lords Chamber is the same as that of the existing House of Lords Chamber. The fact is that this has become out of control.

I see the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), in her place, and we are the guardians of the public purse. Of course we have to put safety first and of course we have to do the work properly, but we do not need to have a feeding feast over 10 years or 15 years, costing between £10 billion and £20 billion, with this gold-plated option of demolishing Richmond House, moving out completely and stripping everything out of this building while we are evicted.

I end on this point: there is a compromise, and I wish my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) well. The debate has moved on, even in small things or not so small things. We were told even quite recently—I was told this by the present Leader of the House—that we had to knock down Richmond House because we needed more office space. That is a strange and quite a circular sort of argument: we need to knock down an office building to get more office

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workers. We do not need them. The entire civil service is now working virtually and the entire civil service will almost certainly go on to a three-day week. We have proven that we do not need an emergency Chamber in case of a disaster; we can work virtually for a few weeks or, indeed, a few months. The whole debate has moved on and we need to think again, but we do not need to delay. We can get on with the work around us now, and that is what we should do.

3.57 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I do rail a little against his comment about groupthink. If I remember rightly, there was a groupthink that we must stay here come what may, until we had a vote—I remember it very well—on 31 January 2018, when the House decided that the best option was to work up one option in detail and move out.

As the right hon. Gentleman said—he is an illustrious predecessor of mine as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, and I am delighted to be here today with the deputy Chair, the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown)—we do, all of us, value spending and watch how taxpayers' money is spent. It is not our money that is being spent on this place, nor is it our place. It is the nation's and the world's: it is a UNESCO world heritage site.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) talked about what makes big projects work. We know that there are many multiple projects within this big project—everything from how the masonry will be dealt with to the Education Centre, how the archives will be stored and the wood carvings, let alone all the mechanical and technical work that goes on. However, the challenge of a major project is to bring all those together and make sure that each is delivered in a time that means the others can carry on.

We therefore see the need for integration, and I refer to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) about the rail system. The integration of our rail system has illustrated one of the big problems with delivering such projects. We can deliver the tracks, the trains and the signalling, but if they do not all work together at the same time, passengers do not get a benefit. That is the challenge, and that is why we set up the Sponsor Body, after a lot of work by a number of us.

It is interesting how this House has divided today between those who have been very heavily involved in meetings, discussions and papers on this project and, hearteningly, a lot of new Members who have probably had less time to get into the subject. I hope that they have been listening carefully to those of us who have been very closely invested in this project.

The project will cost money, but it is not an either/or. On the idea that we should not spend money on a place that everybody who has spoken so far agrees is a huge fire risk and a huge health and safety risk, that money will not be available to spend on other things. Under UNESCO rules, as the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) highlighted, the Treasury is responsible within the Government for paying for this project.I have checked this out, and the Treasury is ultimately responsible for making sure that this place does not crumble and for maintaining it to UNESCO standards. It is vital that that work is done. As I say, fire is a real risk, and there is an important question here for the Leader of the House about who is ultimately responsible for the health and safety of all who work here and all who visit.

I disagree with the right hon. Member for Gainsborough again on the point about the visitors who would come here if we did it in parts. I would not ask schoolchildren from Hackney to come to this building if we were ripping out asbestos and there were building works going on. I would not expect my staff or the staff of this House to come here. I hope that the Leader of the House is taking that very seriously. Has he been talking to the trade unions and staff representatives, whom I have had the privilege to meet on a number of issues, and who are very thoughtful and considerate? They love this place, but they want people to be safe, just as I hope we do.

Value for money is absolutely vital, which is another reason we wrote in the role of the National Audit Office—to get it involved now, before any work is done. One thing I have been trying to promote as a member of the Public Accounts Committee—I put the implication out there, although there is only one Minister present—is more looking at projects before they go wrong, ensuring that the assurances and the methodologies are in place. We need to ensure that the Sponsor Body is set up well to do its job and to hold the Delivery Authority to account for whatever is ultimately delivered.

But how much longer? We have been waiting a long time for this. Some have talked about 2013, some about 2015, 2016 or 2018, but it is for 40 years, really, that we have been having to look at this. The amount of money and time spent on patching this place up is no longer justifiable. It is still taxpayers' money; we just do not see the big tag. Let us not kid ourselves that by avoiding doing it in one hit as a major project—actually, this building is a major project whichever way you cut it up—we will save money. That is a myth. Obviously, the full figures have to be worked up, but we would still be spending millions and millions.

Let us take the risers with some of the electrical and other facilities in them. For work to be done to take asbestos out, all that has to be removed and rebuilt outside the building, while ensuring that the connections are not lost. Then the asbestos is removed in roughly half-hour slots by someone in asbestos gear. It takes more than a year and costs multi-millions of pounds to do each one. There are contractors rubbing their hands with glee as we keep dodging the decision about getting on with this. A lot of people are making a lot of money out of the taxpayer's pockets—our constituents' pockets—and we need to get on with this quickly.

We need to be careful about the smoke and mirrors around whether there should be an exact replica of the Chamber in Richmond House. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant); I remember that there was a very loud cacophony of voices here saying, "We will not consider leaving this Chamber unless we have an exact replica." I am not wedded to an exact replica. I can do my job pretty much anywhere. I do not need this Chamber. I love this Chamber; it is a great place to debate, it is very atmospheric and it provides a lot of opportunities for us to get our

constituents' points of view across. But we do not need to have it precisely like this. We can compromise, as the past few weeks have shown. We have adapted very well.

We need to be aware, as well, of the smoke and mirrors from No. 10 Downing Street's suddenly announcing the suggestion of a move to York. I put the move to York for the House of Lords in the same category as the bridge to Northern Ireland or the estuary airport.

Chris Bryant: Or the garden bridge.

Meg Hillier: Or the garden bridge, indeed. Only £30 million of taxpayers' money went through the Department for Transport to the garden bridge, so that was a relatively cheap proposal by the current Prime Minister. We need to be careful: it is very easy, and very much a tactic of the current incumbent at No. 10, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), to throw out a random thought and let everyone talk about that, and meanwhile we stop talking about the real issue: that this place needs to be sorted, and it needs to be sorted now.

I turn to the Leader of the House again and ask him who is responsible if someone gets injured or hurt. Who would be responsible for asbestos poisoning in this place? I think it would end up being the Clerk of the House and the corporate body of the House of Commons. That means that the Leader of the House is sitting there and everyone is waiting for the musical chairs to stop, hoping that they will not be standing at the moment when a disaster happens in this House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can clarify that. The Clerk of the House is the responsible officer, and he takes his responsibility enormously seriously. He has made it absolutely clear that, if he thought there was a risk to people in this Palace, he would insist that the place closed.

Meg Hillier: That means that we have to be responsible for the Clerk of the House's sake as well, so he would not be left holding the problem if something were to go wrong. We had a fire only a few weeks ago.

We need to decide and get on with it—we have decided; there is a statute in place—and we need to make sure that we get on with costing the preferences and let the Sponsor Body get on and do its work. We cannot keep adding options or we will just build the cost and build in delay. We cannot keep changing our mind.

I am a patient and reasonable woman, I think, but I am angry at the prospect that we could be one of the last generations of MPs to stand in this place and my schoolchildren from Hackney could be the last generation to come to visit, because if we keep dodging the issue, we will have a pile of ash and rubble, not a beautiful world heritage site. We have to avoid that. We have to protect the people who work here. We need to get on with it.

4.5 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): As a relatively new Member of the House, I have not been party to many of the debates that have been referred to in the speeches of right hon. and hon. Members this afternoon, but I have found it enormously illuminating to hear the experiences that have been shared and, in particular, the insights into the advice that the House has received over many years about securing the long-term future of the building.

I am conscious that there are not many Members of the House who have detailed technical experience of the building trade, but there are a good many who have experience of the political oversight of major capital projects. That may be directly, in my case through projects such as Building Schools for the Future, the Priority School Building programme and the decent homes standard, or as stakeholders and consultees in those projects when the NHS or our public transport providers undertake major rebuild works.

From that experience, the warning signs are there of a major capital project that is running into some degree of difficulty. In particular, I highlight something that has been alluded to by a number of Members: the somewhat confused governance about driving the project forward. Who owns each of those decisions? Who owns those risks? At which point do those decisions need to be made to address the issues that have been highlighted by many Members on both sides of the House?

I have had the privilege over many years of visiting places that our democracy uses across the country, such as the Senedd in Cardiff bay, the Scottish Parliament and many of our town halls, although sadly not yet Stormont. A key characteristic of all those places is that they are first and foremost places of work and places in which our democracy delivers for the people.

We cannot open a commentary about the British economy without spotting references to that British disease, the lack of investment in our productivity. When we talk to the people about the rationale behind investing in new hospitals, new schools, new roads and improved railways, the same rationale applies to the need to invest in our democratic institutions. It is about ensuring that, in this place of work, we can be productive in the service of all our citizens. That is not about gold-plating, which has been mentioned a number of times; it is absolutely right to raise that as a criticism.

In all those town halls and each of those regional and national Parliaments, the focus has been not on making a major statement of national confidence necessarily, but on how we can do our job well in those institutions on behalf of the people, and on ensuring that the physical nature of those buildings supports the delivery of that agenda. That includes making sure that, whether it is the leaking school roof that puts the IT department out of use, or the inadequate wi-fi that means constituents cannot get a response, we have adequate facilities so those places do their job effectively.

There are many projects to learn lessons from. Building Schools for the Future is a good example of a project that started with good intentions but morphed into something that was about creating temples to learning. It became astonishingly expensive and, in far too many cases, ended up delivering nothing practical to school teachers and children who, to this day in some cases, are in buildings that were not fit for purpose 20 years ago.

The learning from that project informed the Priority School Building programme which, said we need to focus on doing what makes it easier for people to do their job in that environment at an efficient cost. That has resulted in a better spend of taxpayers' money and a

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faster renewal of many of those buildings, and it has ensured that the facilities are—that key phrase—fit for purpose for the future.

At a time when our Government nationally and Parliament collectively have set out a very clear commitment to investing capital, which is historically cheap at the moment, in improving our public realm for the benefit of our citizens, there is a compelling argument for investing that capital in ensuring that our political institutions are fit for purpose as well.

Let me end by raising two points that I have not yet heard addressed in the debate about this capital project. There are, no doubt, those with more experience who may know about them, but I think it is important to raise them. The first is that there does not seem to be a clear property strategy for Parliament. We have heard reference, for example, to the income-raising capabilities of parts of the parliamentary estate. We have heard about the need for different staff to be based here, and the learning from the virtual working brought about by the covid pandemic and what that means for the future need that this institution has for buildings. There is a very clear programme expressed by the Sponsor Body for how we keep this building intact, but there does not seem to be, as far as I can see, a great long-term strategy that says, "How do we ensure not just that this building here is preserved for the next 40 or 50 years, but the strategy for ensuring that this institution can function in the future?"

Chris Bryant: There is more of a strategy than perhaps the hon. Gentleman is aware of, but one of the things that has plagued the House for some considerable time is that, because we have been bound by Government pay scales, it has been quite difficult to get really high quality personnel to engage in some of the projects here. Sometimes that has meant that we have had to buy in consultants, which of course ends up being far more expensive. That is one of the things the Finance Committee has returned to time and time again, and it is why we set up the structure with the arm's-length body so as to be able to bring in that expertise at the very highest level, rather than constantly having to reinvent the wheel.

David Simmonds: I am very grateful for that intervention, which is illuminating. It sounds as though a suggestion from both of us is that it would perhaps be helpful for the Leader of the House and colleagues to consider a clear exposition to Members, and some thinking about what a long-term property strategy for Parliament looks like, so we can ensure we have the office space and the facilities for our security staff, our Members and our visitors which mean we can sustain this institution for the long term.

I will finish on this point. One thing that is very characteristic of all such major capital projects—we discussed this under the very able chairmanship of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), the Chair of the Finance Committee—is that there comes a point where a decision has to be made and the absence of a decision becomes a bigger problem than almost any decision that could be made to achieve progress. I saw that happen when my local authority, the London Borough of Hillingdon, spent £24 million with consultants on the Buildings Schools for the Future programme without a single brick being laid or sod being turned, because the project management structure was so complex and expensive, and it was not set up to deliver.

The recommendation that we make progress now on the refurbishment of Richmond House and the decant of Norman Shaw North is a wise decision that enables us to ensure that our staff and the Members directly affected are able to continue to do their jobs in a sufficient and adequate working environment. I think that was the outcome of the views debated in the Finance Committee last week. I very much hope, like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), that the review results in swift decision making, so we can ensure that the accusation of fiddling while Rome burns is not justified, and our constituents can see that, as we are doing in respect of our public transport, roads, schools and hospitals, we can make decisions about our democratic institutions, so that they continue to function productively and efficiently in the interests of the people.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid we must now have a time limit of six minutes in the hope that more people will get a chance, in the short time that is left, to contribute to the debate.

4.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds). If he is seeking, as I understand he might be, a chance to visit Northern Ireland and the Assembly, I am sure that that could be arranged. It could be one off his bucket list of things that he wants to do in life.

I have no desire to get caught up today in the most recent protests that have taken place throughout the nation, but something that hit me hard was seeing the statue of my boyhood hero, Sir Winston Churchill—to whom I give a nod every time I have the privilege of coming into this place—being vandalised and covered in graffiti. That was hard, because it reminded me not only of the man but of the victory over fascism that he symbolises. That is something that I and others in this House hold dear.

Similarly, when we discuss the restoration of this place, I do not regard it as I did when my wife decided to replace the windows and refurb the entrance to my home. When I queried the necessity for this, the bottom line was my main concern; obviously it was not hers. The restoration of this place involves the preservation of our history and a nod to the future of the nation. This is the thing that unites us all and where we are. To me, it symbolises where we have come from and where we are heading. As an Ulster Scot who keeps his money pretty tight, I know that money is vitally important and should not be wasted. I also believe that if we are going to do something, it must be done right.

We must cut the cloth to suit us, and the ladies in the House will know that the one dress that they never scrimp on is their wedding dress, because that is the most important dress they will ever wear. I have three

granddaughters, and I understand exactly how that dress will symbolise their dedication and commitment. Similarly, our Parliament is a symbol of the greatest democracy in the world, and my fear is that, amid the to-ing and fro-ing and the usual backbiting, we might forget the symbolic importance of this place and the vital nature of preserving this history.

Before coronavirus, I never once came to this place without seeing a massive queue of people from every corner of the world waiting to catch a glimpse of these hallowed halls and to experience a piece of history dating back to 1016. As I heard the American and other accents marvelling, I was reminded of the fact that America as we know it did not exist at that time and was home only to the proud native Americans. It is little wonder that they marvel at our history as they gaze at the magnificent hammerbeam roof in Westminster Hall, which is the largest medieval timber roof in northern Europe. It was commissioned in 1393 by Richard II, and it is a masterpiece of design. Every time I walk these hallowed halls, the weight of our responsibility to the history of this nation echoes along with my footsteps.

I am not someone who accepts change easily. I am apt to change, and I have to be, but when we need work done in the house or in the office, I arrange for it to be done in my absence. The thought of what is to come is not something that I look forward to, but the prize at the end is worth the upset and worth the finance. It is clear to me that work must be carried out here. Money must be spent and we may have to relocate somewhere else, if that is the option. We have had lots of options put forward here today, and every one of them is feasible. As an Ulster Scot, I would probably wish to see the one that costs less money and less inconvenience, and the amount that has to be spent will only rise with every month we put this off, as other hon. Members have said.

