

Thursday
24 September 2020

Volume 680
No. 107



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 24 September 2020

House of Commons

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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.]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CONTINGENCIES FUND 2019-20

Resolved,

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2019-20, showing:

A Statement of Financial Position

A Statement of Cash Flows and

Notes to the Accounts; together with the Certificate and Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—(*Maria Caulfield.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Creative Industries: Covid-19

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What further steps he will take to support people in the creative industries who are unable to return to work as a result of covid-19 restrictions. [906484]

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support the creative industries during the covid-19 outbreak. [906496]

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support the creative industries during the covid-19 outbreak. [906500]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenge): I recognise the huge contribution that the creative industries make both to the UK's international reputation and to our economy, contributing over £100 billion in gross value added. The Government have provided unprecedented support to employees and businesses through the furlough scheme and the £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund, and we will continue to do all we can to provide support and get the sector back up and running.

Kevin Brennan: I am afraid that what has been trailed by the Treasury in the media today will not do anything to help those in the creative industries who cannot work

because of covid restrictions, whether in music venues, comedy clubs or theatres, or any of the freelance workers in the sector who already receive no help at all, as we saw from the Musicians Union survey this week. When will the help that has already been promised in the package the Minister mentioned actually arrive for people in the sector, and will the new scheme be targeted to supply life support to our genuinely world-beating creative industries?

Caroline Dinenge: The Government's world-class support package has included the self-employed income support scheme, and about two thirds of our sector have been covered by that. Then, of course, there are the very generous extensions to universal credit as well. However, we know that it is very distressing for those who have fallen between the gaps. That is why Arts Council England has made an additional £95 million of additional support available for individuals who are affected.

Rosie Duffield: Equity, the performers' union, has drawn up a four-pillar plan to save the industry: providing financial support for workers, enabling the safe opening of venues, protecting vital arts infrastructure, and eliminating gaps in representation and pay. I know that the Minister has met Equity, so are the Government prepared to back its plan and save our performing arts?

Caroline Dinenge: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know that arts and culture is massively important in Canterbury, which she represents. In fact, it has received over £245,000 of emergency funding so far from the Arts Council. We have listened to the sector at every stage of this terrible pandemic. I meet its representatives on an almost weekly basis, from right across entertainment, arts, culture and creative industries. ACE is currently processing over 4,000 applications for more than £880 million of grant funding. We are doing absolutely everything we can to support the sector.

Mr Sharma [V]: Hundreds of my constituents are highly skilled and self-employed in the creative industries, but most of them have seen their incomes plummet, with no real chance of recovery for the next six months at least. I give the Minister another opportunity to reconfirm that the previous package is not working and is not effective. Will she commit to a new package that will save their incomes and ensure that they and their families do not face poverty?

Caroline Dinenge: I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman that this package of support is not working. In his own constituency of Ealing, Southall, there has been £47,000-worth of emergency funding so far, and £500,000 in total support from Arts Council England in this financial year. We know that, more than anything, those who work in the sector just want to get back to doing what they love. The £1.5 billion cultural recovery fund will secure the future of performing arts and live events and protect jobs in the industry to allow them to do just that.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Millions in our country long for live performing arts to return, none more so than those who work in those industries. Some 70% of theatre workers are self-employed or

freelance, but many are ineligible for the self-employed income support scheme and have been excluded from Government support since March, bringing extreme hardship. They desperately need the sector to be back up and running. While we support the Government's road map to reopening, we know that socially distanced shows are simply not viable without insurance against covid cancellations. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee agrees, warning that without a pandemic indemnity scheme,

"efforts to resume filming, touring and live performance are doomed to failure".

What representations has the Minister made to her Treasury colleagues for insurance support similar to that for film and television so that our incredible creative workforce can get back to what they do best when it is safe to do so?

Caroline Dinenage: As I have already articulated, I meet the sector on a very regular basis, and actually it has been its feedback that has helped to form, to shape and to drive the cultural recovery fund as we have it today. As I have explained, there is £95 million of additional support in there for individuals, including freelancers. We continue to listen. We continue to talk to Treasury colleagues to make sure that we are creative, inventive and thoughtful and doing everything we can to get our sectors back up and running.

TV Licences: Over-75s Concession

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What plans the Government has to reintroduce the TV licence concession for people aged over 75. [906485]

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The Government remain disappointed by the decision of the BBC to restrict the over-75 concession to those on pension credit. However, the responsibility for that was given to the BBC under the Digital Economy Act 2017, passed by Parliament, and it is a matter for the BBC.

Gerald Jones: For many older and vulnerable residents, losing their free TV licence means losing not only entertainment and a source of news, but companionship, which is hugely important as we go into winter and many people across the country face restrictions on movement. Will the Minister do the right thing, stop hiding behind the BBC, take another look at this policy, stick to his manifesto commitment and keep free television licences for over-75s until 2022?

Mr Whittingdale: The Conservative manifesto did say that we believed it should be funded by the BBC. Those who are on low incomes and are eligible for pension credit will continue to receive a free licence. I hope that all those who may be eligible make sure they receive pension credit. The Government continue to believe that the BBC needs to do more to support older people.

Culture Recovery Fund

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering support for the culture and heritage sector through the culture recovery fund. [906486]

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering support for the culture and heritage sector through the culture recovery fund. [906498]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): Arts and heritage are the heart and soul of our communities across the whole nation. That is why we announced the unprecedented £1.57 billion culture recovery fund to help countless organisations to weather this covid storm. We have already saved 135 grassroots music venues from imminent collapse. Arts Council England and other DCMS arms-length bodies are currently assessing thousands of applications from other organisations, and successful applicants will be informed from October.

Laura Trott: Despite heroic efforts from the local community and local councils, the much-loved Stag theatre in Sevenoaks is at risk. Will my right hon. Friend wish the Stag luck in its upcoming application to the culture recovery fund? If it is successful and is saved, will he join me at the annual pantomime to mark the end of a challenging year?

Mr Speaker: I think it's more a cheque than luck!

Oliver Dowden: Of course, I am very happy to wish it the very best of luck. The actual decision will be made by Arts Council England. Were the theatre to be successful, and indeed in any event, I would of course be delighted to join my hon. Friend in a pantomime performance. I know it is facing very difficult circumstances at the moment, particularly as a not-for-profit charity dependent on income from ticket sales. I understand that it has made its application and that it is currently being considered.

Mr Speaker: On that basis, she's behind you—Sarah Dines!

Miss Dines: Will the Secretary of State consider utilising leftover funds from the culture recovery fund to create an emergency fund that historic house wedding venues, like many in the Derbyshire Dales constituency, will be eligible to apply to for emergency assistance in these difficult times?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Our wonderful country houses are a real pillar of our cultural life. Indeed, I had a wonderful visit to Knebworth House in Hertfordshire, and I know what a central role they play not just as cultural institutions but as venues. As she will know, the Government have provided extensive support across the economy through furlough, business loans and VAT relief that will have benefited them, but of course we will continue to look at other proposals.

International Funding

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What steps he is taking to help maintain access to international funding for the culture sector after the transition period. [906487]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): By taking back control of our money, we are able to focus on spending that reflects the needs and ambitions

of UK artists and creative professionals. This includes considering alternatives to former international funding programmes. We are committed to supporting our world-leading culture sector to continue to grow and flourish.

Dr Whitford: As we have already heard from Members in this Chamber this morning, the culture sector has been hit hard by the covid pandemic and many organisations are struggling to simply survive. EU membership is not a requirement of the programme, so why are the Government ending the UK's membership of Creative Europe?

Caroline Dinage: Creative Europe funds co-operation across cultural and audio-visual sectors, as the hon. Lady knows. The value of it is roughly £4 million a year. The Government decided that the UK would not continue to participate, but UK beneficiaries will continue to benefit from the programmes for the lifetime of their project, which in many cases runs beyond 2020. In the meantime, we are working in partnership with the devolved Administrations on domestic alternatives, which will be considered as part of the forthcoming spending review.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: That was simply not good enough from the Minister. The preamble to the constitution of UNESCO states:

“since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”,

and that is the guiding principle of so many cross-border cultural initiatives such as Creative Europe. The decision to end our participation in the programme not only erects barriers to cultural exchange but sends a loud and clear message to our closest neighbours that Britain is closed for collaboration. With non-EU members such as Norway, Ukraine and even Tunisia participating, can the Minister explain the UK Government's decision to withdraw from Creative Europe as anything other than narrow-minded Brexit isolationism?

Caroline Dinage: I have already explained that we intend to find an alternative to the Creative Europe fund, which will be set out as part of the comprehensive spending review. I do not really like having lectures from the hon. Gentleman about what is “good enough”. This Government have worked round the clock with the sector to provide £1.57 billion of support in the form of a cultural recovery package, £97 million of which has gone to Scotland, and yet—guess what?—only £59 million of that has so far been announced for disposal. What have they done—trouserer the rest of it?

Spectator Sports: Covid-19

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the return of spectators at live sports events during the covid-19 outbreak. [906488]

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the return of spectators at live sports events during the covid-19 outbreak. [906491]

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the return of spectators at live sports events during the covid-19 outbreak. [906494]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The Government fully understand that fans want to be back watching live sport—so do all of us—and we continue to work with the sector on solutions and innovations. Having spectators at some sporting events is still possible, but as set out in our road map, sporting event pilots and the full return of fans to stadiums will only take place when it is safe to do so. The Government took the decision to pause test events and the other expansions planned for 1 October because of the sharp upward trajectory of covid-19 cases. We recognise that this news will be disappointing to many fans and to sport, but we have had to make difficult decisions that give us the best chance of containing the virus this winter.

Christian Wakeford: Football's coming home—or so we thought. While it is extremely heartening to see the return of cricket, rugby, football and other sporting fixtures to our national life, such as Bury AFC, Prestwich Heys and Radcliffe in my constituency, we must also be mindful of the rate of infection. Can my hon. Friend provide an update on the plan to continue reopening these activities, given the risks posed by covid?

Nigel Huddleston: I know that my hon. Friend is a huge sports fan; we have spoken about the sector on many occasions. I agree that it has been fantastic to see so many sports return at both professional and grassroots level, and I pay tribute to the work that sporting bodies have done with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make that possible. Sport is hugely important to the nation's physical and mental wellbeing, and although yesterday's announcements mean that adult indoor team sport cannot take place from tomorrow, organised outdoor team sport, outdoor and indoor exercise classes and outdoor licensed physical activity are still exempt from the rule of six and can continue to take place in larger numbers. As the chief medical officer, chief scientific adviser and others have advised, covid cases are on a sharp upward trajectory, and we are introducing measures to attempt to slow the spread of the virus.

Sara Britcliffe: Match day revenue and getting people through the turnstiles is vital to clubs like Accrington Stanley in my area, which has worked tirelessly to work towards bringing fans back safely. As the Minister can imagine, the announcement was a devastating blow to clubs like mine. Can he assure me that he is working towards a road map to bring fans back safely and that further financial support is being considered for local clubs?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is right that football clubs at all levels are the bedrock of our local communities. We have seen that during coronavirus more than ever. I spoke to the Football Supporters' Association yesterday and reiterated our thanks. Of course, grassroots football will continue, and, as she may know, non-elite football is covered by the recreational team sport framework guidance, which does permit spectators. The Football Association's definition of non-elite football means that leagues below national leagues north and south level 6 can continue with spectators. We will continue to work closely with the Sports Grounds Safety Authority and sporting bodies to support the safe return of spectators

to stadiums more widely when the public health situation allows. I can confirm that we are in discussions with football governing bodies about further support measures.

Alan Mak: As its honorary vice-president, I know that, like other non-league clubs, Havant and Waterlooville Football Club relies on match-day income for its financial sustainability. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to allow non-league football fans safely back in stadiums as soon as possible, and what action is there to help them financially in the meantime?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this area. In the many conversations we have had about football and other sports, he has shown that he is not only a great advocate for sport, but indeed for Havant and his constituents. As I have said previously, spectators are allowed to non-elite football events, but the Football Association's definition of "elite" extends to the national league south, in which my hon. Friend's club competes and therefore does not allow for fans at the moment. We understand that the restrictions that have been put in place will cause financial difficulties for clubs, as they rely so much on match-day income. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I truly understand the seriousness of this, and we are working closely with sporting bodies to see how we can support them further.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Minister Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Government's failures on track and trace have consequences for football clubs, as we have heard from Conservative Members of Parliament this morning. We all want to know what the plan is to save the game we love. Suppose, as has been indicated in the media, that the premier league is not prepared to underwrite the rest of football, who then will be to blame when clubs collapse? Will it be the premier league, or will it be Conservative Ministers, speaking from this Dispatch Box?

Nigel Huddleston: I share the hon. Member's passion for sport and football, and I recognise and acknowledge the Opposition's support for the measures that we announced this week. I can assure her that we are having detailed conversations with sport, including with football. We appreciate that this latest announcement will have economic consequences for sports, and we had been hoping for the return of spectators that bring in so much income. Where they can, we will expect the top tiers of professional sport to look at ways in which sport can support itself with the Government focusing on those most in need.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Julian Knight.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the Minister for his engagement on this issue and for his commitment and hard work. Obviously, the progress of this virus is a body blow to sectors facing what is in no small terms a potential extinction event. Does he agree with my Committee in its letter to the Secretary of State early today that lessons can be learned from this aborted attempt to reopen sport and live entertainment, such as

the issuing of a "no earlier than" date with three months' notice, better, wider testing and funds specifically targeted at allowing adaptations to be made for safer reopening?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and very much appreciate the work that he and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee have done. I would be more than happy to discuss his proposals further and thank him for his involvement so far. I wish that I could stand here and give definitive timescales for what we will be able to do, but, as we live in such uncertain times, I am unable to do so. I can assure him that we will endeavour to give as much guidance and notice as possible, and I look forward to working with him further.

Local Newspapers: Covid-19

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support local, independent newspapers during the covid-19 outbreak. [906489]

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The Government recognise the vital importance of local and regional newspapers, particularly during this pandemic. That is why we designated journalists as key workers and ran a £35 million public information campaign to carry covid messaging in more than 600 titles.

Mr Dhese: We in Slough are fortunate to have two brilliant local newspapers, the *Slough Express* and the *Slough Observer*, which play a vital role in our local democracy, ensuring that the good people of Slough are well informed with reliable and accurate news reporting, but, like many of their counterparts across our country, local journalism is under threat. Their trade body News Media Association has repeatedly called for business rates relief, but those calls seem to have fallen on deaf ears. The National Union of Journalists has proposed a detailed news recovery plan to ensure the survival of excellent journalism, which is there for all of us. Can the Minister advise us, before we lose even more valued local newspapers, when the Government will finally listen to and support this important sector?

Mr Whittingdale: I have no doubt that the newspapers in the hon. Gentleman's constituency are doing an excellent job, and I have had a number of conversations with the News Media Association and other publishing organisations. The Government have extended £1,500 business rates relief for local newspaper offices, but we will obviously continue to look at what additional measures we can take to support newspapers.

Rural Mobile Coverage

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): What progress his Department has made on improving mobile coverage in rural areas. [906492]

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on improving mobile coverage in rural areas. [906499]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government have agreed a £1 billion deal with mobile network

operators to deliver the shared rural network, and this landmark deal will see operators collectively increase mobile phone coverage throughout the UK to 95% by the end of 2025, with legally binding coverage commitments. The exact site deployments will be managed by the operators, but I am pleased to say that the shared masts have already gone live in Wales, the Peak district and elsewhere.

Edward Timpson: I very much welcome the introduction and now the roll-out of the shared rural network, but the end of 2025 is still a long way off for many of my constituents, who have atrocious mobile coverage compared with better served urban users, yet pay the same price. Can my hon. Friend give me some reassurance that the roll-out will be done as quickly as possible, particularly in the hardest hit areas, such as Eddisbury, so that they can get the reliable, equitable 4G network they need?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is right that far too much of the country does not yet have the mobile coverage it needs and deserves, and that is why the shared rural network exists. As I said in my answer, it is already being rolled out, and its positive effects will be felt well before 2025. I look forward, with my hon. Friend and others, to engaging with the mobile networks to make sure that those plans come forward as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: Gagan Mohindra? Not here.

BBC News and Political Coverage

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Ofcom on the BBC's compliance with its statutory duties on local and regional news and political coverage for the English regions. [906493]

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The BBC charter requires the BBC to serve audiences across all the UK nations and regions. How it does so is a matter for the BBC, but I share the concern about the recently announced cuts, and I welcome Ofcom's intention to examine this.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for that response, and I assume that he agrees that local and regional news coverage and political coverage are a vital aspect of the BBC's public sector obligation. My concern—this has been raised by the National Union of Journalists—is that the number of staff who currently work on the award-winning investigative programme “Inside Out” will be put at risk of redundancy if the BBC reduces the number of regional production centres from 11 to six. I am pleased by what the Minister said, but is he asking Ofcom to investigate the BBC's compliance with the public sector broadcaster obligation?

Mr Whittingdale: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman that local and regional news coverage by the BBC is one of the core public purposes of the BBC. I have spoken to the new director-general, and I am pleased that he remains absolutely committed to that. Whether the recent cuts reduce the ability of the BBC to

carry out that obligation is a matter that Ofcom is looking at, and it decided to do that without our having even spoken to it.

Sports and Music: Covid-19 Restrictions

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): What steps he has taken to ensure parity in the application of covid-19 restrictions to sports and music groups. [906497]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): In the light of the recent upsurge in covid-19 cases, indoor sport and music groups must follow the rule of six. However, outdoor team sport and exercise are largely exempted from the rules, and, of course, these restrictions will be regularly reviewed.

Alex Davies-Jones [V]: Brass bands and choirs are a core part of our cultural identity. The guidance in terms of brass bands and choirs rehearsing and performing together again has been unclear, confusing and, at times, even contradictory. Will the Minister today please provide clarity on the guidance for rehearsals and clear support for these groups, because the only thing full of hot air at the moment seems to be this Government?

Caroline Dinenage: I completely understand the hon. Lady's frustration; it has been really difficult to bring back choirs and orchestras at an amateur level, because it has been difficult to establish the risks. However, we do know that non-professional performing art groups, including choirs, orchestras and drama groups, can continue to rehearse and perform together in a covid-secure venue, where that is a planned activity and they can carry it out in a way that ensures there is no interaction between groups of six at any one time.

Football Clubs: Covid-19 Restrictions

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What assessment he has made of the financial effect of covid-19 restrictions on football clubs. [906502]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): Football clubs are at the heart of our local communities, and many have made their towns globally famous. The Government have provided an unprecedented package of support to businesses throughout this period, and many football clubs have benefited from those measures. We recognise the impact that the decisions this week to delay the reopening of stadiums over the winter will have on sport, and the Government now will work at pace with sports to understand the issues faced by organisations facing the most challenging circumstances and assess what further support may be required. Where it can, we will expect the top tiers of professional sport to look at ways in which they can support themselves, with Government focusing on those most in need.

Damian Collins [V]: As the Minister knows, many football clubs, particularly in the Football League, face financial ruin now that there is no prospect of the imminent return of fans and match day revenue. The Government have offered £1.5 billion to help arts organisations in the community, recognising their cultural value. What guarantee can the Minister give today to

clubs in the Football League in particular that the Government will be prepared to offer public money to stop those clubs facing financial ruin?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments: he has great expertise in this area. I mentioned earlier that we are in discussions with major sports, including football bodies. Yesterday, I wrote to the governing bodies of all major spectator sports to formally begin discussions and provide them with a contact point in DCMS. I also asked the governing bodies to provide me with details of any member clubs or associations under imminent financial threat, and will be providing more information in due course.

Topical Questions

[906574] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): DCMS sectors have, of course, been particularly hard hit by coronavirus, and we have been working tirelessly with them over the past few months to support them and to help them to reopen as soon as we can in a safe way. Countless museums, theatres and heritage organisations have been able to welcome back visitors, and we have seen innovation across all our creative sectors, for example, with London fashion week returning this month. Gym and leisure centres remain open, and elite sport continues to operate behind closed doors. But of course, our fight against coronavirus is far from over, and unfortunately we have had to introduce carefully judged new restrictions to curb the rising number of daily infections. That does include delaying the reopening of business conferences, exhibitions and large sporting events, which of course was originally planned for 1 October. I know that this will be a severe blow for the business events industry and for our sports clubs, which are of course, the linchpins of their communities, as many Members have said today. I am working urgently with the Chancellor and have met with sports this week to explore how we can support them through this difficult period.

Suzanne Webb: By 2022, it will be very clear to all that I am the Commonwealth games No.1 fan, and so I was thrilled to hear that the games organisers, Birmingham 2022 and Spirit of 2012 announced £600,000 of funding for three west midlands arts organisations. Does the Minister agree that the games' cultural programme is so important to the creative and charity sectors, and what more can we do to ensure that the Commonwealth games best support my constituency and the Black Country?

Oliver Dowden: We are all looking forward enormously—I certainly am—to the Commonwealth games 2022, which will form part of a wonderful year of celebrations in 2022 alongside the festival of the United Kingdom and, of course, Her Majesty the Queen's platinum jubilee. There are exciting plans for the Commonwealth games, but those will coincide with festival UK 2022, and those plans are progressing well, most recently with the launch of a research and development competition earlier this month. We really want to bring together the greatest minds and the brightest talents from science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics to apply to find the 10 most creative and innovative

ideas. I encourage my hon. Friend and, indeed, Members from both sides of the House to encourage people from their constituencies to apply for it.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Eighteen months ago, the Government promised world-leading legislation to finally tackle online harms, promising that Britain would be the safest place in the world to be online. Last week, I met again with Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, who—as the Secretary of State will know—took her own life at the age of 14 after accessing and receiving more and more curated online content about suicide methods and self-harm online. Mr Russell and many other stakeholders told me they have real concerns, not just about the absence of the promised legislation, but that it is being watered down and will not include regulation relating to legal but harmful content like that which led to Molly's death. Can the Secretary of State reassure them and the House that legal but harmful content will be within the scope of the Bill when it eventually appears?

Oliver Dowden: Yes. The short answer is that it will; it will be covered by the duty of care. We continue to work on our full response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation and we will be publishing that this year, with a view to having the legislation at the beginning of next year. Indeed, shortly after this session in the House I will be meeting victims to discuss those proposals further.

Jo Stevens: I thank the Secretary of State for that welcome answer. Another area of legal but harmful content online is covid misinformation; conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers continue to flood social media platforms, 24/7. This morning, a University College London study reports that more than one in five of the public are unlikely to accept a vaccine, amid widespread misinformation about side effects and profiteering. With increased infection rates, new restrictions and winter approaching, people are going to be spending more time online, exposed to this harmful misinformation. His Department leads the counter-disinformation unit, but there is no information available about its resourcing, performance or impact. The public see a Government who have lost control of the virus and of public health communication, so what is he doing to reverse that?

Oliver Dowden: Clearly, I do not accept the hon. Lady's characterisation, which is a little overblown, but she rightly raises the point about the risks associated with disinformation should we succeed in achieving the vaccine, which of course all parts of government are working tirelessly towards. I am well aware of the challenge of misinformation about the vaccine and I have discussed it with the Health Secretary. The Minister for Digital and Culture, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), is working intensively at ministerial level and is engaging with social media companies to ensure we have the necessary measures in place to deal with any misinformation, should it arise at the time of a vaccine.

[906576] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Retail is important, and my constituency contains the excellent new Lexicon shopping centre in Bracknell and many fine shops in Crowthorne, Sandhurst and Finchampstead. Will the Secretary of State outline what is being done to preserve and enhance the high street?

Oliver Dowden: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of our historic high streets, which are more than just places to go to eat, shop and work; they give people a real sense of identity and pride in their communities. That is why last week I was delighted to announce £95 million to restore 68 historic high streets across all of England to their historic glory, from Hexham to Plymouth to Reading and, of course, near my hon. Friend's constituency. The four-year programme shows that this Government are delivering on our promise to level up across the country and it will also ensure that high streets recover more quickly from the pandemic.

[906575] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Now that we have seen a rise in covid cases and a return to stricter regulations, public messaging is more important than ever. The BBC has rowed back on its decision to end covering the Scottish Government's covid updates, but can the Minister understand the concerns of many about the BBC's inclusion of party political punditry following the First Minister's very important public health briefings?

Oliver Dowden: Clearly, the BBC is editorially independent from the Government, and I am sure the hon. Lady will want to raise this issue with Tim Davie and others.

[906578] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress his Department is making on reducing Huawei's presence in our 5G networks to zero by 2027?

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Following the statement I made to this House shortly before the summer recess, we are committed to introducing the telecoms security Bill this autumn, so that it will have a clear and enforceable timetable to zero for Huawei in our 5G networks by the end of 2027. Just to update the House, let me say that alongside that we will also publish our telecoms diversification strategy, and I am pleased to confirm that Lord—Ian—Livingston will be chairing a taskforce of industry experts to drive that forward.

[906577] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): It has come as a hammer blow for non-league clubs such as Chesterfield in the national league to discover that having taken on all the players, and facing all the costs that are normally associated with running its season, it will not now be able to bring fans in at the start of October. Will the Secretary of State take us through his plans to ensure that we do not lose all the national league clubs that are facing a very precarious financial position?

Oliver Dowden: I am acutely aware of the impact of our decision to postpone reopening with fans and social distance from 1 October. Having engaged with the sports, I know the impact that that will have. I think there is agreement on both sides of the House that that was a necessary step, given where we are with covid. On next steps, I am working alongside the Chancellor and sports to understand their circumstances and the detail of how the situation will impact them. Throughout all this, we have moved to reopen sports, which is why we have sports behind closed doors; to ask sports to help

themselves, starting with the premier league in respect of football; and to see what further support the Government can provide. That sits alongside measures such as £150 million of emergency support from Sports England.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say to both Front-Bench teams that topicals are meant to be short and punchy? We really should do better than we have done today. A lot of Members have missed out. We must move on now to oral questions to the Attorney General.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Vulnerable Victim Support

Anthony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to support vulnerable victims during trial. [906444]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The needs and sensitivities of vulnerable victims are at the centre of Crown Prosecution Service casework. Prosecutors apply for special measures to ensure that vulnerable victims are supported to give their best evidence, and the CPS is engaged closely with the Courts and Tribunals Service, the police and other partners to facilitate the rapid roll-out of pre-recorded cross-examination for vulnerable victims and witnesses. The CPS regularly engages with stakeholders and works with national and local partners to continuously inform and improve its service, including to vulnerable victims and witnesses.

Anthony Higginbotham: The sad reality is that there was an increase in domestic violence during the months of lockdown earlier this year. We know that it takes enormous courage for victims to come forward. How can I reassure my constituents in Burnley who are vulnerable victims of this awful crime that they will be protected and supported by the CPS and the Government when they come forward?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right. The Domestic Abuse Bill is a landmark Bill, and it contains many measures that I know he will welcome to support and protect victims. They include the introduction of domestic abuse protection orders, protections for victims to prevent them from being cross-examined by their abusers in family and civil courts, and the introduction of the first statutory definition of domestic abuse. He may be interested to know that in recent months, an increase in the number of domestic abuse cases moving through the system has been seen in CPS data for the county of Lancashire, and that is good news.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Crime rates in Carshalton and Wallington are, thankfully, below the national and London averages. However, worryingly, domestic abuse in the London Borough of Sutton is higher, on average, than in the rest of London, with covid restrictions only exacerbating the problem. What actions can my right hon. and learned Friend take to ensure that vulnerable victims and witnesses of domestic violence are supported and protected from intimidation during trial?

The Solicitor General: Domestic abuse is an abhorrent crime. It is a high priority for the CPS in my hon. Friend's area of Sutton and everywhere in this country. It is vital that we bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. Prosecutors apply for special measures, and that will help to ensure that vulnerable victims are supported to give their best evidence in difficult circumstances, and that they are protected from contact with the perpetrator of their abuse.

Serious Fraud Office: Covid-19

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Serious Fraud Office's response to the covid-19 outbreak. [906445]

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Serious Fraud Office's response to the covid-19 outbreak. [906459]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The Serious Fraud Office responded quickly to the disruption caused by covid, and it has continued to progress casework during this period. Notably, it has achieved a conclusion of the prosecutions in the Unaoil case, reached a deferred prosecution agreement with G4S, laid charges in the GPT case and obtained asset confiscation orders in other cases. The SFO's ability to maintain operational effectiveness during covid was recognised in the report on its response to the pandemic that was published by the Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate.

Ian Levy: Will my right hon. and learned Friend please explain what steps the Serious Fraud Office has taken to minimise any delays to its investigations caused by covid-19?

The Solicitor General: The chief investigator of the SFO led a taskforce in relation to covid, to assess all operational activity that was initially halted by the pandemic as part of the office's wider recovery planning. In addition, general counsel for the Serious Fraud Office introduced virtual systems for reviewing cases and virtual processes. We have been monitoring the SFO closely and it has been performing well in very difficult circumstances.

Mr Speaker: Flight Officer Blackman, you are clear to land.

Bob Blackman [V]: Thank you, ground control.

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his answers thus far. Will he go a bit further on the recent deferred prosecution agreements, including those with G4S and with Airbus? What assessment has he made of the benefits of DPAs as a tool for prosecuting those accused of such offences?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend. DPAs are very important. They are extremely powerful tools that hold companies to account, and the SFO remains committed to using them. Since 2014, the SFO has agreed eight DPAs, five of which were for overseas corruption offences. The total value to the Treasury of all eight DPAs was around £1.58 billion, so I do hope that Her Majesty's Treasury is listening; they bring large sums of money into the Exchequer.

UK Internal Market Bill: Northern Ireland

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill. [906446]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I regularly meet the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to discuss important issues of common interest. The United Kingdom Internal Market Bill is an essential and landmark piece of legislation, which will safeguard and enrich our precious Union. The Bill is a prudent step to create a legal safety net and to take powers in reserve, whereby Ministers can guarantee the integrity of the UK and protect the peace process.

Sir Desmond Swayne: So it does not break any law, does it?

The Attorney General: Consideration of and voting for this Bill do not constitute a breach of the law. However, there are powers in the Bill which, if and when exercised, will operate to disapply treaty obligations at the international law level—in particular, article 4 of the withdrawal agreement, and articles 5 and 10 of the Northern Ireland protocol. Parliamentary supremacy means that it is entirely constitutional and proper for Parliament to enact legislation, even if it breaches international treaty obligations. I am glad that my right hon. Friend voted in support of section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, which made it clear that parliamentary supremacy will prevail over international law.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The last five former UK Prime Ministers have all shared their concern about the Government's intention to break international law through the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill. The Northern Ireland Secretary said that the Government anticipated breaking the law in a "specific and limited way". Even the Attorney General's own predecessor said that the Government's intention to break the law is "unconscionable" and will greatly damage Britain's international reputation. So I ask the Attorney General: are they all wrong?

The Attorney General: The question of whether in law the Government can act in this way is very simply answered: yes, they can. The question of whether they should is one for political debate, not legal argument. The hon. Lady may not like that answer, but it is one that is founded on a robust legal footing by the supremacy of Parliament, elucidated by Dicey and confirmed by a unanimous Supreme Court in Miller.

Ellie Reeves: I have listened to what the Attorney General has said and I do not think that she has really answered the question. As a barrister, she knows full well the role of the Government Law Officers; they must uphold the rule of law without fear or favour. As her political hero, Margaret Thatcher, once said:

"In order to be considered truly free, countries must...have...an abiding respect for the rule of law."

Yet there is a universal view among those who look to the Attorney General to defend the rule of law that she has betrayed them, so could she tell the House what she has done to defend the rule of law in the face of the Government's breach?

The Attorney General: I prefer to take a less emotional approach than the hon. Lady. I am extremely proud to be supporting this Bill. It protects our country and it safeguards the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The leader of the hon. Lady's party called for patriotism this week, but their opposition to this Bill is anything but patriotic. How she can call herself an MP who sits in the United Kingdom Parliament and at the same time vote against a Bill that defends the unity of our country, maintains peace in Northern Ireland and enables the United Kingdom—our country, her country—to thrive is not only illogical but does a grave disservice to the nation's interests.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Attorney General has just clearly illustrated that she is in office because, unlike Jonathan Jones and Lord Keen, she is putting her political loyalties—her Brexit fanaticism—ahead of her loyalty to the rule of law, when it should be the other way around. That is why she should resign. But does not this whole episode also illustrate why future Attorneys General should be lawyers and not party politicians? It is all right for her to trash her own reputation, but not the reputation of the office of Attorney General.

The Attorney General: The legal basis for the Government's proposals was set out in the statements of 10 and 17 September. Those made it clear that it is entirely proper, entirely constitutional and lawful in domestic law to enact legislation that may operate in breach of international law or treaty obligations. It is a pretty basic principle of law, and if the hon. Gentleman is having trouble understanding, I would be very happy to sit down and explain it to him.

Criminal Justice Disclosure Practices

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve disclosure practices throughout the criminal justice system. [906447]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I am committed to improving the disclosure process in criminal proceedings and upholding public trust in the criminal justice system. Following a public consultation during which I hosted several online engagement sessions with defence practitioners, prosecutors and professionals from the victims sector, I will shortly be publishing my revised guidelines on disclosure. Those will address the need for a culture change and provide up-to-date and clear guidance on how all parties in the criminal justice system can improve disclosure performance.

Jerome Mayhew: It is a hackneyed cliché that justice delayed is justice denied—denied for the victim, for witnesses and for the accused, many of whom may be innocent. Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that the leadership and the departmental focus is in place to ensure that disclosure—particularly electronic disclosure—is undertaken in full and in a timely manner? Is this being measured? If so, are the targets currently being met?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. There has been an unprecedented focus over the last few years on ensuring that investigators and prosecutors are properly equipped

to deal with large volumes of electronic evidence. The proliferation in technology and digital devices has put pressure on the disclosure process and notably increased the resources required. That does present a challenge for our investigators and prosecutors. There is not a silver bullet that will solve it, but I can assure my hon. Friend that this issue is not being left to languish. The Crown Prosecution Service, in particular, is investing in tools and working closely with its policing colleagues to meet these challenges.

Domestic and International Law Compliance

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of her role in ensuring compliance with (a) domestic and (b) international law. [906448]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): On 10 September, I wrote to Select Committee Chairs to set out the Government's legal position on the withdrawal agreement and the provisions in the UKIM Bill, and that position has not changed. We will ask Parliament to support the use of clauses 42, 43 and 45 of the UKIM Bill, and any similar subsequent provisions, only in the case of the EU being engaged in a breach of its legal obligations and thereby undermining the Northern Ireland protocol and its fundamental purpose. This creates a legal safety net and takes powers in reserve whereby Ministers can act to guarantee the integrity of the United Kingdom and protect the peace process. We are very clear that we are acting in full accordance with UK law and the UK's constitutional norms.

Joanna Cherry: The Attorney General has justified her support for the Bill by reference to the domestic legal principle of parliamentary supremacy and the judgment of the UK Supreme Court in Miller. But in that case, the UK Supreme Court also said, at paragraph 55, that “treaties between sovereign states”, such as the withdrawal agreement, “have effect in international law and are not governed by the domestic law of any state.”

The Supreme Court was quite clear that such treaties “are binding on the United Kingdom in international law”.

Why did the Attorney General omit reference to that part of the Supreme Court's judgment? Did she not learn the rule against selective citation when she was at law school?

The Attorney General: On the principle, the dualist nature of our constitution makes it clear that international law and international treaty obligations only become binding in the UK until and unless Parliament says they do. That is a reflection of the supremacy of Parliament and of how, effectively, international law gives way to domestic law.

I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for several reasons. The first is for intervening in the Miller litigation. Her intervention allowed the Supreme Court to find unanimously, and hold on this point, for the sovereignty of Parliament when it comes to international law. Secondly, she has allowed me to give examples of where domestic legislatures have acted in breach of international obligations. She will be familiar with the controversial “named persons” legislation that was introduced by the SNP at Holyrood. It was ruled by the Supreme Court to be in breach of international law, namely article 8 of the

European convention on human rights. Finally, I thank the hon. and learned Lady for allowing me to refer to her point about breaching the rules and the rule of law. May I gently suggest that she directs her anger closer to home: towards her SNP colleagues and those who sit on the National Executive Committee, who, as we speak, appear to be changing the rules to prevent her exclusively from standing as an MSP? Breaking the rules—the SNP could write the textbook on it!

Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure that we have responsibility for the SNP conference at the moment. I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: The Attorney General referred to the letter that she sent to me and other Select Committee Chairs on 10 September, which included a statement of the Government's legal position on the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill. What support, input and advice did she receive from any legal officials in her Department, or from Treasury counsel, in drawing up that statement of the Government's legal position?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He will be aware of the Law Officers' convention, which forbids me from confirming the fact of legal advice or the content of it, so I will not divulge any details about who may have assisted me in the drafting of legal advice. However, I am grateful to him for his contribution in finding a resolution, and particularly for his support on the Government amendments tabled earlier this week, which introduce a break-glass clause. That upholds the supremacy of Parliament, giving it an extra check and opportunity to look closely at and examine the case for taking this action. I believe that is lawful and constitutional.

Criminal Justice Backlog

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the backlog of cases in the criminal justice system. [906452]

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the backlog of cases in the criminal justice system. [906454]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): Covid-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge for the criminal justice system, and significant cross-system working has been under way to keep cases moving through the system throughout the pandemic. Prosecutors and front-line CPS staff have continued to cover open courts throughout the outbreak. I pay tribute and put on record my sincere thanks to all the staff at the Crown Prosecution Service for continuing to support the justice system, and to the independent Bar and solicitors as well.

Rosie Cooper [V]: Following the comments of Judge Raynor, who accused the Government of systemic failure for not conducting trials in a reasonable time, what steps is the Attorney General taking with the Lord Chancellor to increase the number of safe and effective jury trials?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Actually, in the Crown court we safely resumed jury trials in England and Wales before any comparable jurisdiction in the world. With the full support of Public Health England and Public Health Wales, we were quicker off the mark to restart jury trials than our neighbouring countries. More than 900 jury trials have been listed since they recommenced on 18 May. I thank the Lord Chief Justice for his leadership in that area.

Gerald Jones: We have seen reports of some trials being listed for 2023, and in some cases court dates are not being given indefinitely. Does the Solicitor General agree with me that justice delayed is justice denied, and what is he doing to work to make sure that safe jury trials can be brought forward?

The Solicitor General: This is clearly a very important issue. We are performing better than comparable Commonwealth countries, but there is always more to do, and the hon. Member is right that we want to avoid delays as much as possible. For example, 128 rooms suitable for jury trials are currently available, and this will rise to 250 by the end of October. We are doing everything we can. The Crown Prosecution Service is now eating into its backlog—so the backlog is no longer increasing; it is decreasing—and will continue to do more. The Ministry of Justice has responsibility in this area.

United Kingdom Internal Market Bill: Rule of Law

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill for her role in promoting the rule of law. [906455]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I speak regularly to my Cabinet colleagues on various matters relating to Government business. In tabling the UKIM Bill, the Government are clear that we are acting in full accordance with UK law and the UK's constitutional norms.

Stephen Farry: Our system of international law has been over 400 years in the making. How would the UK feel if other countries around the world were routinely putting "notwithstanding" clauses into their domestic legislation?

The Attorney General: The reality and challenges of being a sovereign nation state are that there are times when tensions and conflicts arise between domestic legislatures and international obligations. There are countless examples of where states with democratically elected Governments, many of whom we held in high regard and including many with whom we deal and have agreements, have resolved those tensions through legislation to depart from, derogate from or even break international law. Of course, two wrongs do not make a right, but that is an important context that sets a perspective for the action this Government are proposing. We are a member of the international rules-based system, and I know our enviable reputation will hold us in good stead.

Domestic Abuse Prosecutions: Covid-19

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of CPS resources to pursue domestic abuse prosecutions arising from the covid-19 lockdown. [906458]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): In spite of covid-19, the Crown Prosecution Service is determined to bring domestic abuse perpetrators to justice. We had an £85 million uplift from the Treasury last year. The target to recruit 390 more prosecutors has been met.

Liz Twist: But CPS statistics show that domestic abuse complaints have rocketed during the lockdown—that also applies in the Northumbria area, where I am from—yet there are also hidden domestic abuse cases. What measures will the Solicitor General be taking to ensure that these cases are dealt with quickly?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member is right to ask this question. It is important for Northumbria and around the country. Domestic abuse cases continue to be afforded a higher priority than other types of offences by our criminal justice system. This was reinforced, for example, in the guidance for judges about listings in the magistrates courts that has been issued by the senior presiding judge for England and Wales. It is a priority for the Crown Prosecution Service too, and we are going to keep a focus on this important area.

Covid-19 Restrictions

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of the legal framework governing covid-19 restrictions. [906462]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I speak frequently to Cabinet colleagues on various matters relating to Government business, including measures taken on covid. Everyone has made huge sacrifices this year to protect the NHS and save lives, and most people are still following the rules and doing their bit to control the virus, but we do need to act now to stop the virus spreading.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: But does the Attorney General not agree that greater parliamentary scrutiny would prevent some of the wrong convictions and charges, and enable the police to better enforce the law?

The Attorney General: The Coronavirus Act 2020 was put before Parliament and went through every stage that a Bill is expected to go through. Any regulations made under it are also subject to parliamentary approval. There is also a sunset provision in the Coronavirus Act, which means it will expire automatically after two years, if not extended. There is a parliamentary review every six months, which will give this Parliament the chance—for example, this coming Wednesday—to vote on a motion stating that the Act should not end.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Does it relate to this session?

Joanna Cherry: It does. In her response to me a few moments ago, the Attorney General said that I intervened in the case of *Miller v. Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union*. I did not intervene in that case, and perhaps if the Attorney General had read the case more closely, particularly paragraph 55, which I referred her to, she would know that I was not a party or an intervener in that case. I think she is getting it mixed up with the case of *Cherry v. Advocate General for Scotland*, in which a year ago today, the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruled that her Government's action in proroguing Parliament was unlawful. I was not an intervener in that case; I was the lead litigant, and it is great to get an opportunity to mention it on the Floor of the House today and to celebrate that great victory for the rule of law, made in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: In fairness, I wanted to give the hon. and learned Lady the opportunity to make her point of order. That has been corrected, and I am sure that the Attorney General will accept what she has said. It is not a point of order for me, but the correction has now been made.

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.

10.35 am

Sitting suspended.

Gender Recognition Act Consultation

10.38 am

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Women and Equalities if she will make a statement on the Government's response to the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 outlined in the Government Equalities Office update of 22 September.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): We want transgender people to be free to live and prosper in modern Britain. We have looked carefully at the issues raised in the consultation, including potential changes to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. It is the Government's view that the balance struck in this legislation is correct, in that there are proper checks and balances in the system and also support for people who want to change their legal sex.

We will make the gender recognition certificate process kinder and more straightforward. We will cut bureaucracy by enabling applications via gov.uk, and we will also reduce the fee from £140 to a nominal amount. We know from our research that improving healthcare support is a priority for transgender people. That is why we are opening at least three new gender clinics this year, which will see waiting lists cut by 1,600 patients by 2022, and it is why the GEO is providing funding for Dr Michael Brady, the UK's national LGBT health adviser, and working with him and the NHS to improve transgender people's experience.

It is also important that we protect single-sex spaces in line with the Equality Act 2010. The law is clear that service providers are able to restrict access to single-sex spaces on the basis of biological sex. It is also important that under-18s are properly supported in line with their age and decision-making capabilities. That is why Dr Hilary Cass, former president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, will lead an independent review into gender identity services for children and young people. The review will look to ensure that young people get the best possible support and expertise throughout their care, and it will report back next year. Together, this upholds the rights of transgender people and women, ensures that our system is kinder and more straightforward, and addresses the concerns of transgender people.

Crispin Blunt: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for enabling the Government's overdue response to this consultation to be questioned by colleagues so promptly. This issue is of first-order importance to between 200,000 and perhaps 500,000 of our fellow citizens and their families. Perhaps my right hon. Friend could begin her reply with her analysis of why so many trans people choose to hide in plain sight.

I welcome and enjoy the dynamism that my right hon. Friend brings to her unprecedented, historic responsibilities in retaking control of British trade policy after nearly half a century. The command of technical, economic and legal detail required is at once intimidating and inspiring. As a great trading nation, that needs all her attention, and she has risen to the trade challenge.

My right hon. Friend's acquisition of the equalities brief in September 2019 was hardly planned. The Prime Minister has done her and the nation no favours by continuing to overburden her after the election at such

an extraordinary time for trade. The contrast between her reputation between in responsibility is horribly stark. On women and equalities, it is horribly stark set against the reputation and achievement of my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt). It was in her tenure that we created the expectations that we were finally going to deliver on equality for trans people in principle, based on a comprehensive consultation itself based on work under the coalition going back to 2011.

Does my right hon. Friend the Minister understand the crushing disappointment of trans people with the content of her statement on Tuesday, set against the consultation on which it was based? Does she appreciate that trans people cannot discern any strong or coherent reason for this screeching change of direction? They are aware of the fear being used against them and fears, void of evidence, to sustain them. Does she understand the anger at the prospect of their receiving their fundamental rights being snatched away?

The longer the uncertainty has been allowed to continue, the worse the fear and anger have become. Does my right hon. Friend understand that the delay in the statement helped to contribute to that? Does she see that the underlying trend of the majority of people in this country is following the path set by a change of attitude in society a generation earlier towards those with different sexualities? This time, despite the complexities of understanding around trans, younger people in particular are more starkly intolerant of the cruelty of wider society's inhumanity towards trans people. The vast, vast majority of lesbian, gay and bisexual people will stand in solidarity with trans people.

Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that her statement does not command a majority in this House? Will she confirm that that is one of the reasons why she cannot propose any legislation? She has presented the House with an inherently unstable settlement that will have to be addressed—hopefully sooner rather than later.

Does my right hon. Friend understand that when the pre-emptive statement she made to the Women and Equalities Committee earlier this year was properly explained to me, I gave this issue my full attention and that of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights? I engaged with people who had different views to understand the compromises necessary to deliver reassurance around trans people, but also to be able to deliver trans rights. That work was done. It was given, quietly, in a comprehensive paper to the Government in early July and, tragically, it has been ignored.

Elizabeth Truss: I believe that the settlement we have reached balances and upholds the rights of transgender people and of women. It protects access to single-sex spaces. As I noted in my statement earlier, the number one concern of transgender people is improving healthcare services. The new clinics that we are putting in place will be the first new clinics in the United Kingdom for 20 years. We are also addressing people's main concerns—the cost and bureaucracy—with the gender recognition certificate process, and I believe that we have come to the right conclusion, which is in line with other major nations.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab)[V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. After three years of toxic debate, it is deeply disappointing

that the Government have let trans people down and dropped their plans to reform the Gender Recognition Act. The debate around reform of the Act has been intensely fought and has caused great harm to many. Trans people face daily discrimination and the average wait for a first appointment with a gender clinic is 18 months, so it is vital that steps are taken to tackle discrimination and provide the services and support that people need.

The delay in responding to this consultation is completely unacceptable. Can the Minister tell us why it took so long? She failed to answer my question yesterday on whether the three new clinics mentioned in her statement were new, and we now know that they are not. What steps will the Government take to reduce the waiting times radically for people to access gender clinics? What will the Minister do to ensure that all public bodies, including the Government Equalities Office and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, produce statutory guidance that is in keeping with the legislation?

The Government are to make changes to the administrative process for obtaining a gender recognition certificate. Can the Minister tell us what the new online process will look like, what the new fee will be and when it will come into force? What is the timeline for when this new process will go live? Will she commit to ensuring that she engages with stakeholders in developing it? What steps will she be taking to tackle the rise in transphobia and misogyny?

Labour is committed to equality and inclusion for trans people and will continue to support updating the GRA to include self-declaration for trans people. We are also proud to be the party of the Equality Act 2010, and we will uphold it, not least because it plays a vital role in ensuring that we are an inclusive society.

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Lady that I brought this decision forward as much as I was able, given that it is a complex issue that we needed to thoroughly examine. I feel that where we have got to is the right place; it maintains the rights of transgender people and improves the process to make it kinder and more straightforward, at the same time as protecting single-sex spaces.

The hon. Lady asked about healthcare. I agree that that is a priority. That is why we are opening the first new gender identity clinics in 20 years and we are committed to ensuring that transgender healthcare is improved and waiting lists are reduced. We have funded Dr Michael Brady, our LGBT health adviser. There is definitely more work that needs to be done to ensure that services operate fully right across the country and across the national health service, and of course I am working very closely with the Health Secretary on that.

The hon. Lady asked when the new fee arrangements and the new online arrangements will come into place. The answer is that we will be doing that as soon as possible; obviously, it is an IT process that we need to get online, but I aim to introduce the new fee, which will be nominal, as soon as possible.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Many of the trans community that I represent feel very locked out of the healthcare system at the moment. I welcome the comments that my right hon. Friend has made about focusing on healthcare, but can she assure the

trans community that I represent that we will truly look at ensuring that the healthcare is accessible? For many, this issue has gone on for far too long.

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that there are not enough services. That is why we are introducing new clinics. There is also an issue with support for the under-18s, which is why the NHS launched the Cass review yesterday. We are taking this issue seriously. I welcome the reduction in waiting lists, but of course there is more to be done and we need to work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to achieve that.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Sometimes people are opposed to the human rights of others in case they encroach on their own; it is an almost instinctive human reaction. When we as politicians want to ensure those human rights, it is about not just actions but language and education, so that we all understand each other and we are all in a place where we are happy for others with whom we do not necessarily identify to have equal access to human rights and opportunities. That said, action is crucial, and I am sorry to say that the Minister has failed on that front this week.

I am sorry to say that because the Minister's language in the past has indicated better, and her failure to take action will have an impact on the many very distressed trans people who have written to me from across the UK. The fact remains that trans people continue to suffer poorer outcomes relative to the wider population, and that needs to change. We are now at a stage, in terms of equality, where the language we use around race, gender and disability, while not perfect, is getting there. Actions have been taken and laws have been written. We need more compliance and enforcement, but at least the laws exist.

This is a devolved matter and, yes, it is complex, but it is not too complex for the Scottish Government, who continue to have a strong commitment to reforming the Gender Recognition Act in Scotland before next May's elections in 2021. There are many reasons for that. One reason is that everyone surely has the right to be who they are, but we also recognise that we must comply with international human rights law, and the way to do that is to have a system for obtaining legal gender recognition. Do the Minister and her Government recognise the need to comply with international human rights law? Do they care about that? The gender recognition panel takes applications from across the UK, and the Scottish Government will carefully consider what she has said and what it means for Scotland, so will she commit to co-operating with the Scottish Government?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very interested in what the hon. Lady has said, because my understanding is that the Scottish Government's draft Bill to reform the GRA has been paused. I would be very happy to take this up with her at a later opportunity. In terms of human rights law, of course we are committed to that and we continue to lead the world in LGBT rights and human rights. We will shortly be hosting an international LGBT conference.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to reflect on the need to treat members of the trans community with

[Sara Britcliffe]

kindness and respect and to find a way to make the path to self-determination not only cheaper but easier?

Elizabeth Truss: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and it is important that we address the issues that transgender people have had with the process—namely, the cost and the bureaucracy. We do not want finance to be a barrier to people to be able to go through the gender recognition certificate process.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It has been well over two years since the Government first sought views on how to reform the Gender Recognition Act. The consultation received more than 100,000 responses, the vast majority of which were in favour of reform, yet the truth is that the Government have chosen to change little about the process of acquiring a gender recognition certificate. They have chosen to leave in place a lengthy, medicalised process that requires medical reports, statutory declarations, consideration by a panel, and more. Why have the Government taken so long to respond, only to ignore the wishes and destroy the hopes of so many in the trans community?

Elizabeth Truss: As I made clear earlier, the Government do not believe in moving towards a model of self-ID. This is a serious process that has taken time for us to consider, but our view is that we need to maintain proper checks and balances in the system. We have addressed the issues that transgender people highlighted as important to them around healthcare, bureaucracy and the costs of the process, making the process kinder and more straightforward.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): May I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for engaging with me and others on this issue? The community are feeling frustrated by the lack of substance in the conclusion to this lengthy consultation. Notwithstanding her valid point about reforms to healthcare, will she acknowledge that these changes are minimal, with waiting lists of well over 13,000 people pre-covid? This is of great concern, given that research shows that 84% of trans people have thought about suicide, with 50% attempting it. Will she commit to further working with me and others who care passionately that the Government get this right? Will she report back to us on her work with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and on her progress?

Elizabeth Truss: I certainly agree that healthcare is the big issue of concern to transgender people, which is why we are focusing on improving the service received from the national health service. Of course, it is the Health and Social Care Secretary who is in overall charge of that, and I would be very happy to facilitate further meetings with Dr Michael Brady, our LGBT health adviser, and, of course, the Department of Health and Social Care, to make sure that we get this right and reduce those waiting lists.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the fact that the Minister has tried to take some of the heat out of this discussion and that she has at least come forward with some conclusions, because the wait has caused many of the problems. However, I

fail to understand how her administrative changes will comply with the World Health Organisation's requirement that by 2020 we remove gender dysphoria as a medical classification, seeing as the GRA is based on that medical classification. How will the Minister's administrative changes fulfil our international obligations to remove that classification?

Elizabeth Truss: The administrative changes will make the process considerably better. As I have said, we are also putting additional resources into transgender services. The clinical diagnosis is a matter for clinicians, and the Health and Social Care Secretary is working with them on this issue. I think there needs to be a medical element to the process, so that there are proper checks and balances in the system, but the specific diagnosis is a matter for clinicians.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I am proud to be the first openly LGBT person to represent Carshalton and Wallington in this House, and I stand by the trans community in saying that their rights are human rights. The reforms are a welcome first step, particularly in relation to health, but they need to go further. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give that this is indeed the first step and is not the end of what we are going to do for trans people in this country, that we will bring the UK into line with countries such as Argentina and Ireland, and that we will make those changes that cost so little but mean so much to trans people?

Elizabeth Truss: I point out to my hon. Friend that on this issue we are in line with the vast majority of major European countries, and we are working, through our international LGBT conference, to improve the rights of LGBT people across the world. I am very proud of the leadership that we as a country have shown in areas such as equal marriage and other issues of LGBT rights. It is important to note, though, that while we do want to improve healthcare services—and I am committed to working with the Department of Health and Social Care on that—we do not believe in moving to a model of self-ID. We believe that the system needs proper checks and balances.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The problem is that the Minister is not showing leadership on this issue. The decision is wrong, the delay has been wrong, and the hurt caused to the trans community and to the non-binary community is wrong. That is what my constituents are telling me. She has heard the concerns from across the House. Does she understand the hurt to our fellow human beings, who are feeling deep distress and are deeply let down and deeply concerned about the direction in which this Government are going? And will she stop the off-the-record briefings to newspapers, whipping up hatred against the trans and non-binary community?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that not a single off-the-record briefing has come from me.

Stephen Doughty: Rubbish.

Elizabeth Truss: I do not appreciate the hon. Gentleman's tone. I am being genuine and honest, and I am seeking to make this process kinder and more straightforward. I do not think that levelling such accusations at me is helpful.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker; it is very important that this Parliament demonstrates that it represents everybody in the United Kingdom, and I reiterate my solidarity with the trans community. Will my right hon. Friend clarify again the situation in relation to the three new clinics, as was implied by her statement on Tuesday? Are they new clinics in addition to the pilot projects previously announced? On their work, will she take on board the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards), in terms of a number of 1,600 against the ever-growing waiting list?

Elizabeth Truss: The clinics are new. As for whether they are the pilot clinics previously announced, those in the Department of Health and Social Care are the experts on that, but they are new clinics and they will reduce the waiting list. Clearly, they will not reduce the waiting list to the extent that we need that to happen, and that is why we are working with that Department on what more can be done, but I agree with my right hon. Friend that we do not want people to have to wait for this important treatment.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On 13 July, Baroness Barker's office submitted a freedom of information request asking for details of who the Secretary of State met with regards to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. To date, there has been no answer. Will she now confirm whether she personally met trans-led organisations and trans people before making this important decision, which ignores the views and recommendations of a clear majority of those who responded to the consultation?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Lady that I and the GEO have met with a wide variety of organisations. We have met 140 representative organisations, including LGBT and women's organisations. I have also met a number of parliamentary colleagues to discuss this issue.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: There is a strong trans community in Darlington who are valued and appreciated by their employers. Over 200 company leaders have written to the Prime Minister in respect of trans rights. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the compatibility of the Government's position on trans rights with that of corporate Britain?

Elizabeth Truss: I have set out the Government's position on transgender rights, in terms of making sure that we protect those rights and making the process kinder and more straightforward in improving transgender healthcare services. As for what corporates' views are, that is a matter for them rather than the Government.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I welcome the very measured and conciliatory tone that the Minister has taken today. I welcome the improvements to transgender health services and the protection of vulnerable women, in terms of the retention of single-sex spaces in places such as domestic abuse shelters. Will my right hon. Friend outline the Government's approach to women's prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that under the Equality Act 2010, service providers can restrict

entry on the basis of biological sex. Of course, there are cases, such as women's refuges and prisons, where that is an important issue.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It has taken the Government nearly three years to respond to this consultation and, in that time, the trans community have had their hopes raised and now dashed. If my inbox is reflective of the inboxes of other Members, the trans community feel bitterly let down by the Government's actions this week. This has to be seen in a context of rising hate crimes, and the Government's response—I will pull the Minister up on this—is not in line with what other nations are doing. We can look to Argentina or the Republic of Ireland, our near neighbour, which is doing things very differently. The Republic of Ireland has had a de-medicalised, self-determined system for gender recognition since 2015, and it is working. I urge the Minister to look again and not to let down the trans community, who are some of the most vulnerable constituents we represent in the House.

Elizabeth Truss: In my statement, I outlined the work we are doing to improve transgender healthcare. In all the research work and engagement we have done, that comes out as the No. 1 issue for transgender people. Focusing on improving those healthcare services is the way to help people lead better lives.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. Friend's statement will make it easier for people to be who they want to be, while maintaining the integrity of the Equality Act. Many women have felt anxious during this process, so will she reconfirm her support for single-sex spaces where reasonable?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we are striking a balance between the rights of transgender people and the rights of women. The position is clear in the Equality Act that service providers can restrict the use of spaces on the basis of biological sex, and it is important that women's spaces, which have been hard fought for over generations, are protected.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: In her written statement on Tuesday, the Minister stated that she wanted

"transgender people to be free to live and to prosper in a modern Britain",

but between 2013-14 and 2017-18, recorded anti-trans hate crimes nearly trebled. What steps are she and her Government taking to tackle the discrimination, abuse and hate crimes that many trans people experience?

Elizabeth Truss: These crimes are appalling, and that is why the Home Office is taking very strong action to address them.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said: while this is a very important step, it cannot be the destination; it can only be a step in a long journey. Does my right hon. Friend agree that under-18s should receive specialist support, and can she outline some of the measures that will be taken?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that under-18s need specialist support. That is why Dr Hilary Cass, the former president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, has been appointed to lead an independent review of gender identity services for children and young people. It will be wide-ranging, looking at the referral route to specialist services, assessment and diagnosis, as well as best practice for services.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Despite a few crumbs of comfort, fundamentally, the Government are sticking with a process that the Women and Equalities Committee rightly said

“runs contrary to the dignity and personal autonomy of applicants.” Instead of describing this as “checks and balances”, will the Minister recognise that, in actual fact, it is a breach of human rights and the Government should think again?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we want to make the process kinder and more straightforward. That is why we are reducing the bureaucracy by putting it online and reducing the fee, so that finance is not a barrier to people being able to access these services. The most important thing we are doing is improving the level of service available within the national health service, so that more people are seen more quickly.

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.

11.8 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

11.11 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 next week will include:

MONDAY 28 SEPTEMBER—General debate on covid-19.

TUESDAY 29 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill.

WEDNESDAY 30 SEPTEMBER—Second reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) (No.2) Bill, followed by a motion under the Coronavirus Act 2020 relating to the renewal of the temporary provisions, followed by all stages of the Sentencing Bill [*Lords*], followed by a debate on motions relating to planning.

THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Social Security (Up-Rating of Benefits) Bill.

FRIDAY 2 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 5 October will include:

MONDAY 5 OCTOBER—Second reading of the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill.

TUESDAY 6 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information about Victims) Bill, followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill [*Lords*], followed by a motion to approve the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (England) (Amendment) (No.4) Regulations 2020.

WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER—Second reading of the Pension Schemes Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 8 OCTOBER—Debate on a motion on planning reform and house building targets, followed by a general debate on the spending of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on support measures for the DCMS sectors during and after the covid-19 pandemic. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 9 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I am grateful to the Leader of the House for giving us the business for the next two weeks.

The Leader of the House did not give me a reply on Anousheh’s diplomatic protection. As he will know, Nazanin has this week had to file a complaint about being harassed by revolutionary guards. We hear that the Iranian Foreign Minister has offered a complete prisoner swap with the United States, and I thought that was the reason why we were being held back. May we have a statement on our British nationals? I know the Foreign Secretary has been abroad. Will he give a statement next week? I hope that we will have something on Luke Symons in the Yemen debate later on today.

May we have a debate on the unjust policy of the child maintenance service? I have two constituents who have been told that they have paid everything, but have then suddenly received a letter, even though they have a letter saying that they have paid everything, that they have to pay more back. I have written to the Minister

concerned, but received a response from the officials rather than the Minister. I point out that this is a policy issue. There is a third constituent who has said that parental alienation is being incentivised under this scheme, because, basically, if a child is staying with one parent, that parent gets paid on the basis of how long the child stays with them. Can we have a debate on these apparent injustices in the Child Maintenance Service?

It was great to see the Prime Minister come to the House on Tuesday rather than appearing outside. Ministers are now coming to the House. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster came to the House to confirm that there will be a border in Kent. We will just wait for the announcement on the border in the Irish sea. Sadly, though, the Chancellor decided to speak to the media, and not the House, about scrapping the Budget. The shadow Chancellor has asked him 40 times—it will be 41 later on—about his plans for the ending of the furlough scheme. We are trying to support our folk in these difficult times. They are in this situation through no fault of their own.

Will the Leader of the House have a word with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy? I understand that he is interfering with witnesses on the Select Committee. He intervened and did not authorise a witness to attend. He also issued a ministerial direction to force through a deal. The Leader of the House will know that Erskine May says that

“a select committee has the power to send for persons”

and that

“that power is unqualified”.

Can we have a debate then on the Floor of the House—if the Secretary of State will not allow witnesses to the Select Committee—on the OneWeb deal?

It is a great anniversary of Lady Hale’s judgment today. She has said that Parliament “surrendered” its role over the emergency legislation. I know that there is a debate on covid, but that is not what she was talking about. She was talking about the fact that the Coronavirus Act 2020 gave sweeping powers and that it was not surprising that the police were as confused as the public. We do not all have the luxury of going to the rose garden for our pleas in mitigation.

Mr Speaker, you will have seen the seventh report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, which expressed concern about the amount of legislation that is coming into force before it is laid. I know that the Government have had to write to you, Mr Speaker, 25 times since March to explain why legislation has come into force before it was laid. I thought Parliament was sovereign. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that anything that is laid is discussed in Parliament first?

Can we have a debate on the Government’s own report, the McGregor Smith report, which was commissioned by the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid)—he of the “Cummings and goings”. There were 22 recommendations. The noble Baroness said that

“unconscious bias is more pervasive and...more insidious”

than “overt racism”. She recommended free online unconscious bias training. Her Majesty’s Opposition have already done it; I have done it. I got 100%—I may not have got 100%, but I tried nevertheless. Everywhere where sentences are meted out, black, Asian and minority

ethnic people are more likely to be affected than anyone else; they are over-represented. I hope that the Leader of the House will encourage his colleagues to undertake this unconscious bias training that the House is putting forward.

We have lost two giants. We have all lived and grown up with the cultural icons of Sir Terence Conran and Sir Harold Evans, who have both died. They are giants of design and investigative journalism.

Finally, I know that the whole House will agree to raise a cup of coffee to Macmillan Cancer Support. Many of our colleagues are going through difficult times. We also know family and friends who are doing so. They will know that tomorrow, as we raise that cup of coffee, they are not forgotten.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right: we should of course have a cup of coffee tomorrow to help Macmillan, which I know is trying to raise a larger amount of money than it raised last year. My coffee of choice is Alta Rica, which I strongly recommend to anybody who enjoys a nice cup of instant coffee. People may also want to have a cake with it.

May I also join the right hon. Lady in her condolences to the families of Sir Harry Evans and Sir Terence Conran? Sir Harry Evans was my father’s opposite number at *The Sunday Times* for 14 years, while my father was editing *The Times*. My father thought of him as one of the finest editors of his generation and his campaigns were really very remarkable; he made *The Sunday Times* a truly great newspaper.

Coming to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anousheh Ashouri, there will be opportunities to raise issues with the Foreign Secretary in coming weeks. I always pass on to the Foreign Office issues raised by the right hon. Lady. I note her particular inquiry about the diplomatic question for Anousheh Ashouri, and I will take that up specifically to try to get her a direct answer on that.

The right hon. Lady says that responses from officials are not satisfactory. I thought this might come up. It reminds me that when I was at school, if something was handed in that was unsatisfactory, it was given back by the schoolmaster with a little tear at the top of the paper and it was asked that it be redone. I would suggest that if Members have responses from officials that they think are unsatisfactory, they do exactly that and send it back to the Ministry asking for a new response. Responses are expected from Ministers. It was known as a rip. So if you want to let rip, send these letters back, because it is deeply unsatisfactory and has been coming up more and more often at question time.

On unfairness in child maintenance, as a constituency MP I deeply sympathise with this. I have found the various guises of the child maintenance organisations to be one of the hardest issues to deal with on behalf of my constituents. We need to continue to bring to the attention of Ministers the fact that these organisations ought to provide a better service for families. As the right hon Lady mentions, it is desperately unfair when somebody has done the right thing, has made all the payments, and then finds that a further claim is made, usually because of administrative inefficiency.

That is, I am afraid, where the agreement comes to a sad end. Ministers have come to the Dispatch Box with great regularity and have made statement after statement.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

They have brought things to the House. The Prime Minister has been here. The Chancellor will be here very shortly. The Health Secretary has been here. The Foreign Secretary will be here shortly. The House has been kept up to date. Baroness Hale has now, of course, retired from the Supreme Court, and is as entitled to her opinions as any other Member of the House of Lords. [Interruption.] Of course the noble Lady is, and she can make speeches in the House of Lords that I am sure people will pay great attention to and be interested in. However, I think she is out of date as to what is going on in this House and the level of scrutiny that we have—indeed, that we are having next week, with the general debate on covid-19 but also the debate on the six-month extension of the regulations if that is what the House wishes to do. It will be a decision of this House, as the legislation was in the first place. The idea that the House is not doing its job is absurd. There is regular scrutiny and regular debate, and quite rightly so.

On the question of statutory instruments being made, the point at which they are laid and subject to subsequent debate is a form of this House—a form that this House has used for many years to ensure that swift action can be taken where necessary. The debates that are required will be held. Statutory instruments that are made on that basis have to be approved by the House; otherwise they fall if the House were not to approve them. That is very important.

I note what the right hon. Lady says about BEIS and the Select Committee. The House does have the power to call for persons and papers. That is a power delegated to Select Committees, which can of course use various methods to increase pressure on people to come. I will take up with the Secretary of State the specific issue she raised, but there are sometimes good reasons why officials cannot be present at Select Committees.

Finally, the House has made unconscious bias training available, and if people want to do it, that is a matter for them.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Residents in the Mandale and Victoria area of my constituency are having their lives made a misery by gangs of youths. In the past week, I have been told about cars and buses damaged, house windows smashed, people abused in the street, a pensioner assaulted in his own home, and an 11-year-old held at knifepoint on the way home from school. It cannot go on. The Government are putting more police on the streets, with improved stop-and-search powers, but will my right hon. Friend grant a debate in Government time on strengthening the powers of the courts and the police to deal with antisocial behaviour and youth offending?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important and troubling point. As constituency MPs all know, there are difficulties that come from antisocial behaviour, and that causes pain and frustration to our law-abiding constituents. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are making serious headway in tackling antisocial behaviour and violent crime. On top of our strong record since 2010, I am pleased to say that we have now recruited over 4,300 new police officers as part of our drive to recruit 20,000 more officers by the end of this Parliament. We have also announced a £200 million youth endowment

fund, supporting the children and young people most vulnerable to involvement in crime and violence. This is also often a question of enforcement and using the powers that are already there, and the elections next year for police and crime commissioners will be important, because we want good Conservatives who are in favour of the enforcement of law and order.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): May I begin with the debate on coronavirus on Monday, which is welcome and will give Members an opportunity to raise matters of concern to their constituents? However, it would be a missed opportunity if that debate, as well as being general, were unfocused and unstructured. I therefore ask whether the Government can give serious leadership and direction to that debate, and whether Ministers can spend the weekend formulating specific proposals to put to the House on Monday.

In that regard, I would like to raise the matter of four-nation co-operation and co-ordination in response to the pandemic. The Leader of the House may be aware that the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, wrote to the Prime Minister last night asking for urgent talks. She also stated the obvious, which is that even further, more restrictive public health protocols may be necessary to keep the infection rate down in the weeks ahead, and that, if that is to happen, it would be beneficial if there were a co-ordinated four-nation response. That is not to say that things have to be exactly the same in every part of the UK, but there needs to be an integrated and consistent approach. In particular, there needs to be consideration of whether the powers and money available to the devolved Administrations are sufficient to deal with the crisis.

That brings me to the Budget, which the shadow Leader of the House mentioned. I appreciate that the UK's finances are in such a perilous state that there may be a disinclination to discuss these matters in public, but simply keeping a problem secret will not make it go away. A particular problem that arises as a consequence of the Budget delay is that the devolved Administrations are unable to plan their budgets except in the most provisional of terms. Given the covid-19 crisis and the additional expenditure that has been required, the situation is less than desirable. What alternative do the Government have to the Budget in terms of giving direction to the devolved Administrations as to what their planning horizons might be?

Finally, I want to raise unfinished business from last night's debate, when we discussed extending the voting arrangements in the House. Several Members asked the Leader of the House what the justification is for Members being able to participate virtually in some business but not in other business. If the public health restrictions are indeed going to intensify, and if we need to show more leadership as a House, should we not extend the virtual arrangements to debates as well as to Question Time, to make sure that Members can participate in all the proceedings of the House safely and securely?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will deal with the last point first. When we had a completely hybrid House, we found it was deeply unsatisfactory for legislation and debates around legislation. Legislation effects changes and alters people's lives, and it needs to be done thoroughly and scrutinised effectively by the House. Unfortunately, a

series of monologues did not succeed in doing that, subject to very tight time limitations. That was the one bit of the hybrid system that did not work, which is why we have gone back to doing legislative business personally, and we will continue to do that for the foreseeable future.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and to members of other parties for their support for Monday's debate, which is, of course, a change in business from what was previously announced, but I think the House as a whole wanted to have that debate. On the question of its being general, the difficulty is that there are many points that individuals wish to raise on behalf of their constituents. There is always a balance to be struck between the general nature of the debate and the specifics of what is going on, but allowing Members to bring forward individual issues from their constituencies is important.

As regards co-operation between the devolved authorities, devolution inevitably leads to differences, and that is part of its purpose, but the leaders of the devolved authorities have been attending Cobra meetings—they have been invited to some of them, where they have been able to contribute their views. Part of the way of tackling the problem is to have different local options. We have moved away from the one national approach to widespread national advice, followed by very clear but detailed regulations in local areas, and I think that that fits in with the devolved settlement.

