

**Tuesday
20 April 2021**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 20 April 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings continued (Order, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fragile and Conflict-affected Countries: Education

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure that children in fragile and conflict-affected countries can access education and learning. [914434]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Covid-19 has deepened the crisis in access to education and learning that children face, especially girls and especially in conflict. That is why Britain is championing two global targets to get 40 million more girls back into school and 20 million more reading over the next five years.

Ben Everitt: One in four school-age children globally—over 500 million children—already lived in a country affected by conflicts or climate-related emergencies before the pandemic. Violence against children in conflict settings is on the rise. More and more children are at risk of recruitment, sexual violence and attacks on their schools and hospitals. Will the Government commit to including those children and addressing the barriers to their learning in a specific target as part of the ambition to ensure 12 years of quality education for every girl?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right to point to this specific problem within the wider challenge of covid and the compound impacts in conflict situations. The support to fragile and conflict-affected states accounts for over 50% of UK aid to education through our country-led programmes. In 2020, we provided over £10 million in new funding to support refugee and displaced children's education in some of the toughest parts of the world.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I am enormously proud of and grateful for the UK aid that goes to support the poorest children in the world. However, since 31 March, children's centres, education projects and health facilities have all been forced to close, as Ministers have not signed off on funding agreements. My question to the Foreign Secretary is simple: when will he come to the Chamber and tell the

House which aid projects are safe, what is going to be cut, the associated risks and the timeline and criteria he is using? Lives are literally at stake, and jobs are definitely hanging in the balance.

Dominic Raab: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee on International Development for what she has set out. I know that she has a passionate interest in this. Of course, we have taken a very careful approach to the allocations this year. I will be laying them in the House of Commons in the usual way, and I look forward to answering questions in her Committee on Thursday.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister announced that the UK would endorse the safe schools declaration, which includes a commitment to the continuation of education in situations of armed conflict. This last year has seen the biggest global education emergency in our lifetime due to covid-19, and every other G7 member has responded to the pandemic by increasing aid. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the UK Government cutting aid to war-torn Syria and Yemen, described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a “death sentence”, and cutting spending on education by nearly 40% is undeniably a betrayal of the 75 million children in conflict-affected countries across the world who urgently require support to access education?

Dominic Raab: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's rather skewed caricature. We remain one of the biggest global donors of aid. In relation to the Global Partnership for Education, I can tell him that our commitment, which we will announce shortly, will increase.

Ethiopia: Human Rights

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the (a) humanitarian and (b) human rights situation in Tigray, Ethiopia. [914435]

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political situation in Ethiopia. [914445]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The UK has been at the forefront of the international effort to de-escalate the very grave humanitarian situation in Tigray. There can be no military solution; conflict can only be resolved through a political settlement. I saw that at first hand when I was in Ethiopia in January.

Rachel Hopkins [V]: Credible media and NGO reports have found human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, massacres and atrocities by all parties to the conflict in Tigray. The UN states that the top public health official for the appointed interim administration in Tigray has reported the use of sexual slavery and grotesque acts of sexual gender-based violence by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, with more than 10,500 cases of rape being committed. When did the Foreign Secretary last speak to the Ethiopian Government to raise the humanitarian, security and human rights situations, and has the Prime Minister spoken to his Ethiopian counterpart?

Dominic Raab: I share the hon. Lady's concerns about this, and I can reassure her that not only do we regularly raise this, but that is why I visited Ethiopia in January. I went up to Gondar to see for myself the humanitarian access. We have seen since then some improvements in humanitarian access. The Ethiopian Government have introduced a new system that requires notification rather than permission. That is a step forward, but we need further progress. In relation to those credible claims of human rights abuses that we and many have received, I note that Prime Minister Abiy has said that the perpetrators should face justice, and we certainly hold him to that assurance and support the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the planned investigations that they are working on.

Nickie Aiken: I am sure that my right hon. Friend shares my concern and, frankly, horror at the ongoing reports of rape and sexual violence being used as weapons in the ongoing Tigray conflict, and joins the US Government in calling for a joint investigation by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission into such reports. Does he agree that, with the UK hosting the G7 this summer, this is the perfect opportunity to put preventing sexual violence in conflict on the agenda and to lead a global response to such heinous crimes?

Dominic Raab: I totally share my hon. Friend's passion and outrage at the human rights violations we have seen—indeed, not just there, but in many other parts of the world—and I can reassure her in relation to the G7 presidency priorities that, along with tackling covid and climate change, pressing for human rights, freedom of speech and accountability for human rights violations are high up on the agenda.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I think there will be considerable unanimity, frankly, and concern across the House about the situation in Tigray. It is also a test for the UK Government's integrated diplomacy and aid policies, in that the UK is not without arms in this discussion as a significant donor to the region. I am glad that the Foreign Secretary has been in the region, but is there scope for discussions, and what discussions has he had, with the European Union and the African Union, which are also trying to create a durable peace on this, and what part has the UK played in those efforts, because I think those would be the most productive?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Normally, in this kind of situation we would expect the African Union or other regional partners to be engaged in trying to find a diplomatic dialogue and a way forward. I spoke to President Kenyatta about this and I spoke to Prime Minister Hamdok in Sudan about this, and I have also spoken to the UN and the AU about this. It is absolutely clear, for the reasons he has described, that we need a widespread caucus of like-minded countries pushing for a political solution to this because, on top of humanitarian access and accountability for human rights abuses, we need to have political dialogue. One of the most important aspects of that will be to make sure that, as soon as possible, there are elections across Ethiopia, as Prime Minister Abiy is committed to, but also in the Tigray region.

Zimbabwe: Human Rights

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Zimbabwe. [914436]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge): I thank the hon. Lady for her question and her deep interest in human rights more broadly. We remain seriously concerned about human rights in Zimbabwe, including abductions, arrests and assaults on civil society. In fact, on 1 February, we used our new sanctions regime to hold to account four specific individuals responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses. We will continue to press for genuine political and economic reform, and for Zimbabwean laws to be upheld.

Ruth Jones [V]: In recent weeks, I have received emails from constituents about the worsening and very serious political, economic and human rights situation in Zimbabwe, as the Minister has already outlined. My part of south Wales has a vibrant and thriving Zimbabwean community, and although I accept that the Minister has made an assessment of the situation, I would like to know what concrete steps this Government are taking with allies in the region, directly through Harare and through the community groups here in the UK, because enough is enough. There are children dying from malnutrition now, and we cannot simply sit by silently any more.

James Duddridge: Like the hon. Lady, I have a Zimbabwean community in Southend, with which I engage, but we also engage with near partners, particularly South Africa and the African Union, that are very influential. Our ambassador maintains a dialogue across ZANU-PF, and following the death of Foreign Minister Moyo, with whom I had previously had very frank engagements, I am due to meet his replacement when he gets in role and starts making international engagements. I will continue to make these points; and actually this House making the points, as the hon. Lady is doing, is very helpful, because the eyes of the world are watching the Zimbabwean Government, as are the Zimbabwean people.

Climate Change: International Co-operation and the Global South

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent progress the Government have made through international co-operation on tackling climate change. [914437]

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made through international co-operation on tackling climate change. [914450]

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made through international co-operation on tackling climate change. [914452]

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent progress the Government have made through international co-operation on tackling climate change. [914456]

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking ahead of COP26 to work with partners in the global south to tackle climate change. [914460]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge): As COP hosts, we encourage all countries to make a step change in ambition. The success of COP26 is a top priority for the Government and the FCDO this year. It is prioritised by Ministers and it is prioritised across our diplomatic network.

Martin Docherty-Hughes [V]: We know that climate change threatens minority rights, especially in India, where minority and indigenous groups such as Sikhs, Muslims and Dalits have a close interaction with natural resources. Can the Minister therefore advise the House how the UK Government, in future trade talks in India, intend to seek to embed positive climate change outcomes not just for UK companies and UK citizens, but for those who are most marginalised in India due to climate change?

James Duddridge: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight marginal groups, specifically in India but also globally. We have pledged to work with young people, faith leaders, women and indigenous people to amplify the voices of the most marginalised and will do that not only through the narrow lens of climate change but also through our overall relationship with other countries, including trade policy.

Julian Sturdy [V]: A major hurdle in reducing world carbon emissions is our need to sustainably produce 70% more food by 2050 to feed almost 2 billion additional people. Can the Minister therefore reassure me that this vital issue of global food security will be kept at the forefront of Britain's global climate and development strategies going forward?

James Duddridge: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend. In fact, the global transition to sustainable agriculture, and specifically key land use, is a key focus of our COP26 nature campaign, and we are seeking to make further international progress towards climate resilience and sustainable agriculture through the transition to sustainable agriculture dialogues, which will begin next week, so the question is very timely.

Stuart Anderson [V]: I have launched a survey to better understand what matters to my constituents in Wolverhampton in protecting our precious environment. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with international partners to ensure that everybody is included in the global effort to tackle climate change?

James Duddridge: My hon. Friend is a dynamo on climate change in his constituency, and we in our own modest way hope to be dynamos at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We will encourage climate ambition in this critical year of COP; through our presidency we will make an inclusive COP, listening to all parties. It is important that we engage here in the UK, but also that we engage throughout the G7 across communities that are not directly affected now but will be in the future and that need to embed the

ideas of climate change and ambition for the future by driving forward Executives to do more. I thank my hon. Friend for his work, and we will work with him on the international stage.

Angela Crawley [V]: It has been revealed that UK officials have said that

“greater levels of climate action are urgently needed”

and that

“before COP26, partners must step up with more forward-looking commitments.”

I am sure such a statement would carry weight in the international community if it were not for the fact that the UK is simultaneously cutting its overseas spending, which would be helping developing economies to become greener and adapt to steps to address climate change. South Africa's Environment Minister has called the aid cut “a concern”. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on climate change of the UK's cuts to funds committed to the sustainable development goals, of which tackling climate change is a central priority?

James Duddridge: As the hon. Lady can imagine, this is a very important issue, and I have asked the question internally within the Department and can assure her that we are doubling our international climate finance to £11.6 billion over the next five years and have committed to aligning all official development assistance with the Paris agreement, so actually there is a really positive story to tell.