Let us get UK firms doing the work and support our economy at a time when we as a country need to invest in ourselves. Let us ensure that the workload is spread as well as it can be, and that not one penny leaves the UK. This is a very difficult time. Covid-19 has and will cost incredible sums of money; it is costing billions, and there is a demand on the funds that we can spend. We need a programme that will preserve and protect the fabric of this House, and we must deliver the value for money that is needed. Let us do this right. We must have a safe place for our staff—safety first—and ensure the preservation of one of the most important pieces of history, not just in this nation but in the whole world. Let us get the money set aside and the plans drawn up, and let us not for a second risk the heritage of these hallowed halls that we are so privileged and honoured to sit in today. Not to do anything would be a travesty.

4.19 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I want to talk about fact and fiction, place and purpose, and all in six minutes. But before I do so, let me speak about this place. Of course it is true that this is a great edifice. Its aesthetics are something that we celebrate and enjoy, and that are enjoyed, by the way, by all the people who visit here. We have spoken of children and many others who come here to see democracy at work. They would be deprived of that opportunity if we were to abandon this place for however long.

This place is, of course, also a working environment—a place of work not just for Members of Parliament here and in the other place, but for all those who clerk, clean, cater, serve us and serve the people by serving us. And their place of work is something special to them; it fills them with joy, too. What would become of them when we abandoned this place? Would they all be accommodated in Richmond House? Would they be offered some kind of redundancy package?

I see all kinds of horrors for those who in many cases have given a lifetime's service to this place, including, by the way, those who repair and restore it, because restoration and repair is a continuing process and has always been so. I mentioned a day or so ago that Geoffrey Chaucer was a Clerk of Works when this place was being restored a very long time ago, so let us not see restoration and repair as a moment in time. It is an inevitable part of the stewardship of this place, for we are just that—stewards; we have a responsibility to maintain it as well as to enjoy it.

Now, there are some who do not revere the character of this building and do not really much like the traditions associated with it. There are a few who argue that we should strip it out, start again and create some Parliament in the round—some terribly modern body in a terribly modern place. Well, I tell them that I estimate that that would not chime with most of the people I represent in South Holland and The Deepings, and I would say it would not chime with most of the people represented by other Members of this Chamber.

In the three minutes and 33 seconds remaining to me, I want to make five very quick points. First, T.S. Eliot said:

> "Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree: you cannot put your finger upon even the simplest datum and say 'this we know'."

The truth is that facts do not change, but what we believe is factual does, so we should beware of estimates. We should beware when we are told, "This will be more expensive" or "This will be done in seven years." These things always alter in every capital project, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) said.

Secondly, circumstances change too. We now debate this matter given all that has happened with covid. We should understand that when we first considered it, we were in an altogether different climate economically, socially and culturally.

Thirdly, let us look at precedent. There have been times when we have been forced to re-accommodate Parliament. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) reminded us that in the war we moved to the House of Lords, and most of Churchill's great speeches were made from there, not here, contrary to what many might think. So of course there is precedent for the inconvenience that comes from emergencies, and we should look to that precedent and see how we could—at our inconvenience—repair and restore this place while maintaining its life and character.

Fourthly, there is the issue of governance. Do we really believe that we are sufficiently capable in project management terms both to govern the creation of an enormous edifice at Richmond House, and simultaneously to govern and manage—carefully and skilfully—the restoration of this place? I would not be confident about that, and I would be very surprised if any Member of this House could say with confidence that it will not

[Sir John Hayes]

run over time and over budget. I do not think that we have the capabilities to do both, and we probably do not have the capability to do either in one chunk. We should be more modest about what we do and create a timetable that reflects that humility.

Fifthly, there is the issue of the character of Parliament. People say, "Let's strip out staircases. Let's make it more friendly." But it is the eclectic character of this place—its particularity and peculiarity—that is its charm. I want it to be inefficient and I want it to be eclectic. God preserve me from the efficient, clean, utilitarian life because beauty is not always clean, efficient and utilitarian, and love is not either—and I love this place and I know that the people love it too.

That brings me to the people, finally. We know that we can lead the people and follow the people, but we should not get on the wrong side of the people. If we go about what was originally proposed and spend billions of pounds building another Parliament a stone's throw from this one, doubt will quickly turn to disdain and disdain will turn to derision, so I say stick with the common sense of the people and stay put.

4.24 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I have been listening carefully to what colleagues have been saying, and I am struck that some speak with great certainty about the future. Unfortunately, I am not able to speak with such certainty. Indeed, one of the fascinations of life is that we never know what is going to happen. We have only to look at the state of the world and the country at the moment to see that we cannot be certain about the future. What I say to every colleague is that this Parliament cannot tie the hands of the next, and whatever is said in this Parliament could easily change.

Unashamedly, I am very fond of this building. Not everyone is. Some people think, "Oh, it's an old palace; throw it open as a tourist attraction" and all that, but I want future colleagues to share the thrill that I felt when I was first elected. This is the mother of all Parliaments; it is very special indeed. However, I had no idea that it was falling apart, and only when I served on the Administration Committee, and went to the top of Big Ben and saw the iconic clock and the problems there, and then went over the roof and saw the damage there, and then went to the cellars and saw how dangerous things were, did I think, "My goodness. This place does need some restoration." Without any question, therefore, I support the restoration and renewal of this place—some of my critics would probably say that I could do with some restoration myself, and I am open to offers on that account.

There is no question but that the deterioration of this building accelerated when we—how can I put this gently?—opened it to a huge number of people. Some would argue that that was the right approach, but when more and more people were visiting the place, that obviously did damage. Then we did away with our recesses because it was felt that it was not good to be away for so long. The recesses were used to maintain the building, but all that has been lost, at great cost.

As has been said, the sewers are in a terrible state, the façade is decaying, the electrics are awful, the roof is leaking, and there is asbestos everywhere. I know the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) does not want me to reopen this, but I do not agree that the elected Members of this place should leave the estate. When we held a vote on that, there were only 16 votes in it. It was rather close.

I was at Richmond House on the day it opened because I happened to be involved with the then Department of Health. It was a great joy compared to where we were in the Elephant and Castle, but I do not like the building just as—I am sorry if this upsets colleagues—I do not like Portcullis House. I am in love with 1 Parliament Street, which is where I have been since it opened, but that is down to individual taste. It is a crazy idea to demolish Richmond House and rebuild it, and I do not think the electorate will be pleased with that.

I congratulate the House of Lords on the brilliant way it has worked virtually throughout the pandemic. Some people are keen on a virtual approach, and they might want to consider that. I am keen for Members of the Commons to move to the House of Lords, which is very possible. I am advised that the Lords Chamber and the Royal Gallery could be serviced externally in terms of electricity and lighting. There could be enough working space for everyone, and that would eliminate the cost of converting the QEII building—it is absolute madness to spend £350 million on that. Work on the services for the whole palace, including the cabling and basement, could then go some way to allay the minimal disruption.

Since 2016, we have had Brexit and the pandemic. Money is so tight at the moment, and it will not go down well if we spend a huge amount of money on this project. In the first three months of the Sponsor Body, before any actual work starts, the cost will be £27.5 million—these are huge costs. It has been estimated that the programme will cost between £3.52 billion and £3.87 billion. Surely to goodness, in this day and age, we could get the work done in half the time that has been forecast.

This House should take the opportunity to rethink the plans for a full decant and instead consider a rolling programme of work on the Palace structure and services. That would save a huge amount of money, which the electorate would expect us to do. We should do the work continuously in three shifts. The project could then be completed in five years, and this great place could continue without interruption.

4.30 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): This debate and its predecessor debates have shown just how strongly people feel about this building. There is something very special about this place—people feel it whenever they come here. I certainly felt it when I was a new Member, and it does not fade with time, or at least not for me. Visitors whom I have brought here tell me that they feel exactly the same. Whether they are school groups or pensioner groups, the reaction is the same.

We are very lucky to work in a building that, alongside being a functioning Parliament, is an architectural masterpiece, a repository of our national history and one of the most famous buildings in the world. Not many buildings can be recognised globally by their silhouette alone. Its continuity as a central location in our national story is extraordinary. We reflect our national story in the architecture here, such as the Churchill Arch, constructed of rubble from the bomb damage in

the blitz. We reflect it in our art, such as the frescos on the walls depicting moments of importance. I always highlight to visitors the scene of Speaker Lenthall asserting the primacy of the Commons. We also reflect it in our procedures, such as closing the door in Black Rod's face at the State Opening, again to reflect the primacy of the Commons.

What we are showing is how our country has journeyed from one person, one vote, when that one person was the King, to one person, one vote, but with a universal franchise, and how our journey has not been a smooth one. These tell us of the struggle for democracy, how precarious it is and how it cannot be taken for granted. What I am basically saying is that we have something that cannot be replicated and is really worth saving. With that comes special responsibility for us. We all know that there are huge problems with the building. Those have been well articulated—it is always easier to articulate problems than solutions—but we must not be the generation of parliamentarians that fails to protect and pass on what we have, knowing its value and knowing the problems.

Our predecessors may not have grasped the nettle as they could have done, and we now face a bigger problem as a result. There have been many suggested ways forward—some of them have even been sensible. We have already voted on this issue. I would like to see some parameters or guidelines set for those who have the significant challenge of dealing with this project, to help them scope and define it and then help colleagues to contribute, understand and perhaps stick to its conclusions. It is clear that flexibility will be required from everyone. MPs must accept that there will be significant disruption. Changes to procedure may be necessary, but we have shown that we can do that in our response to the current crisis. Do we need to have so many people on site, or even so many people at all? Seeking to create an interim but exact replica of this place will drive cost, not value. We should be asking ourselves what we will actually need to keep Parliament functioning and fulfilling its duties.

There has to be more focus on value for money; our constituents would expect nothing less. Some of the proposals have had price tags which, frankly, have been fanciful and almost embarrassing. We are living in a world where the economy is much smaller as a result of this virus. Gold-plating temporary measures is not acceptable. Knocking down Richmond House does not feel like a temporary measure to me—it seems much more extreme—but we have to focus on value for money. That is critical. The control procedures for project management must be robust, given that it is almost inevitable that, as soon as work starts, there will be nasty surprises. I was struck by the wise words from my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) based on his experience of project management.

We will clearly need a very imaginative approach, as there are so many factors to consider and so many groups to satisfy. There is a lot of colleague concern that if we leave here we will never come back. I am sure that such concern could be allayed by a clear statement in the project objectives that if we choose to leave, our goal is to return to this place as our national parliamentary home. I recognise that I am not an engineer, as most of us in this place are not, so I am not going to be leaping to any conclusions. I am aware how much work has been done, but we need to bear in mind that there is still much more to be done. That is why when solutions are still being debated, we should be clear about the principles and recognise that we are some way off before the options for final progress are in front of us. It is disappointing that we are still in this place after many, many years.

I wish to give the House one last thought. Parliamentarians must support the restoration and renewal team to define this project as comprehensively as possible, and then MPs must stick to the definition and decisions. The lessons from projects changing their objectives during the course of their life, be they from national or local government, is that that is a sure-fire generator of time and cost overruns—that is project creep, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House does not like to describe it. Many Governments have had a tendency to put some questions into the "too hard" category, with some elegant, "It's not the right time" explanations for a deferral. We should not be taking the easy comfort of delay or pretending there are easy answers, as talk has suggested. We have to take our responsibility and make sure we preserve this amazing place and all that it tells us. We need to save it for future generations as our national Parliament, making sure not only that it is modernised, but that it is fit for service for centuries ahead.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry, but we have to reduce the time limit to three minutes, which I appreciate is a bit of a shock for the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), but I am sure that he will manage.

4.36 pm

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is not a debate I thought I would be speaking in, and I did not know much about it prior to becoming the MP for Wolverhampton South West. The issue has never come up on the doorstep and it does not fill my inbox, but as a new MP I think it is important to have a say. It is just a shame that 20 other colleagues around me from the new intake do not get to have their input.

One thing is clear from what we have heard today: we must take swift action. Doing nothing is not an option. We need to consider a lot of factors that have come into play now but that were not there before, the general election being one. The 2019 election brought nearly 150 of my colleagues into this place. Are our views the same as those of our predecessors? Ultimately we will be dealing with this project for many years to come, and that needs to be taken into consideration.

We are still in the covid-19 crisis, and it has changed the way that we operate here. We have seen pros and cons. I reckon that the covid pandemic has advanced technology in this place by probably a decade. We have worked, voted and debated remotely. Lots of things have been done, some of which have worked well and some of which have not, but we have seen what Parliament can do in a very short space of time under pressure. We have risen to the challenge. This site is a UNESCO site, just as the Black Country is—we have recently been awarded that.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that having asked the nation to be resilient and resourceful—and to work from home—we should be doing that as well and leading by example? Does he also agree that should an alternative be necessary, Dudley is exactly that place, as we have a zoo and a castle that just needs a roof?

Stuart Anderson: I love my neighbouring MP's passion for the Black Country, but I think Wolverhampton would be first.

As I said, this issue does not fill my inbox or come up on the doorstep, but if we get it wrong, it will fill all our inboxes. I would like to have heard more of my colleagues' views, but there are a lot of things that I simply do not get. I do not understand some of the decisions and how I would justify the current course of action to the electorate in Wolverhampton. When the great people of Wolverhampton say to me, "Why are you replicating a brand-new building nearby so you can live in semi-comfortable conditions when the rest of the country is having to change how they work?" I cannot justify it. I do not get the move to Richmond House. It is not something that I want to justify to the electorate, because I do not think it is a good use of money.

I would also struggle to explain to people why they cannot have investment in Wolverhampton when we are investing a huge amount of money in the project here, but I understand the importance of ensuring that we invest for generations to come so that they can enjoy this facility. I have had to cut my speech very short, but we need to level up the country and ensure that investment is spent wisely. I cannot justify a lot of the decisions that are being made at the moment as wise, and I could not pass them on to the electorate. We need to adapt to the work for the restoration of this great site. Too much has happened for us to sit back and take the same course of action. I believe that we can think of a new solution that not only restores the Palace, but keeps us here working under circumstances that, while not optimal, mean that we are doing what the rest of the country is having to do through the pandemic.

4.40 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), and I wish him a happy birthday for tomorrow.

I remember the first time I visited the Palace on a day trip to London with my mother when I was seven years old, and how I was mesmerised by these green Benches. Over the years, it has become clear to me that the building is just as fundamental to our democracy as the people in it, so we must do whatever is necessary to conserve it for future generations.

As Winston Churchill said in 1943 when speaking on the restoration of the building at that time:

> "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us. Having dwelt and served for more than 40 years in the late Chamber, and having derived fiery great pleasure and advantage therefrom, I, naturally, would like to see it restored in all essentials to its old form, convenience and dignity. I believe that will be the opinion of the great majority of its Members."—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1943; Vol. 393, c. 403.]

A great deal is at stake. My preference is for a rolling programme of work occurring alongside usual House business. I will support a full decant only if the Sponsor Body's review finds that it is still a substantially cheaper option, because value for money is vital. Indeed, our duty is, first and foremost, to be accountable to our constituents and the taxpayer, more so now than ever, given the economic fallout from covid-19.

The review therefore should provide not a fait accompli, but a range of costed options so that careful consideration and evaluation can be made of change versus cost. If there are changes to be made to this great building, let them be for safety and energy-efficiency reasons. I welcome the emphasis on improving safety for all who work here, as well as on the preservation of the building should the worst occur.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Picking up on my hon. Friend's earlier point, it is important to remember that this is not just a place of wood and stone. It is a place of stories that remind us of the lessons of history over centuries. We need to ensure as we move forward that we remember those stories so that we do not make the mistakes of the past, but learn from our glorious history.

Jane Hunt: Yes, indeed. We feel the hand of history on our shoulder.