The hon. Gentleman also refers to the money issue, and it is worth reminding him that £6.5 billion has gone from the UK taxpayer to Scotland—*[Interruption.]* I said the UK taxpayer, and that does include Scotland for the time being. We are still a United Kingdom, I am glad to say—*[Interruption.]* May it remain forever, and I am glad to see some support coming from the Democratic Unionist party for that view. So £6.5 billion and 157,000 people have been helped on the self-employed scheme and 779,500 on the furlough scheme. I am glad to say that money is going where it is needed because of the strength of the United Kingdom. With regard to the Budget, one cannot make decisions on policy until one has the facts available to make those decisions upon, and this is such a rapidly changing situation that it would be premature to give any commitments on the Budget.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware of the distressing decision by the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation to sell the Maltby Miners Welfare Institute, the Stute, which has for years been paid for by subs from miners, is a key part of our area's history and culture, and is meant to be a community asset. We have seen other welfares sold off with a devastating impact on the community, such as the one in Dinnington. Will he join me in encouraging CISWO to take the Stute off the market and to explore all possible options to keep it open, and encourage them to work with groups such as the Maltby Miners Welfare and Recreation Protection Group and others to find a solution, so that there is a positive mining lasting legacy for future generations for Maltby and across Rother Valley?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a brilliant campaigner for his constituency and for the interests of his communities. He is right to draw attention to the importance of the Maltby social club and recreation area. Such places

often sit at the heart of the community, drawing together people of all ages and interests, and he serves his constituents so well in his support for the Maltby Miners Welfare Institute. If a community nominates a building or recreation ground as a local asset, the council has an obligation to delay the sale for six months to allow time for funds to be raised to purchase it under the Localism Act 2011. So I urge him to continue his campaign and have an Adjournment debate, and perhaps he should set up a crowdfunding scheme to try to raise some money to help in this really important activity that keeps his excellent community together.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: From this morning's exchanges at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, it is clear that the announced debate on the spending on support measures for its sectors, including sport, would be well supported and also very timely.

I give the Leader of the House advance notice that we have a time-sensitive application on the impact of covid-19 on those experiencing baby loss, with Baby Loss Awareness Week running from 9 to 15 October. We eagerly anticipate the reopening of Westminster Hall, with many debates awaiting time, such as family support during the covid-19 pandemic crisis, the effect of covid-19 on those living with obesity, and mental health support for frontline staff.

I ask the Leader of the House to avoid mixed messaging and give clarity for the public. When making announcements could Ministers be cognisant of the fact that different rules, guidelines and regulations pertain not only in the devolved nations but in different parts of England, for instance, in the north-east, Tyne and Wear, Northumberland and Durham, for instance. With different regulations in place, if an announcement is made for the whole of the country, people do not know what guidelines or regulations to actually adhere to.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for selecting a debate for next week that has such widespread support. That is, of course, the virtue of the Backbench Business Committee. I note what he says about Baby Loss Awareness Week, although I am nervous of promising to find time for specific weeks, because it has to fit in with other Government business, but his point is a very important one. I, too, am glad that the motion last night to get Westminster Hall back on 5 October was passed by the House, and that will be an opportunity for Members to raise a much wider range of issues for which time on the Floor of the House is not available. On the issue of local differences, it is up to local councils particularly to ensure that the message gets across in their areas—helped by Members of Parliament, as the hon. Gentleman does so effectively.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend, quite rightly, is a stickler for using clear and correct English. Last week in the House, he mourned—and rightly so—the loss of Somerset's traditional boundaries, but his words were mischievously and dishonestly misinterpreted by the leader of Somerset County Council. My right hon. Friend has now become a victim of fake news, as he is wrongly accused of favouring Somerset County Council's ridiculous half-baked scheme to form a unitary authority which does not take in Somerset. This silly plan fails to restore the Somerset of King Alfred to the greatness

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]

that we want to see. A much better plan for full-scale reform, which would help to reunite our broken county, has been put forward by the district councils. Could we please have a debate in Government time, or a rip—“could do better”—on fake news and on ensuring that the unitary bit, if it goes ahead, is for the district, not the county?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am appalled that fake news should come to this House and this country. I thought that it was something left to our friends across the Atlantic. There is nothing more annoying, when one is driving through God’s own county of Somerset, to see signs that say, “Welcome to Somerset”, when one has been in the county for mile upon mile. They are misleading, mischievous and wrongly placed, and that they were put there to celebrate one of our sovereign’s jubilees is extraordinarily irksome. My hon. Friend makes a good point about how we need to listen to all councils and get all their views, and very often we should listen to my hon. Friend.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Teachers and parents in my constituency of Enfield, Southgate say that the covid-19 pandemic is having a devastating effect on the mental health of young people; they feel anxious, isolated, less motivated and are struggling to cope. The charity YoungMinds’ recent survey of 1,000 respondents found that 80% agreed that the pandemic had made their mental health worse, and 31% said that they were no longer able to access support and still needed it. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the mental health needs of children and young people?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have entire sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. This is one of the great concerns about the effects of the pandemic. The Government are doing what they can in terms of financial support by providing £13.3 billion in 2019-20, and at the heart of the NHS long-term plan is the largest expansion of mental health services in a generation. Supporting children is of particular importance, and there is an extra £9.2 million of funding for charities specifically during the crisis. Next week’s general debate will be an opportunity to raise this issue and to receive an answer from the relevant Ministry.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): A few weeks ago in the Chamber, I raised my—and my constituents’—concerns about Sunnysdale School in Shildon, which has been closed since December after falling into disrepair. We have now learnt that the cost of the most basic repairs to get the school reopened is about £4.8 million, which is a vast sum. The council is obviously quite worried about this. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we really need to get our kids out of portakabins and into classrooms, especially given the school time lost to covid, and that it is vital that kids have a good education and a good school to ensure that the Government are delivering on their levelling-up agenda?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Durham County Council is responsible for Greenfield College’s buildings, supported by annual capital funding. I understand that pupils are being supported to attend the site at Newton Aycliffe due to

maintenance issues at the children’s site. My hon. Friend is quite right to say that portakabins are far from ideal. In 2020-21, Durham was allocated £7 million in school condition allocations to spend on maintaining its schools. I understand that Baroness Berridge, the Minister responsible for school capital funding, has written to my hon. Friend with further details. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to campaign on this issue for the interests of the schoolchildren in her constituency, and I hope that she will continue to do so. Mr Speaker, you look as if you are encouraging her to apply for an Adjournment debate so that this issue may be further discussed.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Every year in Barnsley, we lose nearly 700 lives to cancer, and in the UK we are facing a huge backlog in cancer screening tests and treatment after the covid-19 lockdown. Can we have a statement from the Government on their cancer recovery plan to clear the backlog, deal with spiralling waiting lists for diagnostic tests and get cancer services back on track?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think anybody in the House would disagree with the hon. Lady in the objective she is trying to achieve. It is worth pointing out that more than 100,000 people started treatment for cancer during the pandemic. Indeed, in my constituency the Circle Bath Hospital took the cancer patients from Bath’s Royal United Hospital as an exclusive cancer hospital for a period to try to ensure that people got the treatment they needed. I encourage individuals to go to their doctors if they have any concerns. They are entitled to do that and they should not be nervous about going to see their doctor, and urgent referrals are now receiving checks.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: It is well known that weak leaders often blame the public in order to divide communities and deflect from their own failings. Another worrying trait of weak leadership is threatening military enforcement. As a member of the Cabinet, can the Leader of the House explain what the military enforcement announced this week by the Prime Minister will exactly entail?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that intervention was rather more *parti pris* than we are accustomed to in business questions. We have incredibly strong and effective leadership—leadership that is prepared to take difficult decisions and is willing to take decisions that go against the grain of the philosophy of the Conservative party. Why is that? It is because in these circumstances they are the decisions necessary to safeguard the nation and to help people to save lives. So I think we have strong and effective leadership. I would point out that more than 4,300 police officers have been taken on to support the police in doing this, and that that proposals for support from the Army relate to back-office roles and back-filling to help the police. This is not a proposal as the hon. Lady seems to be thinking about for any more extreme measures.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: I listened intently to the right hon. Gentleman’s earlier response to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). However, I wish to draw his attention to other matters relating to the Child Maintenance Service: failures to provide statements in order that parents can carry out a full reconciliation of their own

accounts to try to locate other discrepancies, such as the January 2020 double payment; harassment, with people receiving text messages at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning threatening legal action for "non-payment", where that is emphatically untrue; and non-pursual of working parents who shamelessly avoid their financial responsibilities, thus inexplicably wiping out hundreds and hundreds of pounds owed to children. Will he therefore arrange for a Minister to look into the specific cases that my constituents are facing? May we have a debate on the wider issues, so that a Minister can come to that Dispatch Box to explain why these government agencies are failing these children and their families?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Department for Work and Pensions Ministers regularly appear at the Dispatch Box. It is a fair set of questions to ask, but I say to the hon. Gentleman that if he has any outstanding cases where he has not received answers after a reasonable length of time and he wishes to contact my office, I will do whatever I can to facilitate speedy answers. I reiterate that as a constituency MP dealing with these child maintenance issues, I have rarely found I have received as satisfactory an answer when dealing with a quango as I get when things are directly controlled by Ministers.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): This week, the National Trust produced its "Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery", in which it listed 93 properties for which it is responsible that have links to slavery and colonialism. One of the properties listed is Chartwell, Winston Churchill's former home, and that has caused great anger to many of my constituents, who see that Winston Churchill was arguably the greatest Briton who ever was. Will my right hon. Friend find Government time for us to debate Churchill's legacy, the man he was, how we should be proud of him, and how we should push back on the left's attempts and determination to denigrate his past? Will my right hon. Friend also take into account the concerns that many of us have about many of our once-loved and currently loved national organisations being increasingly influenced and taken over by woke-ist elements?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. We should be so proud of our great heroes in this nation, like Winston Churchill. An organisation like the National Trust should be honoured that it has Chartwell among its portfolio of properties, and it should remember that its properties were given to it by people who expected it to be a custodian of our history, to be proud of our history and to think well of our great nation, not to shamefacedly, quietly hide away, pretending that it is abashed about the greatness that this country has enjoyed over so many centuries. It is sad that a once great organisation—a membership organisation that owes a duty to its members, many of whom I hear are now resigning in protest—cannot realise how wonderful a man like Churchill was. He is not alone; I could give a list of the great figures of our past, but, Mr Speaker, you want me to be brief.

Mr Speaker: And sometimes it was in lieu of taxes that we got them.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): *The Times* recently reported that the Prime Minister is "energised" by a "hydrogen-fuelled future". It is not often, Mr Speaker,

that you will hear this Unionist calling for the country to go green, but I am enthused and energised by what the Prime Minister has said. I wonder whether the Leader of the House can tell us if there is going to be a statement by the Prime Minister on this subject. Is there a planned policy announcement coming soon, or even a debate on the horizon? We want to ensure that we build on our hydrogen advantage as a nation and stimulate supply and demand, in parallel with the creation of a hub, hopefully in Northern Ireland, to build buses, heavy goods vehicles and cars, all made in green Ulster, to advantage our workforce.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That the hon. Gentleman has gone green shows that the peace process really has worked. I can assure him that the Government are committed to ensuring that the UK meets its green energy commitments and that hydrogen plays an important role in that. I am in full agreement with the Prime Minister—well, I am always in full agreement with the Prime Minister, but particularly on this subject. I think the opportunity for hydrogen is extremely exciting and interesting, and it may be good enough to overturn this anti-car prejudice that some people have. If we have hydrogen cars, we can go back to enjoying all our motoring.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) [V]: Thousands of my constituents, mostly young, hard-working people, currently find themselves owning properties that have no value and are unsaleable due to fire safety-related issues. Will the Housing Secretary make a statement on the progress made in ensuring that leaseholders, such as my constituents in Zenith Close, Ridgemont estate, the Pulse development and Millbrook Park estate, do not have to bear the cost of fixing historical safety defects in their buildings and funding interim safety measures such as waking watches? Will he also make funds available to support remediation work in buildings under 18 metres?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important question. The Government are certainly looking at it and have appointed an adviser, Michael Wade, to accelerate the work on developing financing solutions to ensure that leaseholders are protected from unaffordable remediation costs while also ensuring that costs do not fall unreasonably on the taxpayer. We will provide an update on this work when the building safety Bill is introduced to Parliament.

To tackle historical safety defects, we have provided £1.6 billion in remediation funding, £1 billion of which, through the building safety fund, is specifically to address unsafe non-aluminium composite material forms of cladding systems. The objective of the building safety fund is to make homes safer faster, which is why funding is targeted at remediation costs of high-rise buildings.

We recognise that many leaseholders are anxious about potentially increasing costs from interim measures such as waking watches. We are keen to support leaseholders so that such interim measures are used in the short term and are not a substitute for remediation, and we are urgently investigating what can be done to reduce the costs of waking watches. For information, a waking watch is having people physically walk around the building to see that it is not at risk of catching fire. We are gathering evidence on cost data and will publish this information shortly.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: I am sure that the Leader of the House will join me in recognising the specific impact that coronavirus has had on predominantly female-led industries such as the hair and beauty sector. I have heard from many businesses in my constituency, big and small, that are facing financial devastation. Will the Leader of the House please commit to a debate in Government time that will finally allow their voices to be heard?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to raise this on behalf of her constituents. There will be a debate on Monday on the whole covid-19 problem, so she may wish to raise her points then.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The UK is rightly proud of its commitment to the world's poorest through spending 0.7% of our GNI on eliminating poverty, but with a smaller economy, the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is having to make reductions of £2.9 billion in that spending. Will the Foreign Secretary come to the House to update us on how he is making those difficult choices and trade-offs? When will the Leader of the House table a motion to establish a Committee to look at spending on overseas development assistance across all Departments?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On the second part of my hon. Friend's question, the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee that the Government welcome parliamentary scrutiny. I had a meeting last week with the Chair of the relevant Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), and I discussed with her what steps she wanted to see taken next. Ultimately, what happens to the International Development Committee is a matter for Parliament. As regards the Foreign Secretary coming to the House, he will, admittedly, be here later on, on a different subject, but he is a regular attender of the House and there will be many opportunities to question him.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): Despite the best efforts of our fabulous NHS staff, four out of our seven health boards in Wales are in special measures or under some form of targeted intervention because of the systemic mismanagement of health issues by the Labour Government in Cardiff Bay. It is incumbent on us all to provide assistance where we can. Older persons' charity Independent Age has estimated that the taxpayer pays more than £4 billion in additional NHS costs because 40% of eligible pensioners do not claim pension credit. Will my right hon. Friend facilitate a debate on the matter so that we can determine how best to raise awareness about claiming this important allowance?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is indeed an important allowance. The Government have offered pension credit since 2003, when it was introduced by our predecessor Government. Along with our increases to the state pension, it has been of vital assistance to many poorer pensioners. We want to make sure that all eligible pensioners claim the pension credit to which they are entitled, and the Government work with a range of organisations to make sure that those who are eligible know how to claim. If anybody who is watching the Parliament channel is entitled to claim, I hope they will put in a claim. My hon. Friend can help in this effort by supporting the nationwide campaign to raise awareness that has been running in GP surgeries, post offices and on social media to encourage those who are over state pension age to discover whether they are eligible.

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 a few minutes.

11.53 am

Sitting suspended.

The Economy

11.56 am

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Thank you for granting me permission to make this statement to the House, Mr Speaker. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister set out the next stage of the Government's health response to coronavirus. Today, I want to explain the next phase of our planned economic response. The House will be reassured to know that I have been developing plans to protect jobs and the economy over the winter period—plans that seek to strike a finely judged balance between managing the virus and protecting the jobs and livelihoods of millions.

I know that people are anxious, afraid and exhausted at the prospect of further restrictions on our economic and social freedoms. I share those feelings, but there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic. We are in a fundamentally different position than we were in March, and we now know much more about this virus. Public awareness of the risks and how to mitigate them is far greater, and we have met our promise to give the NHS whatever it needs, with significant new funding for NHS capacity and for personal protective equipment. I can inform the House that we have now provided over £12 billion for test and trace.

In economic terms, while our output remains well below what it was in February, we have seen three consecutive months of growth, and millions of people have moved off the furlough and back to work. But the resurgence of the virus and the measures we need to take in response pose a threat to this fragile economic recovery, so our task now is to move to the next stage of our economic plan, nurturing the recovery by protecting jobs through the difficult winter months.

The underlying rationale for the next phase of economic support must be different from what came before. The primary goal of our economic policy remains unchanged—to support people's jobs—but the way we achieve that must evolve. Back in March, we hoped we were facing a temporary period of disruption. In response, we provided one of the most generous and comprehensive economic plans anywhere in the world, with £190 billion of support for people, businesses and public services as we have protected our economic capacity. It is now clear, as the Prime Minister and our scientific advisers have said, that for at least the next six months the virus and restrictions are going to be a fact of our lives. Our economy is now likely to undergo a more permanent adjustment. The sources of our economic growth and the kinds of jobs we create will adapt and evolve to the new normal, and our plan needs to adapt and evolve in response.

Above all, we need to face up to the trade-offs and hard choices that coronavirus presents, and there has been no harder choice than the decision to end the furlough scheme. The furlough was the right policy at the time we introduced it. It provided immediate short-term protection for millions of jobs through a period of acute crisis, but as the economy reopens, it is fundamentally wrong to hold people in jobs that only exist inside the furlough. We need to create new opportunities and allow the economy to move forward, and that means supporting people to be in viable jobs that provide genuine security.

As I have said throughout this crisis, I cannot save every business. I cannot save every job. No Chancellor could. But what we can and must do is deal with the real problems businesses and employees are facing now. In March, the problem was that we ordered businesses to close. In response, we paid people to stay at home and not work. Today, the problem is different. Many businesses are operating safely and viably, but they now face uncertainty and reduced demand over the winter months. What those businesses need is support to bring people back to work and protect as many viable jobs as we can.

To do that, I am announcing today the new jobs support scheme. The Government will directly support the wages of people in work, giving businesses that face depressed demand the option of keeping employees in a job on shorter hours, rather than making them redundant.

The job support scheme is built on three principles. First, it will support viable jobs. To make sure of that, employees must work at least a third of their normal hours and be paid for that work as normal by their employer. The Government, together with employers, will then increase those people's wages, covering two thirds of the pay they have lost by reducing their working hours. The employee will keep their job.

Secondly, we will target support at firms that need it most. All small and medium-sized businesses are eligible, but larger businesses only when their turnover has fallen through the crisis.

Thirdly, it will be open to employers across the United Kingdom, even if they have not previously used the furlough scheme.

The scheme will run for six months, starting in November. Employers retaining furloughed staff on shorter hours can claim both the job support scheme and the jobs retention bonus.

Throughout this crisis, we have sought parity between employees and the self-employed, providing more than £13 billion of support to over 2.6 million self-employed small businesses, so I am extending the existing self-employed grant on similar terms and conditions as the new jobs support scheme.

These are radical interventions in the UK labour market—policies we have never tried in this country before. Together with their jobs retention bonus, the kickstart scheme for young people, tens of billions of pounds of job creation schemes and new investment in training and apprenticeships, we are protecting millions of jobs and businesses.

If we want to protect jobs this winter, the second major challenge is helping businesses with cash flow. Over the past six months, we have supported business with tens of billions of pounds of tax deferrals and generous Government-backed loans. Those policies have been a lifeline, but right now businesses need every extra pound to protect jobs, rather than repaying loans and tax deferrals, so I am taking four further steps today to make that happen.

First, bounce back loans have given over a million small businesses a £38 billion boost to survive this pandemic. To give those businesses more time and greater flexibility to repay their loans, we are introducing pay as you grow. This means loans can now be extended from six to 10 years, nearly halving the average monthly repayment. Businesses that are struggling can now choose to make interest-only payments, and anyone in real

[Rishi Sunak]

trouble can apply to suspend repayments altogether for up to six months. No business taking up pay as you grow will see its credit rating affected as a result.

Secondly, I am also changing the terms of our other loan schemes. More than 60,000 small and medium-sized businesses have taken out coronavirus business interruption loans. To help them, I plan to extend the Government guarantee on those loans for up to 10 years, making it easier for lenders to give more people more time to repay. I am also extending the deadline for all our loan schemes to the end of this year, and we are starting work on a new successor loan guarantee programme that is set to begin in January.

Thirdly, I want to give businesses more time and flexibility over their deferred tax bills. Nearly half a million businesses deferred more than £30 billion of VAT this year. Under current plans, those payments fall due in March. Instead, I will allow businesses to spread that VAT bill over 11 smaller repayments, with no interest to pay. Any of the millions of self-assessed income tax payers who need extra help can also now extend their outstanding tax bill over 12 months from next January.

The final step I am taking today will support two of the most affected sectors: hospitality and tourism. Under current plans, their VAT rates will increase from 5% to the standard rate of 20% on 13 January. To support more than 150,000 businesses and help to protect 2.4 million jobs through the winter, today I announce that we are cancelling the planned increase, and will keep the lower 5% VAT rate until 31 March next year.

Today's measures mark an important evolution in our approach. Our lives can no longer be put on hold. Since May we have taken steps to liberate our economy and society. We did those things because life means more than simply existing. We find meaning and hope through our friends and family, and through our work and community. People were not wrong for wanting that meaning, and for striving towards normality, and neither were the Government wrong to want that for them. I said in the summer that we must endure, and live with the uncertainty of the moment, and that means learning our new limits as we go. The truth is that responsibility for defeating coronavirus cannot be held by the Government alone. It is a collective responsibility, shared by all, because the cost is paid by all.

We have so often spoken about the virus in terms of lives lost, but the price our country is paying is wider than that. The Government have done much to mitigate the effects of those awful trade-offs between health, education, and employment, and as we think about the next few weeks and months, we must bear all those costs in mind. As such, it would be dishonest to say that there is now a risk-free solution, or that we can mandate behaviour to such an extent that we lose any sense of personal responsibility. What was true at the beginning of this crisis remains true now: it is on all of us, and we must learn to live with it, and live without fear. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I recognise the importance of this statement and that, quite rightly, the shadow Chancellor might need a little more time. I will ensure that the other Front-Bench speakers also have some extra time.

12.9 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chancellor for his statement and for advance sight of this announcement. I have called for the introduction of a system of targeted wage support 40 times. That call has been rebuffed by the Government 20 times. It is a relief that the Government have U-turned now, but we must be open and honest: that delay in introducing this new scheme will have impacted on businesses' confidence. I know that from talking to them, and I am sure that Government Members know that from talking to businesses in their constituencies.

The deadline for redundancy consultations by large firms before the end of the furlough scheme came and went last week without a word from the Government. If the package of measures announced today can help people keep their jobs and help businesses through hard times, Labour will of course support it. There is much in the statement that we do support—as I just said, we have repeatedly called for a system of targeted wage support, and we have called for help for indebted, cash-strapped businesses over and over again—but we must ensure that these measures are as effective as possible at keeping workers in employment, getting unemployed people back into work and keeping viable businesses in operation.

As with many previous announcements by the Government, we must wait for the detail to be revealed—presumably following the press conference scheduled for later on today. Workers and businesses are hanging on the Chancellor's every word right now, and they need to know what is promised here. So can the Chancellor be clear: will the wage support scheme actually keep more people in work? For that to happen, the scheme must make it more attractive for employers to retain more staff on reduced hours than to retain some full time and make others redundant. Does his scheme actually incentivise short-hours working?

What conditions, if any, will be applied to ensure value for public money? Will the scheme require commitments to continuing employment, unlike the existing furlough scheme, where there have been abuses? Will it require those participating to provide decent, sustainable work?

Will the scheme incentivise training and retraining? The German scheme does, and Labour has called for a UK version to include incentives for training, but that is missing here. Indeed, while, as I said, we welcome many of the elements that the Chancellor has announced, the lack of action on training and skills is worrying. I was waiting and waiting for the Chancellor to talk about training. He mentioned the word once, in passing. That is not enough. His Government have already allocated funding for a national skills strategy, but it is not being delivered on the ground. When will the Chancellor get serious about training so that people can be ready for the jobs of the future? He mentioned the fact that our economy is changing. Let us make sure that our population is ready for that change.

Labour has called repeatedly for continued, targeted support for the self-employed, so I am pleased that that is referred to here, but will these measures avoid the gaps in coverage that have bedevilled existing schemes? Why is there no forward plan for the needs of those who are extremely clinically vulnerable to the disease? Belatedly,

will the Chancellor do more to demand that his colleagues get a grip on the UK's public health crisis? Our country is suffering from a double tragedy: the highest excess death rate in Europe and the deepest recession in the G7.

Labour supports the Government in their announcement of additional restrictions this week. The Government's messaging has been confused enough already, so the last thing we want to do is add to that confusion, but we are concerned that these restrictions are necessary only because of continuing problems with test, trace and isolate. The Chancellor referred to the money put into test, trace and isolate. As I said earlier this week, enormous sums have been devoted to that task, but those sums are not delivering the system that we need. We are still not at the stage of many other countries. The Chancellor must work on that, as well as his other colleagues in Government.

Finally, before the summer recess, Labour called for a back to work Budget focused on jobs, jobs, jobs. We did not get one. We expected a Budget this autumn. It appears, again, that we are not getting one. That is despite the challenges it poses for devolved Governments, and despite the fact that the Government have actually referred to provisions in a future Finance Bill as necessary for their approach to Brexit. The Chancellor announced that he would make a statement to Parliament today only after I had called for him to come here to answer an urgent question; I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting that.

This Government have lagged behind on test, trace and isolate. They have lagged behind on wage support. They have lagged behind on support for those having to self-isolate. They are lagging behind on green investment. For these and for other reasons, it looks like our recovery will be lagging behind that of many other countries. So, finally, when will the Chancellor provide the back to work Budget that this country needs?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. On the question of continued support for jobs, however, I had hoped that she would have welcomed strongly today's measures, if for no other reason than that she has previously asked for something similar. However, her position on this matter has been somewhat changeable. At different points in the last few weeks and months, she has said that furlough should not go on for ever, and then changed her mind and said that we should extend it. Then she changed her mind and said it should be replaced, and then only yesterday the Leader of the Opposition said it should be extended again. That is not the kind of certainty that British businesses or British workers need.

To address the specific questions, this scheme absolutely does incentivise shorter time working. The company will pay its workers for the time that they are in work, and the Government and the employer jointly will subsidise the time the worker is not working. The conditions will be set out in guidance, which will be published shortly, and then over the next few weeks the further details will be worked through with businesses and unions, as we did with the furlough scheme.

I can reassure the hon. Lady that the new scheme does indeed have the conditionality that is appropriate for this stage of our response. Notably, this scheme will be available only for larger companies that are seeing a decline in their revenues as a result of coronavirus,

ensuring that our support is targeted where it is most needed. Similarly, there will be restrictions on larger companies in capital distributions to shareholders while they are in receipt of money for their workers under this scheme. Indeed, they will not be able to give redundancy notices to those workers who are on this scheme throughout its duration.

We have increased training both for post-16 at the Budget and, indeed, in the recent plan for jobs, providing increased access for school leavers to level 2 qualifications across the board. Notably, one of the hallmarks of our skills system is our successful apprenticeship programme. What we announced in July was a significant increase in the incentive payment to businesses for taking on a new apprentice: a £2,000 cash incentive to businesses to take on an apprentice and provide that valuable in-work training that we know makes such a difference to young people's futures. So we are committed to providing especially our young people with the opportunities that they need to succeed in the future.

The hon. Lady talked about jobs. In July, we outlined a £30 billion plan for jobs—to support, create and protect jobs across every part of our United Kingdom. Chief among the initiatives was the kickstart scheme, where right now employers—small, medium-sized and large—are rushing to put in applications to take on a young kickstarter later this autumn, to provide them with the opportunities that they need at an incredibly difficult time. I can assure this House and the country that my No. 1 economic priority is to protect people's jobs, and that is what this Government will continue to do.

In conclusion, the Opposition wanted the furlough extended, but they never said for how long. Then they wanted the furlough replaced, but they would not say what with. Then they wanted the furlough targeted, but they would not say on whom. I do stand ready to work with the hon. Lady, if she knew exactly what she wanted. Today, the Government stand with the British people and British business, with the CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Trades Union Congress, in bringing much-needed support to the economy. Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition called for a plan B for the economy. The Labour party does not even have a plan A.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): The devil, of course, will be in the detail, but from what I have heard, I broadly and warmly welcome this statement. I am encouraged by the job support scheme and the fact that it is targeted, for which I and my Committee have been calling for some time. I am encouraged by the announcements on loans and the pay-as-you-grow scheme, particularly to help small and medium-sized enterprises, and I am encouraged that the self-employed will have their scheme extended.

However, my right hon. Friend will know that there was considerable concern that many self-employed people fell through the gaps of the support provided. Will he say something about whether some of those gaps will be ameliorated or ironed out as a consequence of the new measures, and will he meet me in fairly short order to discuss the options that might be available?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments; I am sure he will see in much of what we have announced today some of the thinking in his latest report. I thank him and his Committee members for all

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the input they have provided in helping us to think about the next phase of our economic response. He is right that this package focuses on employment and, indeed, on supporting businesses with their cash flow.

With regard to the self-employed, I am glad my right hon. Friend welcomes the extension of the existing support grant. Virtually no other country in the world has done that, and it comes on top of the most generous support for our self-employed of almost any country throughout the response to this crisis. Of course, I will be happy to meet him, but I know he will also be pleased to learn that the measures today to defer income tax self-assessment will be of particular importance to our self-employed small businesses.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Scottish National party Members are glad that the Chancellor has accepted the need to extend support, but it comes very late in the day and is little comfort to those who have already lost their jobs due to the impending end of the furlough scheme. Industry, trade unions, the Treasury Committee, people across the country and hon. Members across parties in this House have been pleading with him for months now, and it feels as if it is only the latest spike that has prompted his action.

Coronavirus is not done with us yet. The furlough scheme has saved jobs and kept people paying their bills and mortgages. It has been incredibly important and it is a shame that the Chancellor is ending it at the end of next month. Hospitality, travel and tourism, aviation exhibitions, culture and performing arts, even travelling showpeople, and a host of others cannot go back to normal work because the Government have placed restrictions on their businesses.

Those jobs and those businesses are viable—it is not for the Chancellor to decide the viability of businesses. Ending the scheme put 61,000 Scottish jobs at risk. His measures on the pay-as-you-grow scheme recognise that many businesses have deferred payments and have mounting debt. However, the problem for many businesses is not income deferred, but income lost completely, so will he go further and convert those loans to grants and equity, to give companies a bit more certainty about their future? We welcome the hospitality and tourism VAT cut, but will he reassess that in March and perhaps consider keeping it in place permanently to help those businesses pick up, hopefully, through an improved situation next summer?

There is nothing here, nothing whatsoever, for those who have been excluded from existing support schemes—for freelancers, the Forgotten Ltd, the pay-as-you-earn employees, the new starters, the women on maternity and all those who have had not one penny piece from this Government for six months. The Chancellor cannot say he does not know that that is a problem, although he still refuses to meet them. How dare he say that these 3 million people should be left high and dry with nothing?

Will the Chancellor introduce further conditions to prevent unscrupulous employers from exploiting the new schemes as BAE and others have done? Will he support the fire and rehire Bill from my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), which would prevent that exploitation in future?

The Chancellor did not have the courtesy to lift the phone to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance in the Scottish Government, Kate Forbes, or her counterparts in Wales and Northern Ireland, to let her know that he plans to scrap the autumn Budget. They found out on Twitter. It is not the first time this Government have had a lack of respect for the devolved institutions, because that happened last year, too. Does he appreciate the very difficult situation he has created? With no access to the fiscal levers and no clarity on the funding settlement, he has tied both of Kate Forbes's hands behind her back. What does he intend to do about that?

Rishi Sunak: I think the hon. Lady is continuing to ask for an extension of the furlough scheme, but fundamentally I do not believe that that would be the right thing to do. At this stage of the economic recovery it is better that our support is targeted and focused on supporting viable jobs in our economy, and that means a new approach. Extending the furlough and allowing people to be at home full time is not the right approach in this phase of the economic crisis. Our new scheme will ensure that we provide support to those who need it most and protect as many viable jobs as possible in many of the industries she mentioned.

The hon. Lady asked about conditions. I agree with her that there should be conditions on larger companies accessing support from the Government for wage protection. There will be conditions on capital redistributions and on the ability to provide redundancy notices to employees while they are on the scheme, and, in the first place, limiting the eligibility for large companies to those that are most in need.

On dialogue with the Scottish Government, I am pleased to say that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury speaks regularly with his counterparts, as I believe he will be doing very shortly. There is a well worked process for how devolved nations' budgets are set. There is absolutely no requirement for a UK Budget to be done beforehand. Indeed, that was not the case earlier this spring. We will have Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts later this autumn. On the basis of those forecasts, the normal work will be done with our counterparts in the devolved authorities to ensure that they can set the budgets they need.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Over 900,000 Scottish jobs have been protected as a result of the UK Government's furlough scheme during the worst of this crisis, ensuring that over the past six months hundreds of thousands of Scottish families have continued to maintain a regular income. I welcome the further support announced by the UK Government today. Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer outline how the UK Government measures will benefit communities, businesses, individuals and families across Scotland as we enter this next difficult phase in our fight against coronavirus?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for the conversations he has had with both me and the Prime Minister on the importance of supporting every part of our United Kingdom as we go through this economic crisis and drive our recovery forward. That is something this Government will always take very seriously. He has been very helpful and played a valuable role in ensuring that the measures we have put in place today will benefit companies and workers in every single part of our United Kingdom.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Large parts of the north, including my constituency, are under extra restrictions but are not being given additional support from the Treasury, whether it is our local authorities or our businesses. If the Government's levelling up agenda is to mean anything, that must be urgently addressed. Today's statement is a significant change of direction from "whatever it takes", so what extra measures will the Chancellor provide to constituencies such as mine to ensure we are not levelled down as a result of the pandemic?

Rishi Sunak: There is support in place for local authorities, through the NHS, for any response in areas of tightened restrictions, whether for community information or enhanced testing. Recently, we outlined a self-isolation incentive payment of up to £500 and a business grant support scheme for businesses that have been ordered to close. The Government remain committed to levelling up in every part of our country, as outlined in our ambitious plans to invest in infrastructure in every part of our country.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The eat out to help out scheme was a massive success in Ashfield, with 53,000 meals served. The scheme saved thousands of jobs and kept hundreds of businesses open. However, my wife is not happy with the Chancellor, because I put a stone on in weight in August, which meant I needed bigger clothes. Jono Edwards, who owns the world-famous Junction Bar & Restaurant, is very happy with the Chancellor. Jono tells me that without the Chancellor's support his bar would have closed and his staff, who are like a family to him, would have lost their jobs. May I pass on my thanks to the Chancellor from every single pub and hospitality business in Ashfield for extending the 5% VAT cut until next March? Jono Edwards, Dame Margo and Donna at the Junction pub will be very happy with this great news.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am glad that our initiatives have made such a difference on the ground to people in his constituency in protecting jobs, as I am sure they have elsewhere. I very much hope that I can come to visit him and Jono and his team at the Junction pub in the near future, and I wish them every support through the next few months. I hope that the measures we have put in place today will ensure that they continue to thrive in the future.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I have called for targeted support for jobs in the aviation sector a number of times. The sector would be viable if not for the impact of coronavirus, but in my constituency easyJet, Tui and Luton Airport have already been forced into making redundancies due to the lack of Government support. Can the Chancellor explain why the Government waited until a week after the deadline passed for consultation on large redundancies caused by the end of the coronavirus job retention scheme to announce its replacement?

Rishi Sunak: Our response will continue to evolve as the circumstances demand. With respect to aviation, I have every sympathy for companies and employees in that sector; obviously, they have been very hard hit. The measures that we have put in place have made a significant difference to businesses in that sector. Indeed, I think that one of the ones the hon. Lady mentioned is among

the many that have accessed some of our much larger loan schemes to provide vital liquidity at a very difficult time, and I know that many businesses in the aerospace supply chain will particularly welcome the part-time working job support scheme we have announced today, as it will be particularly well suited to their manufacturing businesses.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's statement. His stamp duty holiday, which is due to expire on 31 March, has been extremely successful in stimulating an important part of the UK economy. What plans does he have for further housing initiatives, which will not only generate business activity but, if properly focused, also alleviate poverty and promote social mobility?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the stamp duty cut is driving activity in the housing market, which is helping to protect jobs in that sector. I would point him to our green homes grant, which the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is going to roll out shortly and which will provide households with a grant of up to £5,000 to subsidise initiatives to improve the insulation and energy efficiency of their homes. There will be larger grants available for those households most in need, as determined by their local authorities, helping them not only to save on carbon emissions but to save up to £300 a year on their energy bills.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We talk about a green industrial revolution and the Chancellor talks about job protection, yet just last week, Scottish yards missed out on the procurement contracts for the Seagreen offshore wind project. In terms of real job creation, will he consider the Scottish Government's plea for an £80 billion UK stimulus? Will he also confirm when the national infrastructure strategy and the energy White Paper will be published and, crucially, will he instruct officials to look at how the contracts for difference process works and change it so that it incentivises the use of UK supply chains?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of offshore wind to our economy. It is something that we have a global strategic competitive advantage in, and this Government will continue to support the sector in the way that we have. I am always open to new ideas about how to do that, but we must ensure that we double down on our advantage and drive jobs in every part of our country, not just in Scotland but in the north-east, where we have considerable advantages over other countries, not just in providing energy but now in manufacturing more of the content that goes into our turbines.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Does he agree that, as the coronavirus is now threatening our recovery, it is right that we focus our support on the problems that businesses in Redcar and Cleveland and elsewhere are facing right now? Support for viable businesses and viable jobs through a time of depressed demand due to the restrictions that virus threatens is exactly what the new job support scheme delivers.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows all too well what the businesses in his constituency need, which is support to get through this period of

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depressed demand. They need our support to protect those viable jobs and to help them get through to the other side, and that is exactly what the job support scheme will deliver.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It is right that the economic support schemes evolve, and this will be a lifeline for many people in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister has talked about embracing everyone and the need for creativity and innovation, but surely there are two gaps in today's announcements: first, the excluded; and secondly, the companies where even paying a third of the wages is not a viable option at this time even though they do have sustainable futures, such as in the arts and creative industries and aerospace.