Clive Lewis [V]: A recent Cambridge Sustainability Commission on Scaling Behaviour Change report says the world's wealthiest 1% need to emit 30 times less carbon than they currently do by 2030 if we are to have a fair transition to net zero and, according to the science, save the lives and livelihoods of millions, perhaps billions, of the world's poorest from the worst effects of the climate emergency. Given the stakes and given the UK's historical and disproportionate carbon emissions, will the Minister commit to ensuring that not a single penny from the public purse will be used to fund or subsidise the fossil fuel industry, including through development aid?

James Duddridge: Certainly everybody, especially those emitting the most, needs to make those reductions. We are no longer investing in fossil fuels. Various organisations clearly have a historical book of fossil fuel investment that can be managed down over time, but we are very exercised to do the right thing as individuals and as Government, and, through COP26, to be leading and ambitious and ask others to be ambitious as well.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: To galvanise global support to avert the climate catastrophe, tackle poverty and improve global health in a year when the UK will host the G7 and COP26, we must bring countries together. Instead, this Government are the only one in the G7 to have taken the callous decision to cut their aid budget, which weakens our ability to bring countries together to tackle the global challenges we face. The Government's cuts to the aid budget will remove a lifeline from hundreds of thousands of people and damage our planet, leaving us all less safe. Rather than hiding behind written statements, will

the Foreign Secretary face up to his decision, make a statement to the House on his spending plans for 2021 and put his Government's cuts to a vote?

James Duddridge: The Foreign Secretary is attending the International Development Committee on Thursday, which will allow for a forensic examination of everything that he says, but we are here at the Dispatch Box answering questions. I myself am answering seven or eight questions. Far from running away, we are engaging in this debate, and we have a good story to tell. We are one of the best contributors in the G7 in relation to our GNI. We have the pledge of 0.7%, and we will get back to that when the economy allows. We should be proud, but we need to live within our means.

Israel and the Palestinians: Supporting Peace

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support peace between Israel and the Palestinians. [914438]

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support peace between Israel and the Palestinians. [914446]

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the creation of the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. [914459]

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support peace between Israel and the Palestinians. [R] [914462]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): The UK is actively encouraging the parties back to dialogue. We support the decision of the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel to resume co-operation. We are now pushing for deeper co-operation on health and economic issues, including the re-establishment of the joint economic committee, to rebuild trust and move towards a lasting solution. We support the objectives of the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace and will continue to engage with the Alliance for Middle East Peace and President Biden's Administration to identify further opportunities for collaboration. We are working with regional partners and the United States Administration to seize on the positive momentum of normalisation, alongside improving Israeli-Palestinian co-operation, to advance the prospects of a two-state solution.

Andrew Selous [V]: I am pleased to hear what my right hon. Friend says. Does he agree, though, that a just and lasting peace must be built on the rule of law, with severe consequences for systematic breaches whoever commits them, and that all Palestinians, including those in East Jerusalem, must have the right to vote on 22 May?

James Cleverly: We regularly call on Israel to abide by its obligations under international law, and we have regular conversations on this issue. We also encourage the Palestinian leadership to work towards democratic institutions based on the rule of law, and we welcome President Abbas's announcement of dates for elections in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and will work

closely with the Palestinian Authority to support that. We have called for elections in East Jerusalem; my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has done so, and I did so with the Israeli ambassador in a meeting that we had just yesterday.

Nicola Richards: Despite assurances that, after countless delays, the EU review of Palestinian textbooks would be published in March, there is still no sign of the report. UK taxpayers' money pays the salaries of Palestinian teachers who use material inciting violence against Israel and Jews, making peace harder to achieve. What more will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that UK aid does not prolong the conflict?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I remind the House that the UK does not fund the textbooks used in Palestinian schools. We understand that the EU review is in its final stages. We are not able to comment on the content of that report until it is released. We regularly engage with the EU at senior level to push for timely publication, and we regularly liaise with the Palestinian Authority to try to bring about the improvements that my hon. Friend has highlighted.

Rosie Cooper [V]: It is now five months since the US Congress passed a \$250 million Act to create the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace, the largest ever investment in peace building. In November, our Ministers promised to examine the feasibility of the UK taking up one of the international seats on the fund's board. Will the Minister tell us the results of that assessment and confirm that the UK will use the G7 summit to step up and help to lead this exciting new project with the United States?

James Cleverly: We always engage positively with any steps that push towards greater peace and reconciliation between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and we have engaged with this process. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, we are currently going through a programme of work assessing what we will do with our overseas development aid, but we will continue to engage with the Biden Administration, the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to pursue what has been the long-standing UK goal: a peaceful, prosperous, meaningful two-state solution.

Mrs Sheryll Murray [V]: I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I have been to Israel with the Conservative Friends of Israel.

With the G7 coming to Cornwall, we should underline our commitment to international institutions and multilateral co-operation. We welcomed the US middle east partnership for peace Act in December, but does the Minister agree that it is now time for the UK to take a board seat on the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, which I partially answered in my prior response to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). We have no current plans, but we always take a keen interest in any initiatives that encourage peace and co-operation between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority, and indeed, the Israeli people

and the Palestinian people. We will continue to work alongside Governments in the region and the US Administration in pursuit of that objective.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) [V]: The International Criminal Court has decided to conduct an investigation into alleged war crimes by Palestinian armed groups and Israeli forces in the occupied territories. The FCDO has stated that the UK respects the independence of the ICC. However, the Prime Minister said that the investigation is a “prejudicial attack”, so does the Minister believe that the court is independent or not?

James Cleverly: We absolutely respect the independence of the International Criminal Court. We do expect it to comply with its own mandate. The UK will remain a strong supporter of the ICC.

Official Development Assistance

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his G7 counterparts on global flows of official development assistance. [914439]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton): The Foreign Secretary and junior Ministers, including myself, speak regularly to counterparts in the G7 and other countries about official development assistance, including in supporting the response to and recovery from covid-19. The Foreign Secretary’s most recent bilateral conversations on international development with G7 partners were with French Foreign Minister Le Drian and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi. As G7 president and host this year, we are strongly supporting work towards a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery, and the Foreign Secretary will host G7 Foreign and Development Ministers in May, when we will discuss sustainable recovery as an integral part of our agenda.

Mr Mitchell: Are the Government not a little concerned that when they are chairing the G7 in a global pandemic, when international development has never been more important, the Germans have hit the 0.7%, the French have embraced the 0.7%, and the Americans have increased their international development spending by no less than \$15 billion, whereas we in Britain are breaking our promise to the poorest, breaking our manifesto commitment on which we were all elected just over a year ago, and cutting humanitarian aid, leading directly to hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths, particularly among women and children?

Wendy Morton: I do not accept what my right hon. Friend is saying. The UK remains a development superpower. Based on OECD data for 2020, the UK will be the third largest official development assistance donor in the G7 as a percentage of GNI in 2021. We will spend a greater percentage of our GNI than the US, Japan, Canada or Italy and, to be absolutely clear, we will still spend £10 billion on ODA in 2021. We have said that we will return to spending 0.7% on ODA as soon as the fiscal situation allows, but we have clear priorities and remain an active, confident, internationalist, burden-sharing and problem-solving nation.

Grand Challenges: International Collaboration

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to encourage international collaboration to tackle the UK Government’s grand challenges. [914440]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): We are at the heart of discussions about global challenges and megatrends, including through the UK’s G7 and COP26 presidencies. On clean growth, we will harness those presidencies to advance our climate agenda in the run-up to COP26. On artificial intelligence, in September, the UK signed a declaration with the US to drive technological breakthroughs in AI. This puts the UK at the forefront of the AI and data revolution. On science, the UK has strong science collaboration arrangements with more than 50 countries, from the research powerhouses of the US and Europe to emerging economies.

George Freeman [V]: Through my work with the Prime Minister’s taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform, we are looking at how we can make Brexit a real opportunity for the UK as a global science and innovation superpower to better integrate our aid and trade and to boost R&D investment, inward investment, exports and sustainable global development. Does the Minister agree that, to help developing nations to confront the biggest global grand challenges of sustainable agriculture and development, as set out in the Foresight report, including the challenge of nearly doubling world food production on the same land area with half as much water and energy, we could use variable tariffs to incentivise high-quality production, and UK aid to support tech transfer of UK agritech and clean tech for sustainable growth?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he does in this area. Nowadays—and when he was an excellent Minister—we provide preferential tariffs for 70 developing countries through the generalised scheme of preferences. This includes a framework covering implementation and international environment conventions. We are supporting international research partnerships and the roll-out of agritech across the poorest and most climate-vulnerable countries. This is delivering crop varieties that are more productive, nutritious and resistant to drought and pests. Our clean tech investments are enabling UK battery pioneers to develop new technologies and business models to deliver clean energy in Africa.

Poverty and Inequality and UK Aid

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that tackling poverty and inequality remains a focus of his Department. [914441]

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the UK aid budget on poverty in developing countries. [914443]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton): The UK remains a global leader in international development and is committed to supporting the world’s poorest people. Based on current GNI forecasts, we will spend over £10 billion of ODA in 2021. The Foreign

Secretary has set out seven priorities for the UK's aid budget this year, all of which are in the overarching pursuit of poverty reduction. This new strategic approach will allow us to achieve greater impact from our aid budget, notwithstanding the difficult financial position that we face, and UK ODA continues to serve the primary aim of reducing poverty in developing countries.

Julie Marson [V]: I thank the Minister for her response. I am pleased that I am due to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), shortly to discuss development bonds and a specific opportunity that has arisen. What steps is the FCDO taking to embed innovative finance solutions within the Department's work to ensure that the UK's development approach is the most effective at combating poverty globally?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I know that this is something she takes an interest in. Aid alone cannot deliver the sustainable development goals. The \$2.5 trillion annual financing gap for the SDGs means that we need creative solutions that engage the private sector to end global poverty, and the FCDO is testing innovative financing tools that will pull private finance towards sustainable development. We are currently running a pilot on development impact bonds that will draw in impact investment to achieve the SDG outcomes, such as helping 13,000 households living in extreme poverty in rural Kenya and Uganda to set up income-generating businesses.

Kate Osamor [V]: This Government's decision to cut the aid budget at a time of a global pandemic and economic crisis risks pushing millions of vulnerable people in developing countries into extreme poverty. Co-operative development in sectors such as farming is vital in reducing poverty, generating wealth and power fairly among producers. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the co-operative sectors will not be damaged by these cuts?