The need to increase the building's energy efficiency in recent years has also been important. Members of all parties have rightly placed great emphasis on tackling climate change. I know that the Government are prioritising the issue, and I welcome the work that is being undertaken to determine how we can achieve a green recovery from covid-19, as well as the announcements in last week's summer economic statement on creating more green jobs.

I have had to cut my speech considerably, but I am incredibly proud and honoured to be able to play a role in our democracy and be part of the history of this place. We must preserve the atmosphere—the very nature as well as the fabric—of the building so that future seven-year-olds can come here, stand by the Mace, look up in awe, and realise that this is the place where they wish to be.

4.44 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), and to have heard the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members who have been involved in this project for a lot longer than me: for a new Member, it is has been very insightful. I shall attempt to remove some of the scaffolding from my previously arranged speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Opposition Members said that they would have liked to use this time to discuss other matters; such matters are important and weighty, but it is only right that we, the tenants in this place at this moment, should have a constructive discussion about the preservation of this architectural gem. We owe it to our ancestors, constituents and future generations to get the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster right.

The fire in 1834 was mentioned earlier; although a distant event, that incident is an invaluable warning. Less than a month ago, on 22 June, a small fire in the basement of the Palace was reported and dealt with; in 2019, four fires were put out; and in 2018, eight incidents were identified. Electrical wiring—not always at home within the old structure of the building—is often cited as a cause. Although tally sticks were the reason for the

1834 fire, wires could start a new one at any point. Last year, the world watched in shock as flames engulfed the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris. We must ensure that such a situation never happens here, which means eliminating any potential causes.

I welcome the Government's commitment to protecting this UNESCO world heritage site. In the coming months and years, not only will we build, build, build, but we will restore, renew and revive. I know this sounds like a bad advertisement for furniture polish, but in all seriousness, we will once again marry tradition with optimism and a drive for the future.

In 1840, in the aftermath of the 1834 fire, a four-decade-long reconstruction began. Throughout that period, artists and craftsmen alike poured their work into this magnificent building. Painters, stonemasons, carpenters, joiners, roofers, pipe fitters and many more from across the British Isles contributed to what was a massive project. Some of them cut their teeth here; all of them proved their skill.

Restoring and renewing the Palace will provide an exciting opportunity for both seasoned workers and apprentices, working on a once-in-a-generation project. The Government have championed apprenticeships, and I want to see young people from all four corners of this nation given an opportunity to develop their skill set as part of the renewal programme—the future of our country working for the future of our democracy.

There is precedent for major works occurring around the business of both Houses. Although sittings in the current Lords Chamber began in 1847 and in the current Commons Chamber in 1852, the construction of the new Palace was not finished until the 1880s. This place would be sorely missed by parliamentarians and I am sure that we, too, would be sorely missed, not least by the rodents with whom we share these premises.

4.47 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I had not expected to be discussing leave or remain again so soon, but politics is full of surprises. As a new Member of the House, I do not have experience of the long debate that has been going on, although I have listened intently to this debate. I can, though, comment slightly on this building, with which I have become more familiar over the past few months, and its importance.

We are shaped by our built environment. Architecture matters: it changes our behaviour. The Gothic style is perhaps one of the most powerful architectural styles. It has woven its thread throughout the tapestry of British history since it was introduced to this country in the 12th century. Our Gothic churches make one feel more humble before God; our Gothic courts of law help to reinforce the full might of the law; and in this Palace of Westminster, the Gothic style reinforces our reverence for our democracy and our sense of awe. The building reinforces the fact that we are not the first Members of Parliament to have been elected and that, as long as our democracy endures, as I am sure it will, there will be far more Members of Parliament to follow us after we are dead. That important sense of imposing pressure on us as legislators makes me think that we should be in this place for as long as we can be, so far as is possible.

It would be very symbolic if we were to leave. This Palace symbolises Britain in the way that the Eiffel Tower might symbolise France, the Colosseum might symbolise Italy or the Brandenburg Gate might symbolise Germany. It is powerful that Britain is characterised not by a folly or an ancient ruin, but by a building that functions as the beating heart of our democracy. Were we to leave, it would be a symbolic act, and one that we should approach cautiously. Were it to be the case that we must decant, it should hopefully be for as short a time as possible and as cheaply as possible. I think that a degree of privation on our part would be welcomed at any time, but now particularly so. I hold no particular torch for Richmond House, but I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for bringing to my attention the fact that it is perhaps possible to establish an alternative temporary Chamber within the footprint of the building. I hope that that idea is explored thoroughly, rather than the current plans. This Parliament—the Commons and the Lords—has met in here in Westminster for centuries, and I hope that in the fullness of time it will do so for centuries to come.

4.50 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Let us be honest. This is not a building; it is the home of our nation. Great events happen here. From Charles, King and martyr, who was condemned to die here, to William Rufus building Westminster Hall, this is such a monumental building that needs to be preserved and protected. We cannot have another Notre-Dame happening here. We need to protect it; we all agree with that. The question is, how do we do it and what do we need to preserve?

We have talked about the costs. Let us not see this as a cost. Money will be spent, but in the long run and in the medium term, it will save money. On top of that, as we are spending money, let us spend it on British workmen, British goods and British building materials. Let us use this as an opportunity to revitalise our economy—to invest in Britain. As I am sure hon. Members know, the very stone in this building comes from Rother Valley—from North Anston. I commend to hon. Members a book by my constituent Christine Richardson, which is all about the stone that comes from North Anston. Everyone should enjoy that, and get more stone back here from Rother Valley.

On the question of whether we should decamp or stay, I do not think we should decamp. We have a big building here. Yes, there are issues, but we were bombed in the second world war and we moved down to the other place. It is not just a bit of redecorating and refurbishment. We should not leave this building. We should move down to the other place. We should be where the Lords are, and they should decamp. We are the beating heart of democracy; the other place is not. We need to stay here. It is not beyond the wit of man to understand how to do that. Frankly, to say otherwise is defeatist. I will not have defeatism; I want to invest and continue building here. As I said, we need to use this opportunity to bring back and invest in British quality architecture and British redecorating, and use it to turbo-boost our economy post covid.

4.52 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I welcome this debate about the mother of all refurbishments. This building is the very fabric of our democracy. The building is steeped in such architectural and political history. It is

[Suzanne Webb]

the very bastion of egalitarianism. How I felt as a newly elected MP walking into the Palace is hard to put into words. Every single day I feel the sense of history that this building represents, and the bond that it has with the fabric of this great and united nation and those who have gone before me.

But what strikes me most is how much this building—this great place—means to those who work here: the staff who make this place work, from the Clerks to the Doorkeepers, to those in the Tea Room who make the best jerk sauce on this earth. With their dedication, their loyalty, their own sense of history and purpose in being here, and their pride, they are truly the loyal custodians of this great place.

We should not forget that this building stood tall and towered over covid-19. No matter how it has tried to change our world order, no matter how vindictive it has been, it did not overthrow democracy, and here we will all remain. For me, it is covid-19 that unlocks the answer to what we need to do—that is, we must continue to debate and continue the scrutiny of Government. We need this great place to remain open to ensure that that continues. This is not just a refurbishment project about bricks and mortar; it is a project to ensure that this great symbol of our democracy remains every single day. I hope the way forward will be the mother of all workarounds, protecting one of the world's most recognisable buildings and protecting democracy. But whatever we do, we must do it prudently and safely. This is the mother of all Parliaments, which has stood tall for over 900 years—and may it stand tall for another 900.

4.54 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I will be very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It does not matter who one talks to in any part of our United Kingdom, or, for that matter, in many countries around the world: the image of the Palace of Westminster and the Elizabeth Tower is the first thing that comes to mind when we talk about a Parliament. This is not just another building project; it is a project to preserve the seat of democracy and to renew this place for many years to come.

During normal times, this place attracts thousands, no millions, of visitors, and one of the incredible things about this being one's workplace is that occasionally it feels a bit like a zoo as well, with people looking in at what we are doing. That is a good thing. It is democracy in action and we must preserve it. I am very much of the view that in the same way as we care for our statues and monuments around the country, we must care for this historic palace for generations to come, because it is of global importance.

The frustrating thing, for me as a new Member of Parliament, is that we have been talking about this for 20 years. Now we need action. After 20 years of discussion, and having seen what happened to Notre-Dame, we must not disregard the danger of not taking this action soon. We need value for money, but we also need speed and care and a workforce drawn from the United Kingdom who can bring great craftspeople to this place to create a great place again. Parliamentarians and the public can see how this investment will benefit the future of this Parliament and the future of this great country.

4.56 pm

Valerie Vaz: The Leader of the House and I have kept our closing remarks short to allow more Members to speak. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken. The Sponsor Body is the body that will look after our interests, and I have great faith that the hon. Members on it will, on a cross-party basis, look after the interests of Parliament and the costs and keep those at the forefront of their minds. One hon. Member mentioned the Elizabeth Tower. We did not know what was going to be found there, and that is why the costs went up. On Richmond House, I am not sure, but I think there was legionella disease floating around somewhere, so it is important that we see what is going on there.

The review is important because Members can feed their views into it, and yes, we are not experts, but the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority do have experts on them. I agree with the many Members who have said we cannot do the work because all the services are connected. We do have to decant somewhere, although it might be for the Sponsor Body to provide an answer to that.

I feel sorry for new Members, because they have not been part of the debate, but I think the models were shown to them all at the induction day, so they knew this was coming down the line. I am pleased that many of them have taken part in this debate. We do not know the outcome of the review. Let us wait and see what comes up.

I want to conclude with a quote from the restoration and renewal programme's vision. That vision is

"to transform the Houses of Parliament to be fit for the future as the working home for our parliamentary democracy, welcoming to all and a celebration of our rich heritage."

To coin a phrase: let's get going.

4.58 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I obviously cannot respond to every point made, but if any have been made that require a response, I will write to right hon. and hon. Members. I also encourage those Members who were not called to speak to send their speeches to the challenge panel of the review board so that their views can be on the record. That is very important. If any Members have left the Chamber already, I will make sure they are notified of that suggestion. I will also send a copy of today's *Hansard* to the challenge panel so that they have the views of all right hon. and hon. Members.

This has been an excellent debate. We have listened to a lot of new and developed thinking, including some fresh thinking from Members who entered in 2019, which is extraordinarily helpful. Two things are clear. One is how proud we are of this extraordinary building. We have heard Churchill quoted about how we make our buildings and then they make us. That comment is so right. How proud we are of this magnificent building, which symbolises the democracy we cherish and the pride we take in it.

The other thing we realise is that in a time of economic difficulty we cannot spend vast amounts of money without ensuring that there is value for money. Everything that is done must be done with valuefor money in mind. If we have to take a little bit of inconvenience, so be it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Restoration and Renewal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, which is the statement, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

5 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 4 June).

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

Mr Speaker: Let me just say that I was asked for time for a statement this morning. The copy of the speech arrived at 16:59. I do not think that is acceptable, and I am not sure when the Opposition got theirs. As I was asked this morning, I would have thought there would have been better preparation to ensure that the Opposition and my good self received a copy. I hope you can bear that in mind, because it was not given the urgency that was needed, so a little bit more attention to detail and to making sure the speech is shared would be helpful. Let us come to the Secretary of State for Health—*[Interruption.]* It is no use shaking your head: it is one of those things. It is a fact.

5.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, I would like to make a statement on our action against coronavirus and the decisions we have been taking through the day today to determine the future of the action needed in Leicester.

We continue our determined fight against this invisible killer. The number of new cases yesterday was 642, lower than when lockdown began. According to the latest figures, the number of deaths in all settings is down to 66. We are successfully turning the tide, and part of that success lies in our ability to take action locally whenever we see it flare up. Often this is on a very small scale, swiftly and quietly, such as in an individual farm or factory, but when necessary we also act on a broader basis, as we have done in Leicester.

Today, I want to update the House on the situation in Leicester. At the end of June, we made the decision to close schools and non-essential retail in the city, and not to introduce the relaxations that applied elsewhere from 4 July such as the reopening of pubs. That was not an easy decision, but it was one that we had to take. At that point, the seven-day infection rate in Leicester was 135 cases per 100,000 people, which was three times higher than the rate in the next highest city, and Leicester was accounting for 10% of all positive cases in the country.

That decision was taken with the agreement of all local leaders, and I am grateful to the leader and officers of Leicestershire County Council, and the officers of Leicester City Council, for their support and continued hard work. Since then, we have doubled testing in the city and, through a monumental programme of communications and community engagement, we have been pushing our important messages.

I committed myself to reviewing the measures in Leicester every two weeks. This morning, I chaired a gold meeting of the local action committee to discuss the latest situation, and this afternoon I held a further meeting with local leaders, Public Health England, the joint biosecurity centre, the local resilience forum and my clinical advisers. The latest data show that the seven-day infection rate in Leicester is now 119 cases per 100,000 people, and that the percentage of people who have tested positive is now at 4.8%. Those are positive indicators, especially in the light of the huge increase in testing in the local area, but they still remain well above the national average and the average for surrounding areas.

[Matt Hancock]

Thanks to the incredible efforts of people in Leicester who have followed the lockdown, even while others across the country have had their freedoms relaxed, we are now in a position to relax some, but not all, of the restrictions that were in place. From 24 July, we will remove the restrictions on schools and early years childcare and take a more targeted approach to the restrictions on non-essential retail, replacing the national decision to close non-essential retail outlets with a local power to close them where necessary. This is all part of our more targeted approach.

However, other restrictions, such as those for travel and having social gatherings of only up to six people for example, will remain in force, and measures introduced on 4 July such as reopening the hospitality sector will also not yet apply. The initial definition of the geography covered by the lockdown was a decision that I delegated to Leicestershire County Council and that it made and published. The leader of Leicestershire County Council, Nicholas Rushton, has advised me, on the basis of the data and the best public health advice, that he recommends that the restrictions now apply only to the Oadby and Wigston area of Leicestershire, as well as the city of Leicester itself, and I have accepted his advice.

Some say that the local lockdown is unnecessary. I wish that were true, but sadly it remains vital for the health of everyone in Leicester, and the rest of the country, that these restrictions stay in place. We will review them again in a fortnight. I hope that this careful easing of restrictions will provide some comfort to people in Leicester and Leicestershire. I say directly to the people of Leicester and Leicestershire, "I pay tribute to you all. Your perseverance and your hard work have brought real and tangible results, and you have shown respect for one another."

I understand that this has not been easy. Strong representations have been made to me by my hon. Friends the Members for Charnwood (Edward Argar), for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) and for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), and by Opposition Members who represent the city of Leicester on behalf of constituents who have been impacted, and constituents who want to see the lockdown lifted. However, there is still a lot to do and the public health messages remain critical, so to them I say, "Please get a test if you have symptoms, keep following the rules that are in place, and please do not lose your resolve, because the sooner we get this virus under control, the sooner we can restore life in Leicester and across the country to normal."

This statement also gives me the opportunity to inform the House of an issue relating to testing. We have identified some swabs that are not up to the usual high standard that we expect. We will be carrying out further testing of this batch. As a precautionary measure, and while we investigate further, we are requesting that the use of these Randox swab test kits is paused in all settings until further notice. This problem was brought to my attention yesterday afternoon. We contacted settings using the swabs last night and published the pause notice immediately. Clinical advice is that there is no evidence of any harm and that test results are not affected. There is no evidence of issues with any of our other swab tests, and there is no impact on access to testing.

Our ability to take action on the local level in Leicester is the keystone of our plan to defeat the coronavirus, ensuring we can keep the virus on the run and defeat it once and for all. I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make a statement at this time, and I commend the statement to the House.