Rishi Sunak: In terms of the arts and creative industries, we have provided over £1.5 billion of funding to support vital institutions in every part of the United Kingdom through that scheme, but it is important now that support is focused on companies that can provide viable jobs, with a genuinely secure future for their employees. As we have set the scheme, it is very similar to those around the world and gets that balance right, being generous with our support but also making sure that support is targeted where it can do the most good.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to Members' concerns about small businesses and the self-employed and for taking the time to engage with us and hear our concerns. In Beaconsfield, we have 4,000 people who have already benefited from the Government's self-employed income support scheme, protecting their livelihoods. I therefore welcome today's announcement that we will continue the support for the self-employed, through a further extension in the grant, and continue our unprecedented support for both the employed and self-employed. May I invite him to Marlow to see all the good work that he has done through his schemes?

Rishi Sunak: I am very happy to take up my hon. Friend's invitation. She is right to highlight the very comprehensive support that we have put in place for the self-employed. Compared with almost any other country anywhere in the world, it is more comprehensive, generous and has lasted for far longer than one can find elsewhere.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We seem to be having some trouble hearing Christine Jardine. I will move on and try to come back to her if we can sort out what is wrong with the sound.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Throughout this crisis, the Chancellor has moved with speed and determination to protect jobs and family incomes. I welcome his comments today about targeting job support on viable companies with viable jobs. Implicit in that, though, is a recognition that, sadly, unemployment will continue to increase, so will he say a bit more about the importance of the social security safety net at this time and reaffirm the importance of the increase that we made right at the start of this crisis to universal credit and perhaps tell us that there is no intention on the part of the Government to withdraw it?

Rishi Sunak: I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments. He knows better than most what a difference our welfare system and, indeed, the Department for Work and Pensions and its phenomenal staff can make on the ground. I know that he will join me in welcoming not only the increase, temporarily, that we have put on universal credit for this year, providing almost £1,000 extra to those who are in receipt of it, but our further increases in and generosity with the local housing allowance and the provision of hardship funds to those struggling to pay their council tax bills, distributed through local authorities. In some areas, that represents a significant amount of support for the most vulnerable in our society—a point that was borne out in the distribution analysis that we published this summer, which showed that the most vulnerable in our society had benefited the most from our support.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On universal credit, the Chancellor rightly, at the start of the pandemic, suspended the minimum income floor in universal credit to avoid an unnecessary barrier to new self-employment. Given his welcome announcements today, will he extend the duration of that suspension beyond the middle of November, when it is currently due to end?

Rishi Sunak: Decisions on the exact operation of our welfare system are for the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, but I will happily reflect on the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. He is right that that has made a significant difference in the early stage of this crisis, but as we go through it, we will make sure that we adjust and tailor our support to match the needs of the moment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let us see whether we can go back to Christine Jardine.

Christine Jardine [V]: I hope that you can hear me this time, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Chancellor for early sight of his statement, which I cautiously welcome, to the extent that he has listened to calls from Liberal Democrats to extend furlough and create some flexibility based on the German Kurzarbeit model, but what about the 3 million people who have had no support for six months and will still be excluded from financial help? Where are the job creation plans to tackle unemployment and for those who cannot work for a third of the time? Where are the incentives for manufacturing and industry to invest in this country and create new jobs—the green revolution—allowing us to compete with our European neighbours, who are already moving ahead of us?

Rishi Sunak: In terms of ensuring that we are winners in the green industrial revolution, I point the hon. Lady to measures that we already announced in the Budget to provide significant support for initiatives such as carbon capture and storage and the construction of a charging infrastructure fund, to build more charging points across the United Kingdom. Such measures will make an enormous difference, on top of our commitment to double our research and development spending over the next few years, ensuring that businesses across the UK can play a leading role in driving our progress towards meeting our climate targets and creating new jobs in the process.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I warmly welcome the Chancellor's statement, particularly the extension of the 5% VAT rate to next March. I know that many of the hospitality businesses in my constituency will welcome that as they grapple with the loss of tourists and office workers. Many are reporting that trading is at 20% of normal levels. Will he agree to meet me and representatives of theatres and the hospitality and retail sectors to discuss what further measures we can take to support the west end's recovery?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right. I know that she has spent a lot of time focused on this issue, and businesses in her constituency are facing an especially hard time. I would be delighted to meet her and them to see what more we can do to support them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I used to be a curate, so I recognise a curate's egg when I see one. This is good, but only in parts. The truth is that lots of people's jobs are only unviable because of the virus and Government restrictions—I am not attacking the Government for that, but that is the simple truth. We therefore have a moral duty to try to help those people to survive, with proper livelihoods into the future. That especially applies to the aviation industry and the hospitality industry in my patch. I hope that the Chancellor will be able to say something more about specific grants, not just loans, for businesses that are sorely affected.

The Chancellor still has not answered the question about the 3 million people who got nothing earlier this year. Perhaps there was something hidden in what he said about the self-employed that means more people will get support this time, but he must have had constituents contact him, as I have. Finally, I wrote to him on 23 February—214 days ago—about the massive flooding in south Wales. He has not yet replied. A tip has fallen into the river. Can he visit the Rhondda and see the problems that we have? We really need financial support. The Prime Minister has promised that an answer is coming quickly, but we have still not had it—or the Chancellor could just send a cheque.

Rishi Sunak: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman; I will find his correspondence as soon as I can and get him the reply that he deserves. I do not think I disagree with him. It is right that we focus our support on viable jobs. Those jobs are, in part, not viable because of the restrictions. The balance that we have to get right is in understanding that we will be dealing with this virus for a while to come—it is not here and then gone. That changes what our support should do. We have to focus it on those with a genuine prospect of employment, and I think the job support scheme gets that balance right. It is generous and flexible. With regard to hospitality, which is important to his constituency, I know that the industry will warmly welcome the extension of the VAT cut into the spring.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The Chancellor has shown himself to be nimble and agile throughout this crisis. I congratulate him on his statement and his recognition that we must adapt and evolve and can no longer put our lives on hold. I particularly welcome the measures to support hospitality and the 5% VAT rate extension. The fantastic Telford International Centre for businesses and conferences brings in 300,000 people every year,

but its turnover is now zero. Will he continue to do all he can to support the events industry, which is so important to my town?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments, and she is right: the Government must respond with agility as the virus and our economy evolve over the coming weeks and months, and we will continue to do that. I very much sympathise with her and those in the events industry, given the difficulties they are experiencing. I know that conversations are ongoing with the Business Secretary about what can be done to best ensure that, at some point in the future, we can return to what we all want, which is the thriving industry her constituency wants to see.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Chancellor mentioned that the existing self-employed support grant will be extended on similar terms and conditions to the new jobs support scheme, but can he tell the self-employed in rural areas such as Ceredigion, who represent almost 30% of the workforce, whether he has changed the terms and conditions in such a way as to ensure that those who have been excluded from support so far will now get the help they deserve?

Rishi Sunak: The eligibility conditions will remain as they are, with refinements to make sure that businesses are still trading over the winter and to recognise that they have suffered and are suffering an impact on revenues through coronavirus. The reasons for those eligibility criteria are well documented and have been discussed in this House many times, so I will not recap exactly why they are there, but it is worth bearing in mind that the extension of this support means that we have provided more support to 2.5 million self-employed people, which is considerably more than any other country has and for a longer duration.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the significant and wide-ranging package that my right hon. Friend has introduced, and I want to focus on one element of it, cash flow, which is always a critical issue for businesses. Bounce back loans have been used by over 1 million companies across the UK, including 1,794 in Harrogate and Knaresborough, which have taken out loans worth more than £51 million. I therefore welcome the new pay as you grow scheme, which means that businesses will now enjoy greater flexibility to repay their loans over a longer period. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that will be of great value to businesses and that extending the terms to 10 years will halve the average monthly repayments?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend knows from his own business career the importance of cash flow, and he is absolutely right. He mentioned the almost 2,000 businesses in his constituency; on average, they probably took a bounce back loan of about £30,000. This extension to 10 years will reduce the average monthly repayment from something over £500 to just around £300, which will provide thousands of pounds of cash-flow relief to his 1,800 businesses, but also to 1 million others around the United Kingdom.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As we have heard, around 3 million people across the country were excluded from support during the first stage of the pandemic. Yesterday I was contacted by a

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wedding photographer in my constituency who is struggling to pay his mortgage and feed his family, and the prospect of many more months of uncertainty is terrifying for him and many others in similar industries and sectors, such as event planning, that are unable to operate in anything like normality at the moment. What assurances can the Chancellor offer that the measures he has announced today will not continue to exclude people such as my constituent and many more across the country?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman mentioned mortgages, and I am sure his constituent, like many others, will have benefited from the mortgage holidays that we put in place, which my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary helped to organise with the banking system. Those provided six months of mortgage holidays for people, and, indeed, one in six mortgages across the UK was able to benefit from that generous scheme.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: May I also congratulate the Chancellor on today's groundbreaking announcements and particularly on focusing support on viable jobs and ensuring that support goes where it is most needed? The extended guarantee on CBILS, as well as pay as you grow and the measures on VAT, will be warmly welcomed by individuals and businesses in Chesham and Amersham. However, does my right hon. Friend remember the Micawber principle:

“Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen pounds nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.”

What can he say to my constituents who ask how we are going to pay this enormous bill, and how can he ensure that we provide value for money for the taxpayer?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right and I am grateful to her for her instruction on the fiscal maths that we are grappling with! As we move our way through this crisis, the nature of our response has to change. It is simply not sustainable or affordable to continue to provide the level of support that we gave at the beginning of this crisis. That is why our support is now targeted and focused on where it can make the most difference. That will mean that we cannot do absolutely everything that everybody needs at once, but we will be able to focus it on where it can make the most difference, so that, as quickly as possible, we can get our economy growing again and ensure that the maths my right hon. Friend outlined starts to work in our favour. We cannot borrow at this level forever. We must get our borrowing back under control and eventually get our debt falling again.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the Chancellor's statement. Almost 700,000 people lost their jobs between March and July. What is the Government doing to support these people, because the use of food banks has in some cases tripled? What will the Government do to support those who will lose their jobs in the months to come, to help them during any period of unemployment, and to get them back into work as quickly as possible?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: it is a tragedy that 700,000 people have already lost their jobs and many more will. Our focus should be, and is, on finding fresh, new opportunities to provide them with the security that they and their families so desperately need. That is why we have provided incentives for companies to take on new staff through our apprenticeship scheme. We have also provided incredibly intensive support through the Department for Work and Pensions, through a doubling of the number of work coaches and greater wraparound support to help all of those people mentioned to plot their course and chart a better future for themselves.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): The new jobs support scheme rightly focuses on protecting employment and preserving viable jobs during a period of depressed demand. Businesses and workers in West Bromwich East will be extremely grateful for that. Does the Chancellor agree that it is also fair that the scheme targets those businesses that need it most, and will he set out how the scheme is deliberately targeted in that way? Will he also join me in visiting the incredible Red Lion Desi pub, to hear how it has benefited from the eat out to help out scheme?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the nature of our support at this phase in our recovery. In a couple of different ways, this support has evolved in the way she said. It is targeted at those larger businesses that really need it, whose revenue has declined, and it is targeted specifically at protecting and supporting viable jobs—those jobs where there is work to do but the company is facing a period of repressed demand. This is a scheme that will make an enormous difference to those people, but in a targeted and effective way.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: From talking in July about “nobody left behind”, to accepting today that so-called “unviable jobs” will be lost, the Chancellor has failed to live up to his own rhetoric. The viability of these jobs is in large part dependent on entirely necessary Government restrictions, and it is disappointing that he continues to abandon the 3 million excluded from support. Given that he now accepts further widespread job losses, why has he not made permanent the temporary £20 per week universal credit uplift and expanded it to legacy benefits?

Rishi Sunak: The temporary increase in universal credit already lasts all the way through to the end of March next year. For those who are most vulnerable, as I have said previously, we have provided significant enhanced support through the welfare system, including almost £1 billion of extra investment in local housing allowance, to help with private rent payments, and a hardship fund, to help people who are struggling to pay their council tax bills. As our analysis showed in the summer, the interventions that this Conservative Government have made over the past several months have made the most difference to those on the lowest incomes.

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): I know what it is like to have to postpone a much anticipated Budget, but I am pleased to see that it has not prevented my right hon. Friend from doing whatever it takes to protect the economy. Since the onset of this crisis, he has shown the decisiveness, resilience and creativity that the country

needs right now, and I commend him for it. I know that he values infrastructure investment and knows that it is going to form an important part of our recovery, so may I urge him to publish the national infrastructure strategy, which has been delayed time and again, as soon as he possibly can, so that we can get on with levelling up across our great country?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my right hon. Friend, who is a very good friend of mine, for his warm comments. Whatever I have been able to do over the past several months is in no small part thanks to the instruction that he has given me when he was my boss in not one, but two different Department jobs. He is absolutely right about the importance of infrastructure investment, and he was one of the first people to talk passionately about the need to increase significantly the amount of money that the Government invest in the UK's infrastructure. It was he, as Chancellor, who put in place the infrastructure revolution, and I can commit to him that I will absolutely deliver on that. He is right that we must publish the national infrastructure strategy; we will do so this autumn.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): 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.

12.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Belarus: Presidential Elections

12.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the situation in Belarus.

As the House will recall, on 9 August Belarus held presidential elections that were neither free nor fair. The election campaign was itself characterised by the imprisonment of opposition candidates and the arrests of hundreds of their supporters. On polling day on 9 August, witnesses reported extensive fraud and falsification of results, and local independent observers were barred from witnessing the count, including members of the British embassy, who were threatened and then removed from the polling station. The Belarusian authorities prevented independent international monitoring of the electoral process by refusing to co-operate with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's election monitors. As a result, thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in what can only be described as peaceful protest. They challenged Lukashenko's claim to have won 80% of the vote and demanded fresh elections, and they have been peacefully protesting in huge numbers right across Belarus ever since.

The world has watched, frankly, in horror at the response of the Belarusian authorities. They launched a campaign of violence, intimidation and harassment against peaceful protesters. We have seen horrific scenes of militia attacking demonstrators and then dragging them away. UN human rights experts report that the authorities have beaten those that they held in detention and they have threatened female protesters with violence, including rape.

The Belarusian authorities have targeted journalists, including those of the BBC, and shut down the internet to hide their actions. Opposition leaders set up a co-ordination council to organise peaceful protests. In response, the authorities abducted, imprisoned and expelled all but one of the co-ordination council's board members. Svetlana Tikhonovskaya has been exiled to Lithuania, and prominent campaigner Maria Kolesnikova has been imprisoned and charged with destabilising the state. Only yesterday, Lukashenko was sworn in at a hastily organised and unannounced ceremony. Frankly, hiding his inauguration from the people of Belarus only serves to reinforce his wholesale lack of legitimacy.

The UK, the west and the world cannot sit idly by while the Belarusian people's democratic and human rights are violated so brutally in clear violation of Belarus's responsibilities as a member of the OSCE. For our part, the UK has worked with our key international partners, first, to promote a peaceful resolution, but also to condemn the actions of the Belarusian authorities and to hold those responsible to account. I discussed the situation and our response with Foreign Ministers from France and Germany at Chevening on 10 September. I also discussed the issue and the situation with the Lithuanian Foreign Minister when he visited London last week. I have also just returned from Washington, where I agreed with Vice-President Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo to co-ordinate the UK and US response. The Minister for Europe has spoken to Svetlana Tikhonovskaya and also Svetlana Alexievich.

[Dominic Raab]

Let me be clear about the United Kingdom's position and our approach. First of all, we do not accept the results of this rigged election. Secondly, we condemn the thuggery deployed against the Belarusian people. We have led the way, working with 16 of our international partners, so that on 17 September we triggered the Moscow mechanism in the OSCE, which initiates a full and independent investigation to both the electoral fraud and the human rights abuses carried out by the Belarusian authorities. It is absolutely critical that those responsible are held to account.

We are willing to join the EU in adopting targeted sanctions against those responsible for the violence, the oppression and the vote rigging, although the EU process has now been delayed in Brussels. Given that delay and given Lukashenko's fraudulent inauguration, I have directed the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's sanction team to prepare Magnitsky sanctions for those responsible for the serious human rights violations, and we are co-ordinating with the United States and Canada to prepare appropriate listings as a matter of urgency.

Next, we must support and strengthen civil society and the brave media outlets struggling to shine a light on the repression that we are seeing inflicted by the Belarusian authorities on their people. The Government have already been working with our partners in Belarus to that effect, but we must do more. I have doubled our financial support to human rights groups, independent media organisations and community groups, providing an extra £1.5 million over the next two years. That includes £800,000 of support for journalists in particular in Belarus. That UK funding will help train journalists, provide support to those who have been detained by the authorities and also help replace equipment that has been destroyed or confiscated. We will apply all the tools at our disposal to hold Lukashenko and his regime to account, and we call on him to engage in serious and credible dialogue with the opposition, via mediation, if necessary, in order to facilitate a peaceful outcome to the current crisis and one that reflects and respects the will of the Belarusian people.

If the authorities in Belarus fail to respond based on the outcome of the OSCE investigation, which we have triggered, we will consider further actions with our international partners. Our vision for global Britain means standing up for democracy and human rights. That is what we are doing in Belarus, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.4 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Let me start by thanking the Foreign Secretary for this statement and for advance sight of it. It is rare, but it matters when we agree with one another in all parts of the House. It sends a message to the people of Belarus that this whole House stands with them on their right to choose their own destiny, and to resist interference in their elections and freedoms from anywhere, wherever it comes from. That is why we believe he is right to focus support on the people of Belarus and to focus on tackling the human rights abuses—the tear gas, detentions and beatings—we have seen in recent weeks. I know he will also be as concerned as I am about reports of torture, so perhaps he will take this opportunity to reaffirm his Government's

commitment to upholding the Geneva convention. I want to pay particular tribute to those brave women who have stood up in recent days to the armed, masked men and shown the face of courage to the world. When they defend democracy and stand up for freedom, they stand up for us all and they must have our support.

We very much support the Foreign Secretary's efforts to work with allies to impose Magnitsky sanctions on those involved. Has he had discussion with counterparts about including Lukashenko in these measures? Has he made any progress in ensuring that corruption is in the scope of the Magnitsky legislation that this House recently passed? I welcome the funding the Foreign Secretary has provided to human rights organisations, but will he tell the House what he is doing to protect academics? Is he exploring increasing the number of Chevening scholarships to Belarusians? Has he considered measures to support protesters who have lost their jobs or been blacklisted for the stance they have taken? He will know from his previous work that there is more than one way to harass, intimidate and silence people into compliance, and taking away livelihoods has always been one chief way in which dictatorships seek to silence people. I am particularly concerned about members of the arts and cultural community, more than 50 of whom have been detained, with a greater number having lost their livelihoods. What active steps is the British embassy taking to protect writers and other cultural figures, as well as others involved in the protests, from interference?

The BBC Russian service is a key source of impartial information for the people of Belarus. I am very concerned about the potential for both funding cuts to the World Service and the targeting of its journalists. So will he commit to ensuring that Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office funding for this service is protected in any upcoming spending review? What is his Department doing to support BBC journalists and protect them from attacks on them and their families? Has he had any discussions with the Home Secretary about provision for Belarusians seeking asylum in the UK? Will he take this opportunity to reiterate the UK's support for free and fair elections around the world? I welcome his announcement about the OSCE today. Will he commit to ensure that we play our part in continuing to provide funding to uphold democracy abroad and security at home?

As the Foreign Secretary moves forward with sanctions, this underlines the importance of the UK safeguarding against the UK and our overseas territories providing a safe haven for money obtained through corruption and human rights abuse—blood money, as he called it. So what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Russia report? The Government have been silent on that matter since it was published before the summer recess.

Finally, one of the leading figures in the Belarusian opposition council said recently that more than the prospect of detention what he fears is the prospect that nothing will change. We send a message from all parts of this House today that we stand with him and with those who are defending freedom and democracy, in Belarus and around the world.

Dominic Raab: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her statement and her support. It is powerful for all Members, on all political sides of the House, to stand in

solidarity with the people of Belarus, and I welcome that support. Like her, I am appalled at the arbitrary detention and the abuse of protesters in detention, including any activity that amounts to torture or inhumane and degrading treatment. We absolutely stand for the absolute prohibition of torture, as reflected in various human rights treaties to which we are a party.

The hon. Lady referred to sanctions, and we are consider the whole range of potential individuals. She also mentioned corruption, which she will know is not covered by the Magnitsky sanctions; they deal with a slew of the most serious human rights violations, although they do cover those who might profit from those human rights abuses. I can tell her that I am looking carefully at how we extend the next step of the Magnitsky sanctions to corruption and similar types of offences—I will say more about that in due course.

In terms of money for civil society, including journalists, we have doubled that amount of money, as I explained, and will look very carefully at how it is targeted, not just to journalists, but to writers and the members of the arts that the hon. Lady described. I will not pre-empt the comprehensive spending review, notwithstanding her deft attempt, but I can tell her on media freedom that we have a campaign that we do side by side with the Canadians, which is encouraging those countries that are willing to sign up to new legislation, and also providing support to journalists who are either in detention or have litigation against them. That is progressing. We have worked very hard with the Canadians on it, and the numbers joining that media freedom campaign have grown.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the OSCE. I can tell her that obviously we work very carefully with our partners in the OSCE. It was the United Kingdom that pushed for the Moscow mechanism to get an international review both into the human rights abuses and the vote rigging, and we are proud of the role we play with our partners.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great pleasure to hear the statement from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who has laid out an impressive, decent and strong series of proposals, and it is very pleasing to hear the Opposition agree as well. Building on the discussions that he has so clearly had with various of our allies, what conversations has he had with Germany? I raise Germany, in particular, because the Nord Stream 2 project that is currently going through is allowing the Russian Government to salami-slice our eastern neighbours and friends one by one, and what we are seeing in Belarus could easily happen in other countries. Although Belarus is the last country in the world still to have an active KGB, we hope that it will not become the first of many to have an active SVR base very soon.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend and pay tribute to him and the work of his Committee. I had a detailed discussion on this with Heiko Maas, my German opposite number, at Chevening, along with Jean-Yves Le Drian, my French opposite number. We have made it clear, as my hon. Friend will know, that we have our reservations and concerns about Nord Stream 2, both from the point of view of its encouraging European energy dependence on Russia, but also the impact on Ukraine. Equally, it is quite important, given the lead

Germany has taken with Alexei Navalny and in relation to the work we need to do together on Belarus, that we maintain European solidarity. My hon. Friend's points are well made and, of course, our European partners know the UK position.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of the statement, and I am pleased to commend him on the tone and content of it. It is important that we in this House are not ashamed to say that we stand united with the brave protesters in Belarus. Having said that, the statement includes a number of measures that I called for myself in the last FCDO questions, so it would be churlish not to support them now, and I am glad to see that progress.

I make only a couple of concrete points in relation to the statement. At FCDO questions last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), undertook to meet the Belarusian diaspora here in London. I am conscious that meeting has not happened yet because of diary pressures, but could I urge that that meeting be expedited? There are a lot of good ideas there.

I warmly support the triggering of the Moscow mechanism in the OSCE, but can the Foreign Secretary give us some indication of the timescale of that investigation, because there will be pressures for this to be a long-grass exercise, but I think this is rather more urgent and a quite straightforward investigation in practice. On the Magnitsky sanctions, I am very pleased to see the action in conjunction with the US and others, but does the Foreign Secretary share my disappointment at the lack of unanimity in the EU because of the Cypriot Government's position, and will he express that disappointment and urge his counterparts in Cyprus to change their view?

A concerted effort is needed to support the Belarusian activists. The statement contained a nuanced approach, and the Foreign Secretary can rest assured of my party's support for this approach going forward.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman and welcome both the substance of what he said and the spirit of solidarity, which is now unbroken across the House. He asked about our reaching out to members of the Belarusian opposition and civil society. He is right, of course, that covid has restrained that a bit, although the Minister for Europe has spoken to two of the leading opposition figures, and therefore we do provide that support in principle, but also in practice.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asked about the timeframe for the OSCE investigation. It will want to proceed as expeditiously as possible. We want that conclusion. I think it is quite important for the international community as a whole to be able to support action to see an independent international investigation under the auspices of the very well regarded and respected OSCE. At the same time, I want to give it the time and space to do its job properly, because its credibility also rests on that. I therefore do not have a specific deadline that it has been set, but he makes a sensible point about time.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the lack of a common position in the EU. We hope that it will arrive at that. We have certainly encouraged it; we have been on the ambitious end in those discussions. But of course one of the advantages that we have as we leave,

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with the Magnitsky sanctions in place, is that we are not limited or fettered by that. That is why, at the same time as welcoming and working with our European partners, we are in a position with our American and Canadian friends to proceed with the Magnitsky sanctions, which we will do as soon as possible.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for today's announcement, which will be of huge comfort to many people in Belarus. Putting Magnitsky sanctions in place against those who are propping up this illegitimate regime in Belarus also sends a strong signal about the view that we take of the horrific scale of abuses that people in Belarus are having to endure, including seven murders. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and some of those who have worked tirelessly over the last decade to keep alive the importance of free speech, democracy and human rights on the ground in Belarus, regardless of threats to their own lives, so that we can understand better how our country can play its role fully in supporting the people of Belarus to move forward peacefully to a true democracy in the future?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work that she has done in this area, both as a Back-Bench MP and as a Select Committee Chair, particularly on human rights and equality. I am very happy to see her personally. I am travelling shortly, so if she wishes to have that meeting before I return, the Europe Minister will happily meet her. I absolutely share my right hon. Friend's emphasis on human rights and, more broadly, on standing up for civil society, given the pressures and the attack that they are undergoing right now in Belarus. That is why we have provided that additional £1.5 million to support them at this time.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Dreadful though this situation is, many commentators have suggested that it should not be viewed as a classic east-west conflict, and that Lukashenko is no more a friend of Moscow than he is of his own people. Does the Foreign Secretary agree? Does he plan any further activity on the possibility of a mediated solution?

Dominic Raab: I think the hon. Gentleman is right to call for mediation. At the moment, it feels like there is little movement in that direction. We support it. I know that the Germans and others in the EU have been reaching out on all sides. I would just say that, given the nature and the character of the regime in Belarus, and given the support that it is receiving from Moscow—*notwithstanding the points the hon. Gentleman made*—to give it its best chance, we must put the pressure on and hold the regime to account. Those two things do not run in tandem; actually, I think they reinforce each other.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which I chair, is currently producing two urgent reports: one on the political reform in Belarus, and one by our own Lord Blencathra on the urgent need for electoral reform in Belarus. The Standing Committee of the

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has also called on Belarus to launch a "democratic, broad-based and inclusive" national political process as a first step towards a peaceful way out of the current crisis, and in particular to open the door for those reforms, starting with the constitution and the election process. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is ready to support that process, in close co-operation with the Venice Commission, which has written many opinions on Belarus. I wonder what support and encouragement the Foreign Secretary can give to that process, alongside co-ordinating the USA-UK response and the OSCE response.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend and Members from across the House in the Council of Europe, which is an important institution. It does not get the same media or public attention as the EU, but it does incredibly important work, particularly in this field. I give my full support to the efforts that she and the Council of Europe are making. Not only will our work with the OSCE investigation of vote rigging and human rights abuses provide moral support, but its findings will provide practical support in making progress with her important work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I am greatly encouraged, as this House should be, by the fact that we have a Foreign Secretary who leads from the front. Will he outline whether reports of women and children being beaten by police officers and having their passports removed have been verified by FCDO officials in Belarus? What steps can we take to stand alongside those who are having their most basic human rights disregarded in the horrific scenes we have watched on TV?

Dominic Raab: We are shocked, as the hon. Gentleman is, by the severity and brazenness of the violence that has been carried out in front of the media, and the reports that we have seen are as bad as he suggests. Right now, we need a dual effort: we need to reach out and support those who find themselves under attack, particularly the journalists and those in the media who are trying to shine a light on this horrific abuse; and, ultimately, with our European, American, Canadian and other partners, we need to hold to account those who commit these appalling abuses of human rights.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for making this statement. There is little doubt that the elections in Belarus were neither fair nor free, and the response of the authorities has been absolutely abhorrent, with threats of torture, rape and the presence of the military on the streets. Can he confirm that the UK does not, and will not, accept the result of this election, and that we will consider the most appropriate sanctions against Lukashenko and his regime?

Dominic Raab: That is exactly what we will do. We want to get to the bottom of it, which is why we have triggered the OSCE's Moscow mechanism. We want to hold those responsible to account, and that is why we will, at speed, look at Magnitsky sanctions as well as supporting the EU track. We need to continue to shine a light on the abuses, which is why we are supporting journalists doing their job.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. His commitment to human rights is nothing new. When we both came to the House, we sat on the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and I remember him being a champion on these matters across the board.

My right hon. Friend knows of my interest in religious freedom, on which I have worked with him. Freedom of religion or belief is a basic, fundamental right, and it is crucial for a peaceful, prosperous and virtuous society. It is also a national security imperative. One of my last actions as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion and belief was as a member of the International Religious Freedom Alliance, of which I was honoured to be vice-chair. In that last meeting, the case was raised of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, who was not being allowed to enter Belarus, his own country. I ask the Foreign Secretary to do everything he can to ensure that individuals such as Archbishop Kondrusiewicz can enter their countries and practise their faith openly and freely. Finally, I personally thank the Foreign Secretary for the support that he gave me in my task when I was the Prime Minister's special envoy.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his stalwart work—from his membership of the Joint Committee on Human Rights to his special envoy role—as a champion for human rights and freedom of religious belief. He will know that I view media freedom, Magnitsky sanctions and freedom of religious belief as inextricably entwined. Of course we will look at the case that he described and make sure that those voices for freedom in Belarus are not snuffed out.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Can I push the Secretary of State a little harder? He said he wants to get to the bottom of all this, but at the bottom of all this we surely know is Russia, which is becoming almost a rogue state around the world. Russia only listens when we are tough with it. Can we not have sanctions against Russia and, in this country, clear out the nest of vipers who have taken up residence—Putin supporters and yes men and yes women—here in London? For goodness' sake, can we not take on Russia, show it we mean business and start perhaps with the owner of the *Evening Standard*?

Dominic Raab: I admire the hon. Gentleman's passion for justice and human rights. I am not sure that the relationship between Lukashenko and President Putin is quite the way he describes. I think there is more nuance there, but one of the challenges we have, as we hold Lukashenko to account, is to try to avoid the inevitability of Belarus slipping further and further into Moscow's embrace. On the action we are taking in the UK, we have one of the most rigorous systems in the world to ensure, as I have described, that dirty money and blood money do not find their way washing through UK businesses or banks, and we are going to strengthen that even further in the way I described by proceeding to add and extend Magnitsky sanctions to the corruption field as well.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and the substance of it, and I add the voice of the Liberal Democrats to the solidarity shown across the House. It is so important that we stand together in our fight for

democracy and against those who want to undermine human rights. I am glad also that the Foreign Secretary is now flexing his muscles when it comes to Magnitsky sanctions. It shows what can be done. Can I press him to continue to flex those muscles in other parts of the world so that global Britain is consistent in its approach? I press him in particular to act against those who commit human rights abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady and welcome the Liberal Democrats' support for these measures. We of course want to apply the Magnitsky sanctions as effectively as possible. I think part of that is making sure that we have clear evidence to do so. The one thing we want to avoid is the kind of legal challenge that gives the perpetrators of human rights abuses a political propaganda gift, but as I have said before, both in relation to Xinjiang and Hong Kong, we are assimilating, collating and co-ordinating with our international partners and allies to ensure we have the clearest understanding of the abuses that are taking place.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement today. It sends a clear message about the values we have as a country and the way we will defend them abroad. It was particularly concerning to hear that UK embassy staff and other independent monitors were unable to go about their role. The worry is that the coronavirus pandemic gives autocratic leaders across the world an opportunity to shy away in a veil of public health protection, so will he reassure me and the House that everything is being done to make sure that our staff and other independent observers can go about their work unhindered, whatever the circumstances?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right, and not just in relation to the UK monitors, but in relation to the OSCE election monitors. It is important that the light we are shining on Belarus via the OSCE is there, because it provides an independent, very credible basis on which to make exactly the points that he has raised.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Since 2010, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has seen resources dedicated to human rights cut, due in no small part to the Government's short-sighted austerity programme. While I welcome the announcement today to restore a small part of that funding, does the Foreign Secretary agree that the events in Belarus demonstrate that this approach has been a failure?

Dominic Raab: No.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Free speech and a free press have a vital role to play in any functioning democracy. I am sure the whole House shares a deep concern at the way journalists in Belarus have been targeted by the Belarusian regime. What steps will the Foreign Secretary now take to support the brave media outlets daring to hold Lukashenko to account?

Dominic Raab: As I have set out in my statement, we want to provide support not just for journalists, but for civil society. It is always the journalists who tend to be the first ones that despotic and authoritarian regimes go for, and there is no secret as to why: it is because they are the ones who shine a light on the abuses and give the

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truth not only to the people, but to the outside world. It is right that we extend the money and support we provide for journalists and for civil society, particularly as Belarus goes through this tumultuous period where freedom, liberty and human rights come under such dire threat.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: As a serving member of the Council of Europe, I wholly support the condemnation of the abuse of democracy and human rights in Belarus. But how can the Foreign Secretary expect to be taken completely seriously in condemning Belarus for breaking international law when his Government intend to break international law in their trade negotiations?

Dominic Raab: I can reassure the hon. Member that in all the discussions I have had, he is the only person to have made that point.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): We must stand together with our international partners against thuggery and election rigging. The EU sanctions will be a crucial tool in holding Lukashenko and his regime to account. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we will remain involved in those sanctions even after the end of the transition period?

Dominic Raab: I reassure my hon. Friend that if the EU adopts sanctions—we hope that it will and that they will be ambitious—we would continue them after the end of the transition period, obviously having worked out the timing and how they coincide with the Magnitsky sanctions.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is right to make the case for people in Belarus, and he will find cross-party support for that on both sides of the House, but the shadow Foreign Secretary was right to talk about the impact on workers. May I press the Foreign Secretary specifically on what action the Government are taking through financial support with, for example, the International Labour Organisation, to ensure that workers are not being disadvantaged as a result of standing up for the basic freedoms of human rights and democracy?

Dominic Raab: I am not quite sure what action the hon. Gentleman would propose. We can certainly talk to our partners, including in the ILO, but the fact is, with an election having been rigged to stay in power and with all the authoritarian might of the Belarussian state having been exerted against the people because of that, we cannot in all honesty provide the support we would want to the workers, who among others will be those who will suffer as a result. What we can do is put the pressure on, try to support media institutions and try to press for a path towards a peaceful resolution so that Belarussians can elect their own leaders, who can provide economic support to the workers of that country.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The situation in Belarus has an impact on neighbouring countries such as Lithuania, to which Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has fled. What support will we give our NATO allies in the region? Will we recognise the leadership of

Mrs Tikhanovskaya, who claimed to have won 60% to 70% of the vote in the places where results were properly counted?

Dominic Raab: We have made it clear that we do not accept the illegitimate election that took place. We will watch carefully. The consistent practice of the UK has been to recognise states rather than Governments, but we have been clear that this is an illegitimate election that cannot produce a legitimate result.