Wendy Morton: It is important to remind ourselves and recognise that we will still be spending £10 billion of ODA in 2021 and that the UK economy is 11.3% smaller than last year and undergoing the worst contraction for 300 years. That said, the Foreign Secretary set out clearly in his written ministerial statement on 26 January the conclusion of the cross-Government review on ODA. Driven by the integrated review, our process is really focusing on seven key priorities: climate and biodiversity; covid and global health security; girls' education; science and research; open societies and conflict; humanitarian assistance; and trade.

UK Aid: Effect of Reductions

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the UK aid budget on the UK's humanitarian work overseas. [914442]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): Since 2015, the UK has provided £11 billion in humanitarian funding. As the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), has just stated, despite

this unprecedented economic contraction, we are still proud of our contribution. We remain, in both absolute terms and percentage terms, one of the most generous ODA-donating countries in the world.

Steven Bonnar: I thank the Minister for that answer. While every other G7 member state has responded to the pandemic by increasing aid, the UK Government are out there alone in choosing to cut it by approximately £4 billion this year, after a cut of £2.9 billion last year. The pandemic should have been a rallying cry to this Government, encouraging more robust and urgent investment and prioritisation action to meet sustainable development goals. Instead, this Government chose a path of staggering and shocking betrayal, turning their back on the world's poorest. Have any impact assessments been carried out on how these cuts will affect those in conflict zones? If not, how long will we have to wait for this Government to show a shred of compassion?

James Cleverly: I remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that the UK remains one of the largest donating countries in the G7 and indeed the world. Our commitment to that is undiminished, which is why I am very pleased that we have been able to strengthen our commitments to our headquarters in East Kilbride, in Abercrombie House. We are proud that, despite the fact that we have this economic contraction, we are still donating £10 billion in ODA.

Myanmar: Sanctions

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of using sanctions as part of the diplomatic response to the military coup in Myanmar. [914443]

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What representations he has made to his counterpart in Myanmar on the reports of killings and excessive use of force by security forces against people protesting the recent military coup in that country. [914461]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): The violent crackdown and killing of peaceful protesters in Myanmar are completely unacceptable and require a strong message from the international community. The UK secured G7 statements on 3 February and 23 February, as well as a United Nations Security Council presidential statement on 10 March. In response to the military's appalling human rights violations, the UK has imposed sanctions on two key military-linked entities that fund the military's actions and on nine senior military figures, including the commander-in-chief.

Carla Lockhart [V]: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can I impress upon him the plight of the people in Myanmar and the need to do all in the power of the Government to assist them? Do the Government intend to review the process of administering sanctions, which is often slow and difficult? Will he inform the House as to what talks are being held with other Governments, particularly those in Asia, to ensure a united approach is being taken to sanctions on the Myanmar regime?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Member for her question. When we impose sanctions, we have to make sure that they are done on a properly solid legal basis. The

Foreign Secretary recently travelled to Brunei and Indonesia and attended the second United Kingdom-Association of Southeast Asian Nations meeting of Foreign Ministers. We made clear our views on the coup in Myanmar and the senseless violence against civilians. We welcome ASEAN's unique role in addressing the crisis and support its call for an end to the violence and for restraint and a peaceful resolution.

Afzal Khan [V]: The people of Myanmar desperately need help. Medical staff such as my constituent Dr Thomas Lamb have been actively persecuted—including through arbitrary detention, torture and death—simply for attempting to treat peaceful protesters. Following the coup d'état in February, my constituent saw at first hand the atrocities committed by the junta, such as the use of gunfire and the forcible removal of innocent civilians from their homes. During his meetings with the military junta's Foreign Minister, has the Minister raised the killings of more than 700 innocent Burmese civilians? Will he now follow the lead of Canada and the Netherlands and formally join the Gambia's genocide case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice?

Nigel Adams: We have been clear that we are completely steadfast in our opposition to the coup. What is happening to innocent civilians in Myanmar is obscene. We have demonstrated our strong international leadership, including at the UN Security Council and the G7. We are clear that there should be accountability for the military's acts, both historic and recent, and that all options, including referral to the International Criminal Court, should be on the table.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) [V]: The Labour party stands with the pro-democracy protesters in Myanmar, who have shown extraordinary courage in resisting the barbaric brutality of the military junta. The UK Government's response has lacked both strength and urgency. The Minister mentioned the ASEAN conference, but the tweet put out by the Foreign Secretary shortly after that conference made no mention whatsoever of what has been happening in Myanmar; will the Minister say a little more about why? Also, 42 nations have an arms embargo against Myanmar; will the Government commit today to writing to every other UN nation asking them to join that arms embargo? Will the Foreign Secretary publicly call for the orchestrators of the atrocities that we are witnessing in Myanmar—

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot carry on: it should be one question.

Nigel Adams: We are clear that countries should not sell arms to the Myanmar military. We played a key role in securing and strengthening an EU arms embargo following the 2017 Rohingya crisis. The Foreign Secretary welcomed ASEAN's unique role in addressing the crisis, in line with the purpose and principles enshrined in the ASEAN charter.

Ukraine Border: Russian Forces

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of increases in numbers of Russian forces at the border with Ukraine on peace and security in that region. [914447]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): We have significant concerns about the recent Russian military build-up of forces on Ukraine's border. We are working with our allies—I was at a NATO meeting of Foreign and Defence Ministers last week—and our objective is to deter Russia, reassure Ukraine and de-escalate the situation.

Chris Bryant: I am glad to hear that, but, in 1994, the UK, Russia and the United States of America signed the Budapest memorandum, which issued not exactly guarantees but assurances that we would respect the independence, sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine, in return for which Kiev surrendered 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads, which was vital to secure peace in the region. Is it not now all the more incumbent on us to make it very clear that we will continue to provide political, diplomatic, scientific, financial and, if necessary, military support to Kiev?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who has long-standing experience of this issue; I agree with his level of concern. There are three things that we are doing right now that matter. The first is holding Russia to its international commitments, including not just the ones that he mentioned, but the OSCE principles of accountability for the build-up of troops. Russia has not responded to the calls for an explanation within the OSCE. We will continue our robust approach to sanctions. He is right that we will continue to provide diplomatic support, but we will also continue to provide military support: since 2015, through Operation Orbital, we have trained more than 20,000 Ukrainian armed forces personnel.

Mr Speaker: We go now to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the words of the Foreign Secretary, but has he done an assessment in his Department about how Russia is reading the troop reductions in the British Army and the withdrawal from Afghanistan? Both will be seen from Moscow as a sign that, perhaps, NATO is not quite as serious as we are making out. What is he able to do diplomatically about that? While we do still carry a big stick, some elements seem to be looking a little weaker. Perhaps he can reinforce them by encouraging his partner in Cabinet to put more resources into the Army.

Dominic Raab: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, but I am afraid that he is wrong. It is vital that, as well as increasing the defence and security budget in the ground-breaking way that the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary have done, we make sure that it is agile and fit to face the challenges of the future, including from not just conventional armed forces, but cyber and the other hostile state activity. I was in Brussels on 14 April and spoke to the US Defence Secretary and the Secretary of State along with other Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers from NATO. We are absolutely clear in condemning the build-up of troops. We are assuring Ukraine, as I have said, and we are working overall to de-escalate the situation.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Russia has amassed 100,000 troops on the border with Ukraine, Alexei Navalny lies deteriorating in a prison hospital, and a NATO ally has come under attack from the same hands as those who used chemical weapons on the streets of the UK. Yet in the 18 months since the Foreign Secretary was handed the Russia report, the UK has remained a safe haven for the dark money that helps to sustain the Putin regime, the Conservative party has taken £1 million in donations from Russian-linked sources, and oligarchs are welcomed with open arms. Seriously—I have asked him this before—what accounts for the delay in implementing the Russia report? Is it repercussions from Russia that he is worried about, or is it repercussions from his own party?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady, but I have to say that that is a pretty weak attempt to weave in partisan political considerations in what is a very serious international issue. On the Intelligence and Security Committee report: we have already taken multiple actions against the Russian threat, exposing the reckless cyber activity—we have done that and she is aware of that; we have introduced a new power to stop individuals at UK ports to see whether they represent a threat as part of the hostile state activity; we are introducing new legislation to provide the security services and law enforcement agencies with additional tools to tackle the evolving threat from hostile states; and, as she knows, I will shortly be introducing an extension of the Magnitsky sanctions in relation to corruption.

Just in relation to Salisbury, it was not that long ago that the hon. Lady was campaigning for the leader of her party at the time to be Prime Minister—someone who backed the Russians against this Prime Minister who, as Foreign Secretary, galvanised the international response to the appalling attacks on the streets of Salisbury.

Lisa Nandy: The difference between the right hon. Gentleman and me is that I stood up to my former party leadership when they got it wrong on this issue. It is pathetic that he cannot do the same given the gravity of the situation that this country currently faces. He has had 18 months since the publication of a report that his own Prime Minister tried to block. We have had no action on golden visas, no powers to sanction corrupt officials. Up to half of all the money that is laundered out of Russia comes through the United Kingdom and, in three years since the Salisbury attacks, it is still not illegal to be a foreign agent in this country. Meanwhile we have seen the oligarchs and kleptocrats who have profited from the Putin regime funnelling money to the Conservative party. *[Interruption.]* He shakes his head, but it is £5 million since David Cameron became leader. His own Minister, the Minister for Asia, has had multiple donations from a former Russian arms dealer who described himself as “untouchable” because of his links with the Kremlin. If the Foreign Secretary wants to clear this up, he can clear it up once and for all: implement those recommendations from the Russia report; defend the security, the democracy and the integrity of this country; stop the gross negligence; and give us a date by which all 23 recommendations will be implemented in full.

Mr Speaker: Can I just tidy this up? If we are going to make allegations, they have to be made on a substantive motion; that must be done in the correct manner. Things are getting heated. Let us just calm it down.

Dominic Raab: In relation to the registration of agents, all the hon. Lady has done is pick up on the action that the Home Secretary has already announced and proposed, and called for it; it is a classic action from the shadow Foreign Secretary. *[Interruption.]* She is talking over me because she does not like the response. The reality is that she did campaign for the former leader of the Labour party to be Prime Minister—a man who, in fact, backed Russia at the time when this Prime Minister, as Foreign Secretary, galvanised the international community in an unprecedented diplomatic reaction to President Putin. We will continue to stand up for the British national interest; the shadow Foreign Secretary will make her political points.