5.10 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Before turning to Leicester, may I ask the Secretary of State to update the House and comment on Sir Patrick Vallance's remarks at the Science and Technology Committee, where he said that SAGE had advised the Government to implement lockdown measures as soon as possible on 16 March? Why did it take a further seven days for the Government to implement lockdown if SAGE was advising them to do so on 16 March?

Let me start by putting on record my thanks to the city council and all the health officials, particularly our director of public health, Ivan Browne, for all the work they are doing to drive our infection rates down in Leicester. I welcome the extra testing capacity we have received as a city, including the door-to-door testing, and I put on record my tribute to the people of Leicester, the city where I live, for their fortitude in doing all they can to drive this infection down through 17 weeks of lockdown.

If we still have to make further personal sacrifices to keep people safe and hunt this virus down with the lockdown, so be it, but there is no doubt that there will be a degree of dismay across the city in response to the Secretary of State's remarks. We welcome the opening of non-essential retail, but many businesses were preparing to open their doors for the beginning of July and still cannot open their doors, and they will want to know whether they will get any specific extra business support. The Secretary of State suggested in a previous statement that they would, but the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), ruled it out.

The continued lockdown coincides with the traditional Leicester fortnight. I do not know whether the Secretary of State is familiar with the Leicester fortnight. It is the two weeks in July when our schools break up earlier than other schools across the country. That is a time when many Leicester families will have booked holidays, but they cannot go on holiday because they are not allowed to, and many travel companies are refusing to pay them compensation. Will he guarantee that families will not be out of pocket because they are not allowed to go on a holiday they have saved up for all year round? Will the Government step in, or can he force those travel companies to reimburse those Leicester families?

As the Secretary of State knows, Leicester is a city that suffers from high levels of child poverty, insecure work, low pay and a lack of decent sick pay. We have many deep-rooted economic problems and the spike or larger outbreak in the city appears to coincide with the inner-city areas where we know there are high levels of deprivation and overcrowding. We also have a large ethnic minority community, so will he explain why he has not yet implemented the recommendations of the Public Health England report on protecting those from minority ethnic backgrounds?

There has been widespread speculation about the garment industry. Can the Secretary of State tell us how many inspections by the Health and Safety Executive and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs have now taken place in Leicester's textile factories, particularly since the Home Secretary a couple of weeks ago promised us that she would stamp out any illegal exploitation?

We note that the Secretary of State has rejected the advice of the city mayor of Leicester to partially ease restrictions in parts of the city, although he has taken advice from the leader of Leicestershire County Council to ease restrictions in part of the county. Can he explain what the public health evidence is behind that decision? If the public health advice is to maintain, for example, the lockdown in the west of the city, when we know that the infection rates are at their highest in the east of the city, why does not that advice also apply to the neighbourhoods that border the city boundaries? This is one greater urban area. What is the public health reason why someone living on one side of Gilmorton Avenue—I do not expect the Secretary of State to know Gilmorton Avenue in my constituency, but it illustrates the point—is subject to restrictions because they fall under Leicester City Council, but is not allowed to cross the road to speak to the neighbour who lives opposite, because they fall under Blaby District Council? There are other examples across the city as well. If he could offer us that advice, we would appreciate it.

Leicester went into lockdown because of the infection rate and because it took so long to get us the specific data. Local authorities are still complaining that they are not getting patient—identifiable data, they are not getting data on a daily basis, and they are not getting contact tracing data. Yesterday, at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that we have a world-leading system—the best system in the world—for testing and tracing and it will avoid a second spike this winter, but we know that there have been problems with testing and tracing throughout. Last week, Sky News revealed that he has been overstating the test numbers by 200,000. Today, the Health Secretary has come to the House—we are grateful to him for updating the House—to explain what is happening with Randox. I believe that the £133 million contract was given to Randox without any competitive tender. Can he explain what is exactly wrong with these kits? How many of these presumably faulty kits have been used? Is there a health risk to anyone who has been tested with these kits?

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): He said there wasn't.

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position that there is not a health risk, but the Government are withdrawing these kits. How many people have these unsafe kits been used on, and why were the certifications not checked before the kits were used? These kits tend to be used in many care homes. We want care home residents to be tested regularly. We want care home staff to be tested regularly. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that those care homes will now get alternative kits rapidly?

Today we have seen more testing data come out. The Prime Minister promised that tests would be delivered within 24 hours by the end of June. I think the figures today show that only 66.9% of them are. On the tracing data, we see that only 71% of people are being contacted, not the 80% we were promised. Is not the truth that we now have swabs being recalled, contact tracing not meeting the targets, and Serco call centres with people not doing anything? It is all costing £10 billion and the Health Secretary is now bringing in McKinsey. Why is he throwing good money after bad? Why does he not invest in public health services, primary care and local health teams instead to do this testing?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman has spent weeks complaining about capacity to do things such as contact tracing and now he complains that we have too much capacity. He should decide on a position and stick to it. On the point about Randox and the kits on which we put a pause, the reason is that they had a CE stamp and, on investigation of the certification of that stamp, the certification was not forthcoming, so physical checks were done and we found that the swabs were not up to the standards that we expect. This is limited to the Randox element of the testing system, not the broader testing system that we have. I explained the clinical position, which is that there is no evidence of any harm having been done and that there is full access to testing, because we have plenty of other test kits available.

The hon. Gentleman asked about test and trace. Ninety-nine per cent. of the tests that need to be done quickly are returned the next day. More broadly, he asked about the comments of the chief scientific adviser to the Select Committee. The 16 March is the day I came to the House and said that all unnecessary social contact should cease. That is precisely when the lockdown was started. It is unusual to be attacked for saying exactly the same as the chief scientific adviser.

On the questions with respect to Leicester, the hon. Gentleman rightly raises the Leicester fortnight. Schools have effectively risen for the summer in Leicester already. Of course, I would urge holiday companies with which people in Leicester might have booked a holiday to reimburse them at this point.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the problem and challenges of insecure work in Leicester, and he is absolutely right to do so. This is a long-standing problem, and I think the whole House would strongly support action to ensure that illegal insecure work is stamped out. My right hon. Friend and colleague the Home Secretary is taking action where appropriate, but, of course, the public health response is vital.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the public health advice on geography. Given that there were no cases in many areas of the county that are part of the conurbation of Leicester over the past week, it was, I think, a reasonable recommendation to me by the county council to lift the lockdown in those areas. I gave the Mayor of Leicester the opportunity to put forward any changes he might have wanted within the city boundary, but he declined to do so.

Based on public health across the whole city of Leicester, within the city geography, incidence of this disease is higher than a sustainable level, and we absolutely need to bring it down. It is on the basis of that advice, and working with and listening to local leaders, that we took the decision on the geography of the lockdown in Leicester. I end by again paying tribute to people in Leicester, who are enduring the lockdown longer than others; it is their fortitude that will help to make their city safe again.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for special dispensation to ask this question remotely. I want to ask the Health Secretary about the worrying variation in coronavirus mortality rates between hospitals, which appear to range from 12.5% to 80%. There may be some issues of deprivation or ethnicity, but some of that variation is likely to be due to a failure in some hospitals to adopt best practice, which is what the Getting It Right First Time programme, led by Professor Tim Briggs, addresses. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and Professor Briggs to discuss whether the Getting It Right First Time programme could help to reduce covid mortality rates?

Matt Hancock: I would be very happy to meet my right hon. Friend and Professor Tim Briggs, who does an incredible job. He is a brilliant public servant, who has done great work on the Getting It Right First Time programme. As my right hon. Friend knows better than almost anybody, the unjustified variation in performance between different hospitals within the NHS is a huge issue across the board, because if the standards in every hospital were the same as the standards in the best hospital, the performance of the whole would be so much higher. That is exactly what the Getting It Right First Time programme was designed to deliver. It was instigated by my right hon. Friend, and I would be very happy to listen to what both he and Professor Briggs have to say.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Directors of public health in England are still complaining that they are not getting the information they need. They started to get area data only from late June, when it became clear that Leicester had had 900 cases in less than a month. Within a week, Leicester was back under lockdown. The Prime Minister has described this as his "whack-a-mole" approach to controlling covid, but does the Secretary of State recognise that for the people of Leicester it has felt just as bad as the national lockdown?

I have raised many times the issue of test results from the UK Government labs not being sent to general practitioners or local public health teams. Is it true that that was not even specified in the contract? Even after Leicester, and despite covid being a notifiable disease since 6 March, local authorities and health protection teams in England are still being sent only anonymised area data, which is of little use to identify clusters, and only on a weekly basis, which is far too slow. Does the Secretary of State not accept that public health teams need daily data, with work and home postcode details, so they can spot an outbreak, and that they need individual test results, so they can isolate all those involved to break the chains of infection and prevent the further spread of the virus?

The Secretary of State rarely mentions isolation, but surely he knows that that is what actually breaks the chains of infection. It should be isolation of affected individuals, however, not our whole society or a whole city. The test and protect system in Scotland has been up and running since the end of May and was able to disrupt a cluster of just 12 cases in the south of Scotland. That is the level of detail required to drive an elimination strategy.

The Secretary of State says that local lockdowns will be the cornerstone of his ongoing strategy, but how does he plan to deal with the social and economic impacts? Will he not join the devolved and Irish Governments in following an elimination strategy to avoid repeated local lockdowns? When does he envisage having a fully functioning test, trace and isolate system in place across England?

Matt Hancock: I am terribly sorry that I am not going to be able to answer all the points that were made. All I can say to the hon. Lady is that I will send her an update on the data that, in England, local directors of public health get, because there has been huge progress since many of the situations that she described.

I bow to no one in my desire to use data to make policy and to get the best data out. We have been getting better and better and better data out to local areas. We have been publishing more and more and more data. Many of the hon. Lady's comments were out of date.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Out there in the country, confidence that we have a clear path out of the global coronavirus pandemic is key, as is confidence that the Government will take the right, necessary but sometimes difficult, decisions for us all. We have seen some of that today with the two decisions that the Secretary of State has taken.

On behalf of my constituents, I thank the people of Leicester for the perseverance that they are showing. Will the Secretary of State assure me and my constituents in North West Durham, and in fact the whole country, that he will not hesitate to take similar decisions about local lockdowns if necessary in future?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. We do not ever want to have to bring in local lockdowns, but they are an important tool in our armoury to tackle outbreaks where we find them. I much prefer local action to involve individual specific premises or surgeries in a more targeted way.

I also pay tribute to Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, which has done a good job of bringing in local measures when it saw its numbers going up, before the numbers were anywhere near to where Leicester got to. That local council has done a terrific job. It is vital that we have that local action and that we do not resile from taking it. That said, we also recognise the impact that it has, of course, on the people and businesses involved.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Today, Sir Patrick Vallance told the Science and Technology Committee:

"It is clear that the outcome has not been good in the UK; I think we can be absolutely clear about that."

Although I am delighted by the Prime Minister's commitment to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) yesterday that we would have an independent inquiry, we need to learn lessons urgently now, ahead of a second wave, not least following the warnings in the Academy of Medical Sciences report earlier this week, which suggested that we need to rapidly improve test and trace capacity and our PPE resilience. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what he is doing to make sure that we learn from our mistakes?

Matt Hancock: We are learning all the way through about how best to respond to this virus. In fact, changing measures—making changes such as those we have made in Leicester today—is a good example of learning from

the progress of the virus and learning about how best to tackle it. That is just one of myriad ways in which we are learning and improving all the time.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I want to ask the Secretary of State about the revelations that the Americans and the Canadians have come out with about Russia trying to break into the vaccine testing regimes in their countries and possibly in the UK as well. How secure are the vaccine processes in the UK from cyber-attack from elsewhere, and is there anything further we need to do to make sure that other countries are not looking on this as some kind of stupid competition? We are all in this together, are we not?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. Our approach is that the vaccines developed in the UK—supported by UK Government and, ultimately, UK taxpayers' money—are of course there, should they come off, to provide protection to the UK population, but also to the population around the world. We are using our official development assistance money to help ensure that there is broad global access, should they work. On the question about cyber-security and potential hacking, the hon. Member will understand why I cannot go into the full details, but I can reassure him that the National Cyber Security Centre is taking this very seriously.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I return to the question of public confidence? I thank my right hon. Friend for the tireless way that he submits himself to scrutiny by parliamentarians and the press, but will he accept that the public do want to understand more clearly what mistakes were made and what lessons have been learned? Can I perhaps invite him at least to table a written ministerial statement, before the rising of the House next week, setting out the key lessons learned and how they are being implemented as we go into the autumn, which could be another very testing time for our country?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to do that—I would not deny the Chair of the Liaison Committee his wishes on that—and I am very much looking forward to appearing before the Science and Technology Committee next week to answer any questions it might have.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): What does the Secretary of State say to the man in Barnsley who, when asked whether he was contacted by test and trace whether he would isolate, said no; when asked whether he got covid symptoms he would isolate, said he would have to think about it, but probably not; and when asked why, said it was because if he did not go to work, his kids could not eat? This is the stark reality for many people in this country. What are the Government doing to make sure that people have the financial support so they can follow the Government guidance?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady asks an important question, and it is a question that we address by ensuring there is local support available, in particular when there is a local lockdown. Of course, there is the statutory support that is available, and good employers will ensure that people are supported. Our overall principle is that people should not be penalised for doing the right thing, and I would say to the man, "Please, get the test, and if you are asked to isolate, isolate, and make sure that you seek the support that's available."

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: Many of my constituents are a little confused about where they will have to wear masks in public places from next week. Could the Secretary of State just confirm once and for all: if they go to fetch a takeaway, will they have to wear a mask?

Matt Hancock: If people go to a shop, it will be mandatory from 24 July to wear a mask. If they go to a hospitality venue, it will not.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I am concerned by results from the charity Scope, which has undertaken research showing that one in five adults with a disability has said they will not leave their house until a vaccine for covid is developed, while just 5% said they would feel safe when shielding is paused. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that people with disabilities are protected, but also given confidence to resume their lives after lockdown so they do not slip further into social isolation and loneliness?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point, and she has rightly raised this point before. It is so important, especially as we lift the shielding measures at the end of this month, that people who have been shielding have the confidence to know that we are able to lift those measures because the rate of transmission of this virus is so much lower now. It is safe—indeed, it is recommended—that they go out and about. Many charities, including many that we have funded through this crisis, are available to help and support people in these circumstances. She is right to keep raising this issue, and we must keep working on it.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that lessons will be learned from the experience of the councils in Leicester and Leicestershire—to which he has rightly paid tribute—to ensure that all local authorities, including Buckinghamshire Council, receive all the detailed information that they need from his Department in the form and timeframe in which they need it, so that they can take action to protect their local populations?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend has raised this point with me, privately as well, about access to the data. It is incredibly important. We are constantly improving the data that is available because we are constantly getting better data. That is an important part of the work strand.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: We cannot praise enough carers, key workers and NHS staff during this pandemic, including, of course, in Leicester. My constituent Anthony Francis launched a petition for a national day of recognition for our NHS and key workers. He proposes 26 March, which was the first day of the clap for our carers. The petition has reached over 100,000 signatures from across the country. Will the Secretary of State commit himself to this?