On the Baltic states, they are our friends and NATO allies, and I recently saw the Lithuanian Foreign Minister. We have been working closely with them because not only do we share the same values but they will feel under threat as close neighbours to Belarus and indeed Russia. They need stalwart support now from the United Kingdom.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State talk about how we must support and strengthen civil society, but many trade unionists in Belarus have been arrested. What conversations has he had with the European Trade Union Confederation and trade unions to support the role that trade unions play in civil society in Belarus?

Dominic Raab: I think it is true to say that, particularly in eastern and central Europe—I think in particular of Czechoslovakia, where my father came from—the trade union movement has been closely aligned with the human rights movement and the cause of liberty for many years, including under the Soviet Union. I join her in the spirit of solidarity with unions that are feeling imperilled at this time. We certainly stand with them, as we do with the journalists, for the basic principles of freedom and liberty that unite us all.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): We have already heard about the appalling treatment of journalists by the Belarussian authorities, and I welcome my right hon. Friend's condemnation of that behaviour, as well as the financial support for those trying to shine a light on the disgraceful events in Belarus. Does he share my concern about censorship in Belarus, given that the Committee to Protect Journalists reports that mobile internet services have been deliberately disrupted, and independent news websites have been blocked? Does he further agree that there must be free and unfettered access to news and information in Belarus?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right, and the first liberty that any despot or dictator goes for is freedom of speech, or freedom of expression, because those are the liberties that guard all the others, and they shine a light on mispractices that take place. We absolutely stand with the people of Belarus for freedom of expression, and against any attacks on journalists, the media, or social media, including the internet.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: In the wake of the Belarussian election, NGOs have expressed serious concerns that the UK is considering reducing funding for international election monitoring. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that that is not the case, and that the Government recognise the important role that upholding free and fair elections around the world plays in protecting our national security in the UK?

Dominic Raab: I have not heard that criticism—it is certainly not one that has been directed at me. I reassure the hon. Lady, as I hope I have done through the statement, that we stand full-square behind support for civil society, election monitoring and journalists in Belarus and beyond.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): We all rightly condemn the actions of the Belarusian authorities. Threats of Russian interference in the situation have been a constant feature of the Belarusian protest. On 27 August, Vladimir Putin stated that he has formed a police reserve to use in Belarus if the situation gets out of control. What representations have the Government made to the Government of the Russian Federation to demand that the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus remains intact, regardless of other developments?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to worry about the predatory approach of Russia, which has always regarded Belarus as a client state. We are watching that very carefully, along with our international partners, and that is one reason why we are taking the measures that I set out today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): 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.

1.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

Personal Statement

1.40 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con) [V]: Last week, the Committee on Standards published its report concluding that I inadvertently breached the paid advocacy rule when I asked a topical question in the Chamber and subsequently emailed the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in October 2019. The Committee also concluded that I inadvertently breached the rule on declaration of interest when emailing the Secretary of State. I would like to take this opportunity to formally apologise for these breaches to the whole House. I do so sincerely, and I am very sorry for these breaches. I did not intend to do so, and now I understand the rules and how they should be adhered to.

I had received a £10,000 linked donation to my campaign fund from Aquind Ltd in September 2019. Mistakenly, I thought that by drawing attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests when asking a topical question about EU regulation that could affect Aquind, I was complying with the rules. I was mortified to realise that my topical question and follow-up email were not allowed under the paid advocacy rule. I realise that any breach of the paid advocacy rule is a very serious matter indeed. I am very sorry for this, and I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House that I never intended any breach of any of the rules. I was always endeavouring to actively protect my constituents' interests and adhere to the rules of the House.

I would like to thank the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for her time in deliberating over this matter and concluding that this was an inadvertent breach of the rules. The Standards Committee stated it was confident that I did not intend to breach the rules on either paid advocacy or declaration of interest. I would also like to put on record to the whole House my sincere apologies for my conduct to the commissioner in the early stages of this investigation. My conduct was unacceptable. I do realise that, and I have also personally apologised to the commissioner and the registrar for my conduct. I have since acted promptly, and arranged by myself and attended a virtual briefing from the registrar on the codes and rules in order to improve my awareness of the rules. I endorse the Standards Committee's wish to hold regular refresher seminars for all Members of Parliament, as I found this a very positive experience.

Once again, I apologise to the House and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for any misunderstandings I may have inadvertently caused. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his personal statement.

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

BILL PRESENTED

COVERT HUMAN INTELLIGENCE SOURCES (CRIMINAL CONDUCT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Priti Patel, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, Secretary Robert Buckland, Secretary Brandon Lewis, the Attorney General and

James Brokenshire, presented a Bill to make provision for, and in connection with, the authorisation of criminal conduct in the course of, or otherwise in connection with, the conduct of covert human intelligence sources.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 188) with explanatory notes (Bill 188-EN).

Backbench Business

Yemen

[Relevant documents: e-petition 326932, Broker a ceasefire for all sides in Yemen to carry out humanitarian aid; oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee of Session 2017-19, on 8 October 2019, on Follow-up on Yemen, Syria, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, HC 2682; oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee, on 15 September 2020, on Humanitarian crises monitoring: impact of Coronavirus, HC 292; written evidence to the International Development Committee, on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, reported to the House on 27 March 2020; and written evidence to the International Development Committee, on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, reported to the House on 21 April 2020.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I call Tim Loughton to move the motion, I should point out to colleagues that the Backbench Business debates are very well subscribed, so there will be a time limit—it will probably start at either four or five minutes for Back Benchers—to ensure we can get everybody in during the two debates.

1.43 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Yemen.

I am delighted to move the motion, and I am aware of the very great interest in this debate, so I will make my comments as quickly as possible. If people would not intervene, that would be helpful, and I do not propose to take the few minutes at the end to respond to give as many Members as possible the opportunity to come in. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. We have tried many times—it was aborted some six months ago because of lockdown—but now, at last, we are able to debate this situation.

The trouble is that the situation has not got any better. I am not surprised that there is so much interest in Yemen today, because it has become the victim of the most lethal and complex cocktail: an extended and ostensibly insoluble civil war with international ramifications; various other man-made disasters; numerous natural disasters and potentially catastrophic environmental ones; an economic meltdown; and now, on top of it all, a deadly pandemic that Yemen was least prepared and equipped to deal with.

There is also great interest beyond Parliament; I gather that more than 210,000 people have signed a petition calling for a ceasefire, and that that petition has been tagged to this debate. Alas, in the six months spent trying to secure this debate, the situation has deteriorated yet further on multiple fronts. It is vital that, despite all the distractions at home and across the world in dealing with the pandemic, we neither forget nor neglect the world's worst humanitarian disaster, which Yemen remains.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, and I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who I am glad to see will be participating in the debate, and to the secretariat provided by Jack Patterson, who has kept members updated and arranged briefings, including

just this Tuesday with the British deputy ambassador in Yemen, Simon Smart, the military attaché and representatives from Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières, which, with many other agencies, are doing such an amazing job in almost impossible conditions in Yemen. I pay tribute to all those agencies and workers

To deal with the political and military situation first, 2020 marks five years of a devastating conflict in Yemen and almost 10 years of chaos since the Arab spring in that country. Yemen desperately needs an effective and lasting ceasefire. Out of a total population of some 30 million, 24 million people rely wholly or partly on aid, and they desperately need protection now.

Yet ceasefires and peace agreements in Yemen have a reputation for being broken almost as soon as they are brokered. The comprehensive Stockholm agreement, brokered in December 2018, set out a comprehensive peace plan. It was backed in January 2019 by the United Nations' unanimously adopting the UK-drafted resolution 2452, which established a special political mission and special envoy, Martin Griffiths, who has worked tirelessly to secure a settlement.

The agreement promised the withdrawal of Houthi and Government-led forces from Hodeidah, a large-scale prisoner transfer, UN observers and various other urgently needed measures. The United Arab Emirates, which had been very involved with the conflict, ostensibly stepped back and withdrew its troops from Yemen. The position has been complicated, though, by the emergence of the Southern Transitional Council, who have taken control of Aden, fragmenting the Government position in trying to present a united resistance to the Houthis.

Great importance has been placed on the Riyadh agreement, signed in December 2019 between the Yemeni Government and the STC, outlining a series of measures to bring peace to the south of Yemen; but the agreement broke after just eight months, although Martin Griffiths and others work hard to revive it. The fragile pause in the conflict in 2019 broke down in 2020 after an attack in northern Yemen. A unilateral ceasefire by the Saudi-led coalition in April 2020 in the light of covid-19 expired in May, but *The Guardian* reported that the Houthis had broken a truce no fewer than 241 times in the space of just two days.

I could talk about abuses on all sides: the 42 airstrikes in July alone, which particularly impacted and killed civilians; drones dropping grenades on civilian targets; and Houthi missile strikes on Riyadh in Saudi Arabia just earlier this month. The catalogue of abuse, devastation, destruction and mistrust on all sides goes on. As a result, 10 new frontlines have emerged since the beginning of 2020, with particularly intense fighting in the past four months, especially around the strategically important areas of Ma'rib, which controls access to the oilfields, Taiz and in the Hodeidah governate on the west coast.

Peace is as elusive as ever, yet death and suffering are worse than ever. More than 250,000 Yemenis, at least, have died since 2015, including 100,000 as a result of combat and 130,000 from hunger and disease. That is probably a very conservative estimate. It includes an estimated 1,000 civilians killed or seriously injured in the conflict in the first six months of this year, including 100 children. There are more than 2 million internally displaced people, with a majority in and around Ma'rib, which is currently under siege from the Houthis, who

are throwing everything at that city, despite suffering very high casualties. Clearly they view the lives of their troops as cheap.

Some 24.3 million people need humanitarian aid—24.3 million out of a population of 30 million. That includes 12.2 million children. A total of 20.1 million people are food-insecure, and 20.5 million people lack clean water or sanitation. There have been more than 2.3 million cholera cases since 2017, as a collapsed health system has been woefully inadequate even before covid hit.

The exact impact of covid is unknown; the 1,000 cases reported in Sana'a is surely a woeful underestimate of the reality. We all saw the images on the news of mass graves being dug in the capital. The International Rescue Committee projects that the most likely scenario is that covid could infect nearly 16 million people and kill more than 42,000, making the fatality rate in Yemen one of the highest in the world. There is little chance of testing. We might think we have a problem with testing in the United Kingdom, but there are just 118 tests for every 1 million people in Yemen, compared with 41,500 in the UK. Just 0.01% of the population stands a chance of being tested, and there is no clue about how they will cope if they are hit by a second wave.

Since 2015, air raids have hit water and health facilities more than 200 times. Oxfam reports that those remaining often lack electricity and fresh water, and even if a hospital is operating, fuel is so expensive that people in remoter areas cannot get transport to hospital, and their conditions worsen untreated. Médecins sans Frontières, whose volunteers have done incredible work under fire, reports that many medical staff—if not most—have not been paid for years, and they struggle to survive and carry on their jobs in the most extraordinary circumstances.

The water shortage has brought big challenges for food supply, as farmers cannot irrigate their crops, and more than 90% of Yemen's food is now imported. With a collapsing currency and an economy that has shrunk by 45% since 2015, UNICEF forecasts that the number of malnourished children under the age of five will grow by 20% over the next six months, to reach 2.4 million—2.4 million malnourished children.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for leading the debate; he is making it clear just how heartbreaking the situation is for the people on the ground in Yemen. Does he agree that that is why we should stand proud and firm by the 0.7% of gross national income that this country gives in aid to other countries? It is so sorely needed, especially during this pandemic.

Tim Loughton: I agree with the hon. Lady, and I will finish on the figures about the United Kingdom. We have been the third largest donor and are one of the most important donors at the moment. The reasons are obvious, and the results are so important.

To cap it all, ironically, recent floods in Hajjah and Amran have destroyed crops, and they have now been hit by swarms of locusts—truly a human tragedy of biblical proportions. Added to that, the Red sea faces a potential environmental catastrophe from the FSO Safer, a 45-year-old oil tanker loaded with more than 1 million barrels of crude oil, anchored 60 km off the rebel-held port of Hodeidah and left to decay for the last five years, with no agreement over access for engineers.

[Tim Loughton]

So we can see why the country is almost totally dependent on aid from the international community and the heroic efforts of aid organisations and their staff, who are working in extremely dangerous conditions as a result of conflict and disease, with the added challenge of getting aid in through blockaded ports under fire or via the main airport, which has now closed again, as well as the everyday problems of corruption and bureaucracy on all sides using access to aid as a military weapon. Indeed, the Houthis tried to impose a tax on aid supplies coming in. NGO buildings have been looted and aid workers arrested.

The aid itself is now seriously in question. So far this year, only 37% of the requested funding in the humanitarian response plan has been met, as some of the most generous donors previously—including the US, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—have reduced or withdrawn their funding at the worst possible time. As the International Rescue Committee points out, it was that funding that narrowly prevented famine two years ago, but now more than 9 million Yemenis have seen their aid cut, driving them to the brink of starvation; 12 of the UN's 30 major programmes have already been scaled back; and a further 20 programmes could be reduced or closed completely if funding fails to emerge urgently.

Yemen is facing a perfect storm of a crumbling economy, reducing aid, restrictions placed on humanitarian access by warring parties, the continuing impact of an intractable conflict and now the additional pressures of covid. Amid all this, the support and financial aid from United Kingdom has been a rare, but desperately needed, constant. We are the third largest donor behind the US and Saudi Arabia. The UK has committed nearly £8 billion of assistance since the conflict began, including £160 million at the recent pledging conference. UK support has met the immediate food needs of more than 1 million Yemenis every month. It has treated 70,000 children for malnutrition and provided more than 1 million people with improved water and basic sanitation. The new money in the latest round will provide medical consultations, train 12,000 healthcare workers, boost 4,000 crumbling health centres and help in the fight against covid. The Education Cannot Wait campaign has helped girls, especially, who are missing out on education and helped programmes against the rise in violence against women and girls in particular, and against child labour. These are all problems affecting Yemen, as if it did not have enough problems already.

As the penholder on Yemen at the UN Security Council, the UK is in a crucial position. It is leading the international community to do more to respond to the Yemen crisis, and Martin Griffiths is doing an extraordinary job. We have a proud record of support and I hope that when the Minister speaks, he will confirm that that support will continue. However, there can be no real progress without a sustainable ceasefire leading to peace talks that are broad and inclusive, not just with Government forces, the STC and the Houthis but with all aspects of civil society and with the support of the regional powers, who will hopefully return to the donor table. Again, I hope the Minister can update the House about the UK continuing to play a leading and proactive role to help to bring this about.

Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian disaster, and the world's preoccupation with fighting covid at the moment cannot be an excuse for sidelining the unfolding tragedy that continues to engulf the Arab world's poorest nation. It is difficult to think of a more tragic combination of circumstances affecting a nation and its people quite as toxically and systematically as is happening now in Yemen, and it has been going on for far too long. It is time for peace. It is time for the world to put pressure on the warring factions and their backers, and time to rally around the people of Yemen to regroup, recover and rebuild. I am sure that the whole House will want to show its support for that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I will have to impose a time limit and I will start with four minutes.

1.57 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure and a great honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) in this debate. This is not the first debate on Yemen that I have spoken in, and Members present who were in the previous Parliament will recall the eloquent contributions that our former colleague, Keith Vaz, made to those debates, having been born in Yemen himself.

There are two issues that we are trying to gather together today. The first is the petition, which my hon. Friend has already described. At present, it sets out to put pressure on all groups to halt their attacks in order to allow humanitarian aid to be delivered. I will say more on that in a moment. The second issue is the letters I have been receiving that originated with Oxfam. They are one-sided in their approach and put pressure on the Government to try to prevent arms from being sold to Saudi Arabia. I will deal with these two issues in turn.

We must all agree with the sentiment of the petition. I am glad to say that the UK has taken a great lead in making available just under £1 billion to provide assistance in what has been described as an absolutely terrible situation. I am pleased that the UK is among the top donors. As my hon. Friend has already pointed out, the coronavirus is making the situation considerably worse. We have to couple that with our diplomatic efforts to bring fighting in Yemen to an end.

As we have heard, 80% of the population is in humanitarian need. My hon. Friend said that there were 2 million displaced people; I think that the figure is actually closer to 4 million. We have heard about the big impact on children and their access to schools. We should also note that humanitarian access is constrained—and many people delivering humanitarian aid have been threatened or detained—in the Houthi-controlled areas.

Let me turn to the second matter: the letters originating with Oxfam, which puts the blame almost entirely on Saudi Arabia. There may be many reasons for doing that and there might be a justification for all those reasons, but we need to separate them out if we are to make any headway and put the blame where it belongs, which is with the Houthi rebels. I say that this is one-sided because the Houthi rebels are being funded by Iran; that has been admitted. Unless we can stop the

Iranian funding of the Houthi rebels, it is useless to put all the blame, and an arms embargo, on Saudi Arabia. That simply takes one side out of the equation, but leaves the other side fully funded.

There is also a link between the Houthis, and ISIS and al-Qaeda. It is a flimsy, nebulous link, and there is a lot of double-talk in describing it, but it is there and it is making a big impact. I would therefore ensure that we double our efforts to get a good diplomatic solution.

2.1 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is the view of many constituents in Ilford South that this Government should hang their head in shame at their central role in helping to create the world's worst humanitarian crisis by training, equipping and enabling the Saudi regime to bomb innocent Yemeni civilians. In the past five years alone, Britain has licensed more than £5 billion-worth of arms—mainly in the form of bombs and planes—to Saudi Arabia. In that same period, 60% of all civilian deaths in Yemen have been caused by the Saudi-led coalition's bombing. Even moderate estimates put the number of deaths from Saudi air strikes at more than 12,000. Perhaps that is why the Ministry of Defence refuses to reveal whether these are UK-made weapons that the Saudi regime has dropped on civilians, despite holding that information on its tracker database.

After suspending new arms sales to the Saudi regime last year, the Government resumed their deadly support in July, once again turning a blind eye to the war crimes that it is enabling Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to commit. Saudi Arabia is being allowed to bomb Yemen without any form of accountability or investigation, which is completely unacceptable. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a penholder on Yemen, the UK is obligated to provide leadership in helping to bring about an effective political settlement and end to the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

While this Government are complicit in arming, training and deploying special forces—and all but dropping bombs ourselves—under international law Britain will be party to this conflict. At the very least, British arms sales to Saudi Arabia should be immediately suspended to restrict Saudi Arabia's ability to carry out air strikes on Yemenis and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis. Anything less would be a continuation of the death and destruction there. Let us be clear: the Saudi air force is believed to have carried out at least 90 unlawful air strikes on civilians in the past year alone, with more than 20,000 air strikes since the war began. That is almost 12 attacks on Houthi areas every day. The fact that we are still using our RAF bases to service BAE Systems' logistical support flights for the Saudi air force is a slap in the face to the UN-led peace process.

The Government need to move beyond gestures and apply pressure on Governments violating international law through tangible action. In addition to halting arms sales, tying humanitarian rights to trade deals could be crucial in stopping cycles of oppression and violence that, if unaddressed, will continue to worsen the deepening crisis in Yemen. Just yesterday, a declassified UK investigation revealed that the RAF is training Saudi pilots on UK soil, equipping them with the destructive skills they need to bomb, maim and murder innocent civilians. This is a dark day indeed for the RAF. I am

proud of our military forces and the RAF and we celebrated the 80th anniversary of the battle of Britain, but it is a shameful use of our military to support such a repressive regime.

Our involvement in both this conflict and our relationship with the Saudi dictatorship have had a direct impact on the lives of British citizens, too. Just last month, 21-year-old Lance Corporal Ahmed al-Batati, a British soldier who protested against arms sales to Saudi Arabia, was arrested by the Royal Military Police. His whereabouts are currently unknown and it remains unclear whether he has been charged with any offence. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten the House on that at some point in the near future.

There can be no military solution to this conflict. Labour supports the United Nations in its attempts to bring an end to the conflict through a nationwide ceasefire and peace talks. Britain does not merely supply the bombs that fall on Yemen, it provides personnel and expertise. That is the crucial point. That is where we need to apply pressure. Saudi Arabia is estimated to have spent about £55 billion every year on this failing war. To put that into context, that is almost four times the current GDP of Yemen and enough money to have secured the livelihoods of generations of Yemenis. It is time for the UK Government to step up and use this country's position and influence in the world to persuade all parties in Yemen to end the fighting and usher in a more sensible, peaceful accord. It is only when there is peace in Yemen that there can be an effective response to the humanitarian and health crisis unfolding there.

2.6 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate. May I also take this opportunity to thank him formally in the House for so willingly and adeptly taking on the chairman role of the all-party group for Yemen earlier this year when I was made Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Department for International Development?

Members will know that Yemen is an issue very close to my heart. I was born in the former protectorate of Aden and have always felt closely connected with the country, which is beautiful, ancient and culturally rich. I was first elected in 2015 and often spoke on Yemen in that Parliament. It is truly tragic how little has changed since then. In fact, despite the efforts of the UK, the UN and many others, the political, economic and humanitarian situation has deteriorated. My hon. Friend has already laid out the humanitarian need and I know others will do so, so I would like to concentrate on the political situation, which is as difficult as ever.

I am hopeful that there are small signs of progress. The Riyadh agreement in December 2015 saw a ceasefire and a move towards a unified Government in the south. Although the Southern Transitional Council pulled out of that deal earlier this year, I am glad that that has been reversed and efforts are now moving in the right direction. This is a really important step and we must praise the efforts of the Saudis and the Emiratis to bring it about.

The other major parties are the Houthis, and I welcome rumours that the Saudi Government may be holding talks with them as well. There are many sides in this war and only by engaging with all of them can we bring about a lasting peace. With that in mind, I am glad that

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

UN special envoy Martin Griffiths recently held talks with Iranian diplomats in Geneva. Working with Iran will be crucial in bringing the Houthis on board. The UK Government, the UN and MPs in Parliament must continue to support Martin Griffiths in his efforts to promote his joint declaration. This aims for a national ceasefire, humanitarian and economic measures, and the resumption of the comprehensive political process. It provides a framework for peace in Yemen, an olive branch that various factions must now reach out and grasp.

I would like to end by talking briefly about an ecological disaster waiting to happen off Yemen's shores. The Safer oil tanker is anchored about 37 miles off Hodeidah in the Red sea. It has received virtually no maintenance since the start of the war in 2015. On board, there is just over 1 million barrels of crude oil and experts warn of an environmental catastrophe if the vessel breaks apart. The marine ecology of the Red sea would need over 30 years to recover. The Yemeni environmental group, Holm Akhdar, estimates that more than 126,000 people working in the fishing industry could lose their livelihoods. That would only add to the humanitarian crisis.

To make the issue all the more pressing, recent photos appear to show water entering the Safer, which could cause it to sink or explode. The Houthis absolutely must keep their promise and, without delay, allow UN teams to access the vessel and secure its cargo. Currently, the Houthis are refusing, because they want the rights to sell the oil, but that cannot be allowed to stand when the environmental stakes are so high—the oil is likely to have gone off and lost most of its value in any case. The international community must urgently press the Houthis to give the UN access. I welcome the fact that the UK Government have already done so, and I urge them to keep up the pressure.

This has all been allowed to go on for far too long. I welcome the debate as a chance to raise the profile of this issue, and I hope that by doing so we can help to move things in the right direction and start getting Yemen back on its feet.

2.9 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): When I served my previous term in the House, I was also deeply concerned about the situation in Yemen and the plight of the Yemeni people. Like so many others inside and outside this place, I spoke on the subject on a number of occasions because of the dire plight of the people in Yemen, and I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) have been tireless in their focus on Yemen.

Five years on, the situation is no less perilous; in fact, it would be fair to describe it as even worse, with the horror and continued risk of famine affecting millions of people and with ever-increasing dangers to the health of the population, who are now further imperilled by covid and the continuing and devastating conflict. We are all struggling here to cope with the challenges of covid, and it is hard for everyone—we worry about our older relatives, people who are more vulnerable and our children—but I cannot imagine dealing with those concerns in the midst of the hell facing people and families in Yemen.

As the conflict goes into its sixth year, the humanitarian concerns are hugely pressing. It has been reported to the UN Security Council that the UN appeal has received only 30% of the funding it requires, compared with 90% two years ago. Meanwhile, covid-19 runs rampant, healthcare facilities are rendered unusable by continued violence, and further environmental catastrophe looms because of the long-stranded and decaying oil tanker in the Red sea. There are so many terrible issues affecting Yemen that what people are trying to deal with is almost beyond our comprehension.

It is also beyond my comprehension that, in July this year, the UK Government decided to resume the sales to Saudi Arabia of arms for use in the war in Yemen. The UK Government know that there is data from the Civilian Impact Monitoring Project from July, when this decision was made, showing a total of 42 airstrikes in Yemen in that month impacting on civilians. The strikes are increasing in number, they are widespread and they are causing untold harm. Why on earth the UK Government, knowing this, described them as isolated incidents is beyond me. It is unforgivably callous. However, the sales have continued, despite the questions posed by the Court of Appeal about the use of weapons to violate human rights. The Government's persistence with these arms sales speaks volumes, and it is critical that urgent changes are made to the oversight and review of arms export licences.

As well as pressing for a ceasefire, the UK Government need to explain why they are not following the examples of Canada, Germany, Denmark, the UN, the US Congress and the European Parliament, among others, in calling for an embargo on arms sales to Saudi Arabia, in line with international guidelines on not selling arms to those involved in conflicts that target civilians. We need to stop enabling these gross abuses of human rights and to live up to international obligations. The UK Government are currently utterly failing to do that. I therefore ask Ministers to please reflect on the plight of the people in Yemen, who are suffering so much. Will they please renew calls for an urgent and immediate nationwide ceasefire and please get a grip of their own involvement by calling a halt to these shameful arms sales?

2.13 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The question we face relates to the situation in Yemen, and there is a short answer to it: it is appalling. Even before the outbreak of the current, hugely destructive three-way civil war, conditions in Yemen were terrible and getting worse. Yemen has an overwhelmingly subsistence economy, where the majority of the population relies on agriculture for their survival, but water—that most basic and fundamental of commodities—is literally running out. In the 1970s, groundwater could be found at a depth of 30 metres in the Sana'a basin—deep enough, one might think—but now it has retreated to a depth of 1,200 metres, so people have to go more than a kilometre deep before they find water. Without war, without corruption, without lawlessness and without maladministration, this is an existential crisis in its own right, but war and corruption and lawlessness and maladministration have further exacerbated the problem, as failed-state cash crops, notably khat, have displaced domestic agriculture and are now responsible for a staggering 40% of all water use.

The current political instability was sparked by a general and popular revolt against the coercive and kleptocratic Government of President Saleh—the corruption, the state theft, the authoritarianism and the attempt to change the constitution so that he could become, effectively, president for life. It is a tragedy that the green shoots of the Arab spring that forced President Saleh from office and installed President Hadi in his place have been trampled by the factional insurgency of the Houthis in the north, with the resulting descent into civil war.

Others in this debate have highlighted the massive humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Yemen over the last decade, together with the substantial failure of the international community in funding and then implementing a sufficient humanitarian response. There is so much need and it is immediate. For my part, while I fully endorse the urgency of the need for immediate humanitarian assistance, I want to focus on the longer-term solutions to the current devastation, since we all know that the only real way to protect the population of Yemen is by a political accommodation to the conflict.

To pretend that the conflict does not have the established characteristics of a wider proxy war would be disingenuous. The involvement of Iran in supporting the Houthi rebels and the resulting Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia in support of the Government, has intensified the conflict, and yet it would be a mistake to conclude that there is therefore an equivalence between the parties. We are members of the United Nations. We are a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and it is the United Nations that has recognised the Government of President Hadi as the legitimate Government of Yemen. That is important and it makes a difference. A state has the right—it has the obligation—to defend itself within the international rules of law.

The Stockholm agreement in 2018, as well as the more recent Riyadh agreement, have provided us with the first glimmers of hope. Local ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, prisoner swaps and, crucially, the agreement to continue talks by the parties must surely be the framework through which the conflict can eventually be drawn to a close. I believe that the Government have adopted the right strategy of heavy diplomatic engagement in the region. We cannot force peace on the warring parties, but we can work to create the conditions where the parties can choose peace, and we must continue to do so.

2.16 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Lab): The Yemeni conflict is one of the worst humanitarian crises of the modern era. In January, the death toll passed 100,000, and last month, more civilians were killed by the war than in any other month so far this year. Ten million Yemenis face acute food shortages, while 7 million require treatment for malnutrition. Twenty-four million civilians, or 80% of the population, are dependent on international aid and assistance, and it is shameful. It is shameful that Britain is complicit in such an atrocity.

The UK supplies weapons and crucial military support to the Saudi-led coalition, which is responsible for the highest number of reported civilian fatalities. The UN has verified the deaths of at least 7,700 civilians since 2015, although some estimates are much higher, and it found that 60% of those were due to bombing raids by

the Saudi-led coalition. The UK is estimated to have licensed £5.3 billion-worth of arms to Saudi Arabia since 2015. British officials have also provided military advice, including on bombing, targets and tactics. In contrast, international funding at the 2020 Yemen pledging conference in June fell £1 billion short of the UN's target. The UK contributed just £160 million, which is £40 million less than in 2019 and amounts to just 3% of the value of UK arms sold to Saudi Arabia. British companies should not be allowed to profit from the suffering of the people of Yemen.

Exports of British arms to Saudi Arabia were halted by a legal challenge in the summer of 2019, yet after a court ruling in July this year, the UK is to resume these sales, despite seemingly clear evidence that they will be used against Yemeni civilians in violation of international humanitarian law. This is criminal. The Ministry of Defence recently revealed that it has logged more than 500 Saudi air raids that are in possible breach of international law in Yemen—an increase of more than 200 in just over two and a half years. That directly contradicts the Government's recent justification to resume arms sales on the basis that only isolated incidents without any pattern have occurred. In fact, the UK Government's duplicity is shameful. On the one hand, they sign resolutions and speak of their desire to end the conflict, yet on the other, they continue to facilitate the suffering of the Yemeni people by providing the weapons that rain down on civilian houses.

Last week, the United Nations Secretary-General reported that there were more than 2,000 confirmed cases of covid-19 in Yemen. The country is already suffering from the largest cholera outbreak on record, with more than 2 million cases. A coronavirus outbreak would compound the misery, which the UK has shamefully allowed to fester. The global pandemic should have offered our Government an opportunity to step away from the conflict as well as from other theatres of war, which is causing so much suffering across the globe.

At the start of this pandemic, the UN Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire. It is about time that the Government listen and come here and account for their criminal acts.

2.20 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe), although I do not think that the Government are acting in a criminal way in the slightest. It was quite disingenuous to say that. The Government are acting under international law. Indeed, we are a fan of international law, so we are abiding by it.

Members of this House will know that I have a deep interest in middle eastern affairs. It is a part of the world that boasts great beauty, a rich history and a warm talented people. Yemen is of particular interest as an important bridge between the horn of Africa and the Gulf nations. However, the House will also know too well that the middle east has been deeply troubled in recent times, with political instability, terrorism, dictatorships and civil war. We should not talk about Yemen without mentioning its influential place in history. It was the mighty Ma'rib dam built in the 8th century BC that collapsed, causing a migration of 50,000 people into the Arab peninsula, which affected and influenced so much of the world's great events. We also have to look at the

[Alexander Stafford]

great UNESCO sites, such as Shibam, which is known as the skyscraper city. Its 500 mud brick buildings over 98ft high are at risk from the civil war, so we must think about the cultural as well as the humanitarian losses during the civil war.

Hon. Members have spoken passionately in this debate about the dreadful human suffering currently taking place in Yemen. Nearly 250,000 Yemeni people have died since 2015 and 24 million people are in need of aid, with almost 4 million people having been displaced. Cholera and other diseases are omnipresent and health services and vital infrastructure are on their knees. These numbers are almost too great to fully comprehend. This is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, but unbelievably things are getting worse. Fighting has not let up and the casualties, especially among children, have increased. Furthermore, Yemen is especially vulnerable to the spread of coronavirus.

This crisis is one that should move every parliamentarian to action in a bid to stop this devastating conflict. I am therefore pleased to say that the UK has been at the forefront of global efforts to deliver aid and broker a peace deal. Only last week, the Foreign Secretary co-hosted an international meeting in Yemen, calling on the international community to step up its funding and humanitarian response and to pressure Yemeni parties to agree to the UN peace proposals. This is a civil war. Our duty is to broker a deal between the people.

My right hon. friend the Foreign Secretary has also announced a further £5.8 million contribution to the UN humanitarian response, bringing the total UK aid commitment to Yemen since the conflict began to £1 billion. That is us stepping up, and rightly so, to broker peace in the middle east.

Our efforts must be wholly focused on achieving peace in Yemen, and I welcome the opportunity for Members to press the Government today to ensure the implementation of the Stockholm agreement and to guarantee our continued assistance to the Yemeni people. Yemen is a wonderful, beautiful country. Yemen is a country to which we, in Britain, have a long history of connection. It is a country to which we have great affinity and it is right, therefore, that the Government are stepping up to the plate. I do think that it is disingenuous for us to be divided across this House while we are trying to broker a peace deal. When we are dealing with arms sales and other such issues, we obey international law, as we should. It is absolutely critical that the international community, led by the UK, secures long-term peace and stability in Yemen.

As we all know, Yemen was a hub of foreign languages before the civil war. Many people from Britain went to Yemen to learn Arabic. I myself learned Arabic not in Yemen, but in England—I would have loved to go there. It is a travesty for the whole world that we cannot embrace the country as it is. Therefore, I am pleased that the UK is stepping up to improve the situation and trying to work with all the parties involved. We owe it to the Yemeni people and to the country's proud history and heritage. I know that we all look forward to Yemen's emergence from the dark days into the sunlight of prosperity.

2.24 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool has a long-established and vibrant Yemeni community, dating back to the 19th century; originally they arrived as seamen and traders, and now an estimated 11,000 live in the city. Many of my constituents still have relatives back in Yemen and are very concerned about the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the increased number of civilian deaths since August and the forced deportations of Yemeni asylum seekers from the Brook House detention centre, with 10 asylum seekers scheduled to fly out on 1 October.

Yemen is a poor and underdeveloped country that has suffered four years of political crises, followed by five years of devastating war. Yemen is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The country has been left weak and vulnerable, both for its people and its infrastructure, with at least 80% of the population of 24 million now reliant on aid to survive. Yemen relies on imports for between 80% and 90% of its food, fuel and basic necessities. Some 10 million Yemenis face acute food shortages, while 7 million require treatment for malnutrition. Yemen is the world's gravest humanitarian emergency, experiencing crisis on three fronts—conflict, covid-19 and famine.

A pause in the conflict broke down in January, after an attack in northern Yemen. Since that point, despite various initiatives, rounds of negotiations have failed to produce an agreement workable for all sides. In recent weeks, the conflict has escalated; August had more civilian deaths than any other month so far this year. A quarter of people who were killed or injured were killed or injured in their own home. Covid-19 has further exacerbated the crisis. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said that there were more than 2,000 confirmed cases of covid-19 in Yemen and he warned that with the war having “decimated” the country's health facilities, the need for a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict is more urgent now than ever. Covid-19 remains unchallenged, as widespread testing, tracing and treatment are non-existent.

The cholera outbreak continues to rage across Yemen. According to the World Health Organisation there were 1.3 million detected cases between January 2018 and June 2020. The level of immunisation against preventable diseases has fallen. Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance reports that only 65% to 80% of children have received the DTP3—diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis—vaccination. The oral cholera vaccine was not widely distributed until 16 months after the outbreak began in 2016. Non-covid-19 illnesses or health conditions are going unmanaged. Based on reports on the ground and from international non-governmental organisations, there is a need for urgent action. Only half of all the hospitals and health centres remain operational, while in conflict-stricken, isolated or displaced communities services are non-existent. The remaining health centres are overcrowded and understaffed, and they face shortages of the basic essentials, medicines, personal protective equipment. There are electricity outages, and fuel supplies are sporadic and unreliable.

I have met Liverpool Friends of Yemen and Labour Friends of Yemen, and spoken to medical experts, who have expressed grave concerns about the Government's intransigence in tackling the significant humanitarian and political crisis in Yemen. The UK is the pen holder

on Yemen at the UN Security Council and plays an instrumental role in the continuous efforts to achieve long-lasting, sustainable peace. The UK has a moral responsibility towards Yemen, owing to its historical relationship. The UK is also a key member of the quartet tasked to look after Yemen—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry but we have to move on.