Mr Speaker: Let us see if we can turn the temperature down, with Dave Doogan.

Topical Questions

[914494] **Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): May I first pay tribute to His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, whose life's work was to serve our country, often on the world stage?

Since the last oral questions, I have attended the UK-Gibraltar joint ministerial council and reaffirmed our commitment to delivering a treaty with the EU that safeguards UK sovereignty and the prosperity of Gibraltar and the surrounding region. I have also visited Indonesia and Brunei to forge closer ties and to join the second UK Association of Southeast Asian Nations ministerial dialogue as the UK pursues ASEAN dialogue partner status.

Dave Doogan: My constituent David Cornock tragically lost his son in Thailand in 2019. Mr Cornock is adamant that his son did not commit suicide, but was murdered—and, after supporting him for 18 months in this case, I am inclined to agree with his assessment. The FCDO insists that in order to get Mr Cornock's son's case reopened and properly investigated, the only avenue for my constituent is personally to petition the Thai Attorney General, with no diplomatic support. The Department provided a list of 10 Thai lawyers to expedite this; six declined, two did not respond, one did not speak English and the other wanted £25,000 upfront.

Moreover, thanks to the Minister for Asia, the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), I have since established that there is not a single instance where a UK citizen has successfully petitioned the Thai Attorney General in the way determined by the FCDO. Will the Secretary of State agree to take up this case with the Thai ambassador here in London, and, having due regard for diplomatic norms and the sovereignty of internal justice, review this wholly unrealistic protocol by the FCDO? Will he also meet me and my constituent to discuss the matter?

Dominic Raab: First of all, we at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office try to give the best advice that we can as to how such cases—I have dealt with a number of these difficult cases over the years—can be raised most effectively. If it is viewed that

there is political interference, it is often counterproductive. Of course, we will take another look at the case to see whether there is anything more that we can do. We give advice in good faith as to the best and most effective means to try to secure the outcome that the hon. Gentleman wants for his constituents.

[914495] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The 2001 UN conference against racism in Durban degenerated into hatred, antisemitism and criticism of Israel that was excessive, disproportionate and unfair, so will the UK Government boycott Durban IV, which marks the 20th anniversary of that disgraceful 2001 conference?

Dominic Raab: We will obviously attend the UN General Assembly in September. In relation to the Durban declaration and its anniversary, let me reassure my right hon. Friend that—as we demonstrated at the Human Rights Council recently on the approach that we took to items 7 and 2—we will not support any partisan or political attacks on Israel. I reassure her that the Government are absolutely crystal clear in our condemnation of and opposition to any and all forms of antisemitism.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As we have heard this morning, this year the UK hosts the global COP summit and the G7, which give us a wonderful opportunity to lay out our leadership and ambition on a world stage. If the Government are really serious about tackling the climate emergency, where is the leadership on the deforestation question in Brazil, where, under the leadership of Jair Bolsonaro, we have seen a rise up to the highest levels of deforestation and impact on indigenous communities in more than a decade? Has the Foreign Secretary raised this directly with Jair Bolsonaro? If not, in broad terms what is he doing at an institutional level to try to address that desperate issue?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Deforestation is a key plank of our agenda for COP26, and I have raised it in Indonesia, where it is obviously a big issue, and in parts of Asia. I also raised it recently in a virtual meeting I had with Foreign Minister Araújo of Brazil, although he is no longer in place. The key will be galvanising international support to make sure that the measures those countries take are not economically damaging to them, while at the same time being environmentally sustainable for the world. We have a key plank of work that is focused on that area, and I can reassure the hon. Lady that it is a major component of our approach to COP26.

[914498] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils, I thank the FCDO for its work in securing the new resolution on accountability in Sri Lanka at the recent UN Human Rights Council sessions. However, from speaking to Tamils in Carshalton and Wallington and across the UK, there is obviously still more to do, so could the Minister outline what steps the UK is taking to implement the UN high commissioner's recommendations on applying sanctions and travel embargos and filing cases against alleged war crimes under universal jurisdiction?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. The Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth,

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, set out the UK's serious concerns about human rights in Sri Lanka in a statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 25 February, and the UK has welcomed the adoption in March of a new UN Human Rights Council resolution on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka. That UK-led resolution enhances the UN's role in monitoring the situation and collecting evidence of human rights violations that can be used in future accountability processes. Just quickly on the point about sanctions, though, it is important to recognise that it would not be appropriate to speculate on any further designation.

[914499] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I agreed with the Prime Minister when he said that his greatest mistake when he was Foreign Secretary was in relation to Russia—that he had misplayed the relationship with Russia—and I want to return to that point. We now know for certain that the two men who were involved in the Skripal poisoning, or attempted poisoning and inadvertent successful poisoning, were GRU officers, almost certainly acting on the direct command of the Kremlin, and that those two officers were also involved in a murder and an explosion in the Czech Republic. It seems extraordinary to me that this has taken so many years to come out. Why has there been such a delay in this information coming to the public, and what are we going to do to make sure that murderers on Putin's payroll are not strolling the streets of every capital in Europe?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Czech explosion that led to the attribution was many years ago. The decision to attribute was the product of a long investigation by the Czech authorities, and he will have seen that we stood absolutely full square in solidarity with our Czech friends.

In the ways that I explained earlier to the shadow Foreign Minister, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), we have increased and continue to increase our measures for screening and for accountability, and of course, through the Magnitsky sanctions—which the hon. Gentleman himself has championed—we have a new means of targeting human rights abuses. To the extent that they also impinge on dirty money, which in fairness the hon. Member for Wigan spoke about, I have already made clear that we will shortly be introducing an extension to the Magnitsky sanctions to cover that.

[914503] **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Eight years ago, my constituent Tyrell Matthews-Burton—a young man with a bright future ahead of him—was brutally murdered in Greece. His family have fought tirelessly to bring those responsible to justice, yet despite convictions, the Metropolitan Police tell us that the Greek authorities are the stumbling block. Will the Foreign Secretary meet me and Tyrell's family, so that we can prove that it does not matter what colour a person's skin, this country will always fight for justice for its citizens?

Dominic Raab: Absolutely. We take the consular work that we do for citizens abroad exceptionally seriously. We deal with those cases day in, day out, often below the media or public radar. I am very happy for Ministers in the Department to look again at the case she has raised to see whether there is anything further we can do. That is very difficult and always very complex, even

in European countries, but we must be able to satisfy ourselves that we are doing everything we can to provide closure and accountability for the families affected.

[914504] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con) [V]: What steps is my right hon. Friend taking with his international counterparts to prepare for the G7 leaders' summit this summer in Cornwall?

Dominic Raab: I know my hon. Friend has a strong vested interest in that conference, beyond her international interest. Ahead of the leaders summit—I let her and the House know—I will be convening the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers meeting from 3 to 5 May here in London. That will be a very important opportunity to build on and tee up our work on equitable access to vaccines in relation to the pandemic, our ambitious global girls education targets, the rigorous and ambitious approach we are taking to climate finance, and commitment to media freedoms, human rights and democracy.

[914510] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): On the G7, what are the Government doing to address the global debt crisis engulfing the world's poorest countries? Might I suggest that one way to show leadership on that would be for this House to pass legislation to compel private creditors to participate in debt relief and to stop them suing for debt recovery under UK law?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his engagement in this issue. We are already doing an awful lot on debt suspension, most importantly on the common framework and on those remaining countries such as Somalia and Sudan, which were left out of the HIPC—heavily indebted poor countries—process, but there are other parties and complexities, China's sovereign debt being one of them and multilaterals another, as well as sovereign nations' private sector debt, which we would encourage to participate where appropriate.

[914505] **Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The covid-19 pandemic has shone a depressing light on the digital poverty that exists in developing countries. Without access to the internet, millions of children across the world have lost thousands of hours of education. Sadly, the problem is even more acute for girls. What action is being taken to ensure that the UK uses its presidency of the G7 and the Global Partnership for Education to enable the most marginalised children, in particular girls, to return to school and catch up with their lost learning?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this important issue. She takes a very keen interest in girls education and 2021 is a crucial year for it, with multiple opportunities for us to take co-ordinated action with our international partners to address the learning losses from covid-19. That is why the UK has put girls

education at the heart of our G7 presidency. We are working with G7 members to champion two SDG 4 milestone targets: 40 million more girls in school and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10 in low and lower-middle income countries over the next five years. The UK with Kenya will also host the global education summit in July to mobilise much needed financing.

[914513] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) [V]: I would like to declare an interest: a visit to Colombia with Justice for Colombia. In February, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported on the alleged involvement of Colombian security forces in the deaths of at least 13 protestors last year. There have also been worrying reports of an increased number of protestors losing their sight after being hit with projectiles fired by police, including 19-year-old Yuri Camargo and 22-year-old Miguel Angel Linares, both in 2019. Will the Secretary of State raise the importance of full legal and disciplinary investigations of those cases with his Colombian counterparts?

Wendy Morton: First, we really welcome the Colombian Government's continuing commitment to the full implementation of the 2016 peace agreement with FARC. We will continue to support them in doing so. Colombia is an FCDO human rights priority country. We regularly raise concerns with the Colombian Government and at the UN. We will continue to do so. Our embassy will continue to support at-risk human rights defenders, social leaders and ex-combatants, and will work to tackle the root causes of the violence.

[914507] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is brilliant to see the UK and Israel working so closely together in the roll-out of our world-leading vaccination programmes. Israel has vaccinated almost half its population with both doses of the covid vaccine, so will the Minister provide an update on the status of discussions with Israel on establishing a travel corridor arrangement?

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that very topical question. We welcome the success of the Israeli vaccination programme, and the co-operation between the UK and Israel on covid continues throughout the pandemic. On 17 May, the Prime Minister will announce further travel measures and which countries will fit into which traffic-light categorisations. We are looking to see how we can share health data, and we are all looking forward to hearing from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster following his visit, to get some real-life examples on what we can do here in the UK.

Mr Speaker: I am now suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business.