Matt Hancock: I will certainly look at that; it seems like a very interesting idea. I think that clap for our carers was an absolutely brilliant initiative. I love the fact that it was essentially a social initiative. It did not

[Matt Hancock]

come from Government. We embraced it enthusiastically and all went out clapping, as did everybody, and a way to mark that permanently is something that I am absolutely open to.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): On Monday morning, I will attend the opening of the brand new Guildford ward at the Royal Surrey: a 20-room isolation ward, fully equipped with CPAP—continuous positive airway pressure—and built in just four months. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the local council on the pragmatism shown, and the hospital on its forward planning? Does he agree that in the event of a localised spike in cases requiring hospitalisation, the Royal Surrey will be well placed to deal with it effectively?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend is a great champion of the Royal Surrey at Guildford. The hospital has done a brilliant thing by, in short order, expanding its capabilities in this crisis, as have many other hospitals around the country. One of the positive things that have come out of it has been the dynamism and flexibility of parts of the NHS and their collaboration with local authorities. Both of those have risen to heights never previously seen, and I hope that we can bottle that best practice and make sure that we keep a dynamic, flexible NHS that works collaboratively with local authorities long into the future.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I accept that today we have to focus on Leicester, but perhaps I can revert to the general. Will the Secretary of State, during the recess, prepare a national plan for recovery to announce when we reconvene in September, and does he accept that we may have to face up to the fact that while we have to contain the virus, we may have to co-exist with it? We are facing over the summer a tsunami of job losses and business closures, and we will have to get Britain back to work.

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely spot on in highlighting the two vast challenges that this country, and every country, face: an unprecedented health challenge and an unprecedented economic challenge as a consequence. Both of those are extraordinary. Rising to and making sure that we deal with each of them as best we can is at the heart of every single Government across the world.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Secretary of State on coming to the House first to update us on the situation in Leicester. This week, a report from the Centre for Social Justice stated that we have 100,000 modern-day slaves in this country. It appears that many of those are in Leicester and that, unfortunately, created this high infection rate. What are the Government going to do to look into this matter and, if this is happening, to clamp down very hard on the people who are causing it?

Matt Hancock: The allegations my hon. Friend makes are ones that have been widely made and are widely understood to be a potential part of the problem. I speak carefully in terms of the language, because I know there are ongoing operations to deal both with the public health problem and with other illegality. This is a sore that has long gone untreated and undealt with in Leicester. It is absolutely vital that we add national resources to ensure we get to the bottom of the problem in Leicester once and for all, both the public health response and dealing with some of the potentially illegal employment practices that many people have raised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement on the health update for Leicester. On masks, I fully understand the need to wear a mask when travelling on a bus, a train or a plane, as I do twice a week. Everyone else I have seen who travels also adheres to that. However, there is uncertainty around wearing a mask and we need to bring the general public with us. Does he not agree that the Government message on masks must be clarified, as many people are questioning the appropriate time and the appropriate place to wear a mask?

Matt Hancock: It will, by 24 July, be mandatory to wear a mask in a shop, on public transport and in any NHS setting. It is then recommended in a broader range of settings. That is based on medical advice and on the judgment that we want to bring confidence to people that they can and should go shopping, precisely because of the economic benefits, which were raised a moment ago, that that would bring.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Medical nutrition has been vital for the treatment of covid patients in hospital, but it is also vital for those who require to be fed by tube at home. During this period, GPs have not, owing to working remotely, been able to use the electronic prescription service in the most appropriate way, which that has meant that many of the providers of medical nutrition have run up huge prescription debts. That is a risk for the future, so will the Secretary of State look at what can be done to ensure that the supply of these vital medicines can continue?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question, both because it is important and because in many places the electronic prescription was absolutely vital to getting through the covid period. I want to know of the examples he raises where it has not been able to be used during the crisis, because, in many parts of the country, using this sort of digital technology has been part of the way we have got through it.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Leicester's director of public health has said that getting the information needed about the outbreak in Leicester—data and so on—has been particularly challenging. That is of particular interest to my constituents, given that the demographic of Ilford South is remarkably similar, with large ethnic minority populations and many south Asian constituents. As we know from the recent Public Health England review, they have seen a disproportionate number of deaths from covid-19. I would therefore like to know directly from the Secretary of State what he is doing to get not only Leicester the information and data it needs, but every borough, including Redbridge.

Matt Hancock: This is incredibly important. As I said before, I bow to nobody in my enthusiasm for using data to inform better decision making, so we have been constantly improving the data available at both national and local level. There are now very sophisticated systems

in place to ensure that the directors of public health can get that information. We are constantly improving the information available to those who have statutory duties and have signed data protection agreements, so they can have access to much more information, and publicly without giving away confidential information about individual people.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): The Secretary of State is working on a package of support for care homes with an unusually high rate of vacancies due to a lack of applications at the moment. May I impress on him that for some the situation is becoming desperate? In Trafford, the number of vacancies is now 160. A week ago it was 147. That is an increase of nearly 9% in a week. May I ask him to give those homes some hope by communicating when they can hope to hear about the support package?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend has pushed on this point repeatedly, and all I can tell him is that that is vital and ongoing work inside Government.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: The fourth annual report of the Learning Disabilities Mortality Review Programme was published today, and it showed that people with learning disabilities continue to die prematurely and from treatable causes. Since March, nearly 40% of the deaths notified to the LeDeR process were linked to covid-19, compared with a quarter of all deaths in the UK. That group of people have been let down by our health and care services. They die 22 years before their peers, and they are now dying disproportionately from covid-19. Will the Secretary of State look urgently at the 10 recommendations in the LeDeR report, and consider what can be done to reverse that tragic loss of decades of life for people with learning disabilities?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. The hon. Lady rightly refers to an incredibly important report. We brought in a system of annual reports precisely to bring such issues to public attention. I am also glad to report that the number of people with learning disabilities and autism who are in secure settings has fallen significantly over the past few months—that is a connected area in which I know the hon. Lady takes a great interest.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: May I offer my support to the Secretary of State, who has been working tirelessly during this crisis? Epilepsy Society is a major charity based in my constituency. It states that people with epilepsy are adversely affected by covid-19, particularly because the fever associated with coronavirus can trigger an increase in the number of seizures and cause breakthrough seizures. Despite that, as the Secretary of State will know, people with epilepsy are not classified as clinically vulnerable for coronavirus or the flu, and they do not qualify for the free flu vaccine or any future covid vaccine. Will the Secretary of State look into that and ensure that it is remedied as soon as possible, so that we can protect that valuable cohort of people?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is an incredibly strong voice for those who suffer with epilepsy, and I will ensure that the clinical decision makers who make recommendations on the order of priority for any vaccine, both flu and coronavirus, take a specific look at the latest evidence on epilepsy. I cannot give her the guaranteed assurance that she seeks, because those decisions are rightly taken on the basis of recommendation from clinicians. I would not want to break that important principle, but I can ensure that the latest information, including information on the impact of coronavirus on those with epilepsy, is taken into account in the decisions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call Neale Hanvey, let me appeal for quick questions, not statements. If the questions are quick, the Secretary of State, who is being most assiduous in answering thoroughly, will be able to give quicker answers.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: A learning culture is the hallmark of any robust patient safety strategy, and being able to own, reflect on and learn from past errors is a defining characteristic of that. Across health and social care, that tone is set by the Secretary of State, so when concerns such as those of Professor John Edmunds about the loss of life relating to the timing of lockdown are raised, it behoves him not to be dismissive but to take them seriously. How can clinical staff and the wider public have confidence in the Secretary of State's leadership, when they can readily fact—check that his assertions were wrong?

Matt Hancock: The last bit of the question was a bit broad. Not all my assertions have been wrong, but I do learn and try to learn. Indeed, I have discussed openly some of the things that went badly and wrong judgments, as well as things that have gone well. I have mentioned, for instance, the fact that when we first brought in guidance on funerals, it had the impact of too many people staying away—spouses who might have been married for 50 years. We changed that, because it was an error. Absolutely, the learning culture is important. It is important that it is set from the top, and I am happy to be open about the errors that I have made—others can be open about their errors—and learn. I also think it is important to be robust where you think you have made a decision correctly.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend commit to using the experience of what has happened in Leicester to inform future measures in other areas, with a ruling on which essential workers should be able to keep working, with all the appropriate safeguards, such as those in our high-class engineering companies in South Derbyshire and elsewhere?

Matt Hancock: Yes. That links to the previous question, and this is one of the things we learned from Leicester. We had the power to close non-essential retail across the city. We will now take the power to enable the local council to close non-essential retail where necessary and therefore take a much more targeted approach. That allows us to fight the virus but with a lower negative impact on business. We are constantly seeking to improve the tools at our disposal—in this case, legislative tools—to fight the virus.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): This afternoon, the Government's chief scientific adviser revealed that the SAGE committee urged the Government to impose

[Zarah Sultana]

a lockdown on 16 March, a week before they did. The Secretary of State has just suggested that he responded by advising people to practise social distancing on that date, but advising people to socially distance is not the same as imposing a lockdown. That week-long delay could have cost thousands of lives. Why did the Government fail to act when SAGE called on them to, and does the Secretary of State regret that delay?

Matt Hancock: The shadow Secretary of State said this, and the hon. Lady is now trying again. On 16 March, I said to this House—and it was welcomed by the shadow Secretary of State—

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Orwellian!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Do not shout at the Secretary of State. He is answering the question.

Matt Hancock: Thank you. What I said on 16 March was:

"Today, we are advising people against all unnecessary social contact with others and all unnecessary travel."—[*Official Report*, 16 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 697.]

That is when the lockdown truly started.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the actions he has taken, which have isolated the virus and protected nearby areas such as mine. For our neighbours in Oadby and Wigston, can he confirm that these decisions are being made on the basis of scientific data and that the city and county councils have a significant voice in the decision-making process?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. The decisions that we have taken in Leicester are based on the data and the best public health, scientific and clinical advice, in consultation with the local leadership, hence the decision to ask for the advice of local leaders in terms of the geography of coverage and ask for their insight. As I said in my statement, I accepted those recommendations. As we have seen across the country, local councils have such an important role: Blackburn and Darwen, for instance, took the initiative to take the action that was needed. I pay tribute to what the council did there, because I hope that it will stop its area getting into the position that Leicester got itself into.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: It was shockingly clear at Prime Minister's questions this week that the Prime Minister had not read the report commissioned by his Government on the worst-case scenario for a second spike of coronavirus, which suggests that there could be upwards of 120,000 hospital deaths. Given the seriousness of this report, can the Secretary of State confirm that, unlike the Prime Minister, he has read it? What steps is he taking to implement the recommendations of the report, to prevent a catastrophic second spike of the virus?

Matt Hancock: The report was incredibly important in making sure that we cast ahead and look at all the challenges facing us, but it took the assumption that there would be no action from the Government should the R go to 1.7, and it is our stated policy not to allow that to happen. So although the report showed a worst-case scenario based on a set of assumptions, we are constantly vigilant.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: I appreciate the Secretary of State's answer to several questions about the learning he has done, because 10 days ago I asked him about information for the people of Hinckley and Bosworth, in Leicestershire. They want to know where the boundary is and what the implication is of any changes. Would he be kind enough to point out exactly where the boundary is? For the people who are now out of lockdown, will he say what that means in terms of the measures they are taking, so that they have a clear message to take home tonight?

Matt Hancock: I am happy to give that answer, which is very clear. For those in the city of Leicester, and in Oadby and Wigston, the position is that of the measures that I have set out: releasing, from 24 July, non-essential retail closure and closure of schools and childcare facilities, but keeping all the other measures in place. Those not in those two specific areas return to the same measures that the rest of the country is living with, except of course that we will keep the higher vigilance, the higher level of testing and the communications in those areas. The decisions on this geography were taken on the advice of local council leaders. While I have been on my feet, I have seen that the Mayor of Leicester has made some comments on this. I did ask him whether he wanted to put forward a different geography within the city of Leicester and he declined to do so, but we work very hard and as closely we can with Leicester and especially with the public health officials there, who are doing a valiant job in difficult circumstances.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): On lessons learned, given the circumstances in Leicester, does the Secretary of State agree that the Government made a terrible mistake in cutting the Health and Safety Executive's budget by 48% and in instructing the HSE to reduce inspections in the textiles industry by a third?

Matt Hancock: I have not seen those figures, but what I do know is that local councils have incredibly important responsibilities in this space and we will now act to make sure that we tackle some of the challenges that we find, especially in Leicester.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I welcome the targeted new approach to business closures in the local lockdown area. However, the current lockdown has affected businesses both within that area and outside it, because people have decided not to open for fear of an unmanageable number of people coming to their establishments. Will the Secretary of State look to offer additional support for those businesses?

Matt Hancock: The support available nationally to businesses, which is incredibly generous, is of course available to those outside the areas in question. I do understand the impact on businesses, both in Leicester and more broadly. All I can say is that that national support is available to all.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Over the past few weeks, I have exposed a significant risk of covid-19 in some York care homes. Those findings have wider application. Measures in the Coronavirus Act 2020, poor decision making and poor governance have undoubtedly led to increases in infection and mortality, and there are serious questions over the recording and reporting of deaths. Will the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers meet me urgently before the recess to discuss these tragic findings, so that lessons can be learned and lives can be saved?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to ensure that the social care Minister meets the hon. Lady as soon as possible.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The Secretary of State is assiduous and energetic in making himself available to answer questions at all times, and I am grateful that he has agreed to come before my Committee next week so that we have longer than we would have had today given this statement. In March, we did not have the testing capacity in place to cope with the volume of testing that was needed, and it took until May to get it. Sir Patrick Vallance said to the Science and Technology Committee this afternoon that we do not currently have the testing capacity needed for the coming winter. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that it will be available long before then, and that we do not repeat one of the principal mistakes of the current pandemic?

Matt Hancock: I was heavily and personally involved in making sure there was that rapid increase in testing capacity back then, and I am determined to ensure that the testing that we need for this winter is available. We have plans in place to deliver it. Of course, that needs to be built; it is not there now, but it will be built. Even if there are no breakthroughs on testing technology that would make testing much easier to access, we have plans to ensure that the testing capacity that is necessary for winter will be available by winter.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We know that distinct areas of the country are seeing local rises in the number of cases, so can he explain what urgent steps the Government are taking to increase testing in those areas? With his indulgence, as someone who is on week 17 of long covid viral fatigue, may I also ask the Secretary of State what additional resources he is committing to NHS support services for those who are, bluntly, struggling to recover from the virus?

Matt Hancock: I am very sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman is suffering from post-viral fatigue. It is a significant problem for a minority of people who have had coronavirus, and my heart goes out to him because I know how debilitating it can be. I am glad to say that we have brought in an NHS service. I will ensure that he has access to that service, as should anybody who is suffering from the symptoms of the fatigue that comes to some. I have also put just under £10 million into research to ensure that we get the best possible treatment. It is an area that is very close to my heart.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Tapadh leibh, Madam Deputy Speaker. In his statement on 7 July, the Secretary of State agreed with me that 80% of positive cases are asymptomatic and said, "We are using capability for testing of asymptomatic people." Unless we patrol for the virus, today it is Leicester but tomorrow it will be somewhere else. One serious gap for many communities involves the people returning from work as merchant mariners and oil rig workers. Most workers are routinely tested going on to oil rigs, but not coming off them, and I know of some oil rig workers who have tested positive having taken tests for various reasons when they have come off a rig. Will the Secretary of State commit to testing returning mariners, and especially those coming off oil rigs, because it is a danger and a gap that we have left open—that unchecked people may be unwitting asymptomatic coronavirus carriers. Will he please do something to close this gap?

Matt Hancock: I would be very happy to look into that. We have a number of surveys to find out which are the highest risk groups by occupation so that we can put in place asymptomatic testing to address that risk. Of course, many oil rig workers come ashore in Scotland. The UK's testing capability is significant on the west coast of Scotland, in Inverness, in Aberdeen and elsewhere. I would be very happy to work with my counterparts in the Scottish Government to test the hypothesis that the hon. Member proposes.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House as to the steps that Public Health England is taking to ensure that we are ready in the winter, if there is a second spike?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right to ask about that, but it is not just Public Health England—it is right across the board. It is about taking steps in the NHS and in test and trace to grow capacity in contact tracing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) just asked about testing capacity; we need to know that that is there right across the board. Public Health England has its responsibilities, but so do we all.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that the Secretary of State is so keen on data. My local clinical commissioning group tells me that it is still not getting the right data to GPs—it is quite clunky—and I think it is right in saying that GPs can see comorbidities, so it is particularly important that they get data about people who have been tested. We currently have an outbreak in the north of my borough and although we have the postcode data, we do not yet have the full address data, which is isolated to households. If we can get that very precise location, it will prevent a local lockdown. Surely the track-and-tracers are getting that data; can they get it to local authorities so that we can handle this situation locally?