2.29 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, having—along with my SNP colleagues—raised this matter and participated in debates on it a number of times over the years. The awful gravity of the situation in Yemen means that it is a matter of profound regret that we so often have to raise these matters and so often have to repeat the harrowing suffering of the people in that country. One of the points that comes up again and again—in fact, it is impossible to have any discussion about Yemen without talking about it—is the shameful fact that the UK Government continue to persist in their sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, which is committing sickening atrocities on Yemeni civilians. Independent reports from a number of sources have shown over the years that by doing so, the UK Government are aiding and assisting war crimes. Yemen has long suffered a deep humanitarian crisis.

The UK Government, as we have heard again today from the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), obfuscates, equivocates and pettifogs about the legality of arms sales to the Saudis, when it is as plain as the nose on your face that Saudi is a barbaric regime which has perpetrated appalling massacres on the Yemeni people. It is beyond sickening, it really is.

Alexander Stafford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: No, I want to make some progress: other people want to speak.

It really is putting profit and trade in death before due and proper consideration for the sanctity of the lives of the Yemeni people and the huge suffering that they have encountered. We have heard today of “heavy diplomatic engagement” by the UK Government, but the arms sales to Saudi undermine and indeed mock any efforts by the UK to pretend to be an honest broker.

Despite the legal and ethical considerations, we have heard today that since 2013 the UK has sold £5.4 billion-worth of arms to Saudi. Let us not forget that the country we are selling arms to is the same country that punishes its homosexual citizens with public whippings, beatings, vigilante attacks, chemical castrations, imprisonment—possibly for life—capital punishment and many other forms of torture. Why do we not take a much firmer line with a mediaeval regime like that in the first place, instead of selling it arms so that it can perpetrate its own forms of barbarism? It is a country based on sharia law where women are legally the property of their oldest male relative. Is it any wonder that Saudi has no respect for the human rights of the Yemeni people when that is how it treats its own civilians?

The Government’s trade and foreign policies are contradictory. They sell arms to that regime so that it can slaughter civilians, while trumpeting their subscription to the global human rights sanction regulations on selling instruments of torture to the Yemenis. It really is time

for the UK to stop the warm words, which will not save the lives of the Yemeni people. It is time to stop selling arms to the blood-soaked regime in Saudi, stand up properly, in practical terms, against the slaughter of the Yemeni people, and play a less equivocal role in this conflict.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Front Bench speeches will start no later than 2.51 pm.

2.33 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Like other hon. Members across the House, I am deeply concerned about the situation in Yemen, as are many of my constituents, with over 900 people in Luton South signing the parliamentary petition relating to the subject of this debate.

I want to focus on the health and humanitarian crises caused by the conflict, which are exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic. Before the global pandemic, Yemen had already been described by the UN as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. More than 20 million people require urgent humanitarian assistance. The threat of famine is very real. People are struggling to access food due to the logistical challenges posed by the blockade. UN official Sir Mark Lowcock has said that, because aid has been cut, the UN is barely able to give food to half the people it is reaching. Fundamentally, this comes down to powerful countries choosing to abandon the people of Yemen in the middle of a global pandemic.

The virus thrives on vulnerabilities and chaos. The UN has warned that covid-19 could spread faster and more widely, and with deadlier consequences, than in many other countries, due to the hundreds of thousands of people displaced in camps. Poor access to water and sanitation is helping the virus to spread. The country’s health infrastructure is close to collapse, and there is only enough capacity to treat those in the most critical situations. Malnutrition is ravaging the youth of Yemen, but only half of the health facilities are operational and there are huge shortages of medicines, equipment and staff.

In July, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated that there are 1 million covid infections in Yemen, with the forecast that without concerted action, cases could rise to 11 million and cause 85,000 deaths.

We have a moral duty not to leave the people of Yemen in their time of need. Every report in the country shows growing misery and desperation, but instead of maintaining aid through this critical period, powerful countries have decided to cut aid for Yemen. While the Government state that they are very concerned about the situation, according to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, they have more than halved their aid, from £253 million in 2019, to £125 million in 2020. This will severely impact on healthcare services for Yemeni civilians, with some forced to close.

UNICEF states that, without additional aid funding, millions of children in Yemen could be pushed to the brink of starvation. As Dr Ali Al Ashwal, who works in a hospital in Hajjah, north-west of the capital Sana’a, told CNN:

“Those who aren’t killed by the airstrikes or this war? They will die from shortages in medical supplies”.

[Rachel Hopkins]

I urge the Government to take global leadership on this issue and call for increased aid to support the people of Yemen.

2.36 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): May I start by saying how glad I am that we are having this debate at long last, and I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing it?

Yemen is the world's gravest humanitarian emergency. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a penholder on Yemen, the UK has a unique leadership role in helping to bring about relief, at last, for millions of suffering Yemenis. The UK Government must step up and use our country's position and influence in the world to persuade all parties in Yemen to end the fighting and usher in an immediate ceasefire and a lasting peace. The UK's arms sales to Saudi Arabia must stop. They undermine our peace efforts. We must lead on an international embargo on arms sales, instead of being a country that will not follow others.

I want to focus on a critical aspect lacking in the humanitarian response in particular—water, sanitation and hygiene. Yemen is one of the most water-scarce nations on Earth. According to Oxfam, 20 million people lack reliable access to clean water. Seventy per cent. of Yemenis do not have soap for hand washing and hygiene. Not only does this have dire consequences for poverty levels and public health; it makes disease prevention almost impossible. It is, therefore, absolutely no surprise that there are an estimated 1 million covid-19 cases in the country, alongside a severe outbreak of cholera and increasing malnutrition and incidence of polio.

Public health is almost impossible without access to water, sanitation and hygiene. It is the first line of defence against infectious diseases. It is also a best buy in public health. Hand washing is one of the cheapest and most effective disease-prevention methods. It really is a no-regrets intervention and investment.

Good water, sanitation and hygiene also have benefits beyond public health for the Yemeni people. It is crucial in addressing gender inequality, reaching the most marginalised people and groups, and removing disparities in access to public services. However, according to the World Bank last year, there is a global financing gap of \$114 billion for water, sanitation and hygiene. In 2019, the UK spent just 2% of our bilateral aid on water, sanitation and hygiene, and this summer cut the aid budget by £2.9 billion overall.

The Government claim to be one of the largest humanitarian donors to the crisis in Yemen. We should rightly be proud of that, but why did the UK cut its contribution to the Yemen pledging conference by £40 million this year? Overall, international funding at the pledging conference fell £1 billion short of the UN's target. As a result of these funding shortages, 12 out of 40 major programmes in Yemen have been cut or reduced.

The Labour party warned the Government that a shortfall in aid funding would lead to the humanitarian and health crises spiralling into irreparable disaster. Warnings have become reality in Yemen. The Government must do more. I would welcome an assurance from the

Minister that he will support more funding for WaSH, alongside ceasefires to get aid where it is needed, to rebuild water systems.

At the moment, the UK's primary export to Yemen seems to be bombs delivered by Saudi fighter jets, rather than the clean water and sanitation that Yemenis desperately need. I implore the Government to shoulder the responsibilities conferred on them by the UN and show the leadership needed to open up the humanitarian response to the crisis. The suffering of the Yemeni people has gone on long enough, and the world is looking to us to lead the way.

2.40 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): On the morning of 9 August 2018 in Dahyan, Yemen, a group of schoolchildren were on a day trip. On their way, the bus driver stopped at a market to pick up water for the children. Then, the bus was hit by an airstrike. At least 40 children were killed, along with a dozen adults. A further 63 people were injured. The bomb had been dropped by a Saudi jet. The Saudi authorities later admitted that there were no military targets in the area. The strike was a mistake, they said.

That is just one of countless examples of apparent war crimes that have been committed by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. The conflict has now lasted five years. More than 100,000 people are estimated to have been violently killed in that time, and the war has triggered the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Last week, the UN warned that more than 20 million Yemenis face starvation, including 10 million children. Eighty per cent. of the population is now dependent on aid, and an estimated 1 million Yemenis have covid-19.

What utterly shames this House—it should be a national scandal, leading the front pages of newspapers every single day—is that these war crimes and this humanitarian crisis would not be possible without British and American support. As an expert on the war has observed:

“Bombs supplied by Britain and America are dropped from planes built by Britain and America, flown by pilots trained by Britain and America, and kept in the sky with British and American maintenance.”

This war would not be possible without that support, these violent deaths would not occur without that support, and a humanitarian crisis on this scale would not have happened were it not for that support.

Since the war began, the UK Government have issued arms export licences worth £5.3 billion to the Saudis. Figures revealed in response to a written question that I tabled show that, in that time, the Ministry of Defence has recorded 516 known instances of alleged breaches of international law. Yet this summer, the Government decided that those violations are not systematic, in spite of their repeated, consistent occurrence, so they resumed granting export licences to the Saudis.

This war could have been stopped by the British and American Governments. They could have withdrawn their support. They could have stopped selling the weapons, stopped training the pilots and stopped maintaining the planes, but they have not. The British and American Governments have put the profits of arms dealers first. They have put their alliance with the Saudi dictatorship ahead of the basic human rights of the Yemeni people.

This Government like to boast that Britain upholds peace and justice on the world stage. Their record in Yemen is the latest example of what a cruel joke that is. This Government are deeply complicit in this war and in pushing Yemen to catastrophe. So my message is simple: stop selling arms to Saudi Arabia, stop your support of this horrific war, and truly stand up for peace, justice and human rights on the world stage.

2.43 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I thank hon. Members for securing this debate. I am glad to see the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) back in the House, because she is a strong voice for Yemen.

I wish to draw the House's attention to the third report of the UN group of eminent experts on Yemen, entitled "A Pandemic of Impunity in a Tortured Land". The chair of that group, Kamel Jendoubi, has implored the international community to take action and "not turn a blind eye"

any longer. So much of what has happened in Yemen has been incredibly well documented, and we all know that that has happened.

The eminent experts recognise that "there are no clean hands in this conflict".

However, I ask all Members to reflect on the group's statements, particularly on arms sales. It says that

"the continued supply of weapons to parties to the conflict is only perpetuating the conflict and prolonging the suffering of the Yemeni people."

Anybody who is selling arms into that conflict should bear that in mind. I ask the Minister to respond in particular to the recommendation by the group of eminent experts that the situation in Yemen should be referred to the International Criminal Court. Will he support that very strong recommendation?

Will the Minister consider speaking to his colleagues in the Home Office? There should be a place of safety in this country for Yemenis who reach these shores. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) said, however, that has not been the case. Last week, May Bulman reported in *The Independent* that Yemenis were among those the Home Office tried to put on a removal flight. This matters; it has been going on for as long as the war. A Yemeni constituent the Home Office tried to remove, not long after I was first elected in 2015, eventually got sanctuary in Glasgow, but I wish that many more Yemenis who reach these shores were able to get that peace of mind and safety.

Let me reflect on some comments from people in Yemen and what they are asking for, and particularly on the position of women within peace negotiations, which is incredibly important. Dr Bilqis Abu Osba, head of the Awam Foundation for Development and Culture, says of women and their involvement in peace building that

"the inclusion of women and youth in any upcoming peace process is an assurance for comprehensive and just peace for all Yemenis."

I encourage the Minister to ensure that as many women's organisations as possible are included in those negotiation to help build the peace.

Other organisations such as Amnesty, Mwatana for Human Rights, and the Mothers of Abductees Association have raised particular concerns about the failure to

implement measures in the Stockholm agreements regarding the return of those who have been kidnapped, detained or forcibly disappeared. Many people have disappeared. People do not know where they are, and their families remain concerned about their prospects. It seems particularly brutal that that situation is still going on, despite being mentioned in those agreements. I urge the Minister to consider what more can be done to ensure that people can get back home to their families.

Finally, I will mention one person who was forcibly disappeared by the Houthis, but who was able to return to his family. Hisham al-Omeisy spoke on Peace Day, and I will conclude with what he said:

"I'm haunted by the ghosts of thousands of souls lost in the brutal Yemen conflict asking if it was worth it. It wasn't. Violence was never the answer. Sadly, we can't change the past. But we can learn and charter a new path for reconciliation and peace together."

I urge the Government to take that on board.

2.47 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate. We have heard some incredible contributions. I spoke about Yemen many times in the Chamber with Keith Vaz, the former hon. Member for Leicester East, and we shared many things in common.

As chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, I wish to mention two things in the short time available to me. A Foreign and Commonwealth Office report on human rights and democracy stated that the

"right to freedom of religion and belief has been widely denied in Yemen",

and that is certainly the case for the few thousand Christians in that country. There is no room for any open church activities or private worship, and those who wish to convert from Islam can face the death penalty. Even if someone is not prosecuted for apostasy by the authorities, it is seen as a huge source of shame for a family member to leave Islam, and Christians from Muslim backgrounds run the risk of honour killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith.

The 2019 Open Doors world watchlist stated that the crisis in Yemen is making an already difficult situation for Christians even harder, as the war has allowed radical Islamic groups to expand their operations in certain areas, leading to Christians being abducted and killed. I have asked for, and hopefully will get, a Backbench Business Committee debate on religious minorities and ethnic groups, which are often the last to receive the benefits of medication for covid-19.

I also wish to mention people in the Baha'i community, about 2,000 of whom are in Yemen. They are facing severe persecution in territories under the de facto governance of the Houthi movement. Beyond hate speech, the persecution of the Baha'is in Yemen has included arrest, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, torture, the threat of execution, and forced exile. Currently, 24 people from the Baha'i faith, including many administrators of that community, are being prosecuted on the basis of their faith. The Government are clear, as are hon. Members, that those with a different religious belief have the right to express that faith, but that does not happen in Yemen.

[Jim Shannon]

The Baha'i community in the UK have stated that, based on their previous findings, briefings and reports, it appears that the Iranian state is actively contributing to the escalation of persecution of Baha'is in the Houthi-controlled territory. Indeed, the behaviour of both the Iranian and Houthi Governments is consistent with the recommendations contained in a secret memorandum approved by Iran's Supreme Leader in 1991, which stated:

"A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country."

I urge the Minister to do all that can be done to protect religion and belief minorities in Yemen. I also ask the Government to live up to recommendation 2 of the Bishop of Truro's independent report, which called on us to become

"the global leader in championing freedom of religion and belief", with the freedom of religion and belief for those in Yemen—that is what the debate is all about—given due priority in the UK's engagement in multilateral institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council. We can then say with a clear conscience and a clear voice in this Chamber that we have done all we can for those poor communities during this humanitarian crisis.

2.51 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I too congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on bringing forward the debate, and I pay tribute to him for his long-standing and committed interest in the region, along with a number of other colleagues. It is right that we should discuss Yemen today. It is difficult to imagine how any more tragedies could befall that poor benighted country.

I hope that in the short time I have been a Member of this House, I have proven that I am naturally bipartisan and consensual in my politics. I believe we solve most problems on the centre ground, and that is where we need to meet to find solutions. I am not in the business of pretending that there is difference where there is none in our approach. In that spirit, on Yemen, we on the SNP Benches fundamentally disagree with the actions of the UK Government.

It is dangerous, of course, to view any international affairs or foreign affairs matter in black and white terms, and Yemen more than most, but there is a fundamental dichotomy in the UK's approach to Yemen. We have heard that the UK is the third biggest humanitarian donor. I pay tribute to that and praise it. We have also heard that the UK has committed considerable diplomatic resource to try to find a peace in the region. I acknowledge and pay tribute to that as well. But those actions, praiseworthy as they are, are completely overshadowed by the role of the UK as a supplier of arms for the continuation of that conflict. I am not naive—the reality is that the UK has chosen a side in the conflict, and therefore cannot claim clean hands in the promotion of peace.

It is not just the UK, and I acknowledge that this is a complicated region, but these are not just my concerns. I refer the House to the UN Human Rights Council report from 14 September, which says, in paragraph 25:

"Notwithstanding the strong recommendations by the Group of Experts in its previous reports, third States, including Canada, France, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United Kingdom...and

the United States of America, continued their support of parties to the conflict including through arms transfers, thereby helping to perpetuate the conflict."

I am not a pacifist. We on the SNP Benches are not pacifists, and we are not naive. We are not against arms exports. But in that spirit, it is incumbent on the Government to acknowledge that there are grave and legitimate doubts over the legality and morality of continuing arms exports to the Saudi regime for use in Yemen. Other countries have embargoes in place and I strongly urge the UK to follow suit; however, that plea may fall on deaf ears.

I urge the UK to go further. The arms export regime we have in this state is not sufficiently robust or transparent. The SNP would take that responsibility away from the Department for International Trade and give it to a bipartisan committee of this House to ensure greater transparency and, indeed, a hope for consensus on where the UK's arms go.

We may disagree on that effort, but I will end with a plea on which perhaps we can see more progress. In Yemen, winter is coming, and on 15 September Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs, reported to the UN Security Council that the UN's appeals have received barely 30% of the funding necessary to alleviate the famine for 9 million people. If the United Kingdom Government will not change tack on arms exports, perhaps the Minister, who I have much respect for and who I believe has a nuanced approach to this, could commit to at least alleviating the problems that our foreign policy is causing.

2.54 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I warmly welcome this debate. My congratulations to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on his comments and on securing this debate, and my thanks to the House for clearly responding so effectively to public concern.

Yemen is the world's greatest humanitarian crisis, as many hon. Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), have said. We are seeing 2 million acutely malnourished children, 4.3 million people forced from their homes and 80% of the population of Yemen needing humanitarian assistance. We are seeing a terrible civil war made worse by Yemen becoming an arena for international competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This terrible situation is now becoming much worse because of covid-19.

Aid is obviously vital to Yemen; we should all share concerns about the disappointing response of the international community and, indeed, our own Government, but now it is important to consider how that money is spent, as well as how much money is allocated, and whether the funds are distributed effectively. I ask the Minister to give clarification on how much British aid is being channelled through Yemeni organisations. That is important, because I know it is difficult in many parts of Yemen, but there is concern among non-governmental organisations about the correct distributive mechanisms not being in place to ensure that the people who need the aid actually receive it.

Yemen is being ripped apart by civil war and many people believe it is unlikely that any side will have an outright victory. What is needed now is a meaningful

ceasefire, followed by negotiations leading to a lasting peace. Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy, is doing a sterling job in our view, but what is needed is for the British Government to be as proactive as possible, as it is a key penholder.

A number of hon. Members have expressed concerns about British arms sales to Saudi Arabia, including my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana). We should take note that, while the Court of Appeal in this country recently ruled against the Government, our Government started arms sales again the day after 20 Saudi officials were placed on the Foreign Office's Magnitsky sanctions list. I welcome that ruling—it should have been made—but how obtuse can it be that arms sales to Saudi Arabia began the day after?

It is not just hon. Members who are expressing concern, but many people inside the United Nations. The United Nations group of eminent international and regional experts on Yemen recently published a report stating:

“The Group of Experts repeats its concern about third States transferring arms to parties to the conflict in Yemen in blatant disregard of the documented patterns of serious violations of IHL”—

international humanitarian law—

“and human rights law in the conflict to date.”

We really ought to take note of that, and morally act upon what is an objective statement of truth.

I would like briefly to refer to two other issues, if I may. There are recent reports that the Houthis may be close to seizing Ma'rib, a city of some strategic importance that contains many displaced persons, and there is real concern about their safety. We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) concerns about members of the Baha'i faith being discriminated against and persecuted. The city could well see a whole range of human rights abuses if the situation is not rectified. What diplomatic efforts are the Government making to protect civilians in that city?

Finally, an ageing oil tanker—the FSO Safer—is moored off the Yemeni coast, with 157 tonnes of crude oil aboard. We could well be on the verge of an ecological disaster that will afflict not just the Yemeni coast but much of the Red sea. What representations and co-ordinated work are the Government involved in to ensure that the international response prevents a crisis from materialising?

We have had an important debate. We all agree that the situation in Yemen is terrible. It is the most acute humanitarian crisis that the world has faced for a long time, and it is incumbent on us all to pull together, play our part and find as much common ground as possible, to ensure that the people of Yemen do not suffer anymore.

3.1 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing the debate and pay tribute to his work as chair of the APPG for Yemen. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who preceded him as Chair; I know that she is passionate about this issue because of a long-standing personal connection with Yemen.

I am grateful for the contributions of Members across the House. This is an important debate, and there have been many thoughtful speeches. I recognise the passion with which those contributions have been made, even if I do not always agree with all elements of them. I will attempt to cover as many of the points raised as possible, but Members will recognise that this is a significantly complicated environment.

The looming famine in Yemen, which a number of Members have raised, worries us in the UK greatly. The simple truth is that Yemen is closer to famine than at any point since the conflict began. The UN projects that, by the end of 2020, 1.2 million more people in the south of Yemen alone will be classified as severely food-insecure. The Government recognise that, which is why we have appointed senior official Nick Dyer to be our envoy for famine relief. I raised this issue when I met David Beasley of the World Food Programme earlier this month. The primary cause of this issue is the conflict and the additional pressure imposed by covid-19.

The situation in Yemen highlights why the co-ordination of our diplomatic and our development and aid work is so important. If we were able to bring peace to Yemen, we would be able to start the repair work on its economy, its ability to buy food, its health infrastructure and its ability to fight coronavirus. That is why it is so important that our aid effort goes hand in hand with our diplomatic effort.

The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) rightly highlighted the real concern about the situation in and around Ma'rib. The Houthi offensive on that city could see people who are already suffering enormously and are already internally displaced suffer even more greatly. I will come on to talk about arms sales, but a number of Members have asked why we engage with Saudi Arabia on this issue. I ask Members from across the House to consider the imminent offensive by the Houthis towards Ma'rib. If the coalition were to disengage from this conflict, who would stop that? Who would protect the people of Ma'rib? That is why we work closely with Saudi Arabia.

We recognise the concerns about our arms sales policy. We have reviewed it in the light of the Court of Appeal decision, and all sales are measured against the revised set of criteria¹. We are working to support Martin Griffiths in pursuing a nationwide ceasefire, and we welcomed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's unilateral ceasefire earlier this summer. What did we see in return for its ceasefire? We saw attacks by the Houthis, backed by Iran, into Saudi Arabia and within Yemen. Oh that it were so simple that we could just disengage from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Yemen would cease. Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the Safer oil tanker, which is of huge concern to us. It is estimated that a spill from the Safer oil tanker would be four times larger than the spill caused by the Exxon Valdez, and the environmental impact in the Red sea would be incalculable. He asked what we had done about the situation. We have called for a stand-alone session of the United Nations Security Council, and I regularly raise Safer in my engagement with parties in the region. I discussed it with the Yemeni Foreign Minister on 24 August, the Saudi ambassador on 5 August and the Saudi deputy Foreign Minister on 20 June. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised it at the high-level

1. [Official Report, 28 September 2020, Vol. 681, c. 1MC.]

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ministerial meeting on Yemen that he co-hosted on 17 September, and I have commissioned work to look into what the UK could do to secure it. The situation is terrible, and we are working hard to prevent the environmental catastrophe that would flow from it.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Theewlis) spoke about the role of women in the peace process, and she was absolutely right to do so. I am the Minister responsible for the women, peace and security agenda in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and we seek to make sure that all voices, particularly the voices of those who are most directly impacted by conflict—unfortunately, the simple truth is that that is women—play an increasing and important role. That was brought up during my virtual visit to Yemen.

A number of Members have asked about our engagement, and we engage regularly with parties. Several Members raised concern about the significant shortfall of £1.9 billion in aid. I am proud that the United Kingdom has maintained its position as one of the leading aid donors to Yemen. We have matched our earlier commitment levels, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary recently announced additional expenditure that brings us up to £200 million. Not only that, but in our international relationships we have used the fact that we have stepped up to the plate on aid spending to encourage other countries to do so. I genuinely believe that that has played a part in Kuwait's recent announcement of an extra \$20 million contribution, and in Saudi Arabia's agreement to disburse more of the money that it has already pledged.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was right to raise the protection of religious freedom as a serious concern. We welcome the release of six detained Baha'is last month, but there is far more work to do. We will continue to work on these issues, including the release of Luke Symons.

This situation, unfortunately, is going to remain one of the most difficult on the agenda of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We will not sit back and allow the people of Yemen to suffer without our doing everything we are able to do to help them. That is why we are seeking to get a ceasefire and

supporting Martin Griffiths and the United Nations in their efforts to secure that ceasefire, and that is why we are maintaining our expenditure in aid and lobbying other countries to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I would like to thank Mr Loughton, who waived the opportunity to respond to this debate in order that more Members of Parliament could speak.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in Yemen.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is about the licence by this House to the BBC as to our proceedings, and what I believe to be a failure by the BBC under the House of Commons rules of coverage. It arose in respect of what I believe to be a less than full and accurate account on Radio 4 on Monday and Tuesday of exchanges on the controversial issue of UK breaches of international law, and those exchanges arose from an intervention I made on my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). The matter relates to the specific question of UK breaches of international law, and I do not believe it was accurately reported. The matter is now with the House authorities and under investigation. I have complained to the BBC, which says it is editing; I disagree. I wish to put this matter on the record as part of my continuing complaint.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank Sir William for his forward notice of his point of order. While it is not a matter for the Chair, he has clearly taken all the right actions and he has put it on the record.

I intend to suspend the sitting briefly, as I did last Thursday, because a lot of Members want to take part in the next debate. Please would those leaving the Chamber do so in a socially aware way? Once both Dispatch Boxes have been sanitised and as soon as the main players are in place, which most of them are already, we will start again.

3.11 pm

Sitting suspended.

Occupied Palestinian Territories

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee of Session 2017-19 on 8 October 2019 on "Follow-up on Yemen, Syria, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories", HC 2682.]

3.13 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered settlement and annexation of the Occupied Palestinian territories.

I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the Backbench Business Committee for making time for this crucially important debate. As the outgoing chair of the British-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, I pay particular tribute to colleagues who have been such powerful advocates for peace, justice and security in this troubled land, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), who will be taking over as chair of the APPG. I wish her well.

I start by setting out three core principles, which I hope and believe are shared by all who are taking part in this debate. First, this is not about religion or ethnicity. It is not a question of Arab, Muslim or Jewish identity. It is about upholding the universal norms and values that we hold dear, and it is about working to constrain and reverse the actions of those who seek to undermine those norms and values. Nor is this about being pro-Israel or pro-Palestine. This is about striving for peace, justice and security for all.

Secondly, we condemn violence in all its forms, whether it is Hamas launching rockets or the Israel Defence Forces bombarding Gaza or bulldozing Bedouin villages to make way for illegal settlements. We oppose any and all actions that lead to the death and destruction that have so tragically come to define this conflict.

Thirdly, we believe passionately in the rule of law. Indeed, our point of departure is that the rule of law is not up for negotiation. It is not some bargaining chip that can be tossed on to the table in exchange for concessions or compromises; it is the very cornerstone of the rules-based order and the bedrock of the norms, rights and values that we cherish and seek to defend.

I believe that our defence of the rule of law matters more now than it has done at any time since 1945, because we stand today at a moment in history when the rule of law is under threat across the world. The Chinese Communist party has breached the Sino-British declaration on Hong Kong, the Russian Government annexed Crimea in 2014 and, deeply regrettably, even our own Government are willing to renege on their commitment to a legally binding treaty.

Israel's consistent flouting of UN resolutions and the fourth Geneva convention has undermined the rules-based order for decades, and the international community can no longer just look the other way. Both sides in this conflict have witnessed horrific bloodshed and both sides deserve an end to the fear and suffering that they have had to experience. That is why it is so vital and urgent that the rule of law be brought to bear as the foundation upon which a viable and sustainable Palestine can be negotiated and built—a Palestine that protects the rights of its citizens and lives in peace with its neighbours.

The illegal Israeli settlements undermine all three of the principles that I have set out. They drive and amplify the vicious identity politics that poisons this conflict. They cause violence on a daily basis and they are a flagrant breach of international law, yet they continue and expand.

In 2018, we marked 25 years since the signing of the Oslo accords. That moment in 1993 was meant to herald a new and lasting era of peace and co-existence—the beginning of a genuine two-state solution—but since then, the number of illegal settlers has increased from 258,000 to more than 610,000. Fifty thousand homes and properties have been demolished, and an illegal separation barrier has been built that carves up the west bank and brutally disconnects towns, cities, families and communities from each other. What have the Israeli people experienced in that time? They have experienced insecurity, fear of attacks through suicide bombings, rockets and mortars, knife attacks and car rammings. None of this will end while there is no proper peace and no end to the occupation. It has been a disaster for all sides in this conflict.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the balanced way in which he is opening this debate. The events of the recent weeks have encouraged me and many others; I wonder whether they have encouraged him as well. They have shown that the 70-year unresolved conflict between Israel and the Arabs will no longer be allowed to define regional dynamics and relations. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this new outside-in approach to peace offers an invaluable opportunity to transform the entire region, and that there is an opportunity to move forward together, perhaps with a two-state solution?

Stephen Kinnock: We certainly welcome any steps towards peace and conflict resolution, but we should be realistic about what the so-called Abraham accords really signify. The reality is that the United Arab Emirates and Israel have never been at war with each other. They have pre-existing and long-standing relations. Indeed, they have co-operated on military matters, in counter-revolutions, and in coups in many of the Arab League states. We should be realistic that this is really more the formalisation of pre-existing relations, rather than something new. Nevertheless, it is to be welcomed.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has made some important and strong points in his opening remarks. May I bring him back to the reference he made a few moments ago to the signing of the Oslo accords, and their failure to result in the era of peace that so many people had hoped for? Straight after mentioning Oslo, he talked about settlements—almost implying that it was the issue of settlements that meant that the aspirations behind Oslo were never realised. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to read Bill Clinton's account of the peace negotiations and many other accounts to see exactly why peace was not struck when there was an opportunity; it was not the Israelis who walked away from that opportunity.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree that opportunities have been missed on all sides—there is no doubt about that—but the reality is that the constant feature of everything that has happened since 1993 has been the expansion of

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the settlements, which are a flagrant breach of international law. Once we start to erode the foundations of international law on which all the negotiations are based, they are rendered effectively meaningless. We need to bear that in mind as we look back on what has happened since 1993, but it is also vital that we look to the future with hope and optimism.

It is against that backdrop that President Trump and the Prime Minister Netanyahu have come forward with their so-called deal of the century. This is not a deal. It is not a plan. It is not even a starting point for talks. It is a proposal that is fundamentally flawed because it has no basis in law. It is a land and power grab that would mean Israel seizing around 40% of the west bank, with full military and security control over the Palestinian people and their resources. Which Government, in their right mind, would ever agree to such terms? Why would the Palestinian Authority ever enter into talks on the basis of a document that effectively legitimises attempts to destroy any chance of an independent sovereign Palestine?

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the deal of the century could well have been the starting point for a conversation? Yes, there is a lot that is disagreed with on both sides, but there are also elements that could be agreed on. It is those levels where agreement could be sought that could be moved forward to deliver the two-state solution that everyone—on both sides of this House—ultimately wants.

Stephen Kinnock: But if one is seeking to restart negotiations, one needs to do so on the basis of a plan that has legitimacy. It is not possible to move forward if the plan is actually based on breaking the law. Countless UN resolutions have pointed out that the settlements, as they stand, are illegal, so that has to be taken off the table before there is even a basis for starting to talk. That is why it is perfectly understandable why the Palestinian Authority is refusing to engage on that basis.

The Foreign Secretary and his Ministers continue to present the Trump-Netanyahu plan as a basis for talks. They ask the Palestinians to compromise, yet the Palestinians have already ceded 78% of their land to Israel. How much more can they be asked to compromise?

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that given Britain's unique history in relation to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, it is important our Government continue to work at being an honest broker rather than taking sides? The position the UK Government have taken actually puts at risk Britain being seen as an honest broker.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely. This country has a unique place in history and a unique responsibility, particularly if we trace this back to the Balfour declaration. It is vital that everything this Government say and do honours the commitments in that declaration.

The Foreign Secretary and Ministers also say that the Palestinian side should make a counter-offer. Well, they have: a two-state solution, as already set out in countless UN resolutions and based on 1967 lines. That is the

counter-offer. Prime Minister Netanyahu's coalition had agreed that Israel would begin de jure annexation from 1 July. Thankfully, the Israeli Government have rowed back on that for now, but what we are instead witnessing is more annexation by stealth. Netanyahu announced approval of preliminary plans for 3,500 new housing units in a new settlement in the E1 area between Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim, thus severing East Jerusalem's contiguity with the rest of the west bank.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the developments he is now describing pose a threat to the feasibility of a two-state solution, because there will not be enough left for a viable state in Palestine to be established?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely with right hon. Friend. If one looks at the map, one sees it is not really a viable geographical area anymore; it is an archipelago of patches of land that are no longer connected to each other. E1 and E2 would in many ways represent the final nail in the coffin of the two-state solution in my view.

Building on E1 is more of a danger to the two-state outcome than the formal annexation of parts of the west bank. It has long been seen by the UK, France and Germany as a red line. Another huge settlement plan of 7,000 units has been approved at Efrat to the south of Bethlehem, often labelled E2. In both cases, the reality is that the Israeli Government hold all the cards, while the Palestinian Authority have limited power and must rely on international solidarity.

Those who take a more sympathetic view of the actions of the Israeli Government will no doubt point to the so-called Abraham accords, which were signed by UAE and Bahrain at the White House on 13 August, and which commit those states to the normalisation of relations with Israel. Yet the reality is that the Abraham accords are simply the formalisation of pre-existing and well-established relations between the signatories. Those states have been working together for years on joint military operations, coups and counter-revolutions. For the Palestinian people, nothing has changed. The reality is the creeping annexation of their land continuing and accelerating.

Actions speak louder than words. The question we must therefore address today is how the British Government can use their position as a leading member of the international community to press the Israeli Government to pull back from creeping annexation and to re-engage in talks on the basis of a viable two-state solution. The problem we face is that the deadlock will continue as long as Israel rejects any deal that includes Jerusalem and does not mean Israel keeps the Jordan valley, rejects a sovereign viable Palestinian state, and will negotiate only on the basis of a plan that annexes occupied territory and includes total security control on any Palestinian entity, including control of all borders. Israel must drop those preconditions. There have already been some attempts by European states to assert their influence. For instance, 11 states, including the UK, Germany and France, joined in a démarche to the Israeli Foreign Ministry on 1 May opposing Netanyahu's annexation plans. But together the international community must go further.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful, balanced and considered speech. On that point about the international response, could the accords that have been struck with the UAE and Bahrain provide an opportunity for the UK Government to work with them and with Europe to gain extra leverage to bring about some sort of change in Israeli policy?

Stephen Kinnock: That is absolutely a step in the right direction, although I think it needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, for the reasons that I have set out. The reality is that as long as the basis for the talks is the so-called Trump-Netanyahu plan, it is a non-starter, because that plan violates international law.

We should explore the potential for the International Criminal Court to play a role. The Israeli Attorney General's office has already warned the Israeli Prime Minister that annexation could trigger an investigation of

“senior Army officers, civil service officials and heads of regional councils of West Bank settlements”.

It is essential that the UK condemns any further creeping annexation, but condemnation alone will never be enough. To this end, the UK Government must take the following steps with urgency. First, they must immediately recognise the state of Palestine on the basis of the 1967 lines. The UK Government argue that recognition should follow successful negotiations, but the logic of this argument is deeply flawed and partisan. It suggests that we are happy to see a 53-year-old occupation persist, legitimising the illegal actions of the Israeli Government and contributing to the brutality and violence that shame us all.

Secondly, the Government must ban all products that originate from Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. Profiting from such products is tantamount to profiting from the proceeds of crime, and it must stop. When we trade with these settlements, we are essentially telling the world that international law does not matter, and such trade legitimises and facilitates the existence and expansion of the settlements. In 2014, it was right that the UK, as part of the European Union, prohibited trade with Crimea following its illegal annexation by Russia. It is crucial that we are consistent in our application of international law.

Thirdly, the Government must act to end the involvement of UK-based companies within the illegal settlements. In March, the UN published a list of companies that are involved in the settlements, which included JCB, Opodo and Greenkote PLC. Charities actively involved in illegal settlement projects should not be eligible for the privileges of charitable status, including tax exemption. What steps will our Government now take to hold these companies and charities to account? I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on these points. These measures must be put in place immediately: no more excuses, and no more obfuscation from this Government.