12.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Afghanistan

12.39 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Afghanistan.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): Following the shocking attacks of September 11 2001, NATO allies invoked article 5 of the Washington treaty. An attack on one was an attack on us all. In Afghanistan over the two decades since, NATO has shown extraordinary resolve in a country where the soldiering is tough and operational success is very hard won. Some 150,610 UK service personnel have served in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. Hundreds of our troops have suffered life-changing injuries, and 457 of our young men and women have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country. I pay tribute to their service and their sacrifice. They will not be forgotten.

I served in Afghanistan on two tours—the first, to Kabul in 2005; and the second, to Sangin, in 2009. My battalion lost 13 men on that second tour, with many more killed in our wider battlegroup. I have friends who will walk on prosthetic limbs for the rest of their lives, and I know people who suffered severe mental pain that tragically caused them to subsequently take their own lives. Like every other Afghanistan veteran, when I heard NATO's decision last week, I could not help but ask myself whether it was all worth it.

We went into Afghanistan to disrupt a global terrorist threat and to deny al-Qaeda the opportunity to use that nation as a base for mounting further international attacks. In that mission, we were successful. By fighting the insurgency in its heartlands in the south and east of the country, NATO created space for the machinery of the Afghan government to be established and strengthened. Afghan civil society flourished. Schools reopened and girls enjoyed education just as boys did. There is a vibrant and free media. Women are not only valued and respected but are working in Afghan academia, healthcare and politics. Over 20 years we have developed and then partnered the brave men and women of the Afghan national security forces. They are now a proud army with the capacity to keep the peace in Afghanistan if empowered to do so by future Governments in Kabul.

Those of us who have served very rarely get to reflect on an absolute victory; only in the most binary of state-on-state wars can the military instrument alone be decisive. But two generations of Afghan children have now grown up with access to education. The Afghan people have tasted freedom and democracy, and they have an expectation of what life in their country should be like in the future. The Taliban, apparently, have no appetite to be an international pariah like they were in the late '90s. Our endeavours over the past two decades have created those conditions and have given Afghanistan every chance of maintaining peace within its own borders. We will continue to support the Afghan Government in delivering that, but our military could not stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, and so we will leave, in line with NATO allies, by September. Nothing in the future of Afghanistan is guaranteed, but the bravery, determination and sacrifice of so many British soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen has given Afghanistan every possible chance of success.

Mr Ellwood: Sending our troops into conflict is the biggest decision that any Prime Minister has to make. The strategic objective must be clear, yet we now withdraw from Afghanistan, after enormous cost and human sacrifice, with the country heading towards another civil war and the Taliban on the ascent. I have visited the country many times. This cannot be the exit strategy that we ever envisaged.

Our nation and our military deserve answers. I request a Chilcot-style inquiry so that we can learn the lessons of what went wrong. How did we squander the relative peace of the first four years? Why were the Taliban excluded from the peace talks in 2001—a fundamental error that could have brought stability early on? Why did we adopt an over-centralised western model of governance? Why were we too slow in building up Afghan security forces, up to a paltry 26,000 five years after the invasion? Why was Pakistan allowed to harbour and train the Taliban for so long? More widely, did the ease of the initial Afghan invasion lead to an over-confidence by the US for it to then invade Iraq, meaning that we had to fight on two fronts? Should we take responsibility for the Taliban's emergence in the first place after the US abandoned Afghanistan once the Soviets had left? Where was the British thought leadership—our situational awareness that might have influenced US strategic thinking? As we have learned in Northern Ireland, you cannot defeat the enemy by military means alone.

If we depart completely, a dangerous part of the world becomes more dangerous as the Taliban assumes control of the bulk of the country and once again gives sanctuary to extremist groups. Our brave military served with honour, but they were let down by poor strategic judgments that if politicians today do not understand and learn from, will impede our confidence to step forward and stand up to extremism and authoritarianism in the future. There are so many questions and it is the Government's duty to respond.

James Heappey: I thank my right hon. Friend for calling for this urgent question. I do not entirely share his analysis of what would have happened next. The relatively benign, by Afghan standards, security situation in the country at the moment is not the norm; it is the consequence of the accommodation that the US and the Taliban had come to last year. That means, in effect, that there are three options for the international community. One is to prepare for a fighting season this summer once the 1 May deadline expires. The second is to come to a new accommodation with the Taliban that effectively removes all of the political imperative to reaching a solution. The third is to agree that, effectively, the military mission is done and that what remains now is a political one, and the way to accelerate that is to force the hand and agree to leave as we have done.

My right hon. Friend asks some great questions about the route to being in Afghanistan and the prosecution of the campaign thereafter. I think that those of us who have served, as he has done, take some solace from the way that these things are considered deliberately after the event. It is not for me to agree to such an inquiry right now, but one would hope that the lessons would be learned. I do not necessarily accept all of his analysis of how the campaign has played out, but obviously we have reached the point where the military mission has effectively culminated and what remains is a requirement

[James Heapey]

for politics. To keep our people there indefinitely with 1 May approaching does not seem to me to be the right use of the military instrument.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The House will appreciate the Minister wanting to respond to this question himself. He saw two tours in Afghanistan and I know that more than 50 from his regiment were among the 454 British personnel who lost their lives there. We honour their service and their sacrifice.

There certainly have been some gains in governance, economic development, rights for women, education for girls and in ending Afghanistan as a base for terrorism abroad, but Afghanistan is more failure than success for the British military. Now, with the full withdrawal of NATO troops, it is hard to see a future without bloodier conflict, wider Taliban control, and greater jeopardy for those Afghans who worked with the west and for the women now in political, judicial, academic and business roles. The Chief of the Defence Staff has said that this was

“not a decision we hoped for”.

Did the UK Government argue against full withdrawal? What steps will NATO allies take now to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for terrorism directed towards our western democracies again? There is US talk of over-the-horizon operations and of building anti-terrorist infrastructure on the periphery of Afghanistan. Will Britain play any part in this, and where?

The Minister said that Britain's remaining 750 troops will be out by September. When will their withdrawal begin? How many UK contractors helping Afghan forces to maintain equipment are in Afghanistan? Will they withdraw at the same time as UK troops? How many Afghans who helped British troops are still in Afghanistan, in danger and in need of the special scheme to settle in the UK? Ending military deployment should mean expanding diplomatic and development support, yet Britain cut direct aid to Afghanistan last year by a quarter. This year, will the Government reverse that cut?

Finally, where does this withdrawal leave the Government's strategy of forward deployment in a region that sits between the three main state threats identified in the integrated review? Does this cause the Secretary of State to reconsider his decision to cut Army numbers by another 10,000?

James Heapey: First, I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his reflections on the service and sacrifice of the UK armed forces. I am not sure that I accept his characterisation of the situation as defeat. Many members of the armed forces will reflect, as I do, on their tactical and operational successes in their individual tours and in the districts for which they were responsible. If they arrive in a district and the school is shut, but when they leave, it is open; or if they arrive in a district and the market has six stalls, but when they leave, it has 20—those are the sorts of successes that show them with their own eyes that their service has been worth it and they have done good.

The shadow Secretary of State picks up on what the Chief of the Defence Staff said in his interview on the “Today” programme last week, and I do not think that anybody in the UK Government would shy away from

his very honest assessment of what happened. I think we should be clear that the disagreement, to the extent that there was one, was over a matter of months, rather than over staying there for four years more.

As I said, there is a logic to this, because we were at a decision point no matter what. On 1 May, the accommodation would run out and we would be preparing for a fighting season; or we would need a new political accommodation with the Taliban, and that would remove the political imperative altogether; or we would take the decision, as the President did, and with which NATO subsequently agreed unanimously, to leave and, in doing so, to force the pace of the political process. I think that is the right thing. The opportunity to prosecute counter-terrorism missions from the wider region into Afghanistan is something that we are working up with our NATO allies and the Americans at the moment. I am sure that the UK will have a role in that.

The exact withdrawal timeline is not one that I intend to share publicly—I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will understand the operational security reasons why that is the case—but a withdrawal from Afghanistan this year is not unexpected. It was completely within our planning last year and over the winter. We can achieve the timeline that is required without any cost to our other planned military activities this summer. I can reassure him that my right hon. Friends the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary are working with all appropriate haste to make sure that those who have served alongside us in Afghanistan are looked after in the future.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I was in Afghanistan with the Afghan resistance, and I know that when the foreigners leave, the theological justification for jihad finishes. The problem we have is that Afghanistan still faces attack from the Taliban, fully supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, with the simple aim of conquering the country. Given the success since 2015 when the coalition moved into an advisory CT mode, what is the coalition's plan now to prevent even larger swathes of the country from falling to the Taliban—indeed, to prevent Kabul itself from falling? If it does, I would call that strategic failure.

James Heapey: I share my hon. Friend's assessment of the requirement for regional partners not only to step up and take a stake in Afghanistan's peace, but to behave responsibly in the way they go about their diplomatic affairs in the region. His characterisation of what remains of the coalition is, if he does not mind my saying so, somewhat out of date. We have been down to a residual counter-terrorism mission for some time. For five years or more, the coalition has not extended its writ across the whole country. Actually, the Afghan national security forces have done a good job of maintaining security within the borders of Afghanistan since the NATO mission stepped back towards the current CT mission. I am full of optimism for what the Afghan national security forces could achieve. It depends, of course, on their being empowered to do so by a future Government in Kabul.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP) [V]: Like the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State, I pay tribute on behalf of the Scottish National party to all those who served, and of course, we remember all those who sadly lost their lives in Afghanistan.

All of us want the Government to get this right. I accept that there are no easy, clearcut, black and white ways forward, but I share some of the concern at the somewhat over-optimistic assessment that the Minister comes to the House with today. There is no absolute victory, of course—there is victory of sorts—but the peace is unstable. Governance is better, but it is still unstable, and the Taliban are not the outfit they once were, but they still pose a threat. The Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), made some excellent points on how lessons are learned about what went wrong, because some things did. I return to the question he asked, which the Minister was not quite clear on: what is the Government's view of a Chilcot-style inquiry? If we are all committed to getting this right, that is the kind of thing that surely needs to happen.

This might be the end of one of America's forever wars, as it is sometimes known, but for Afghanistan, it remains immensely uncertain. What does the post-September relationship look like with the Afghan Government? I say this to the Minister on foreign aid. We can either have peace and stability in countries such as Afghanistan, or we can have foreign aid cuts; we cannot have both. If the Government are committed to a stable future for Afghanistan—which, in fairness, I believe they are—they need to reverse not just the cut that the shadow Secretary of State mentioned but the cut in its entirety across the foreign aid field.