Matt Hancock: I will personally ensure that all the data that we have on the hon. Lady's borough is made available to her borough—subject to a data sharing agreement, which I think is in place with Hackney—so that it can best address the situation. It may be that we do not have the data that is being sought, in which case we will be straightforward and open about that, and we might want to have a discussion about whether we can get any further data that is necessary.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State, the Department of Health and Social Care and the people of Leicester for their heroic efforts to suppress the virus in the city and prevent further widespread infections throughout the country. However, will my right hon. Friend comment on the levels of support and co-operation that he believes these vital efforts have received from the Leicester Mayor Sir Peter Soulsby and from the Labour-controlled city council?

Matt Hancock: We have been working very closely with the city council, and the officers of the city council have been doing a heroic job. I think it is best if everybody pulls together and tries to come together to tackle the virus. Given that we have involved local leaders in all the critical decisions, it is best if people just try —try—to stay on the same page as much as is possible, no matter how hard some people seem to find that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Secretary of State, two of the recurring themes of your statement today have been people asking—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Even at this late moment, will the hon. Lady please address the Chair, not the Secretary of State?

Christine Jardine: I do apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As we look at the lessons that we learn from the first wave of this virus, at the threat of a second wave and at the fact that the British public have been so keen to thank those working on the frontline—we talked earlier about clapping for the NHS—would the Secretary of State consider using his influence with the Home Secretary to offer migrants working in health and social care in this country the right to remain indefinitely?

Matt Hancock: We absolutely value enormously all those who work in health and social care. Just this week I was able to say that the exemption from the immigration health surcharge has been extended right across those who work in health and social care. That demonstrates the value that we place on them.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): My sympathies are with the people of Leicester. In north Wales, we continue to experience the low levels of infection that characterise a flat-topped curve, while containing local workforce outbreaks. I put on record my thanks to the care workers and staff at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board for tackling the different challenges presented by an outbreak of this kind. History teaches us that great tragedies present opportunities for innovation—for example, the great fire of 1666 gave us the origins of our fire service and modern insurance. Can my right hon. Friend give us any hope that any advances will come from this tragic pandemic?

Matt Hancock: I am a man who is an unashamed optimist. It is sometimes difficult to be an optimist in the middle of a global pandemic, but I am glad of the chance to answer my hon. Friend's wise question with some enthusiasm, because, amid the great tragedy of this pandemic, we have seen some big steps forward. The use of telemedicine and improved access to medicine for so many people through the use of technology is one example. Another is the advance and the march of British science, which has led the world not only in terms of the discovery of the first drug known to reduce the impact of coronavirus, but across the board in the scientific work that has gone on. I talked earlier about the flexibility and the system working in the NHS, which have to be the hallmark of the future of our NHS.

Those are just three examples off the top of my head, but there are myriad others. Amidst this dark cloud, when we see a shard of light we must take great hope from it.

Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 4 June).

Historic Churches: Covid-19

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(James Morris.)*

6.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, let me say what a pleasure it is to have you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I raise a subject that I know you have great interest in. I am very pleased to have an Adjournment debate; I usually intervene in Adjournment debates, but on this occasion I actually have one. I want to put on record my thanks to Mr Speaker for making it possible. I know that it is due to his forbearance and interest in this matter. When I spoke to him about it a week or 10 days ago, he was obviously quite intrigued to see what was going on and wanted to ensure that the House had a chance to hear the story.

Obviously, we are very pleased to see the Minister in his place. He and I came into this House at the same time and are friends. We have done the armed forces parliamentary scheme together, and many other things. I am very pleased to see him in his place, and I look forward to his response.

I am very thankful to have the privilege and honour of being the MP for Strangford, which boasts much rich heritage and history, with Greyabbey being noted as the best example of Anglo-Norman Cistercian architecture in Ulster. It was founded in 1193 by Affreca, wife of John de Courcy, the Anglo-Norman invader of east Ulster. Poor and decayed in the late middle ages, the abbey was dissolved in 1541, but in the early 17th century it was granted to Sir Hugh Montgomery and the nave was refurbished for parish worship until the late 18th century.

At the south-east edge of Newtownards, the substantial remains of a Dominican friary founded in 1244 may be viewed. They are the only ones of their type in Northern Ireland. Built by the Savage family, the buildings were destroyed by Sir Brian O'Neill to prevent English soldiers from using them. Sir Hugh Montgomery restored the church in 1607 and added a small chapel, but it fell into disrepair in the middle of the 18th century. We are also blessed to host the St Patrick's trail in memory of the legacy of St Patrick, the British missionary to Ireland, and many of the abbeys that were erected as his legacy exist only as ruins and relics.

Members may wonder why I am bringing up the history of those churches, but the reason is clear. Although they were designed as houses of worship, they are now wonderfully rich pieces of history, having lost their true purpose, and it would make my heart ache to see world-renowned St Margaret's, the parish church of Westminster, become another wonderfully rich old building that is not fulfilling its true design as a house of prayer and worship. It is also our church, as was discussed the other night. It is very clear that it is the church for MPs and Peers as well.

I was absolutely gutted to receive notification last week that services were to be halted at St Margaret's, and as time has passed I see that I am not the only one to feel that way. I thank every person who has signed the online petition, with more than 1,300 people asking for us to be able to make a way forward to enable that church to be a tourist attraction, because if we look at the background, it clearly is a part of the ceremony of this place—the House of the Commons and the House of Lords—and we want it to do what it was built for: to be a place for seekers of Christ to meet and worship Him. That is what the congregation are asking for, and that is what I am asking in this place. I am looking longingly and beseechingly to the Minister for that purpose: to facilitate as best we can the costs of churches, which are tourism attractions and places of worship, to ensure that they can remain open.

I think of St Mark's church in Newtownards, my main town. That beautiful historic building is a real central hub in the town, with children's work, work for disabled people, the women's institute, the men's group and a thriving community hub, whose primary aim remains to glorify God. That is what we need to see in churches throughout this land, and the fact that something completely out of our control—covid-19—has put some of those things in jeopardy means that we need to step up and step in, as we have done for almost all facets of life affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

I want to put on record my eternal thanks to the Government for all they have done.

I am very pleased to see the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) in his place, and I know that he wants a couple of minutes to make a contribution, if the Minister is happy with that. I am very happy to let that happen. The hon. Gentleman wants to raise some pressing matters, similar to what I am asking for, but for his own constituency.

Church tourism is a massive income generator throughout the UK. Four world heritage sites in the UK specifically include church buildings—Durham Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Canterbury Cathedral and Fountains Abbey. Of the 16,000 Church of England church buildings, 4,200 are listed grade I, representing 45% of all secular or religious buildings listed at that grade, and a further 8,000 are listed grade II. There are 340 listed buildings of national importance in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, and other listed faith buildings include 622 Roman Catholic churches, 537 Methodist churches, 306 Baptist churches, 69 Congregational churches, 28 synagogues and one mosque. So that is the magnitude of what we are asking for. A further 146 ecclesiastical sites are in the care of English Heritage or the National Trust.

Statistics for English tourism have revealed that 55% of all day trips include at least one visit to a cathedral or a church—the third most visited of all types of attraction. Church tourism is phenomenal, and one of the largest attractions is our own Westminster Abbey, which incorporates St Margaret's, just outside the House of Commons. It has an enormous number of visitors each year and creates a revenue that sustains Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's. What we need is some help and assistance. The amount of revenue created through the visitors to Westminster Abbey and Saint Margaret's is a loss somewhere in the region of £9 million to £12 million. It is enormous, and I spoke to the Secretary of State about it. I always feel a bit guilty when I see Ministers at teatime or at meals and say, "I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you…" I nab those opportunities and then think, "Oh, I hope he didn't mind me doing that." But he did not, and I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place.

A scoping study by the North West Multi-Faith Tourism Association estimated 17 million visits to 45 cathedrals and 52 places of worship. That is an incredible figure,

[Jim Shannon]

suggesting that each parish church typically receives around 700 to 4,000 visitors each year. That tourism absolutely provides revenue to keep those wonderful churches open and working, although they may need regular work carried out and may have smaller congregations. We understand that the size of congregations in churches across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is decreasing, and not just because of covid-19. But the virus has exacerbated that, and taken away that revenue stream. I read in the paper one day that one Church of England church had 150 people in the congregation, but when it went virtual there were 25,000 people. So there are other ways of doing church, but speaking personally, I love going to church. I have done so probably nearly all my life. I went because my dad made me go when I was a wee boy, but I now go because I want to go. I believe it is important to have the communion and the chance to pray and worship, and to do that in fellowship with other people. I am very much a people person and always have been. I find Zoom incredibly hard to get used to and I find the virtual Parliament extremely difficult, but I love coming here and intermingling with people. That is important to me.

The issue was highlighted to me by members of St Margaret's parish church who are desperate to find a way to retain their parish church. I believe there is a way to retain weekly worship, and I believe the House and the Minister can facilitate that. There has been a church on the site of St Margaret's next to Westminster Abbey since the 12th century. In 1614, it became the parish church of the Palace of Westminster. It has a regular congregation of between 70 and 120 people and more than 250 on the community roll. When I first came here in 2010, I was made aware that there was holy communion once a month at St Margaret's. That was my first attendance at a Church of England church on the mainland. I look forward so much to that Wednesday service. We were fortunate to have an opportunity for that just yesterday, not at St Margaret's, but here in the House. I know that many MPs and peers look forward to the encouragement that we get on a Wednesday morning through a service, holy communion and then breakfast at Mr Speaker's house. That cannot happen at the moment because Mr Speaker's premises are being renovated, but we usually go there for breakfast and it is always part of the occasion—part of the fellowship and part of who we are.

Services at the church are spiritually uplifting and beautifully led by the priest vicars, and the choral music is absolutely exceptional. I have loved the choral services that St Margaret's holds for the Palace of Westminster. We are blessed in the House to have some wonderful singers. Some right hon. and hon. Members have the most wonderful voices. I am sorry—I know their names, but I cannot remember their constituencies, so I will not name them because it is not appropriate. I have witnessed some of their contributions in St Margaret's and they are truly uplifting.

The congregation of St Margaret's is made up of an unusual mixture of local residents, employees at the Palace of Westminster, staff at Westminster School, Members of Parliament, parents of boy choristers, enthusiasts for top-class choral music and many other congregants, some of whom come halfway across London on a Sunday. Not a week passes without a visit from a former chorister, or someone who was married at St Margaret's, or someone who remembers it from their time working in London. I am sure that you personally, Madam Deputy Speaker, and hon. Members present can understand that, because we meet people who have worshipped at St Margaret's and they always say that it was a wonderful occasion. Tourists are not usually part of the congregation. Although they are welcome, they prefer to go to the Abbey. Sometimes the queues to get into the Abbey do not lend themselves to visitors being able to worship there.

There is an acknowledgement that worship will change—as has every church throughout the land. I understand that, but I honestly feel that aid from a specific churches fund will enable the Church to deal with the deficit caused by coronavirus. Indeed, perhaps new forms of income could be considered for during the week, such as conferences or exhibitions as long as Sunday worship is preserved. Sunday worship is critical for churches to survive. Could financial assistance be available through the £1.4 billion that the Government announced for culture, arts and heritage the week before last? Perhaps there is a way of doing that through the choral groups or the choristers. It is important to maintain St Margaret's if we can.

I believe that, as a body that uses St Margaret's when the need arises, we should play our part in this House not simply to secure that place. There are other historic churches that can normally stay open thanks to tourism income but are struggling, and I believe that we have a duty to protect them. It is not only about St Margaret's and Westminster Abbey, which are important to us in this place; it is also about other churches. The hon. Member for Ipswich will refer to them during his contribution. It must be remembered that before this time, those churches were viable and the congregations were larger. They simply need support at this time, not in the long term. If we move towards pre-covid-19 normality—I do not know what normality is; I do not think any of us do, but we hope at some stage to get back to normal—we can resume services in churches and resume the tourism, and we will hear again the many different accents, languages and voices that we used to hear whenever we walked out of this place.

I look to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which has striven to secure our arts venues, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I ask that historic churches, and on this occasion our very own St Margaret's, receive them the help that is needed to see her through this troublesome time.

In this time of fear and despair, the mental health impact of lockdown and bereavement is very real. It is very real to me personally, and I believe it is probably very real to every one of us who represents our areas, knows our people and knows the losses that there have been. I have had two good friends who have died through coronavirus. I was unable to attend both of their funerals and pay my respects personally to the families because of adhering to the rule on 10 people at a funeral. We hope to celebrate their lives at some later stage, and I believe we will, whenever we get back to normality—but that is not just yet. So this bereavement is very real to us all.

It is clear that churches, which have a vital role in our relationship with the Lord Jesus and our God, also have a role to play as essential community hubs. People want to seek God and His guidance and comfort, and to attend church at Sunday services with the prayer and worship that are a key component of this need. We must, I believe, facilitate that, and not see more churches falling or failing due to something out of their control—covid-19. I look to the Minister for the help that we need in seeing what can be done and what will be done to secure churches not simply as historic buildings but as places of vibrant and spiritually fulfilling worship. Thank you so much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance, through this debate, to ask that in this House.

6.26 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate on the effects of covid-19 on our historic churches. I completely appreciate how the closure of churches used as places of worship has been incredibly difficult for many people of faith.

Ipswich has 12 medieval churches, six of which are still used as places of worship, but I want to use this opportunity to briefly touch on some of the other six, which are now used to provide important community services. They include the church of St Mary-at-the-Quay near the waterfront in Ipswich. After a bomb skidded into the chancery in 1942, the church went unused for 30 years and was eventually vested in the hands of the Churches Conservation Trust. With its fixtures and fittings moved to other churches, it was a shadow of its former self, but it had a renaissance in 2008 when funding was used to restore it and give it new life as the Quay Place wellbeing centre run by the local mental health charity, Suffolk Mind. Unfortunately, Suffolk Mind had to take the decision last month not to reopen Quay Place after lockdown, partly because of a loss of income caused by covid-19. Quay Place has been an important feature in our town since 2016, supporting many local residents, and it will not really feel like going back to normal without it there.

Next, I want to talk about the financial pressures caused by covid-19 touching St Stephen's church in our town centre, with the borough council announcing that the tourist information centre located there will not reopen after lockdown. Even in the age of the smartphone, the centre was holding its own, selling theatre and coach tickets and advising tourists about Ipswich's many attractions. It is a loss that this important way for our town to welcome visitors will not reopen. Like St Mary-at-the-Quay, St Stephen's church faced a crumbling fate before its restoration in 1994.

The recent history of our local churches is a reminder that they have been through difficult patches before, and it is now up to us not to let them fall into obscurity again and to find new uses for them so that they continue to be at the heart of our community as we recover from covid-19. All our churches in Ipswich are invaluable, whether they are used for worship or as places of community. They are fundamental parts of our town's heritage and Ipswich's story. We must not let the chapter that covid-19 represents in that story mean that our great churches are allowed to gather dust, and risk them not being there for future generations to benefit from them.