Standing here in the Chamber today, it is easy to forget the human cost of this conflict. Visiting the west bank and East Jerusalem with Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East and the Council for Arab-British Understanding in 2014, I saw how the settlements touched the lives of those in the occupied territories. I think of the father from Gaza I met in Makassed hospital who was nursing his four-year-old double-amputee son and worrying about his wife in another hospital 20 miles away, who had also had both her legs amputated.

I think of the Bedouin community of Khan al-Ahmar, whose residents live in perpetual fear of military demolitions and harassment. I think of the quarter of a million children across the Palestinian territories who the UN identifies as in need of psychosocial support and child protection interventions. What future can these children look forward to? What hope can we offer them? A 10-year-old child in Gaza will already have witnessed three wars and nothing but the siege.

I therefore rise today to convey this simple message to the Minister: act now. Act now to show that Britain is still a country that will give voice to the voiceless and stand up for the rights of the oppressed. Act now to show that Britain is still a beacon of hope and a country that stands tall in the world and strives relentlessly for peace and justice. Act now to help us to believe that yours is a Government who still believe in the rule of law.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For Members' information, there will be a four-minute limit as we begin, and the wind-ups will start no later than 4.34 in this debate.

3.33 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate. Anyone who visits the west bank will soon see the extent and scale of the Israeli settlement programme. As we have heard from the hon. Gentleman, more than 500,000 Israeli settlers currently live in around 150 settlements constructed on occupied territory, and it is generally agreed by legal commentators that Israel's actions in actively encouraging the settlement of the west bank contravene the provisions of the 1949 fourth Geneva convention.

The settlement programme was given some sort of a spurious legitimacy by the US peace plan for the middle east, which potentially paved the way towards a further major violation of Palestinian territory by annexation. It was, quite properly, subject to extensive international criticism. The British Government have made clear their opposition to the Israeli annexation plans, and I commend the Minister for the stance that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has taken. It is good news that the Israeli annexation plan has been suspended after the recent announcement of normalised relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the kingdom of Bahrain.

Jim Shannon: One interesting point that was made at the time of this significant agreement was about finding “a just, comprehensive and enduring resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on the Palestinian Authority to engage with Israel and its Arab neighbours to use the impetus of this historic agreement to negotiate a two-state solution?

Mr Jones: Yes, I am grateful for that intervention, and I will refer to that in my speech. I think that this opportunity should be seized.

As I said, this is an announcement that should be unequivocally welcomed. It represents a significant triumph of statecraft on the part of three important countries with which the UK has strong ties and the friendliest of relations. It also gives hope for further normalisation of relations between Israel and other Arab states. It holds

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out the prospect of peace, and it is a moment that should be seized by Israel as pointing a way forward that does not rest on a constant state of confrontation and conflict.

There will, sadly, never be peace for Israel or Palestine unless a sensible two-state solution is pursued and achieved. The US plan is not the way forward. It would amount to the shakiest possible foundation for a real and enduring peace. As for the United Kingdom, our position has always been clear: we support a negotiated settlement, providing for Israeli security and Palestinian sovereignty based upon the 1967 lines, with agreed land swaps and Jerusalem as a shared capital. I believe that that provides the best prospect of peace.

There is, however, one further action that the United Kingdom can, and should, take—that is, the recognition of the state of Palestine. This House already voted in 2014 to recognise Palestine’s statehood, and I suggest that now is the time for the British Government to confirm that recognition. With Israel receiving its own recognition across the Arab world, the two-state talks would enjoy a fairer wind if the parties negotiating were sovereign entities recognised by leading nations, such as the United Kingdom, with global influence. The position of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has consistently been that British recognition of Palestine’s statehood will come when it best serves the objective of peace. That time is now.

3.38 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), who is an expert in these matters, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this debate, which I think he first secured back in March. Time has moved on, but this is perhaps even more relevant now, so I thank the Backbench Business Committee for sticking with it.

This debate is about annexation and settlements, de jure and de facto theft of Palestinian land, sequestrating and simply seizing land. Neither is new. East Jerusalem was annexed in 1980, and the Golan in 1981. Settlement has continued unabated under successive Israeli Governments since 1967. It is the most obvious and effective manifestation of the occupation. However, the focus since the launch of the so-called Trump peace plan in January and Netanyahu’s call for annexation of the west bank in May has been on annexation. Trump envisages 30% to 40% of the west bank, including the Jordan valley and much of area C, being absorbed into Israel. Netanyahu would go further, although in stages. If there does remain any hope for a viable Palestinian state, and therefore for the two-state solution, either scheme would finally kill it. No doubt we will hear from the Government that the threat of annexation has gone away, but it is clear from the comments made by Netanyahu himself, by his ambassador at the UN and, indeed, by the US ambassador to Israel in the last few weeks that this is a temporary abatement and that annexation is still firmly on the table.

Let me briefly say a word about the UAE and Bahrain accords with Israel. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon said, there has been no friction between those countries; indeed, there has been substantial military

co-operation. A thousand miles separate them, and there has been no hostility between them. It is easy to see what is in the accords for Trump and Netanyahu, but it is less easy to see how they benefit the Palestinians or advance peace between Israel and Palestine. The Arab peace initiative—almost 20 years old—offered full recognition of Israel by the entire Arab world, in exchange for ending the occupation, and it is a pity that we have not gone further down that route. It does rather look as though all of this is rewarding bullying, in the sense that, by taking the threat of annexation off the table, albeit temporarily, Israel gains benefit.

However, that is something of a distraction compared with what is happening on the ground in terms of settlement expansion. Some 610,000 Israeli settlers are living in the occupied territories and, as we have heard, thousands more units are being built. Area C is being annexed de facto as we speak; indeed, just today I heard from the villages in the south Hebron hills—12 villages, with around 1,000 people, including Susya, which many Members have visited—which are being incorporated into a firing zone and threatened with being demolished, in the same way that Khan al-Ahmar was. As for Gaza, where most of the water is undrinkable and most people are reliant on international aid, as far as the international community is concerned it is still under occupation.

So what do we do in the light of this situation? I repeat what the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said about recognition. The Government say, “When the time is right.” I wonder what would make the time right. Perhaps the Minister can tell us. Recognition would be a positive step.

We cannot continue trading with settlements that are illegal under international law or supporting companies that do that. One positive thing is that many groups, from all sides of the equation, have come together to condemn the recent threats of annexation. I hope that that is a way forward, but it comes at a bleak time. We acted within days in relation to the occupation and annexation of the Crimea. Why can we not do the same for the occupied Palestinian territories?

3.42 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important and timely debate, especially given the patience that he has had to show in bringing it to the Floor of the House, and I also congratulate other hon. Members.

It is often claimed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict comes from Palestinian spokespeople claiming that ongoing Palestinian terrorism is the result of Israel’s occupation of the west bank and Gaza and its settlement construction, adding that the violence will cease only when those end. While I recognise that settlements are counterproductive, I do not believe they can be regarded as a permanent obstacle, and it is misleading to argue that the settlements are the primary reason for the continuation of the conflict. Indeed, violence long predates the existence of settlements, which began construction in 1967, following Israel’s occupation of the west bank. Violence against Jews in the region had been taking place even before the state’s establishment in 1948. For millennia, Jews lived in the west bank, known as the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important speech, but would he be kind enough to outline whether the settlements are illegal or not?

Damien Moore: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and I will get to my beliefs on that later in my speech.

Between 1948 and 1967, Jordan refused Jews access to territory including the old city of Jerusalem and Judaism's holiest sites. It is also important to note that the Palestine Liberation Organisation was formed three years before the Israeli occupation began, in 1967, with the goal of liberating Palestine—meaning modern-day Israel.

What is more, Israel has a history of removing settlements in the interests of peace. Had settlements been the main cause of violence, one would have expected it to decrease following Israel's unilateral withdrawal of settlers from all settlements in Gaza in 2005. On the contrary, Palestinian violence has intensified and tens of thousands of rockets and missiles have been fired into Israeli communities in the last 15 years. Had continuing settlement construction been the main motivation behind the Palestinian Authority's refusal to engage in direct peace talks with Israel, why did they fail to talk with Israel after Prime Minister Netanyahu unilaterally imposed a 10-month moratorium on settlement building in 2010?

It is my view that settlements are just one of several core issues that can be ultimately resolved in final status negotiations between the parties. Moreover, the blueprint for resolving the issue of settlements has been long accepted between the parties, including the Palestinians themselves. The principle of land swaps, under which Israel compensates Palestinians with territory equivalent to that of the settlements, has been agreed for decades and offered by Israel in successive peace proposals. Instead, it is the end of claims and recognition of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state that perhaps best explains their justification and refusal to accept peace. Yet in recent weeks, as has been mentioned by hon. Members on both sides of the House, we have seen the beginnings of significant change and the formalisation of that is important. The trilateral Abraham accords, signed by the UAE and Bahrain, explicitly acknowledge the Jewish people and the importance of co-existence, mutual understanding and mutual respect between Jews, Muslims and Christians in the region.

I welcome the Foreign Secretary's recent call on the Palestinian Authority to engage with the peace process. I hope that the Palestinians seize this moment to work with their Arab neighbours and use their new-found commonality with Israel to broker a deal and have a long-lasting two-state peaceful solution.

3.46 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this debate and for his very kind words. I associate myself with every word that he said in his very eloquent speech.

The Trump plan to me was an annexation plan. I said that in this House in January and I believe it now. It was not a peace plan. It was not anything that negotiations or a peaceful solution could be born out of. It would not have brought peace to either Palestinian people or

Israeli people, and peace is what we all want in this House. We all want to see that. We want a two-state solution, from my point of view, based on 1967 boundaries. It is the only solution that will really bring peace to the region.

Although I welcome the treaties between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, announced with great fanfare in the gardens of the White House, this does nothing to help peace on the ground in Israel and the occupied territories of Palestine. It is a formalisation, as has already been said by a number of colleagues, of a relationship that already existed.

The suspension of the annexation plan does not mean that annexation is not happening by the backdoor. The status quo means that de facto annexation continues—the process of taking land and resources in occupied territories for settlements. Today, around 600,000 people are settlers living in settlements in the Palestinian occupied territories. They are living in about 150 settlements and more than 100 outposts.

Since the Trump plan was released, Netanyahu has announced approval of preliminary plans for some 3,500 new housing units in the E1 area. Israel also announced another 1,000-plus housing units in Givat Hamatos and advanced plans for more than 2,000 units in the existing settlement at Har Homa, to mention just a few, and that is just a few. The list goes on and on. Today, I learned of the developments in firing zone 918 in the south Hebron hills, which, again, has already been mentioned. This will mean displacing around 700 villages, where up to 1,000 people live. As of April 2020, there are 455 demolition orders in place—they cover the vast majority of structures in that area, including schools and clinics funded by European countries, and toilets and water cisterns funded by our own now defunct Department for International Development.

As we see, the creep of land being taken by Israel is ongoing. It continues every single day. This makes nonsense of the statement about the “suspension” of annexation. What can the British Government do? Many times I have heard in this House the Government say that they will recognise Palestine when the time is right. We are in a unique position because of our history and our strong record in this area. The time is now to recognise Palestine. It is the time that the British Government recognised the state of Palestine. I firmly believe that the British Government should also bring in a ban on products from the illegally occupied territories. It is not acceptable that we can bring in bans in respect of Crimea in a matter of days, as we heard, and not do so for the occupied territories.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): On the point the hon. Lady just made about her eagerness to recognise the state of Palestine now, may I ask which Government—which state of Palestine—she would recognise? Would it be the Palestinian Authority, who spend 40% of their foreign aid on salaries to terrorists and their families, or perhaps Hamas, who are openly committed to the genocide of Jewish people?

Julie Elliott: That intervention was not helpful to the tone of the debate, but I accept it. The recognition of the state of Palestine is well outlined on the 1967 borders. The hon. Gentleman's own Government have talked about it numerous times; they have said it in the House numerous times. We all deplore violence and we all

[Julie Elliott]

deplore people breaking the law, but it would give people an equalisation as we move forward, hopefully, to a negotiated settlement providing a two-state solution that would enhance the lives of both Israeli citizens and Palestinians—a peaceful way forward. I think that is what the vast majority in this House want to see.

Returning to what I was saying, the two things that the British Government can do are to recognise the state of Palestine and to put a ban on products from the illegal settlements—occupied settlements. Those two actions would be welcomed by the Palestinian people, and in my view they are the right thing to do.

3.51 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing time for this discussion. As other Members have pointed out, events have moved on considerably since the application for this debate was initially submitted. We stand here this afternoon still taking stock of and reflecting on some enormous changes that have happened in recent weeks.

Even though some Members have sought to downplay it, make no mistake that the signing of peace agreements between the Governments of Bahrain and the UAE and Israel is an enormous step forward for peace for the whole region—Gulf Arab states taking steps to recognise that what is good for their own peace, security and prosperity aligns pretty closely with what is good for the peace, prosperity and security of Israel; Gulf states recognising that, because of geography and history, and because in the 21st century the world is so much smaller than ever before, their future is more entwined than ever before with that of Israel.

The point that I would like to make this afternoon is that what is good for peace, prosperity and security for the UAE, Bahrain and Israel is exactly the same thing that holds out the promise of a better future—a peaceful future, a just future—for the people of Palestine. I do not believe that there is a single person in the Chamber who genuinely does not want to see peace, prosperity and security for Israel and Palestine alike.

Anybody who has visited that part of the world, as I have on many occasions in my role as parliamentary chairman of Conservative Friends of Israel, will have seen the enormous potential and opportunity there. They will also have seen the scars and shadows of warfare and conflict, and felt the threat of violence and conflict that still hangs heavy across the region.

Christian Wakeford: During our trip in February, we went to Ramallah and saw high-tech companies thriving, in spite of the political leadership in Palestine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the leadership of Palestine that is not only holding its people back but holding the region back?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is exactly right: it is about leadership. If the history of this region teaches us anything, it is that peace comes about not through fine words alone, but through courageous action. That has been underlined again in the last few weeks by those decisions by Bahrain and the UAE.

I referred to our trip to Israel and the west bank in February, just before lockdown. We sat with Dr Saeb Erekat, who still holds the title of official chief negotiator on the part of the PLO, and discussed prospects for peace with him. When the hon. Member for Aberavon talked about the Trump deal being no basis for negotiation and not a starting point for any kind of discussion, I closed my eyes and heard the words of Dr Saeb Erekat, because that is exactly what he said to us then. The point we made to him was that it requires the Palestinian leadership not to continue missing opportunities, as they have done in the past, but to seize an opportunity for a basis of discussion and step out of old ways of thinking and old paths that lead time and again to a block.

Stephen Kinnock: I am glad that Dr Erekat and I are aligned; I can guarantee that I have not discussed it with him. How is it possible to have talks on a basis that breaks international law?

Stephen Crabb: There is a lot in the Trump plan that I am sceptical about, and the viability of a future Palestinian state is important for me as I reflect on these issues, but I believe first and foremost in the power of sitting down and talking. The intransigence and refusal to engage on the part of the Palestinian leadership is a huge roadblock to progress in the region. That is why I reiterate my point about the need for leaders to show leadership. It is not just about the job title. It is about taking brave decisions to sit down and talk and break out of old modes of thinking and old patterns of behaviour.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) referred to a tech start-up company that we visited in Ramallah a number of months ago. The young people we met in that company look at what has happened in the tech sector in Israel, which has seen enormous growth and been a source of prosperity for Israel, and they want that too—they aspire to be a start-up nation too. They have every right to aspire to that, but they are also aware that their leadership has let them down on so many occasions. When we debate these issues in the Chamber, it is important that we think about not only the words of the Palestinian leaders but the Palestinian people themselves and what they aspire to.

Rushanara Ali: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the major obstacles to young Palestinians being able to do what he describes is their lack of freedom of movement and their inability to access education, skills and opportunities? In order to present a balanced argument, I appeal to him to recognise that freedom of movement is a major obstacle to opportunity for the very people he is talking about.

Stephen Crabb: I have seen all the roadblocks and the impediment that they create to economic opportunity. It is bad in the west bank, and it even worse in Gaza, but there is a reason why those roadblocks are there: they minimise the threat of violence and death for Jewish Israeli citizens. That is exactly the point I am trying to make—we need to move beyond that. It requires our Government to put more pressure on the Palestinian leadership to root out the school textbooks that glorify violence and incite hatred, to abandon the language of conflict and confrontation and to seize opportunities for peace.

3.58 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I welcome this debate, and I endorse the principles outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) in his excellent introductory speech. Like him, I consider myself a friend of Israel and a supporter of the Palestinian cause and Palestinian statehood, and I think a two-state solution is the only way to get a lasting peaceful outcome.

I visited the west bank in February—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—for the first time in many years. Until that visit, I had not appreciated just how seriously these settlements threaten that two-state solution, how complex the situation is on the ground in terms of the settlements' locations—they are increasingly further east of the green line into the west bank, including parts of the Jordan valley—or how the nature of the settlements complicates the situation. These are permanently established towns and villages with strong and complex infrastructure. We heard reference earlier to land swaps as a potential solution, but the nature of the settlements would make that much more difficult and complicated than I had appreciated. I do not think anybody is arguing that settlements are the only obstacle to a peaceful solution, but they are a very significant one, and increasingly so, as encouraged by the Netanyahu Government and now, unfortunately, by the Trump plan for annexation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) pointed out, it is a plan for annexation: it will not lead to a lasting peace.

Like others, I welcome the accords with the UAE and Bahrain. There has to be a pragmatic approach to relations in the region, but let us not forget—to issue another reminder—that has led only to a suspension of the plans. Netanyahu has said that the plans for annexation remain on the table, and many of us fear that his Government could still bring those plans into practice.

The single message that I took away from a visit to the west bank—the one thing that came from many human rights groups and a range of people on the ground including diplomats and strong supporters of Israel—is that unless there are consequences for their actions, this Israeli Government will continue on their current path. That means, ultimately, moves towards further annexation and the end of a two-state solution.

Matt Western: On that very point, the whole issue about the consequences is to do with the role of the United States, and in President Trump we no longer see a global policeman: we actually see a global thug.

Jeff Smith: I do not disagree. I might phrase it differently, but my hon. Friend makes an important point.

We need to think about how we can practically influence the Israeli Government to abandon the plans. We have talked in this House about sanctions against Governments that break international law, and Crimea was mentioned earlier. We were talking a couple of hours ago about sanctions on Belarus, and we seriously need to consider how this country, as a friend of Israel and with a historical responsibility, can use our influence to stop the Israeli Government going down the line of permanent annexation. I think we do have to be clear that there must be consequences, whether that is banning settlement goods or considering other forms of sanctions, because words have not been enough.

Even if the current plan were abandoned, that would certainly not be the end of the issue. There are some right-wing representatives in the Israeli Government who actually prefer creeping annexation, because it means that that kind of de facto annexation does not have to accommodate any agreement with the Palestinians. We need to be very wary of that, and we need to look beyond the immediate issue of the Trump plan and make it clear that creeping annexation is equally problematic and needs to cease.

I just repeat one or two of the requests to the Minister made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon. I strongly support recognition of the state of Palestine and confirmation that the UK will not recognise any annexation and that we will consider actions against the Israeli Government if it goes ahead. As several of us have said, words have not been enough.

I will just make one final related point. The humanitarian situation in the west bank and Gaza is, as we all know, very difficult, and I would welcome an assurance that our support for our aid to the occupied territories will not be cut as a result of the cuts in the aid budget.

4.3 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests in relation to my trip to Israel and the west bank on a fact-finding mission in February of this year.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of the events of recent weeks for the prospect of Israeli-Palestine peace. The Arab League of 2020, which has refused to condemn Israel's peace agreement with the UAE, is a very different organisation from that of 1967. After gaining control of East Jerusalem and the west bank from Jordan, Gaza from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria in the six-day war, Israel offered to return most of the territories it had occupied in exchange for peace treaties with its neighbours. In response, the Arab League issued the infamous three noes—no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negotiations with Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflict, as it was then known, was born out of the refusal of those Arab states to accept Israel's existence in any borders.

The conflict is no longer one between Israel and the entire Arab world, with Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain having now officially recognised Israel in landmark peace deals. Those agreements have included land swaps and concessions, with Israel prioritising the principle of land for peace over territorial gain.

We must not forget that Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005, uprooting thousands of Israeli Jews who lived there, in order to advance peace with the Palestinians. It is regrettable that, instead of seizing that opportunity, Hamas murdered its Fatah opponents and turned the Gaza strip into a launch pad for terrorism.

Israel's occupation of the west bank cannot be understood without considering that, before Jordan seized control of east Jerusalem and the west bank in 1948 and ethnically cleansed the territory of Jews, there had been a continuous Jewish presence in the area for four millennia. Many of Judaism's holy sites, including the Cave of the Patriarchs, are located in the west bank. More than 10,000 Jews living in the old city of Jerusalem, the west bank and Gaza were driven out or killed in the 1948 war of independence. Today the territories are designated by the international community as illegally occupied

[*Christian Wakeford*]

Palestinian territories, a definition that Israel and the United States contest. The implication that Jews praying at their holiest sites are doing so illegally is deeply troubling to me and to the Jewish community.

Land borders can only be resolved in direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, with difficult compromises needed from both sides. I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa what steps he is taking with international partners, including Israel's new partners in the Gulf, to make the resumption of direct talks a reality.

The state of Israel is a beacon of freedom and democracy, developing solutions to global problems, including coronavirus, and sharing expertise worldwide. I welcome the remarks by the Minister last week that:

“The UK's commitment to Israel is unwavering.”

With that in mind, does he share the Foreign Secretary's view that now annexation is off the table, the Palestinians should re-engage with Israel on finance and security co-operation as a confidence-building measure? Does he agree that until the Palestinian leadership embraces co-existence with Israel and stops teaching Palestinian children that Israel's presence is temporary, the prospects for peace remain bleak? As our close ally, Israel further develops ties with the Arab world, let us ensure that the Palestinian people are not left behind, by telling the Palestinian leadership the hard truths needed to achieve a lasting peace and providing the support needed to reinvigorate the peace process.

4.7 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Some 103 years ago, the Palestinians were abandoned when our then Foreign Secretary decided unilaterally to facilitate the establishment of a new state for one people in another people's homeland. In 1948 the Palestinians were abandoned when that state was established, and in 1967 they were abandoned again when much of their remaining homeland was lost, leading to the occupation that continues today.

But this year they have not just been abandoned; they have also been ignored. On the back of ignoring them, Israel's ignoring of international law has been rewarded, not punished, by political normalisation with two states in the region. We all want peace in the Holy Land, but when we are told that there are peace deals being announced without the Palestinians even being part of those deals, we should get real about whether peace is what we are really getting.

Peace is too important to be mis-sold. While Israel, understandably, pursues normalisation, we should remind all concerned that there is nothing normal about occupation. We found the lockdown due to covid-19 incredibly difficult, with curfews, lack of freedom to travel and being cut off from family, but Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation have been under their own lockdown for so many decades.

The argument being proposed is that the normalisation agreements with Bahrain and the UAE have halted annexation of even more Palestinian territory, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnoch), who I thank for securing this debate, pointed out, they are continuing behind the scenes. The Israeli Prime Minister has made no such guarantee in any case

to his own Knesset, and he has been indicted already more than once for breach of trust as well as for fraud. Why should we take anything he says at face value?

Closer to home, we know from our experiences with the Good Friday agreement that peace can come only when sworn enemies are seated around the table, not when only one side of the table has the chairs out. It is that experience we should be sharing with the world in Britain's commitment to a safer, fairer world for all—including Israelis and Palestinians.

The recent announcements coming from the UAE and Bahrain are significant to those states' relations with Israel but detrimental to peace between Israelis and Palestinians and righting the wrongs committed during the military occupation. No normalisation effort with Israel will be real and genuine—let alone accepted by the people of the region more widely—without addressing the reasons why normalisation has escaped Israelis for so long: the occupation and the wrongs emanating from it.

Rushanara Ali: Does my hon. Friend agree that, despite what has recently happened, the Israeli Government have not ruled out normalisation of annexation for the long term, that it is a temporary thing, and that our Government need to ensure that the Israeli Government do not continue to pursue that as an agenda?

Naz Shah: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Indeed, she and I were in Palestine last year, visiting the Palestinians, and we saw at first hand what happens. I agree and would go further: as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon said earlier, it is not even paused; the truth is, it continues.

In Northern Ireland, we would not have declared peace with the Irish just because Britain normalised full political relations with Dublin. Nor can the Israelis claim peace with the Arabs just because of deals struck in the UAE and Bahrain. Trade deals and PR stunts are one thing; peace is completely different. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve better than the status quo. Both the oppressor and the oppressed and their populations suffer through injustice.

As Dr H. A. Hellyer of the Royal United Services Institute and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote last week,

“full normalization for Israel does not require its government to set up diplomatic outposts in cities far away from Tel Aviv, but rather, to come to an equitable and just settlement with the people of Palestine, from Gaza to Jerusalem to Ramallah.”

In the end, the normalisation of Israel in the region can come only through acceptance on the ground by the wider Arab public, including the people of Palestine, irrespective of the fanfare from the Trump Administration.

As we continue to pursue peace, we must ask, who is peace for? It is not for the Emiratis and it is not for the Bahrainis. It is not even for us. It is for the Israelis and Palestinians. Anything that excludes one side is nothing to do with peace. This is not about the art of a deal—especially when the artwork is counterfeit—it is about the rights of the oppressed, the occupied and the erased.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes. I apologise to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith), who has had no notice of that fact, but I am sure he will manage very well.

4.13 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, at a time when the prospects for middle east peace are perhaps greater than ever before. Israel's recent peace agreements with the UAE and Bahrain demonstrate how the outdated view that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will lead to regional peace is rooted in a lack of understanding of the issues at hand. Conflict is in no way as clearcut as it is so often presented, just as the settlements issue requires greater nuance than some are willing to provide.

While settlement expansion is counterproductive, it is worth recalling that Israel gained control of the west bank in a defensive war to maintain security and that there was no previous legitimate sovereign there. While I welcome how annexation has been taken off the table for the foreseeable future, it appears that the settlements issue can be resolved only through a negotiated peace deal that defines the borders of a sovereign Palestinian state with agreed land swaps. It is for that reason that I have greater hope for the possibility of a two-state solution following the historic signing of peace deals between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain.

I applaud the vision and bravery of the UAE and Bahrain in choosing a future of peace and reconciliation. Unlike Israel's peace deals with Egypt and Jordan, these are likely to be much warmer in nature, with a far greater emphasis on cultural and economic co-operation.

The role of Saudi Arabia in these events is of great interest. Although the kingdom has not publicly indicated its intention to agree a peace deal with Israel in the immediate future, it is clear that Riyadh and Jerusalem are co-operating in a way that has never happened before. The fact that Bahrain has agreed a peace deal with Israel is significant, as the Gulf state is widely regarded as a close ally of Saudi Arabia. Let us consider the point that Saudi Arabia has permitted flights to and from Israel to use its airspace, including by Israel's flag carrier, El Al, in a region all too often beset by violence. These are momentous developments, and I call on my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to do everything he can to support this new relationship.

We must not forget that it was Saudi Arabia that instigated and led the Arab peace initiative of the 2000s, which ushered in a decades-long consensus in the Arab world. The price of normalisation and recognition of Israel was the creation of a Palestinian state. As the years passed and the impasse grew, commentators and analysts increasingly speculated that the initiative had simply emboldened the Palestinians in their rejectionism in relation to repeated peace initiatives, as they adopted a maximalist approach, yet a pivot towards a better future built on peace, prosperity and shared interests has shattered this consensus.

While international efforts have historically focused on unlocking the impasse between Israel and the Palestinians to enable peace, the United States has emphatically shown that peace is possible from the outside in. The Palestinian Authority's joint rejection of the peace deals, alongside Hamas, is deeply regrettable. The peace agreements clearly recommitted the signatories to a just and enduring solution for the Palestinians, and I hope that the Palestinians will choose to engage instead of continuing their accusations of betrayal. After all,

the strategy of prolonging the conflict and rejecting successive peace offers has repeatedly harmed the hope of ordinary Palestinians for statehood. Now is the time for change.

4.16 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the Backbench Business Committee, but also the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for leading this debate and the other Members who have brought it to the House. It is incredibly important—I thank those who have contributed—and I think many of the facts and figures that have been thrown around are well understood. I rise as the first British Palestinian MP, and I thought the best thing I could do would be to give some human colour to the debate.

When I saw Trump's peace plan, which we asked to debate back in March, my heart sank. The reason why it sank was that there is no one more than me and my family, and my cousins and aunts and uncles back home, who wants peace. We want peace—of course we want peace—and Hamas does not speak for me. I stand here as a friend of Israel as much as I am a daughter of Palestine. To those who suggest that this is in some way a weird thing for a Palestinian to say, I reply that most Palestinians I know actually say that. All Palestinians I know recognise Israel and all Palestinians I know want peace. This is not some black-and-white situation; that is where we want to get to.

In that plan there was mention of Jericho. My family is a Greek Orthodox family, and we had a long history of living in Jerusalem within the city walls, but after 1967, the family moved away because it was no longer safe to raise my mother there. She and her five siblings went to live in Jericho, which is where she grew up. The plan that Trump was putting forward would essentially have meant a suffocation of Jericho. A farmer in Jericho would, under this plan, have had to seek a permit to go and tend to their land. When Members say—I noted the words of the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb)—in the old ways of thinking, “Why don't people just engage?” it is the equivalent of someone going to where they have grown up and saying to them, “We are going to suffocate the very village where you grew up or where your mother grew up, and you should be grateful that we have come up with this great plan for your family.” In response, Members would turn around and go, “No!”, yet that is what is going on in this case.

It is very obvious that this plan was never going to work. It is very obvious that the peace plan between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel—good for them; all peace is good, and the more peace, the better—is not going to help Palestine. Let us not fool ourselves. What we can do in this House and what this Government can do is recognise my other country, the one I love equally with this one. What that would do is give hope, because ultimately that is what keeps being eroded with every annexation, with every so-called peace plan and with every intervention by Trump. Frankly, he does not believe in peace; he just wants to be re-elected. What we need now is hope, and that is what is in the gift of this Government.

4.19 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. There is an organisation in Europe

[John Howell]

that could help with this issue: the Council of Europe. I mention it because both the Israelis and the Palestinians are associate members, yet not once has it been involved in this discussion or reached out to try to get them together. I hope the Minister will support my efforts in the Council of Europe to try to get it to do that sort of thing and play a role in taking that forward.

I am not going to underplay the role of the recent agreements. Israel signing deals with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain was a seismic moment of historic proportions. To many casual observers, they have appeared as almost incomprehensible, given the historical enmity of the Arab states towards the Jewish state. Conversely, the region has been changing before our eyes in recent decades, and the landmark deals are the most significant manifestations of that new reality. Despite the recent Israel-UAE deal taking annexation off the table, the Palestinian leadership is yet to recognise the good-will gesture. Land swaps have been part of the agreed framework for a two-state solution for decades, and settlements, although unhelpful, cannot be seen as a permanent obstacle to peace.

I read in an article in *The Guardian*, which typified the attitude of Palestinians. Rather than seeing such deals as an opportunity to engage and get lasting peace, they fell back on the same arguments about settlements and on attacking the Arab nations that had signed the agreements as simply betraying their cause. The article went on to blame the Israelis for violence, which is ironic, given the extent of Palestinian violence, for example in the ramming of cars, which makes the settlements necessary in the first place. I am afraid that Arab leaders have just grown frustrated at Palestinian intransigence. Does that mean that Arab states are simply going to forget the settlements?

Christian Wakeford: What are my hon. Friend's thoughts on whether or not new elections in Palestine are needed? Would new leadership bring not only an impetus for negotiation, but hope for the Palestinian people to move forward and find peace in the middle east?

John Howell: The question of elections among the Palestinian people is interesting. I attended a presentation by pollsters in the Palestinian territories that put as at-risk the continuation of the current Administration in the Palestinian territories. That throws up a difficult area.

As I was saying, does the Arab leaders' frustration mean that Arab states are simply going to forget the settlements? Or are they, as we have seen, putting pressure on Israel not to go ahead with new settlement building, which was talked about in the election but for which I do not believe there is a genuine appetite. As the so-called Arab spring swept through the region, citizens were not protesting about the Israeli-Palestinian dispute on settlements. Those brave citizens passionately demanded the exact same rights and social securities as we take for granted in the UK. It is my great hope that the peace agreements between Israel and her neighbours, and the additional ones that are expected soon, will offer a new and overdue route to a lasting two-state solution. I am sure that colleagues in all parties in this House will share my hope that the Palestinian leadership will embrace this new forward-looking dynamic, rather than continue its rejection.

In closing, let me say some words that have stuck in my mind. They are from Theodor Herzl, who said:

"If you will it, it is no dream."

That is the truth of the matter.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I hope that hon. Members will not now intervene unless it is absolutely necessary, especially those who have already spoken. We are not going to be able to get everyone in; we are running out of time. I am trying my best, but if people take long interventions, it is not fair to others.

4.24 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): I am a supporter of the state of Israel. I am a supporter of its creation and our role in achieving it, a supporter of its flourishing within the region, and a supporter of its robust and thriving democracy in a region where democracy does not thrive. I am a supporter of its place in the international community of nations, and of its culture, religion, dynamism and growth. But that considerable admiration does not blind me to the areas where Israel has failed to live up to its international obligations, and where its actions have worked against the global need for peace in the middle east.

Settlements are just one of many issues that stand in the way of peace, and a three-minute speech is not the place to discuss the issues of the middle east. However, there is nothing in building settlements in the occupied territories that encourages the prospect of a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. If we believe that a long-term peace accord relies on the creation of an agreed two-state solution, how can a Government policy of ongoing building of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories do anything other than make a long-term division of lands less achievable? Yet such a peace agreement would massively benefit Israel, as well as the nascent Palestine. Surely the Israeli Government's current plans to annexe the west bank throws up yet another barrier to the kind of peace that both protagonists and the wider international community purport to support.

I welcome the peace agreements between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain, and I hope that they presage an increased impetus for more normalised relations throughout the region, giving greater impetus to the opportunity for peace. The suspension of the annexation plans, at least for the time being, is an early example of the positive impact of those agreements. It is through the normalisation of relations, and dialogue, rather than assertive acts of annexation in defiance of international law, that the progress we all crave will be achieved.

On the current Israeli-US peace plan, one only needs to turn to the map of the proposed Palestinian state to see that, at best, it can only be the start of a conversation, which perhaps it should be. The proposed state does not look like a state, but rather an internal diaspora of enclaves. We know from the history of the past 50 years that the weeping sore of low-grade attritional conflict between Israel and the Palestinians will not be settled by the imposition of one side's solution on the other. Equally, peace cannot be imposed from the outside. The only way that peace will come is from the free agreement of both parties, supported and facilitated by their international friends. I support Her Majesty's Government as they continue to promote just such a solution.

4.27 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As chair of Labour Friends of Israel, I welcome recent news from the middle east, while acknowledging the challenges facing a two-state solution and an end to conflict. LFI has repeatedly made clear that we oppose annexation in the west bank, and we welcome the fact that, as part of its historic agreement with the United Arab Emirates, Israel has abandoned such plans. The decisions by the UEA and Bahrain to normalise relations with Israel is a cause for optimism. I hope others will follow so that Israel can live in peace with its neighbours and play its part in creating a stable and prosperous region.

As Dennis Ross, veteran of the Clinton and Obama peace efforts said,

“The UAE example can be used to foster a resumption of diplomacy that can change the stalemated reality between Israelis and Palestinians.”

The international community should facilitate that, but only Israel and the Palestinians can find peace. Settlement building is an obstacle—that is why LFI called for a freeze on new settlements—but it is not insurmountable. Israel has previously withdrawn from Sinai in 1981, and Gaza and the northern west bank in 2005. Since Oslo, all negotiations have included land swaps.

Settlements are not the only obstacle. Hamas denies Israel’s right to exist, and terrorises the people of Israel and Gaza. Iran’s proxy army, Hezbollah, has around 140,000 rockets and missiles, and an army of 45,000. Tehran has repeatedly called for Israel’s destruction, pledging, in the words on Ayatollah Khamenei’s website, a “final solution”. In their classrooms and in their policy of paying salaries to terrorists and their families, the Palestinian Authority incite and glorify violence—a policy aided and abetted by international donors, including our own Government. That does nothing to advance peace. I am disappointed that this problem, which has been recognised on both sides of the House, continues and I urge Ministers to act.