Mr Speaker: May I remind the SNP spokesperson that he has one minute, not the more than two minutes that he has taken?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to ask what the mechanism is for solidifying the peace within Afghanistan, but I am not sure that I see what the international military presence would do to solidify that peace any further. What needs to happen now, as we have seen in Northern Ireland and many other conflicts in which we have been involved in the past, is this deeply imperfect and—for those of us who have served—uneasy reality that all parties, irrespective of the role they played in the conflict, need to come together and make the politics work. I think that the conditions are right for that to happen now.

I do not mean to sound over-optimistic. My eyes are wide open. I said in my answer that the future for Afghanistan is uncertain—of course it is. But there is a set of Afghan national security forces in place now that are capable of maintaining the peace, and I genuinely believe that there is a political will to achieve that and an expectation within the Afghan public that their politicians will achieve that.

How the lessons are learned from this campaign, as they were with Iraq, is for my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary to decide in due course. Of course, in everything we do in the Ministry of Defence, we look at what we have done, and where it worked, we reinforce, and where it did not work, we change. Within the integrated review, there is already a recognition that the way we have done our business in the last two decades may not be the way that we do it in the next.

On the hon. Gentleman's final point about the relationship with the Afghan Government and the need to financially support them, as the Secretary-General of

NATO said, this is not the end of our involvement in Afghanistan; it is just the start of a new chapter. That new chapter is one that remains every bit as committed to supporting the Afghan national Government, and this year alone the UK will spend up to £70 million on supporting the Afghan security forces. Such support—both diplomatic and financial—is key to ensuring the future that we envisage for Afghanistan in the absence of a military contribution.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Alongside its regular colleagues, the Territorial Army has served with distinction in Afghanistan, not least 21 Special Air Service Artists Rifles, which, as a formed unit, demonstrated its extreme gallantry by winning three Military Crosses in the fighting in Nad-e Ali in Helmand in 2008 as well as a Conspicuous Gallantry Cross at a later date. On the back of that highly distinguished record, will my hon. and gallant Friend retain the option to deploy the Army Reserve on live operations abroad, both as attachments to regular forces and in their own formed units?

James Heappey: Within the 150,000-plus service personnel who have served in Afghanistan, there will be many thousands of reservists who have mobilised and answered their nation's call, and they have done so with great distinction, as my hon. Friend describes. He will be pleased to hear, I am sure, that the design of our armed forces for the next decades recognises absolutely the importance of the role that reservists play both as individuals, with the expertise that they bring to the force, and as formed units. There is every intention of building on their success in Iraq and Afghanistan as we look at how we use the reserves in the future.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Let us be quite honest about this: we are where we are today because the United States is going to do what it is going to do. Some of us will remember the scenes of Saigon in 1975, with people who had helped the US forces scrambling desperately to get on board the helicopters. Those who were left faced imprisonment and in some cases execution. So my question is very clear: the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State have touched on the fate of those Afghans who have helped us—the translators and the like—but will we give them asylum and will we give them residency in the UK to thank them for what they have done? Let me go further: will we extend the same offer, because there is interchange, to those who helped the US forces if the United States refuses to do so?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman asks me a very straightforward question, and I hope I can give him a very straightforward answer. Between 1 May and the completion of the withdrawal in September, any attack on NATO troops will be responded to robustly. The withdrawal will happen in good order; there will be none of the scenes that he evokes from previous conflicts. The plans are well established, and I have every confidence in the ability of our military and the militaries of our allies to deliver them. He is quite right to raise our responsibility to those who have served alongside us. It is not for me to pre-empt the decision that is yet to be made by the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary, but I can reassure him that they are both seized of our responsibility, and I know they are working with all appropriate haste to make sure that a solution is put in place.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to the service of my hon. Friend the Minister, with whom I served a lot in Afghanistan and a lot in the Ministry of Defence. May I just say that the work the NATO troops are currently doing in Afghanistan is hugely important—not because they are in combat operations, as the Minister rightly says, but because they are enabling the Afghan troops and supporting them with medical aid, logistics and so on? So while I recognise that this withdrawal cannot be avoided by the UK, because fundamentally it is a US decision, what assessment have he and his Department made of the implications for the responses of others? He will know that the perception that we may not endure on an operation, even when we are no longer in combat, will weaken the way we are seen by our enemies and may lead our allies to doubt us.

James Heappey: I think that our resolve has been tested and demonstrated by the longevity of the mission. We could arbitrarily say, “Well, if we were to stay for another 10 years or 20 years, that would even further show our resolve”. I think the alliance set itself a set of military objectives, which were broadly achieved. It is clear that the politics must now take over. My hon. Friend is entirely right to point, however, to the wider range of effort that goes on and the degree to which that underpins the operational effectiveness of the Afghan national security forces. Clearly the military presence within Afghanistan itself will come to an end, but our ability to remain connected to the Afghan military academy remotely is undiminished, and likewise our ability to host Afghan officers and NCOs on military courses in the UK. All of that will I think, first, help to strengthen the connections between the Afghan and UK armed forces, but secondly, help to continue to develop their capacity so that they sustain their own operations and ensure that there is a lasting peace within Afghanistan.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) [V]: I do believe that the decision by the United States, ourselves and NATO to pull out military personnel at this stage will be wrong. I think it only gives succour to the Taliban. We do not have a stable situation in Afghanistan yet. Can I ask the Minister what support is being given to women during the peace process? He knows the importance of women within Afghan society, and their advancement is so important. What is he doing to give support to women to ensure that they have a strong platform and to ensure that things such as girls’ education are protected?

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman picks up on one of the great successes of the intervention in Afghanistan: for 20 years schools have been open to girls, and the education of girls remains one of the Government’s key foreign policy aims. Around the world seldom are those aims underpinned by military effort, however, and there are two things from which we should take heart. First, there are now so many women, relatively speaking, within the Afghan institutions—its Parliament, academia and media—that there is an expectation within Afghan civil society that women and girls will have more rights than what they had to endure under the previous Taliban Government. Secondly, the Taliban want legitimacy within the international community if or when they become a part of a future Afghanistan Government. Therefore it is reasonable to expect that they will not

want to be the international pariah that they were, so they will be responsive to the diplomatic efforts to promote opportunities for women and girls that we are pursuing bilaterally and through the United Nations and our alliances. I wholly expect that future Afghan Governments would not want to reverse all the great progress that has been made in this important area over the past 20 years.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My hon. Friend speaks with great experience and knows of what he talks, but I am still struggling to understand precisely what the NATO strategy or plan is here. In addition to the great bravery and sacrifices of our own military, some very brave Afghan leaders, including women, believed that NATO would stay the course and will now feel very let down while the Taliban have little need to negotiate but increasingly will be in a very strong position. Does this not underline the very real limits of hard power and the importance of using soft power judiciously?

James Heappey: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He is of course correct that the military could underpin an accommodation of sorts almost indefinitely, but that is not an enduring solution for any country. The decision NATO took last week recognises that we are at a moment of decision. The accommodation with the Taliban is coming to an end, so the decision is to extend the deal, which removes the political imperative, to fight this summer, and who knows where that would have gone—and from a position of having far fewer troops in Afghanistan than has been the case since five years ago—or to force the pace of the political settlement. All those options are imperfect, but what matters now, exactly as my right hon. Friend says, is that the Governments who have formed the alliance now use their soft power to ensure that the parties come round the table and an enduring peace is found.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: Our withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced without a peace-day deal in place and with the security situation continuing to deteriorate. Many who fought in, and are still affected by, the conflict are wondering just what it was all for. We cannot allow either the Afghan security forces to be completely overrun or terrorist groups to re-establish training camps, so what operational capability will the Government make available to prevent this from happening?

James Heappey: The decision to draw down our military presence within Afghanistan has been announced, and I know that the hon. and gallant Member will appreciate that we will need over the next couple of months to work through the intricacies of what capabilities may endure in Afghanistan. However, it is clear that the United Kingdom will not tolerate an ungoverned space in Afghanistan from which international terrorism can find a base and from which attacks on the UK homeland or those of our allies can be mounted. A CT effort within the wider region will be required to counter that, and of course the alliance reserves the right to go back in if the security situation deteriorates to such an extent that our national security is threatened.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: As we have heard, 457 brave men and women of our armed forces have paid with their lives to protect us here at home, and

countless others have been wounded. I sincerely hope that their sacrifice has not been in vain. I seek my hon. and gallant Friend's assurance that this withdrawal will not see a reluctance on our part to combat terrorism in the future, for, as Edmund Burke said so succinctly, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I should be clear that, as I hope the integrated review made clear, the UK has an ambition to be a force for good in the world and that where terrorism threatens the UK's interests or those of our allies, we will be present, building the capacity of partner forces and helping to remove that instability and insecurity around the world. What we have learnt over the past 20 years is that there are ways of doing that, and the vision we have set out in the integrated review is for a far more intelligent way of doing that: developing capacity, tackling insecurity and being a force for good around the world.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: I am sure that we all pay tribute to the service and sacrifice of all those who served and of those who, sadly, lost their life. General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff, said in a recent interview that although he respects the decision of the Biden Administration, it was

“not a decision we hoped for”.

Will the Minister confirm whether the MOD feels confident in the ability of the Afghan national security forces to defend the Afghan Government and their people without the current NATO presence in Afghanistan?

James Heappey: I fear that that question invites a reprise for all the answers I have already given, but, yes, the Afghan national security forces have the capacity to maintain peace within Afghanistan. The key is whether they are empowered to do so by a future Government in Kabul.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree that the United States should be a global neighbourhood watch in the middle east, not just a superpower that draws down the blinds? Does he share my grave concern, and that of many colleagues, that the withdrawal of troops will boost Sunni extremism, not just in Afghanistan, but in Iraq, where the Sunni ISIS death cult threatens Iraq and Kurdistan? Will he consider gifting surplus military and medical kit to the Iraqi Kurds in Kurdistan, rather than leaving it in Afghanistan?