I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford. Whether as places of worship or places of community, particularly in Ipswich—which we know is the oldest town in the country, much as Colchester might like to dispute that—we know how important our wonderful medieval churches are. I urge the Minister to provide any necessary support to ensure that we can keep these icons and these bastions of what is so important in our town.

6.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): First, I offer my sincere thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a very good friend, for introducing a debate on this important issue. As always, he spoke with great eloquence and knowledge about the matter. His passion for the Church and churches came through clearly, and we all know that that passion is shared by many of our constituents right across the country.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for his comments, in particular about the important community asset that is St-Mary-at-the-Quay church. My understanding is that the Churches Conservation Trust is working to ensure that the space is able to reopen and serve his community again.

As the Minister for sport, heritage and tourism, I am always heartened to see our historic churches and places of worship of all faiths evoke passion and commitment. Our historic churches have served as focal points for their local communities for tens, hundreds and even thousands of years. Across the country, historic parish churches are the lifeblood of the communities they serve. The hon. Member for Strangford raised many important points, and I hope to give him some of the assurances he was seeking.

Supporting historic churches protects our cultural heritage and our community cohesion. Although heritage is a devolved responsibility, I am pleased to say that the Government support the maintenance of historic churches throughout the UK by means of the listed places of worship grant scheme. The vast majority of historic working churches are listed buildings, as the hon. Gentleman said, and are therefore eligible for support under the scheme, which was established in 2001 to provide grants towards VAT paid on repairs and maintenance.

Since its inception, the scheme has made grants totalling more than £285 million and has played a significant part in ensuring that listed places of worship are in their best overall condition for many years. The scheme handles around 7,000 claims a year, is open to all faiths and denominations, and is delivered UK-wide. In 2012, my Department and the Treasury became joint funders of the scheme, with the annual funding increased to £42 million. The level of funding is guaranteed up to 31 March 2021, and any extension to the scheme is on hold until the completion of the spending review.

Further more, since 1994, the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded more than £985 million to more than 6,400 projects supporting the UK's places of worship. In response to the extraordinary times we are now all facing, the fund has refocused its efforts, temporarily halting new awards through its core programmes to provide a package of emergency support to help the country's heritage sector navigate the covid-19 crisis.

[Nigel Huddleston]

Covid-19 has had a profound impact on many of the individuals who regularly attend our places of worship and are responsible for their everyday care. It has affected the income of places of worship, including income derived from regular giving, tourism, venue hire, fundraising and many other measures, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. It has also affected the schedule of repair and maintenance for many places of worship, and over the past few months I have had weekly calls with representatives from the heritage sector about the impacts of covid-19, including representatives from the Church of England. Those calls have been incredibly useful and provided valuable insight into the challenges that grassroots organisations and churches have been facing and the support they require.

The Government are committed to supporting all heritage organisations, including historic places of worship, through the coronavirus outbreak, and I would like to explain a couple of the measures we have taken. To help our historic places of worship get back on their feet, it is important that we help them reopen as soon as possible and as safely as possible. The heritage working group that I chair, together with the places of worship working group, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), have provided input into the guidance we published last month on the safe use of places of worship during the pandemic. That offers a blueprint for safe, socially distanced worship from 4 July onwards. It offers in-depth guidance for places of worship, with specific advice for those based in historic buildings. Hon. Members will be aware that places of worship are still operating under a number of restrictions in terms of the types of activity that can be carried out. The Government are keeping their advice under close review and will continue to work with places of worship on the issue.

Let me also set out some of the financial support package that we have recently launched. In response to feedback received from organisations across all sectors, the Government have announced an unprecedented stream of support schemes. The highly visible job retention scheme is one part of that, but, with regard to support specifically targeted at the heritage sector, Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund are also administering grant funding worth more than £55 million.

That funding comprises the Heritage Fund's £50 million heritage emergency fund, which was launched on 1 April and is already helping places of worship across the UK to respond to the crisis by supporting them while closed and preparing them to reopen, and Historic England's covid-19 emergency response fund, which was launched on 17 April and extends a safety net worth £2 million to small heritage organisations. The grants will help organisations, voluntary groups and self-employed contractors to survive the immediate challenges posed by coronavirus.

Historic England launched a second emergency fund on 9 June to help to fund urgent maintenance repairs and investigations for Heritage at Risk. The £3 million fund will award grants of up to £25,000. Of course, listed places of worship are not precluded from the support package for the cultural sector recently announced by the Chancellor, the £1.57 billion fund that the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. The new funding will mean an extra £188 million for the devolved Administrations, including £33 million for Northern Ireland and £96 million for Scotland, while Wales will receive £59 million.

That funding will support our vibrant culture and heritage sectors, supporting hundreds of projects. It will also protect hundreds of jobs in our heritage construction industry through a £120 million capital investment programme supporting highly specialised skills and businesses such as architects and woodwork restorers.

Jim Shannon: I did ask whether there would be any help for the choirs and the choristers, because I understand, and the Minister understands, the importance of encouraging and retaining the choirs. We cannot lose that talent either.

Nigel Huddleston: It is not a debate without an intervention, as well as a main participation, from the hon. Gentleman. The eligibility criteria for that grant are still to be detailed, but they will be released very soon, certainly by the end of July. Hopefully that will give him further guidance.

Finally, on covid funding, the charity support fund is a £200 million fund to support registered or excepted charities, including eligible historic places of worship, to provide essential services for vulnerable people affected by the current crisis. We recognise that, notwithstanding these generous support schemes, there will still be challenges for our historic places of worship. They will face these challenges over the coming months as we resume normal activities following the pandemic, and we are committed to keeping the dialogue going and seeking to support this sector in whatever way we can.

My thanks again to the hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate. I know how important our historic churches are and want to see them and the country recover and thrive. Our historic churches are vital assets, treasured for their heritage, community and social value. They must be protected for generations to come, and this Government will continue to vigorously support them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It should be noted that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) almost always intervenes in Adjournment debates, he did not spoil his record, as he managed to intervene in his own Adjournment debate. That is quite an achievement—but it was an excellent debate.

Question put and agreed to.

6.38 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 July 2020

TREASURY

Public Service Pensions Consultation

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): Today I have laid in Parliament the consultation document "Public service pension schemes: changes to the transitional arrangements to the 2015 schemes" (CP No. 253) detailing proposals regarding public service pensions. In December 2018, the Court of Appeal identified that transitional protection arrangements provided to older judges and firefighters in 2015 gave rise to unlawful discrimination. The consultation sets out options to deliver the Government's commitments, made in July 2019 (HCWS1725) and March 2020 (HCWS187), to address the discrimination across the public service pension schemes and for all affected members. It also sets out the Government's intention to move all affected public servants to the 2015 reformed pension schemes from 1 April 2022. The consultation will run from 16 July to 11 October 2020. Furthermore, the Government are today announcing that the pause of the cost control mechanism, which was implemented in 2019 (HCWS1286), will be lifted. The Government will also proceed with the previously announced review by the Government Actuary as to whether the mechanism is working in line with original objectives.

Proposals for addressing discrimination

The consultation published today sets out proposals to address the unlawful discrimination arising from the transitional arrangements introduced when public service schemes were reformed in 2015. There are two possible mechanisms for achieving this: an immediate choice exercise or a deferred choice underpin. Both will enable all affected members, whether they originally received transitional protection or not, to decide whether to take the legacy or reformed scheme benefits for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2022. These options differ in the point at which the member makes the decision: the immediate choice exercise would be held in the years after the point of legal implementation in 2022; whereas under the deferred choice underpin, the decision would be deferred until the point at which a member takes their pension benefits. Until that deferred choice is made, all members would be treated as having been in their legacy scheme between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2022. Where members are already in receipt of their pension, they would get the choice as soon as practicable after the policy is implemented.

These proposals apply to all members who were in a relevant public service pension scheme on or before 31 March 2012 and remained in a relevant pension scheme on or after 1 April 2015.

The public service schemes affected by this announcement are the main public service pension schemes managed by the UK Government, Welsh Government and Scottish Government. Changes to the local government pension scheme in England and Wales, and the equivalent scheme in Scotland, as well as the UK-wide judicial pension scheme and the public service pension schemes in Northern Ireland will be consulted on separately.

Future pension provision

From 1 April 2022, all members who are not already in the reformed schemes and who are still accruing benefits in legacy schemes will be placed into the 2015 reformed pension schemes. The reformed schemes are important in ensuring that the cost of public service pensions is affordable and sustainable, while providing vital public servants with a generous, inflation-protected income in retirement. The reformed schemes are also fairer to those who do not see their earnings increase greatly during their careers such as many lower and middle earners.

Cost control mechanism update

The 2015 reforms also introduced a mechanism to control the cost of public service pensions.

This assesses the value of schemes to members and is designed to ensure members receive fair entitlement while ensuring costs remain sustainable. It has both a ceiling and a floor—when costs increase above the ceiling or fall below the floor, member benefits are adjusted to meet the target cost.

Following the Court of Appeal's judgment, the Government announced a pause to the "cost control" element of the 2016 scheme valuations, as the judgment led to significant uncertainty about benefit entitlements, meaning that at the time there was not enough certainty to assess the value of benefits to members.

Progress has now been made in the employment tribunals to determine a remedy for claimants, and the Government are now setting out their proposals for consultation. As the uncertainties about the current level of benefits have receded, I can therefore announce that the pause to the cost control mechanism will now be lifted, and the Government have started the process to complete the cost control element of the 2016 valuations.

When the mechanism was established, it was agreed that it would consider "member costs": i.e. costs that affect the value of schemes to members. As the proposals in the consultation published today will increase the value of schemes to members, this falls into the "member cost" category.

As a "member cost", this will be considered as part of the completion of the cost control element of the 2016 valuations process. Current employer contribution rates will not be affected. The Government have published an "Update on the cost control element of the 2016 valuations" today, providing additional details.

In September 2018, the Government announced their intention to ask the Government Actuary to review the cost control mechanism to assess whether it is working in line with original objectives. The review has been on hold, but I can today announce that it will proceed and report ahead of the completion of the 2020 valuations.

The Government remain committed to public service pensions which are fair to public servants and fair to other taxpayers.

Copies of the consultation document (CP No. 253) are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office, and it is published on gov.uk.

[HCWS380]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Regulating Consumer Smart Product Security: Call for Views

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): This Government have ambitious plans to ensure the UK's smart technology, products and services are more secure by having cyber-security designed into them by default.

From January 2017 to February 2018, my Department conducted a review, in collaboration with the National Cyber Security Centre, to identify proposals for improving the cyber-security of consumer smart products and associated services. This led to the creation of our code of practice for consumer internet of things (IoT) security, which was published on 14 October 2018.

The Government initially encouraged industry to adopt the guidelines in the code of practice for consumer IoT security voluntarily. However, in many cases, poor security practices remain commonplace.

In a consultation held in 2019, we found widespread support for the introduction of a mandatory cyber-security baseline for consumer smart products sold in the UK. As part of the Government response to the 2019 consultation, in January 2020 I announced the Government's intention to implement regulation to ensure that stronger security is built into consumer smart products, aligned with the top three security requirements of the code of practice for consumer IoT security.

Since then, my officials have been working with the National Cyber Security Centre, industry leaders and cyber-security experts to develop world-leading legislation in this space. Today I am pleased to inform members that we are launching a public call for views on the Government's proposed regulatory approach to consumer smart products on 16 July. This will run until 6 September 2020, and represents an important opportunity for us to test our proposed approach, and for industry to input and build a regulatory framework that is world-leading, promotes innovation, and protects consumers.

Our proposed regulation will set a cyber-security baseline for consumer smart products sold in the UK. The call for views will detail the scope of products the legislation would apply to, security requirements that we are proposing to mandate, obligations on producers and distributors, and a proposed enforcement approach. Following the conclusion of this call for views, we will develop our regulation approach further, before introducing legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

As a reserved matter, these proposed amendments will apply across the UK. The safety of consumer smart products is a priority across the whole of the UK, and my officials will continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations on this policy.

[HCWS375]

EDUCATION

Covid-19: Higher Education Restructuring Regime

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): The establishment of the higher education restructuring regime in response to covid-19 has been announced today.

On 4 May, I put forward a higher education (HE) stabilisation package which reprofiled public funding and introduced measures to stabilise admissions with a view to mitigating the impact of covid-19 on HE providers' finances. This package, along with the Government-backed business support schemes, provided substantial support to the HE sector. On 27 June, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy announced further support to preserve research capacity and capability in the research stabilisation package.

Many providers may continue to be affected by income losses across teaching, research, commercial and other activities resulting from covid-19. There remains significant uncertainty around the extent of financial challenge providers will face and the full picture of this will not become clear until the autumn term.

I recognised at the time of my announcement in May that there may be a case for Government intervention to support an otherwise sustainable provider's efforts to restructure its business and overcome ongoing financial threats caused by covid-19.

That is why I am announcing today the establishment of the higher education restructuring regime to support, in the right circumstances, individual HE providers in England at risk of market exit as a result of covid-19 and to intervene where there is a case to do so.

Providers in scope for consideration for support through this regime are those on the Office for Students register in the approved (fee cap) category.

The Government's intention is not to provide a blanket bail-out to the sector. It is not a guarantee that no organisation will fail. Instead, the Government will consider supporting restructuring of providers as a last resort and provided there is an economic case to do so. Restructuring plans will need to combine financial rigour and business efficiency with a strong focus on emerging from the challenges of covid-19 to deliver higher-quality provision to meet the needs of our economy and society.

The regime will take into account the following overarching policy objectives which will guide my Department's assessment of cases:

Protecting the welfare of current students.

Preserving the sector's internationally outstanding science base.

Supporting the role that HE providers play in regional and local economies through the provision of high-quality courses aligned with economic and societal needs.

Providers facing financial difficulties should continue to engage with the Office for Students as the regulator for HE in England. They may choose to approach the new DFE restructuring unit to begin discussion about potentially becoming engaged in the HE restructuring regime.

I will receive advice to support my decision on whether the Government should intervene in the case of an individual provider and the nature of the intervention from an independent restructuring regime board. This board will include experts on restructuring and the HE sector. Any financial support will be in the form of a repayable loan with clear conditions that support Government objectives. An assessment of the individual provider's business model and restructuring plan will determine the precise terms and conditions to be attached to any public funding.

I have deposited a copy of the announcement document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS382]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Human Rights and Democracy Annual Report 2019

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): I have today laid before Parliament a copy of the 2019 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) report on human rights and democracy (CP number 273).

The report analyses human rights developments overseas in 2019 and illustrates how the Government work to promote and defend human rights globally.

The report assesses the situation in 30 countries, which the FCO has designated as its human rights priority countries. These are Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

Almost 75 years ago, the UN charter established the three pillars of the UN's work: maintaining international peace and security; promoting and protecting human rights; and fostering development. As we mark the UN's 75th anniversary, the UK's commitment to these three pillars remains steadfast. This report details the UK's partnerships with human rights defenders, our leadership on promoting media freedom and gender equality, our work to eradicate modern slavery, and our commitment to deliver change for those who are abused, targeted, or killed for their religion or beliefs.

[HCWS379]

Cyber-security: Foreign Interference

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): I am today updating Parliament on the ongoing investigations into the leak of the UK-US free trade agreement documents ahead of the general election in 2019. The chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee has been briefed on the details of this incident.

The Government have robust systems in place to protect the UK against foreign malign influence. These bring together Government, civil society and private sector organisations to monitor and respond to interference, to ensure our democracy stays open, transparent and resilient. During the 2019 general election a cross-government election security cell was stood up to co-ordinate responses to threats and hazards relating to the election.

On the basis of extensive analysis, the Government have concluded that it is almost certain that Russian actors sought to interfere in the 2019 general election through the online amplification of illicitly acquired and leaked Government documents.