I am also disappointed that the UK has cut all funding to peacebuilding co-existence projects that foster conflict resolution and improve relationships. I appeal to the Minister to look at what is happening in the US House of Representatives and join the call to build a peacebuilding fund.

4.30 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is a good thing that the annexation of the west bank has not gone ahead, but suspending it, with the implication that it will go ahead at some future point, is not enough. It has not been taken off the table, as has been suggested in a couple of contributions to this debate. That threat needs to be lifted.

Over the summer, I was contacted by more than 400 constituents who were deeply concerned about annexation and illegal settlement building going ahead. Those developments and what is happening in that part of the world are of deep concern to people in the UK. I welcome the stand that the Government have taken against annexation, but simply stating that we do not approve of it is not enough. We must back up those statements.

Even without annexation, as we have been reminded, the construction of illegal settlements makes the prospect of a two-state solution increasingly illusory. Those from across the House who have argued for a two-state solution need to recognise the impact of continued settlement expansion on the prospect of that ever being feasible. The United Nations special rapporteur has rightly spoken of the two-state solution having become “a vanishing mirage”. It would be a tragedy if that were allowed to happen. If it does, there will not be a peaceful settlement in this part of the world.

It is shocking that the Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses has continued even during the pandemic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) reminded us, we have seen the demolition of buildings and structures that were funded by donors from countries such as ours. The UN special rapporteur has called on the international community

“to review its extensive menu of sanctions...to stem this march towards further illegality.”

That, surely, is what we have to do.

We need to hear from the Minister today, beyond hand-wringing and objections to annexation, what action the UK Government will take to address the continuing damaging illegality that is under way in Israel and Palestine.

4.33 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests for a visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territories with Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Council for Arab-British Understanding.

I rise to speak as a friend of Palestinians as well as Israelis—as, I believe, are all Members across the House. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has meant suffering on all sides for generations, along with regional instability and insecurity for Israelis as well as Palestinians. In Gaza, 80% of civilians depend on international humanitarian relief. In 2010, former Prime Minister David Cameron described the blockaded Gaza strip as a “prison camp”. The situation has not improved much since then; in fact, it has got worse. The plight of Palestinians has been worsened by restrictions on freedom of movement and on freedom of access to work, opportunity, healthcare and education. When I visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories last year, it was clear that the situation had got progressively worse. The daily battle of survival—to get to work and through checkpoints—is exhausting to observe, never mind to live through. That is why it is imperative that all of us work together to ensure that the Palestinians have a right to statehood. Our Government must do all they can to ensure that there is a genuine peace process to provide security for Israelis, a two-state solution and the right to Palestinian statehood. But the so-called Trump plan and the annexation threat by the Israeli Government have put all that in jeopardy and taken us backwards.

We need our Government to fight for an end to the occupation, to illegal settlements, to demolition orders, and to the barriers that prevent Palestinians and Israelis from being able to live side by side in peace and security. We need the international community to redouble its

[*Rushanara Ali*]

efforts to ensure that a genuine peaceful settlement can be reached. The Trump plan is far from that. That is why it is important that our Government fights for a permanent commitment to preventing annexation, not just a temporary reprieve. We need our Government to act as an honest broker, not to take sides. We need our Government to play the role that the world desperately needs us to play with other partners to ensure peace and security in a troubled nation and a troubled region. It is imperative that we all work together to make that happen in a genuine way.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that we have run out of time for Back-Bench contributions, but I note that everyone who is present and has not been called in this debate has already spoken this afternoon in the earlier debate, so I hope they will not feel too badly done by.

4.36 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on bringing this subject forward today. I also congratulate him on a speech that, frankly, I wish I had made myself; I associate myself warmly with it.

It was interesting that the hon. Member started with what this debate is not about, and that is worth restating. This debate is not about being pro or anti Jew or Muslim, Israeli or Palestinian. The reality on the ground is far more complex. It is about our being consistent in our application of international law. A few other things also bear restatement. Israel has a right to exist. It is an important partner for the European Union and the UK. It has a right to security within its borders—the 1967 borders, which are the only legal borders recognised. I regard myself as a friend of Israel and a friend of Palestine. My party takes a position of principled neutrality on this matter. We favour, as do many others, a two-state solution. We condemn any violence against anyone, whoever it is perpetrated by, and we condemn any breach of international law.

Any discussion of the middle east by outsiders is bedevilled by a wilfully short memory on occasion and wilful partial-sightedness. We have heard some of that today. The Trump plan is the worst example of it lately. The Trump plan is not a serious basis for talks—quite the reverse. It rewards bad, illegal behaviour, and should be rejected out of hand. The Israel-UAE and Israel-Bahrain accords are to be welcomed as far as they go—any dialogue and co-operation surely has to be welcomed—but they themselves ignore the 2002 Arab peace initiative condition that any normalisation of relations is contingent on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The developments in the middle east are bedevilled by a series of year zeros that seek to erase what happened before. These accords in themselves do nothing in international law to change or erase Israel's obligations as an occupying power under international humanitarian law.

We have heard from the Government Benches that settlements are one issue among many or that they are not a significant barrier to peace. I find that a remarkable

analysis, which I utterly reject. I would contend quite the reverse. The settlements are the primary obstacle to a two-state solution, in that they have rendered Palestinian territory an ungovernable archipelago.

The formal annexation seems to have receded for the moment, but the occupation continues, and the occupation undermines a two-state solution. We should remember that under the UK Government's own policy settlements are illegal. Contact with them should be illegal also. Settlement produce is stolen goods and there should be consequences in dealing in it, so I have some concrete questions for the Minister. Will the UK ban settlement goods? Failing that, will we at least clearly label them so that consumers can make choices? Following the formal publication of the UN list of companies trading with settlements, what action will the Government take against JCB, Opodo and Greenkote, who continue that illegal trade?

We all favour a just peace for all in the middle east, but it must be based on a clear-eyed assessment and application of international law. The UK Government could be doing more to encourage that discussion.

4.40 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). He said at the start that this is a debate of critical importance and that he had waited a long time for it. I commend him for his patience. The debate has been conducted, by and large, in a very positive spirit. That has been personified by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). She set the tone that we all need to maintain.

Earlier this year, President Trump published his so-called “deal of the century”. It was, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon said, a package of proposals designed in effect to break international law, and in so doing offering little hope to the Palestinian people. Moving the United States embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has also done absolutely nothing to promote peace. President Trump's deal was followed by Prime Minister Netanyahu's proposals to unilaterally annex large parts of the west bank. Again, that was against international law. It placed in jeopardy existing peace treaties and would effectively have brought to an end, if it had been successful, the prospect of a viable two-state solution.

Since the publication of the various permutations of the annexation proposals, there has been widespread international condemnation of annexation. The UAE-Bahrain-Israel agreement has at least halted the move towards annexation, but we should note that Prime Minister Netanyahu said that as far as he is concerned annexation is “still on the table”. I understand that the Foreign Secretary recently visited Israel and the west bank, and had talks with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. I would like to know from the Minister if our Foreign Secretary said emphatically that it is not enough for those plans to be halted, but that they should be withdrawn absolutely and irreversibly cancelled. I hope our Foreign Secretary said that.

I know that the Government support a two-state solution, as we in the Labour party do, but we should recognise that it will not just happen. We need to acknowledge that illegal settlements are a real barrier.

They are in breach of the fourth Geneva convention. They are a real barrier to peace, an impediment to moving forward. The demolition of houses and the eviction of Palestinian people from their homes in Jerusalem and elsewhere is deplorable—no ifs or buts. The Government also need to recognise that there is a need to support the creation of a new climate in Israel and Palestine, so that people are able to move towards a process of peace. That is why it is important to support coexistence projects. There was funding, provided by the Government, for coexistence projects, but that has now, sadly, come to an end. I believe the Government need to support projects that promote coexistence, because only when Palestinians and Israelis have an ongoing dialogue, when they live and work together and engage in reconciliation, can there be a firm basis for a permanent peace. I also think that we need to recognise that there needs to be the beginning of a meaningful peace process. The Trump plan does not offer the basis for that. I would like to see the Government—I give the Minister the opportunity to do so today—saying loudly and clearly that the Trump plan is unacceptable and does not offer the basis for real negotiations.

Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon once again for securing this important debate, and I thank everyone who has contributed. I look forward to the Minister's reply, which I hope will be positive.

4.45 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am genuinely grateful that the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) secured this debate on what is a sensitive but incredibly important issue. A number of Members from all parts of the House have highlighted that since initially being given a date for this debate, much has changed in Israel's situation and its relationship with its regional neighbours and the Palestinian people.

The middle eastern peace process continues to be a complex and sensitive issue. I cannot really do it full justice in the time allocated today, but I will attempt to cover as many points as I can. I know that many Members correspond with the Department on a regular basis on this area. I hope that, through correspondence and perhaps in future debates, any details that I am not able to cover today will be explored.

The UK remains active in attempting to secure a peace process for the region, and we warmly welcome the recent announcements of the normalisation of relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. All three countries are good friends to the United Kingdom. We welcome that their relations have improved. I recognise the points that the hon. Member made about it formalising what was, in many instances, a pre-existing relationship, but that public formalisation really matters. As has already been discussed, it has unlocked direct flights through Saudi airspace, which is another significant issue. I do hope that it has also shown the leadership of the PA that there is a shift in mood among Arabic neighbours. They should recognise that and take this as an opportunity to positively engage with a dialogue for future peace.

That said, it should be clear that the United Kingdom's position on the future relationship between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples has not changed. We desire a

stable, secure and peaceful two-state solution, with a thriving Israel next door to a thriving Palestine based on 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states and fair, agreed and realistic settlements for refugees. We continue to believe that a two-state solution is the only viable long-term solution for the area. More than that, as a good friend of Israel, we genuinely believe it is in Israel's best interests to also have a viable Palestinian state so that it can maintain its desired future as a Jewish democratic state.

I have been asked very explicitly in a number of speeches about the UK's position on annexation, so let me explain it to the House in clear and unambiguous terms. The UK's position on annexation is that it would be a violation of international law. It would be counterproductive to securing peace, and it would be a significant blow to a viable two-state solution. As a lifelong friend, admirer and supporter of Israel—

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

James Cleverly: I will.

Zarah Sultana: In August, the Labour party announced that should annexation take place, we would call for a boycott of goods sourced in the occupied territories. Does the Minister agree that this would demonstrate a genuine commitment to the rights of the Palestinian people and international law?

James Cleverly: The UK Government have a long-standing position to oppose the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement towards the state of Israel, but more than that, it is better that we prevent annexation from taking place. We have made the case, through our excellent bilateral relationships, that we oppose annexation. The Prime Minister has consistently made it clear, as a vocal friend of the state of Israel, that he opposes annexation. He expressed this publicly in an article in the Israeli media and directly, including in a phone call with Prime Minister Netanyahu on 6 July. The Foreign Secretary raised this in Jerusalem on the 24 August with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Alternate Prime Minister Gantz and Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, and I outlined our opposition to such moves at the UN Security Council on 24 June. Our position is clear on that.

As a strong friend of Israel, and a friend who stood up for Israel when it faced biased and unreasonable criticism, we are continuing to urge Israel not to take steps in this direction and for annexation to be permanently removed as an option.

Jim Shannon: The country that continues to be the greatest problem is Iran. I understand that the United Nations arms embargo on Iran, for conventional weapons, expires in mid-October. Will the Minister use his good powers as a Foreign Office Minister to ensure that work is done alongside the USA to make sure that that arms embargo is reinstated?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I am constrained by time, and that is an important and complicated issue, which I cannot address in this speech.

The UK's position on settlements is also clear. Again, they are illegal under international law and present an obstacle to a sustainable two-state solution. We want to

[James Cleverly]

see a contiguous west bank, including East Jerusalem, as part of a viable sovereign Palestinian state, based on the 1967 borders.

In 2016, the UK supported UN Security Council resolution 2334, which states that Israeli settlement activity “constitutes a flagrant violation” of international law and “has no legal validity”. This is the long-standing position of the UK Government, and we are able to have these very direct conversations with the Israeli Government because we are friends—long-standing and close friends of the Israeli people and the Israeli Government. That gives us the opportunity to have these frank and sometimes difficult discussions.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

James Cleverly: I am going to make progress; otherwise, I will deny the hon. Member for Aberavon the opportunity to come back in. We maintain strong and close relations with the Israeli people and the state of Israel, which enables us to have these direct conversations.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised Iran’s intentionally insulting and provocative language, and we must understand that Israel, from its inception, has felt an existential threat. That very much informs its view to its own protection, and we must understand that. We must also work to remove that existential fear because that ultimately will unlock the viable, peaceful two-state solution.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who injected a very moving, personal contribution. We must always remember that this is not just about lines on maps and international power politics—this is actually about people. That is why the UK Government maintain our support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, to help those people who are suffering because of this unresolved situation.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and some of my right hon. and hon. Friends raised the issue of insulting language and incitement in textbooks. The former Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), raised this issue with the Palestinian Authority’s Education Minister on her very first phone call in post. The Foreign Secretary also raised it with the Palestinian Prime Minister and the Education Minister on his recent visit to the OPTs. We have pressed the EU to publish its interim report on Palestinian textbooks. We want it to be addressed at pace and transparently.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), in what was once again a thoughtful and balanced contribution, asked about businesses and their activities in the occupied territories. We give guidance to businesses and ultimately it is a decision for individual companies whether to operate in settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, but the British Government absolutely do not encourage or support such activities. ¹As I have said, the British Government firmly oppose boycotts of Israel, but we understand the concerns of people who do not wish to purchase goods exported from Israeli settlements near the OPTs. It was in order to allow consumers to have that choice that in December 2009 the UK Government

introduced voluntary guidance to enable products from Israeli settlements near the OPTs to be specifically labelled as such.

Time precludes me from going much further with the details, but I will close with a reminder that this debate is about protecting the viability of a peaceful, secure state of Israel, and a peaceful and secure state for the Palestinian people. There is an opportunity, and we have encouraged the Palestinian Authority to engage with Israel, the United States of America, its Arab neighbours and friends, and the UK, to put a counter-offer on the table. We know that President Trump is someone who likes to do a deal, and we strongly urge our friends in the region to take him up on the offer.

4.58 pm

Stephen Kinnock: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members present for what has been a rich and multifaceted debate. If I had to distil it, I think there are five really important points that we need to take away from it.

First, the UAE deal has not stopped annexation. The settlements continue. Planning has been approved for 3,500 new units in E1 and 7,000 in E2. It is blatantly not the case that annexation and settlements have stopped, so we should shoot that fox.

Secondly, the Trump plan has to be taken off the table. It is not a viable basis for negotiations. It represents the breaking of international law.

Thirdly, the British Government must recognise Palestine immediately, on the basis of 1967 lines; otherwise, we are simply not having a realistic or constructive engagement in this process.

Fourthly, on banning trade in products, the Minister kept saying that this is about banning trade in products from Israel, but it is not Israel that we are talking about. The illegal settlements are not Israel. They are illegally occupied territory that should belong to the Palestinians, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) correctly pointed out.

Finally, we need to act against those British companies that are involved in the illegal settlements. It is all very well having guidelines and encouragement, but that is clearly not working. It is time for the British Government to step up to the plate. It is time for tangible action. Hand wringing and expressions of outrage will no longer cut it. We need to see action, and we need to see it now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered settlement and annexation of the Occupied Palestinian territories.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (30 SEPTEMBER)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 30 September, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) and Standing Order No. 17 (Delegated legislation (negative procedure))—

(1) debate on the Motions in the name of Keir Starmer relating to Town and Country Planning (SI, 2020, Nos. 632, 755 & 756) may continue for up to one and a half hours, after which the Speaker shall put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of each Motion;

(2) proceedings may continue, though opposed, beyond the moment of interruption; and

(3) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*David Duguid.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I propose not to formally suspend the House as we come to the Adjournment, but I am pausing to allow people to leave in a quiet and orderly fashion and to allow those who need to be here—ah!—to be here. Mission accomplished.

NHS Hysteroscopy Treatment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David Duguid.*)

5.1 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am really grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is really good to see you.

This is the eighth time I have raised in this House the way women are treated by the NHS when they need a hysteroscopy. I have always had a sympathetic hearing. Throughout the years, I have given voice to an ever-growing group of courageous women, the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy. I am sad to tell the House that the issue has not been resolved. Far from it. Women are still being denied the right to provide informed consent and having their pain ignored while a procedure is performed, and some suffer lasting trauma as a result of a hysteroscopy.

For those who do not know, a hysteroscopy involves a camera probe being inserted into the womb, past the cervix. Sometimes, a sample will be cut away from the woman's womb for examination—it will be cut away from her womb. A hysteroscopy can be an important tool for diagnosing the causes of common problems, such as unusually heavy periods, unexplained pain or bleeding. It can enable life-saving treatment to begin, or provide invaluable reassurance that a problem being experienced is not caused by cancer.

It is true that for some women, sometimes, a hysteroscopy causes only minor discomfort, but for others it causes agony and a sense of violation, because hysteroscopies are often carried out in NHS hospitals with little or no anaesthetic. Frequently, women are simply advised to take paracetamol or ibuprofen for the pain.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I say how nice it is to see the hon. Lady back in the Chamber? I am very pleased to see her.

Someone very close to me is going through this particular thing at the moment, so I understand exactly what the hon. Lady refers to. Does she agree that some women's experience of this treatment is truly extreme, and that pain medication must be made available for those who need it, as opposed to stopping and sometimes redoing the procedure?

Ms Brown: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is a delight to see him in his place, too. I will come to the lack of pain relief for women and just how damaging that can be for them, not only in that moment but often for their ongoing healthcare, because it creates fear and a barrier.

Massively improved information leaflets have been produced by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, in collaboration with patients. I am also pleased to note that the NHS website, which I quoted from in the last debate, has now been changed to recognise that some women experience severe pain and a general anaesthetic should be an option. However, many women having a hysteroscopy are still not being given this essential information. They still are not having the risk of severe pain discussed with them properly, and they still are not having the option of a more effective anaesthetic offered freely. In truth, these women cannot give genuinely informed consent, and therefore their rights as patients are being violated.

[Ms Lyn Brown]

Telling the story of your trauma is very difficult. The excellent women at the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy are still a relatively small group. Despite that, the campaign has collected 1,500 personal accounts of painful hysteroscopy. Previously in this House, I have told the stories of women who have been held down as they tried to stop the procedure, who have collapsed from shock, bleeding in hospital car parks afterwards, and who have been criticised by doctors for their supposedly low pain thresholds because apparently “most women are fine with it”. Today I will raise the voices of three very recent hysteroscopy patients, because I want the Minister to know that this barbarism is still taking place.

Rebecca had a hysteroscopy last year. She was given no information before her appointment, received no warnings about severe pain and was not offered sedation. Fortunately, Rebecca had had a similar painful procedure before, so she asked for pain relief and was offered a local anaesthetic injected into her cervix. That, in itself, was painful, but she hoped beyond hope that it would be worth it, and the doctor reassured her that the procedure had been massively improved. Instead, Rebecca said:

“As the probe was inserted I struggled to believe how severe that pain was. As the biopsies were taken... I could feel my insides being cut away and I had absolutely NOTHING to address the agony of it all! I was trying not to scream, very close to vomiting and fainting. In trying to contain my screams I couldn't speak—if I had, the screams would have ‘escaped’ and I knew that they would be deafening. The procedure seemed to go on and on. It was barbaric and, as I hadn't been given any warning, I felt panicked and unsafe.”

After they were “finished” with her, in her words, she says that no one cared that she felt faint, was close to tears and was struggling to walk. Rebecca tells me she felt conned, and not treated as a human being but “an object to cut bits out of”.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting what many women have been suffering in silence. The Minister's reaction to this is profound. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must ensure that the national health service provides proper guidance and instruction to practitioners, so that women do not suffer in the way her constituent did?

Ms Brown: The reason I am here tonight is to continue the campaign, because it has been going on for some years. I first spoke about this in an Adjournment debate, and an hon. Gentleman I know who sat on the Front Bench took it back to the Department of Health. This campaign has gone on for quite a long time.

Let me tell the House about Vidya. Vidya had a terrible experience with hysteroscopy earlier this year. Vidya has had a vaginal birth. She has experienced that pain, but when the camera was inserted into her womb, Vidya felt such agony that she was not even able to tell the doctor to stop. Like Rebecca, she simply could not scream out. Vidya had not been asked to sign an informed consent form. She was not asked about the level of pain she was experiencing at any time. She said:

“I can't eat, I can't go out, I cannot stop reliving the agony in my mind. If I sleep I wake up with terrifying nightmares. I can't stop crying.”

Like so many of the women who have had to go through this, Vidya has lost trust in healthcare professionals and in our NHS, and I think she is likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder.

I would also like to talk about Alison. She was completely unaware that she was going to have a hysteroscopy until she arrived at the hospital. She had not been sent a leaflet or told anything to prepare her. She had not even had a paracetamol. She said:

“The pain was like I had been thrown into full-on labour contractions. I was crying and screaming out... panting... my heart was racing. The pain was off the scale. After I left the hospital crying in my sister's arms, she had to help me to the car. I cried solid for 14 hours. This will stay with me the rest of my life.”

Alison's hysteroscopy took place last Wednesday. These violations of patient dignity and rights are still happening regularly, seven years on. They have to be stopped. I would be happy to send the survey to the Minister, as I have done with previous Ministers, and I hope she will find the time to read through the accounts herself.

Personal experiences are the most important thing here, but there is also new scientific evidence. On 14 September this year, the *British Journal of Anaesthesia* published an analysis of eight years of data on hysteroscopy outpatients. It found that 18% of patients reported pain at a level of seven or more out of 10, and only 8% reported no pain. Almost 40% of patients were given no pain relief and only 2% were given a local anaesthetic. The doctors and their patients reported back. The clinicians' judgments about pain seemed to be the very opposite of what their patients actually felt. The doctors who had given an anaesthetic, even a low dose, reported observing very little pain. Sadly, they were not seeing the reality of their patients' experience. Their patients reported feeling pain when the doctors said there was none. The study suggests that the doctors are, frankly, terrible at judging the extent of the pain of the women in front of them. It also suggests that local anaesthetics are not enough for many women.

We know that our NHS is overwhelmed by covid. We all understand the pressure that the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care are under. I also understand the pressure that Ministers must be under, but I hope that the Minister will commit, like the last Minister, to taking forward this issue quickly to ensure that the necessary change happens. In January, I asked if pain during hysteroscopy could be included on the agenda of the women's health taskforce of England. I was told that the taskforce would be open to it, but then came covid. So can the Minister tell me whether the taskforce has met since January? Has it discussed the issue of suffering during hysteroscopy? If not, will she commit to including it when the taskforce next meets?

Also in January, I followed up the most fundamental changes that I think we need to see. The NHS is currently actively encouraging hospitals to perform hysteroscopies as outpatient procedures, with no possibility of a general anaesthetic or other sedation, through the ironically named NHS best practice tariff. Due to the tariff, an NHS manager's trust will lose money if it provides a general anaesthetic. I have raised the problem of the best practice tariff several times now. Last year, I sent submissions to the utterly opaque and unaccountable consultation conducted by NHS Improvement—also ironic. Like many

women of the campaign, I did not even receive a proper response. That is simply a disgrace. Women must not be ignored. We must see the change we seek.

In my last debate in December 2018, I had four straightforward asks. Sadly, they are still relevant today. I want to see: better information to enable informed consent; improved training, especially on the risk factors and forms of pain relief that doctors are trained to offer; every trust properly funded for the most effective and necessary forms of anaesthetic appropriate to hysteroscopy patients; and, finally, permanent removal of the perverse financial incentive that puts more women at risk of trauma. I hope the Minister will tell us about what action the Government might take on each of those.

Every time I have raised the experiences of the many women who have suffered as a result of hysteroscopy, I have had a genuinely sympathetic response. I genuinely believed that the former Minister, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), was taking forward our case within Government, but the work she started did not seem to be allowed to come to fruition. I have to ask why.

If women's health, informed consent and patient safety are genuine priorities for the Government, I hope to leave today with genuine optimism and renewed confidence that, with the new Minister, our campaign will finally have its success. We cannot be satisfied with sympathy—it is not enough. We need action. The Government must finally bring this sorry state of affairs to a conclusion so that women can be assured that, if they need a hysteroscopy on the NHS, they will be in safe, caring and sensitive hands.

5.16 pm

The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Ms Nadine Dorries): Wow. That was certainly a moving Adjournment speech. I thank the hon. Member, who knows she has my respect. We have been here together for many years, and I have to say that I am truly moved—more than moved—by the accounts of Rebecca, Vidya and Alison. Those stories are incredibly impactful because we know they are real and because, as women, we understand exactly what they are relaying in their experiences in a way that—I am sorry—chaps just do not.

The hon. Member referred to being here eight times. I think I have some good news for her in my response, and that is because she has brought this issue back here eight times. What I am about to say is in no small part due to her persistence. We all know that, in this place, very little happens overnight. The only way we achieve change is by doggedly continuing to push until something happens. I think she will be pleased with what I am about to tell her, but there is also something we will need her and the campaign to do to continue the momentum.

I thank the hon. Member for her continued campaigning, and I am delighted to respond to the debate. A hysteroscopy can be an essential tool in the diagnosis and treatment of conditions. What she referred to in, I think, Rebecca's experience was a biopsy that is taken to look at tissues, for various reasons. Hysteroscopies are most important in investigating unexplained and distressing problems—they are a timely diagnosis tool—and can be used as a process for dilation and curettage. There are many reasons why women need them.

I am almost loth to read out these words—the hon. Member can tell I am going off script here—but the answer always is, “It's a very quick procedure, it takes 10 to 15 minutes. If someone is in pain, 15 minutes is a very long time. Who would want to be in labour for 15 minutes? It is a long, long time.

I am almost tempted to say, “Shall we put our hands up to show who in here has been through a hysteroscopy?”, but maybe it is not appropriate for me to say that. I think we all can understand what the experiences are like. Patient experience is significantly varied, so there will be patients who say they did not feel anything and there will be patients who have stories such as those of the people the hon. Member has spoken to.

The NHS does not collect data on the number of women who experience pain—surprise, surprise—during hysteroscopy. However, I am aware that the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy estimates that between 5% and 25% of hysteroscopy patients have reported pain, and 25% is a considerable number. It is essential that women who are offered a hysteroscopy are given the information that they need to make that informed decision, which must include information about potential pain, options for pain management and alternative procedures that are available, such as a general anaesthetic.

I will address the points the hon. Member made regarding whether women are being offered appropriate pain relief and her concern that the national tariff—I completely agree with her here—creates an incentive for hysteroscopies to be carried out as an out-patient, without appropriate pain relief for those 25% of women. I will talk about three components to ensuring that women receive the care they deserve: evidence-based clinical guidelines, embedding the patient voice and monitoring implementation.

To minimise pain and promote best practice in hysteroscopy, it is essential that clinicians have access to guidelines. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists currently has a guideline, produced in 2011, which provides clinicians with evidence-based information regarding out-patient hysteroscopy. The guideline has an explicit focus on minimising pain and optimising the woman's experience. It makes specific recommendations on practices that help to reduce pain.

I am told that the RCOG is now developing a second edition of those guidelines to ensure that the recommendations are based on the most up-to-date and robust evidence base. It is being developed jointly with the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy, and patient groups are represented on RCOG's guidelines committee and the development group. Furthermore, a statement from the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy, which was published on RCOG's website in 2018, also emphasises the importance of offering women from the outset the choice of having the procedure performed as a day-case procedure under general or regional anaesthetic as an alternative to an out-patient setting.

Alongside clinical guidance, I note the importance of patients' voices, which are critical at every stage of the treatment pathway. Decisions on any treatment, including out-patient hysteroscopy with its benefits and risks, should always be discussed as part of the shared decision making between the clinician and patient. I understand that since the last parliamentary debate on this subject in December 2018, the NHS website, as the hon. Member

[Ms Nadine Dorries]

noted, has been updated. I thank her for pointing it out and enabling that to happen. The website has been updated and RCOG has published a patient information leaflet regarding the procedure.

NHS England recommends that, as part of good practice, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' patient information leaflet, published in 2018, is provided to patients in advance, to assist with obtaining informed consent for the procedure. I imagine by that they mean that it is sent out with the appointment for the procedure or handed out at the clinic.

The patient information leaflet contains a lot of helpful information for patients. It explains what the procedure is and what is involved, what the patient should do beforehand and the questions they should ask health care professionals, the risks and alternatives, after-effects and what will happen following the procedure. The leaflet also recommends that patients take pain relief one to two hours before the procedure. After a hysteroscopy, I encourage any woman to read these valuable resources, along with the additional resources provided by their clinician. First, before the procedure, women must be able to speak to their doctor or nurse about what to expect and about pain relief options, including local or general anaesthetic, but, as we know and as the Cumberlege report has recently shown us, women's voices are very often not listened to.

Ms Brown: I just point out that Rebecca turned up last week to an appointment, and there was no information. She did not even know that she was having a hysteroscopy. That was last week.

Ms Dorries: That is distressing to hear.

Women should also be advised that the procedure can be stopped at any time— but, although they are aware of that, that is an incredibly difficult decision to make. When we are in pain, we do not think rationally. It is important to put this on the record as women must be informed of their rights and have their voices heard. Finally, after the procedure, if the woman believes that there have been issues with the treatment that should be raised with the trust.

I want to talk about progress. NHS England advises that progress is being made through the implementation of clinical guidance. Within that, commissioners, and providers should advise service user feedback to be monitored to identify where the guidance is not being followed. As the hon. Member may be aware, women's health is a personal priority of mine, and I have been looking at improving the experiences of women in the healthcare system since I arrived in the Department. As I recently set out in my statement to the House on the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review, we cannot accept the status quo whereby it takes women so long to have their voices heard and for their concerns to be taken seriously. Whether we are talking about the Shipman or Paterson inquiries or the Cumberlege review or another maternity incident, it is sobering to reflect on the amount of inquiries that we have taking place that are about women-only issues. As I work with the team to evaluate every recommendation and every aspect of the Cumberlege review, I want to assure the hon. Member and the House that it remains an absolute priority of mine to tackle these issues.

I understand that the hon. Member has ongoing concerns with the best practice tariff. The aim of the best practice tariff is to encourage procedures in an out-patient setting where clinically appropriate. Out-patient procedures provide the patient with a quicker recovery, as well as allowing them to recuperate at home. I understand that NHS England and NHS Improvement will shortly be engaging with the sector on policy proposals for the 2021-22 national tariff. The tariff engagement document due for October publication will lay out NHS England and NHS Improvement's initial proposals for the 2021-22 national tariff and will be followed by a statutory consultation. I understand, drawing on the momentum created by changes in the payments system this year due to covid-19, NHS England and NHS Improvement expect to propose an accelerated shift towards the use of a blended payment approach. This proposal would include the majority of services providing hysteroscopy. Blended payment would not differentiate between in-patient and out-patient procedures and, as such, the out-patient procedure's best practice tariff would no longer be necessary. NHS England and NHS Improvement are currently planning to propose the removal of the best practice tariff from April 2021.

I hope the hon. Member will be pleased to hear this update, and I encourage her and patient groups to comment and contribute to NHS England and NHS Improvement's proposals both in the tariff engagement document and the subsequent statutory consultation. I myself will be contributing to that consultation.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for raising this important matter for discussion. She raised the issue of what was the women's taskforce. I am not aware of any work that has taken place so far on hysteroscopies, but I will look into that. What I will say is that we have established something called the women's health agenda, which has met this year. Sadly, it had to be stopped because of covid. We are already looking at restarting that agenda now and hysteroscopies will very definitely be on the table, as with all women's procedures, when we are discussing the women's health agenda. I really feel strongly that there is more we can do to ensure that we empower women to talk about their health, and I hope that we enjoy better outcomes as a result. Women are not listened to. They are not listened to in so many areas within health as a whole, and we have to change that. We have to ensure that a woman's voice is heard throughout all the settings in the NHS.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have heard this debate before, and I am very, very glad to hear that progress is being made. Fifteen minutes is the time that the Minister took to speak, not two minutes. [Interruption.] No, I am not criticising the Minister. I am pointing out that being in pain for the whole of the Minister's speech would not have been amusing.

Ms Dorries: Some people may.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We were not in pain for that time.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 24 September 2020

CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and Common Frameworks

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I am today laying before Parliament a report, “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks: 26 March to 25 June 2020”. I am laying this report because it is a legal requirement under the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018 for quarterly reports to be made to Parliament on the progress of the work to develop common frameworks. The report is being made available on gov.uk and details the progress made between the UK Government and devolved Administrations regarding the development of common frameworks. This report details progress made during the eighth three-month reporting period, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act. A copy of the “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks: 26 March to 25 June 2020” report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

I am also laying before Parliament the “Frameworks Analysis 2020”. The analysis is being made available on gov.uk and outlines the expected implementing arrangements for each of the policy areas within the UK common frameworks programme. This analysis highlights the significant changes since April 2019 whilst recognising that future changes are expected throughout the remainder of the programme. A copy of the “Frameworks Analysis 2020” has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-09-24/HCWS466/>.

[HCWS466]

TREASURY

Counter-terrorist Asset Freezing Regime: January-March 2020

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAFE 2010), the Treasury is required to prepare a quarterly report regarding its exercise of the powers conferred on it by part 1 of TAFE 2010. This written statement satisfies that requirement for the period 1 January 2020 to 31 March 2020.

This report also covers the UK’s implementation of the UN’s ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaida asset freezing regime (ISIL-AQ), and the operation of the EU’s asset freezing regime under EU Regulation (EC) 2580/2001 concerning external terrorist threats to the EU (also referred to as the CP 931 regime).

Under the ISIL-AQ asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Daesh) and al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011.

Under EU Regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and OFSI has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAFE 2010.

EU Regulation 2016/1686 was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous al-Qaida and ISIL (Daesh) listings.

The attached tables set out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-09-24/HCWS467/>.

[HCWS467]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Coronavirus Update

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): As set out by the Prime Minister in Parliament on 22 September, the covid-19 infection rate is rising across the country. It is now vitally important that Government take decisive action to limit any further spread, and reduce the chance of more restrictive measures.

I therefore wish to update you on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (England) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2020 (“the No. 2 Amendment Regulations”), and the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings in a Relevant Place and on Public Transport) (England) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 which both came into force on 24 September 2020.

It is now a legal requirement for hospitality venues (including cafes, bars, pubs and restaurants) to close between the hours of 10 pm and 5 am. This rule also applies to social clubs, cinemas, theatres, concert halls, casinos, bowling alleys, amusement arcades (and other indoor leisure centres or facilities), funfairs, theme parks, and adventure parks and activities, and bingo halls. However, cinemas, theatres and concert halls will be able to remain open beyond 10 pm if the performance started before 10 pm. There are certain exemptions to these restrictions, including delivery services, drive-through, and service stations. In addition, a “table service only” policy means that customers must be seated to consume food and drink served on hospitality premises.

If businesses do not adhere to these new requirements, they could face a fine of £1,000 increasing in intervals to £2,000 then £4,000 to a maximum of £10,000 for subsequent offences.

The “rule of six” introduced on 14 September prohibits social gatherings of more than six people in England, apart from specific exemptions. These exemptions have been further limited to reduce the risk of covid-19 transmission. The amendments include: limiting attendance at support groups, weddings and wedding receptions to 15 people and removing the existing exemption for

indoor team sports (except for indoor disabled sports and supervised under-18s sports), and significant life events (other than weddings, civil partnerships, and funerals).

Fines for initial breaches of the rule of six gathering limit have been doubled to reflect the severity of non-compliance. This means fines will be doubled from £100 to £200, doubling again upon reoffence.

Amendments to the face covering regulations introduce a requirement for the public to wear a face covering in retail, leisure and hospitality venues including restaurants, public houses and bars, except for when seated to eat or drink. We have also extended the requirement to wear a face covering to staff working in these settings unless

they have a reasonable excuse, in areas which are open to the public and where they are likely to come into close contact with members of the public.

The penalty for failing to wear a face covering where one is required or gathering in groups of more than six, will now increase from £100 to £200 on the first offence (reduced to £100 if paid within 14 days), rising to a maximum of £6,400 for repeat offenders with no reduction for early payment from the second fine.

Publicly available Government guidance on gov.uk is being updated to ensure that it is consistent with the new regulations. Sector bodies will also produce updated guidance where relevant.

[HCWS468]

ORAL ANSWERS

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