James Heappey: IS and the Taliban are no friends, and I suspect that that will moderate the march of IS in Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend invites me to set out how we might gift the equipment we have been using in Afghanistan. Some of it will be gifted to the Afghan national security forces. Where we have critical capabilities that we want to recover to the UK, we will of course do that. Whether or not those are in due course re-gifted in other theatres is a decision for us to take over the next few months, but I note his suggestion.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I think we are all aware that the risks in Afghanistan remain and are significant, and although over the past

decade they have metastasised through different iterations and dispersed through the region, they still have significant roots in Afghan territories. So how will the Minister ensure that the strategic expertise brought by our armed forces' soft power can be utilised to reduce the risk of the resurgence of violence and to support the Afghan security forces for as long as they require us?

James Heappey: The institutional connections between the UK Ministry of Defence and our armed forces, and the Afghan Ministry of Defence and armed forces are as strong as one would expect them to be, given that those relationships have been forged in combat over the past 20 years. As I said in response to an earlier question, there is every intent to continue to mentor the Afghan national security forces and MOD remotely, and to continue our involvement in the Afghan national military academy remotely, and of course to give the opportunity to Afghan officers and non-commissioned officers to attend courses in the UK that will maintain those connections and develop their capability.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend for his service. Some three years ago, I had the privilege of visiting Kabul and seeing the Welsh Guards serve in Afghanistan and contribute to the building of a civic and civil society in the community. Given the fragility of that society, what tangible steps does my hon. Friend propose to take, as we leave Afghanistan by September, to ensure that the steps taken in recent years are not lost?

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend has seen with his own eyes the good work that has happened. As I said in response to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), there are opportunities to maintain those connections even without a physical presence on the ground. I have every confidence that we will do so. This is not just about politics and ministerial decision making; there are friendships between our armed forces that mean that the UK armed forces and UK MOD want to see the Afghan army, the Afghan security forces and the Afghan MOD succeed in the future. We will do everything we can to maintain those connections and develop capabilities so that the green shoots that my right hon. Friend saw can grow.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my tribute to all those who served and those who tragically lost their lives? I visited Helmand in 2009, when I believe the Minister was on his second tour, and I saw at first hand the bravery, dedication and professionalism of our armed forces and all those who worked with them in extraordinary circumstances. That will never be forgotten. They did make a difference.

The Minister mentioned those who are living with life-changing injuries, including some of those he served with. Of course, those injuries are not just physical; tragically, there are mental health consequences for many, and there are also issues with housing, access to public services and so on. Will he give a cast-iron guarantee that we will continue to meet our debt of obligation to all those who served in Afghanistan, whether it is with respect to their physical health, their mental health, their housing or other needs, for as long as that is necessary?

James Heappey: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his question. Yes, the Ministry of Defence and Her Majesty's Government will continue to meet that obligation. One of the things that came out of the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan was huge public recognition of the debt that we owe to our armed forces, and a recognition of the sacrifice and the commitment that they make on behalf of our nation. It is absolutely incumbent on those of us who now have the honour of making policy in Government to ensure that we live up to those obligations and that our veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq and all other conflicts are properly looked after.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend and, indeed, all those who served with distinction in Afghanistan. Clearly, the economy of Afghanistan—in particular the farming community—will be vital to preserving peace and security in the region. Will my hon. Friend update the House on what will be done to encourage farmers to develop products and crops rather than feeding the illegal drugs trade, which has caused so much damage not only to the region but to the rest of the world?

James Heappey: My hon. Friend has taken me well out of my comfort zone. If he will indulge me, I might need to write to him.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to all the veterans of the Afghanistan conflict, a number of whom are residents at the Cranhill Scottish Veteran Residences complex in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) was right to link this issue back to the decision to cut foreign aid. The Minister should not just listen to him; James Cowan, the chief executive officer of the HALO Trust and a former commander of British troops in Afghanistan, said:

“I have seen first-hand the importance of foreign aid. But the prime minister has announced a £4 billion cut in UK aid – money that is vital not only to the wellbeing of vulnerable people worldwide, but also British national security”.

He is not wrong, is he?

James Heappey: This issue has been touched on in previous questions. There is a commitment to spend up to £70 million in Afghanistan this year alone in support of the Afghan security forces, and of course there is an aid package beyond that. Very obviously, the end of our military contribution in Afghanistan does not mean the end of our wider diplomatic and development agenda in the country, and I fully expect that the UK Government will maintain that commitment so that we can do our bit in helping Afghanistan to succeed in the future.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con) [V]: This nation has a proud record, as indeed do many Members of this House, of responding to need around the globe. Decisions to get involved are not taken lightly. Questions of purpose and measures of success are rarely clearcut, and they always come at a cost. We have already heard that, for 454 British troops in Afghanistan, it was the ultimate sacrifice. For many more, including veterans and families that I have met here in Aberconwy, it is something they continue to carry day by day. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the veterans of the conflict in Afghanistan and their families? What assurance can he give them that their work and their sacrifices will be remembered?

James Heappey: This Government, and indeed our nation, place huge importance on our duty to remember the sacrifice of those who have given their lives in the service of our nation around the world. I have every confidence that we will continue to do so, and when we reach remembrance events in the autumn I think people will be particularly focused on the end of our military operations in Afghanistan and the sacrifice made there.

Beyond that, I hope that Afghanistan veterans such as myself and six other Members of the House will reflect on their personal experiences in that country and on the good that they know they did and that they saw with their own eyes. Cumulatively across the whole country over 20 years that amounted to an environment in which the Afghan Government could establish itself and grow and in which civil society could flourish. We have set the conditions within which Afghanistan has the chance of a peaceful and secure future.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I join the Minister in paying tribute to all those who were deployed to Afghanistan, and it is right that we remember today the 457 who paid the ultimate price, as well as those who are now living with life-changing injuries. I first visited Afghanistan in 2003, and then on numerous occasions up until 2010, and the Minister is correct to highlight the success stories. One of those is the Afghan security forces, and Britain can be quietly proud of the work it did at the Kabul officer academy in developing that force. However, operationally, the Afghan security forces are dependent on allied air power, so will Minister highlight whether there are any plans to give that air support once we withdraw?

James Heappey: Clearly, the announcement was that there will be no military presence in Afghanistan. Air support can come from outwith Afghanistan, and I suspect that decisions on that would be based on the security situation at the time. However, I think that the priority of all in NATO is to force the pace of a political settlement, which our departure does. What we should all hope for is a successful political outcome, where the capabilities that the right hon. Gentleman draws our attention to would not be required.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Will my hon. and gallant Friend tell the House how confident the Government are that the peace negotiations will bring the right governance and security to Afghanistan by September and, in particular, that women will continue to have rights under a future regime? Only in the last few months, several women have been targeted for assassination, apparently by the Taliban. The treatment of women under the Taliban was totally unacceptable, and as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women, peace and security, I do not want to see any reversal of women's rights in Afghanistan, but I am afraid I do not share the Minister's optimistic outlook on this issue.

James Heappey: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her work in chairing the APPG, to which I think my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa and I will present the annual report in the coming weeks. The work on this issue is important and characterises so much of our contribution to conflicts. My hon. Friend will be aware

that 3.7 million girls are now in school—a huge step forward from zero, which was previously the case. There is an expectation in Afghan society that is far more powerful than any military stick that may be wielded, and one can only hope that that is irreversible. The genie is out of the bottle, and once women and girls have that expectation and it becomes the norm in society, it is awfully hard—even for the Taliban—to reverse it.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: The allies' withdrawal from Afghanistan is causing deep concern for those who placed their lives on the line as invaluable interpreters for British forces. We know that the Taliban will exact revenge on those who supported the alliance, so what steps are Ministers taking now to fulfil our responsibility and our promises to ensure that the remaining interpreters and the families of those who are already here—I still have ongoing constituency cases where there are problems—are rescued? This is about honouring our promises.

James Heappey: I hope that the hon. Lady will have taken some reassurance from my earlier answers on the work of the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary. I am sure that they will come forward with an answer imminently.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the locally employed civilians throughout Afghanistan, who were a vital help during our deployments? Colleagues have asked questions about interpreters and their safety, and I was pleased by his answer that, during the drawdown, people who had helped our forces will not be abandoned. However, once we have left, will he give us some assurance that all the many hundreds of locally employed civilians and the interpreters—the people who have risked their lives, their family's lives and their safety—will not be abandoned?

James Heappey: I refer my hon. Friend to my previous answer. I have seen with my own eyes just how integral those locally employed civilians were to the success of our mission. We owe them a debt. There is work going on in Government to make sure that that debt is paid.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): There are no easy answers in Afghanistan and I pay tribute to the service of personnel who have worked so hard to bring peace to the country. I reiterate the SNP's strong support for a Chilcot-style inquiry into our engagement in Afghanistan to learn the lessons. On aid, we regret deeply the cuts to the aid budget, but I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity and commitment to Afghanistan. Would he accept and agree with our call to exempt Afghanistan from any cuts to the wider aid budget, because now is precisely the time to step up that support, not scale it back?

James Heappey: I know that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I refrain from making policy on the hoof at the Dispatch Box, but the suggestion is noted, and, as I have made clear in previous answers, it is clear that the removal of the military instrument does not bring with it an end to our commitment in Afghanistan. I am confident that my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary will be listening to the contributions about the importance of making sure that we continue to support an Afghan civil society and military to underpin the peace that we all hope for.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: Improvements in Afghanistan's society, such as to girls' education, are welcome and, as the Minister said, show signs of an improved future for Afghanistan's people. However, freedom of religion or belief remains severely curtailed. Does he share my concerns about that, and what can be done to address it?

James Heappey: Afghanistan is a deeply Islamic and conservative country. As my hon. Friend will know from the amazing work that she does as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, those countries are hard ones in which to espouse the values that she so enthusiastically campaigns for. I know that she will keep all the pressure that she can on the Prime Minister and my colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. She is absolutely right that this is a very important hallmark of a free democracy, and we should have every expectation that the sort of things that she would want to see are things that we are comfortable and enthusiastic about discussing with Afghan Governments in future.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Can the Minister give specific examples of actions that the Government now intend to take as we withdraw from Afghanistan to support and ensure that all the improvements that have been taking place over the past 20 years in the human rights of women and girls, such as access to education and healthcare, will not be reduced or reversed?