Sensitive Government documents relating to the UK-US free trade agreement were illicitly acquired before the 2019 general election and disseminated online via the social media platform Reddit. When these gained no traction, further attempts were made to promote the illicitly acquired material online in the run-up to the general election.

Whilst there is no evidence of a broad spectrum Russian campaign against the general election, any attempt to interfere in our democratic processes is completely unacceptable. It is, and will always be, an absolute priority to protect our democracy and elections.

There is an ongoing criminal investigation and it would be inappropriate for us to say anything further at this point.

The Government reserve the right to respond with appropriate measures in the future.

The UK will continue to call out and respond to malign activity, including any attempts to interfere in our democratic processes, alongside our international partners. We fully support the recent action taken by our German partners who exposed Russian responsibility for the hack of their Parliament in 2015, as well as their intention to act against those responsible under the cyber sanctions regime. The UK Government laid the statutory instrument for our own cyber sanctions regime on 17 June.

[HCWS384]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Liberty Protection Safeguards

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): This statement provides an update on the implementation of liberty protection safeguards (LPS). The Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2019, which received Royal Assent in May 2019, introduced LPS to replace deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS).

LPS will authorise deprivation of liberty in order to provide care or treatment to an individual who lacks capacity to consent to their arrangements, in England and Wales. It will replace a system that many agree is overly bureaucratic and complicated.

It is paramount that implementation of LPS is successful so that the new system provides the safeguards needed. The intention to date, subject to the Department for Health and Social Care's work with stakeholders and delivery partners, was for LPS to come into force on 1 October 2020.

It is now clear that successful implementation is not possible by this October. We now aim for full implementation of LPS by April 2022. Some provisions, covering new roles and training, will come into force ahead of that date. I will continue to update the sector and stakeholders on timings.

The Government will undertake a public consultation on the draft regulations and code of practice for LPS. That will run for 12 weeks, allowing sufficient time for those that are affected, including those with learning disabilities, to engage properly.

The sector will need time following the publication of the final code to prepare for implementation. We will give the sector sufficient time to prepare for the new system to ensure successful implementation. I am considering a period of approximately six months for this.

After we have considered responses to the consultation, the updated code and regulations will need to be laid in Parliament to allow for proper scrutiny. This needs to happen well in advance of the target implementation date, first to allow for that scrutiny and second because some of the regulations need to come into force earlier.

Health and social care has been at the frontline of the nation's response to covid-19, with social care providers looking after many of the most vulnerable in society. We have received representations from public and private bodies from across the sector over the last few months, outlining the pressures they face if they were to implement by October 2020.

My overall objective remains to ensure implementation of an effective system in particular for those whose lives will be most affected by this legislation.

The forthcoming draft code of practice and regulations will also offer more detailed information about how LPS will operate in practice. I will provide a further update on the progress of implementation in due course. I hope that the additional time announced today provides reassurance to the sector.

[HCWS377]

Patient Safety Incidents and Deaths: Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust

The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Ms Nadine Dorries): Following questions raised about the management of the Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust an independent review chaired by Dr Bill Kirkup CBE was established. The review report, published on 8 February 2018, found that there were significant failings in the trust from November 2010 to December 2014.

It is important that these failings are investigated, and lessons learnt to improve services. In response to these serious patient safety incidents described in the report the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care commissioned Dr Bill Kirkup to conduct an independent investigation into patient safety incidents at the trust.

These terms of reference cover patient safety incidents that occurred in the same period as the initial independent review addressed, namely November 2010 to December 2014.

This independent investigation is being conducted over three stages. Stage 1, which identified individual serious patient safety incidents that had not been reported or adequately investigated by the trust, and stage 2, an examination of a series of historic mortality reviews.

We are now entering stage 3, which will fully investigate those individual serious patient safety incidents identified from the previous stages to determine the scale of deaths and patient harm and identify local and national learning.

The work of the independent investigation panel is expected to complete by the end of 2021 and arrangements will be made for publication of its report to Parliament.

A copy of the terms of reference will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS376]

Learning Disabilities Mortality Review: Fourth Annual Report

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I am announcing today the publication of the fourth annual report of the learning disabilities mortality review programme (LeDeR). A copy will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Addressing the persistent health inequalities faced by people with learning disabilities is a priority for this Government and this report is an important contribution towards that.

The LeDeR programme was established in June 2015 to help reduce early deaths and health inequalities for people with a learning disability by supporting local areas in England to review the deaths of people with a learning disability and to ensure that the learning from these reviews lead to improved health and care services. The programme is led by the University of Bristol and commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement.

As in previous years, the report makes a number of recommendations for Government and its system partners to improve the care of people with a learning disability which does not always meet the high standard we would expect for each and every individual. We must carefully consider these recommendations to better support those who need care and take the right action as soon as possible.

Earlier this year, we provided an update on action being taken in response to the third LeDeR report and any ongoing actions highlighted in previous years' reports. This week, NHS England has also published its "Action from Learning Report" alongside the fourth LeDeR report, which sets out a range of work taking place to improve the safety and quality of care to reduce early deaths and health inequalities.

The fourth annual LeDeR report covers the period 1 July 2016 up to 31 December 2019, with a particular focus on deaths in 2019. This means the report will not include reference to deaths from covid-19, as the reviews it includes, and the analysis of them, were completed before the pandemic. From 1 July 2016 to 31 December 2019, 7,145 deaths were notified to the LeDeR programme. Some 3,450 of these were notified in 2019. In 122 of the cases reviewed, people received care that fell so far short of expected good practice that it significantly impacted on their well-being or directly contributed to their cause of death.

Based on the evidence from completed LeDeR reviews, the report makes 10 recommendations for the health and care system, as follows:

> A continued focus on the deaths of adults and children from BAME groups is required.
>
> For the Department of Health and Social Care to work with the chief coroner to identify the proportion of deaths of people with learning disabilities referred to a coroner in England and Wales.
>
> The standards against which the Care Quality Commission inspects should explicitly incorporate compliance with the Mental Capacity Act as a core requirement.
>
> Establish and agree a programme of work to implement the from the "Best practice in care co-ordination for people with a learning disability and long term conditions" (March 2019) report and liaise with the National Institute for Health Research regarding the importance of commissioning a programme of work that develops, pilots and evaluates different models of care co-ordination for adults and children with learning disabilities.

Adapt (and then adopt) the national early warning score 2 regionally to ensure it captures baseline and soft signs of acute deterioration in physical health for people with learning disabilities.

Consider developing, piloting and introducing: Specialist physicians for people with learning disabilities who would work within the specialist multi-disciplinary teams; a diploma in learning disabilities medicine; and making "learning disabilities" a physician speciality of the Royal College of Physicians.

Consider the need for timely, NICE evidence-based guidance that is inclusive of prevention, diagnosis and management of aspiration pneumonia.

Right Care to provide a toolkit to support systems to improve outcomes for adults and children at risk of aspiration pneumonia.

Safety of people with epilepsy to be prioritised. The forthcoming revision of the NICE guideline "Epilepsies in children, young people and adults" to include guidance on the safety of people with epilepsy, and safety measures to be verified in Care Quality Commission inspections.

For a national clinical audit of adults and children admitted to hospital for a condition related to chronic constipation.

The inappropriate use of do not attempt cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (DNACPR) decisions is highlighted in this fourth report, as it has been previously. DNACPRs should never be used in a blanket way and this has been reiterated during the covid-19 crisis through letters from the NHSE, including the NHSE medical director on 7 April 2020, and by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 15 April 2020.

I am clear that we must tackle the issues raised in the LeDeR report to ensure the care that each individual deserves is provided. We will consider the report and its recommendations in more detail in the coming weeks, in order to determine the action that must be taken.

[HCWS378]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 March to 31 May 2020

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

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

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2020)	6
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2020)	6
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	1
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	2
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during this the reporting period)	3

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. Second quarter TRG meetings took place on 31 May 2020.

One individual has been charged with two counts of breaching their TPIM notice. The criminal trial has been listed to be heard in January 2021.

[HCWS374]

JUSTICE

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme Review

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): Today I have laid before Parliament a public consultation on proposals following a review of the statutory criminal injuries compensation scheme (the scheme).

No amount of compensation can ever make up for the harm and suffering caused to victims and families by violent crime. However, compensation, alongside victims' services and other practical and emotional support, can help victims of violent crime to start to rebuild their lives.

In 2018, in the first-ever cross-government victims strategy, we made two commitments: to abolish the pre-1979 "same roof rule", which denied compensation for some victims who lived with their attacker prior to 1979, and to undertake a comprehensive review of the scheme, the last having been undertaken in 2012.

We met the first commitment in June 2019 when an amended 2012 scheme came into force. Victims who have never applied for compensation, perhaps because of the existence of the rule, can now do so. And we have also made provision for victims whose applications had previously been refused under this rule to reapply. I am pleased to announce today that over £10 million has been made available to hundreds of victims who applied under the amended scheme in the period to 5 April 2020. Under the amended scheme, victims can continue to apply up to 13 June 2021.

The review of the scheme has been thorough. We have looked at how the scheme takes account of trends in violent crime and attitudes within society, and we have examined the impact of the scheme's rules on particular victim groups who might apply for compensation. We have considered carefully the scope of the scheme, eligibility rules, requirements in relation to decision-making, the value and composition of awards, and the affordability and financial sustainability of the scheme.

The review has taken into account recommendations from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, and the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, and examined topical issues. We have listened to concerns and feedback, and tested criticisms and perceptions. Analysis of a three-year period of caseload data has given us a detailed picture of the operation of the scheme and the impacts of different rules on victims. We have found that for the vast majority of applicants the scheme is working well and as intended, but we recognise there are areas where it may not be serving victims as effectively as it might.

Underlying the proposals in this consultation are key principles that have been woven into the fabric of the scheme and which I believe must be retained: that it is a universal scheme that exists to support all eligible victims of violent crime who have suffered the most serious injuries, and that compensation is an important and public recognition of their suffering.

I want to make it easier for victims to understand and engage with the scheme. We have identified changes that I believe will improve the experience of victims applying to the scheme, by making it simpler and easier to navigate, and more transparent. We are asking for views on proposals including on:

Ways to simplify the tariff of injuries and to update provisions for disabling mental injury;

Reducing burdens in cases where a loved one is lost, by moving to a single bereavement payment for all qualifying relatives and to a flat rate funeral payment;

And removing the remaining "same roof rule" that has applied since 1979.

We are also consulting on the merits of a separate scheme for victims of terrorism, both domestic and international, and for views on legislating to make provision for families bereaved by homicide that occurs outside Great Britain.

The consultation is available in full at: https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/criminal-injuries-compensation-scheme-review-2020/.

[HCWS381]

Judicial Pensions and Mandatory Retirement Age

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I am today launching three Government consultations on proposals for judicial pensions and the judicial mandatory retirement age.

The independent judiciary is a pillar of our democracy and plays a unique role in ensuring our freedoms and prosperity. Every day, judges take decisions on critically important issues that directly impact on people's lives.

The importance and influence of our judiciary also reaches beyond our shores. Its reputation for integrity and impartiality helps attract international business to the UK, contributing to a legal services industry worth around £25 billion a year to our economy.

As Lord Chancellor, I have a duty to ensure that we have enough judges and that we continue to attract the very best legal practitioners to the bench. In its major review of the judicial salary structure, presented to this House on 26 October 2018, the Senior Salaries Review Body identified clear evidence of growing recruitment and retention issues at all tiers of the judiciary and pointed to pension-related changes as the main cause. The Government response to the major review, published on 5 June 2019, included a commitment to provide a long-term solution to these problems by making changes to judicial pensions.

Proposals for reforming the judicial pension scheme

The first consultation being published today sets out our proposals for reforming the judicial pension scheme to address the significant problems of recruitment and retention that we continue to experience. If we fail to tackle this issue, we put at risk the effective functioning of our justice system and its reputation. Without enough judges, cases will take longer, seriously affecting all jurisdictions. It will also undermine our ability to compete internationally for legal services, which are of such importance to the UK economy.

The proposed approach to pension reform offers a remuneration package which is both fair to the taxpayer and attractive to potential candidates for judicial office. I am confident that it will enable us to attract and retain high-calibre judges, ensuring the proper functioning of our justice system and supporting the UK's wider prosperity. The aim is that the reformed scheme will come into operation from April 2022.

This consultation document is available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-a-reformed-judicial-pension-scheme.

Proposals for responding to the McCloud litigation

Alongside the consultation on future reform of the judicial pension scheme, we are consulting on proposals for addressing the unlawful age discrimination identified in the case of McCloud in respect of the 2015 reforms of the judicial pension scheme.

The consultation proposes that the Ministry of Justice will run a single options exercise, which will give judges in scope of the McCloud judgment the choice of whether to have retrospectively accrued benefits in the 2015 pension scheme or the legacy scheme from 1 April 2015. Membership of the chosen scheme would continue until 31 March 2022, following which the reformed pension scheme is scheduled to come into operation.

Owing to the unique characteristics of the judicial pension schemes, the Ministry of Justice proposals are distinct from the approach being taken to most other public service pension schemes, as set out in HM Treasury's McCloud consultation, which was also published today.

The consultation document relating to the judicial scheme is available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-proposed-response-to-mccloud.

Proposals for increasing the judicial mandatory retirement age

Finally, we are also publishing a consultation on proposals for changing the mandatory retirement age for judges. The make-up of our judiciary has changed significantly in recent years and so have the resourcing needs of our courts and tribunals. We have responded to this change by increasing our recruitment programmes, but challenges remain. At the same time, life expectancy has increased. We are therefore consulting on whether to raise the mandatory retirement age for judicial office holders.

The proposals in this consultation would allow judges, coroners and magistrates to sit for longer and continue to contribute to the justice system. These proposals only relate to those judicial offices for which the UK Parliament has sole competence to legislate. The Ministry of Justice will continue to engage the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales on approaches to the mandatory retirement age for judicial office holders across the UK.

This consultation document is available online at: https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/judicial-mandatory-retirement-age/.

The consultations close on 16 October 2020 and the Government will publish their response to each in early 2021.

The three consultation documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS386]

PRIME MINISTER

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Today I am establishing an independent commission on race and ethnic disparities. This cross-government commission will review inequality in the UK, across the whole population.

The commission's work will touch upon many areas of public policy. It will make recommendations for action across government, public bodies and the private sector, and will inform a national conversation about race, led by the evidence.

I have assembled a group of 10 talented and ethnically diverse commissioners. They bring a wealth of experience from across a range of important sectors. In order to understand why disparities exist, what works and what does not, they will consider detailed quantitative data and qualitative evidence. They will also commission new research and invite submissions where necessary.

The commission will set out a new, positive agenda for change—balancing the needs of individuals, communities and society, maximising opportunities and ensuring fairness for all.

I have placed the list of commissioners and the commission's ambitious terms of reference, in the Libraries of both Houses. Commissioners will be supported by a secretariat in the Cabinet Office race disparities unit and will submit their report by the end of the year.

[HCWS383]

TRANSPORT

"A303 Stonehenge" Application: Update

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made under the Planning Act 2008 for the proposed construction by Highways England of a new two-lane dual carriageway for the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down in Wiltshire (also known as the "A303 Stonehenge" application).

Under sub-section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under sub-section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the Houses of Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on the A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down development consent order application on 2 January 2020 and the deadline for a decision was previously extended from 2 April 2020 to 17 July 2020 to allow for further work to be carried out.

Following notification of a recent archaeological find within the world heritage site, the deadline for the decision is to be further extended to 13 November 2020 (an extension of four months) to enable further consultation on and consideration of this matter before determination of the application by the Secretary of State.

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to give development consent.

[HCWS385]

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