James Heappey: I can. The bilateral relationship between the UK Government and the Afghan Government will endure, and so, too, will our engagement through multilateral forums such as the UN. These are hard-won steps that have made Afghanistan a better country. Our expectation must be that nobody involved in the peace process would want to row back from those, and the international community must be united in ensuring that they do not.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): As we draw down our forces in Afghanistan, the United Kingdom can look proudly at the contribution that we have made to supporting and developing the local security forces. Because our military contribution ends, that training and assistance need not, so will my hon. and gallant Friend confirm that, moving forward, we will continue to offer support and training to the Afghan security forces, including, for example, by posting cadets at Sandhurst?

James Heappey: That is exactly the sort of support that we envisage. The agreement is that there will be no military presence within Afghanistan, but that does not diminish in the slightest our ability to continue to have a strong relationship with the Afghan national security forces and to develop their capability either from the outside in or by bringing them to study and train in the United Kingdom.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind) [V]: I congratulate the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), on securing this question and on his excellent contribution, because whatever way the British

[Jonathan Edwards]

Government try to present it, the unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan is a humiliation. No parliamentary vote was held to authorise the invasion 20 years ago, nor was democratic endorsement sought for the disastrous escalation of UK involvement in Helmand province. Is it not time that it was enshrined in law that major military engagements and significant escalations of conflict must be endorsed by this House and, I would argue, when Welsh troops are involved, by the Senedd as well?

James Heappey: That last point is clearly somewhat problematic. People from across the United Kingdom serve in our units and they serve as the UK's armed forces. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman knows how impractical his suggestion is, but perhaps he is playing to an audience back home.

As for the hon. Gentleman's earlier point, it would be impractical in the extreme for all operational decisions, some of which have to be taken with some haste, to be a matter for a vote in this House. The detail that underpins those decisions often cannot be fully shared at the Dispatch Box, for obvious reasons. The Government have, throughout, made every effort to be transparent about the way the Afghanistan campaign has been progressing. I remember there being regular updates to the House on it and the opportunity for Ministers to be held to account, but I am not sure that military planning by parliamentary vote is necessarily the way to show the coherence of the military instrument to our adversaries overseas.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I am concerned that, with the drawdown of our troops, Afghanistan could again become a centre and base for international terrorism. Can my hon. Friend update the House on the steps we are taking to mitigate that risk?

James Heappey: I suspect that I have answered that question a few times over the last hour. This is simply the end of military operations in Afghanistan; it is not the end of the UK's commitment to that country. Everybody is clear on that. So, too, are our partners and allies around NATO and beyond. The international effort to deliver peace and security within Afghanistan continues; it is just no longer appropriate to seek to achieve that through military means.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: There are many who would say that the Taliban control a huge swathe of Afghanistan, and that this decision will mean that the Afghan security forces could be overrun. Will the Minister advise us, as an Afghan veteran? I pay tribute to that service, as I do to all the other veterans, including my own brother, Ronnie, who served two tours in Afghanistan. Can the Minister

answer the question that many of them will be asking today: why oh why were they there in the first place, if we have not achieved what we intended to?

James Heappey: I do not accept that we have not achieved what we were there to do in the first place. We went into Afghanistan as a direct consequence of what happened on 11 September 2001. Article 5 was invoked because an attack on one was an attack on us all, and that attack originated in Afghanistan. Since then, there has been no international terrorist attack launched from Afghanistan on the UK, the US or, indeed, any other NATO ally, so in that sense the mission was achieved.

Actually, the mission has gone far further, as we have explored in our exchanges on the urgent question: in the 20 years that we have been there, we have given the opportunity for the Afghan Government to establish and strengthen and for an Afghan civil society to flourish. I truly believe that we have set the conditions within which a political process now has the best chances of success.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know that the Minister will take back the very strong feelings expressed on both sides of the House that interpreters and other locally employed civilians must not be abandoned to a terrible fate at the hands of our enemies.

When the Minister says that the military process is over, does he not realise that the only thing that will prevent the Taliban from going back to the position they were in before we intervened 20 years will be the threat that if they try to overthrow the Government, they themselves will face a military consequence—if necessary, from outside the borders of the country? If he rules that out, he is basically giving them carte blanche.

James Heappey: As my right hon. Friend will know from his extensive experience of peace processes around the world, it is very likely—indeed, almost certain—that a lasting peace settlement in Afghanistan will involve the Taliban as part of the Afghan Government. It is in all our interests to support the political process as it plays out, but if there is a return to an ungoverned space that gives succour to international terrorism that is a threat to the UK homeland or the interests of our allies, we of course reserve the right to protect our interests, both unilaterally and multilaterally through NATO.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for responding to the urgent question and answering 31 questions.

We are now going to suspend for a short while.

1.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

1.38 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on our work to examine inequality across the population and set out a new, positive agenda for change.

The Government are committed to building a fairer Britain and taking the action needed to promote equality and opportunity for all. We do, however, recognise that serious disparities exist across our society, and are determined to take the action that is required to address them. Following the events of last summer, our nation has engaged in a serious examination of the issue of race inequality, and the Government have been determined to respond by carefully examining the evidence and data. We need to recognise progress where it has been made, but we also need to tackle barriers where they remain. That was why, last summer, the Prime Minister established the independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. It was tasked with informing our national conversation on race by carrying out a deeper examination of why disparities exist and considering how we can reduce them.

After careful study, the commission made evidence-based recommendations for action across Government, the private sector and other public bodies. The commission was established with 10 experts drawn from a variety of fields, spanning science, education, economics, broadcasting, medicine and policing. With one exception, all are from ethnic minority backgrounds. The chair, Dr Sewell, has dedicated his life to education and to supporting young people from socially deprived backgrounds to reach their full potential. This distinguished group was tasked with reviewing inequality in the UK, and it focused on education, employment, crime and policing, and health.

As this House will be aware, on 31 March, the commission published its independent report. I will now turn to its findings. It is right to say that the picture painted by this report is complex, particularly in comparison with the way that issues of race are often presented. The report shows that disparities do persist, that racism and discrimination remain a factor in shaping people's life outcomes, and it is clear about the fact that abhorrent racist attitudes continue in society, within institutions and increasingly online. It calls for action to tackle this.

However, the report also points out that, while disparities between ethnic groups exist across numerous areas, many factors other than racism are often the root cause. Among these are geography, deprivation and family structure. For example, a black Caribbean child is 10 times more likely than an Indian child to grow up in a lone parent household. Disparities exist in different directions. People from south Asian and Chinese ethnic groups have better outcomes than the white population in more than half of the top 25 causes of premature death.

The report also highlights the progress that Britain has made in tackling racism, and the report's data reveal a range of success stories. For example, it underlines the significant progress achieved in educational attainment, with most ethnic minority groups now outperforming their white British peers at GCSE level. The report also delves into the causes and drivers of some of the most persistent and enduring issues. For example, the commission has identified the disproportionate rate of black men convicted of class B drug offences.

Let me be clear: the report does not deny that institutional racism exists in the UK. Rather the report did not find conclusive evidence of it in the specific areas it examined. It reaffirms the Macpherson report's definition of the term, but argues that it should be applied more carefully and always based on evidence.

The commission made 24 evidence-based and practical recommendations. These have been grouped into four broad themes: to build trust; promote fairness; create agency; and achieve inclusivity.

There are many things that unite this House. A shared commitment to making Britain fairer for everyone is one of them. In the light of that fact, I urge right hon. and hon. Members to take the time to read the report's 258 pages. There is also another thing that I am sure unites this House, which is abhorrence of the appalling abuse meted out to the commissioners and the false assertions made about their work in the past three weeks. It is true that this landmark analysis challenges a number of strongly held beliefs about the extent and influence of racism in Britain today. The commissioners have followed the evidence and drawn conclusions that challenge orthodoxy, and they were prepared for a robust and constructive debate. However, they were not prepared for the wilful misrepresentation of the report that occurred following its publication, such as false accusations that they denied racism exists, or that they wished to put a positive spin on the atrocities of slavery, or false statements that commissioners did not read or sign off their own report, or that they are breaking ranks. I have been informed by the chair and by individual members that the commission remains united and stands by its report.

This Government welcome legitimate disagreement and debate, but firmly reject bad-faith attempts to undermine the credibility of this report. Doing so risks undermining the vital work that we are trying to do to understand and address the causes of inequality in the UK, and any other positive work that results from it. For that reason it is necessary to set the record straight. This report makes it clear that the UK is not a post-racial society and that racism is still a real force that has the power to deny opportunity and painfully disrupt lives. That is why the first recommendation of the commission is to challenge racist and discriminatory actions. The report calls on the Government to increase funding to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to make greater use of

"its compliance, enforcement and litigation powers to challenge policies or practices that...cause...unjust racial disadvantage, or arise from racial discrimination."

The Government even more firmly condemn the deeply personal and racialised attacks against the commissioners, which have included death threats. In fact, one Opposition Member presented commissioners as members of the Ku Klux Klan—an example of the very online racial hatred and abuse on which the report itself recommended more action be taken by the Government.

It is, of course, to be expected that Members will disagree about how to address racial inequality and the kinds of policies that the Government should enact. However, it is wrong to accuse those who argue for a different approach of being racism deniers or race traitors. It is even more irresponsible—dangerously so—to call ethnic minority people racial slurs like "Uncle Toms", "coconuts", "house slaves" or "house negroes" for daring to think differently.

[Kemi Badenoch]

Such deplorable tactics are designed to intimidate ethnic minority people away from their right to express legitimate views. This House depends on robust debate and diversity of thought. Too many ethnic minority people have to put up with this shameful treatment every day, as some of my fellow MPs and I know too well. The House should condemn it and reprimand those who continue with such behaviour.

The commissioners' experience since publication only reinforces the need for informed debate on race based on mutual respect and a nuanced understanding of the evidence. The Government will now consider the report in detail and assess the next steps for future policy. In recognition of the extensive scope of recommendations, the Prime Minister has established a new inter-ministerial group to review the recommendations. It will ensure that action is taken to continue progress to create a fairer society. As sponsoring Minister, I will provide strategic direction with support from my officials in the Race Disparity Unit. The group will be chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

On that note, on behalf of the Prime Minister, I would like to thank the commissioners once again for all that they have done. They have generously volunteered their time, unpaid, to lead this important piece of work, and the Government welcome their thoughtful, balanced and evidence-based findings and analysis.

The Government will now work at pace to produce a response to the report this summer. I assure the House that it will be ambitious about tackling negative disparities where they exist and building on successes. It will play a significant part in this Government's mission to level up and unite the country, and ensure equality and opportunity for all, whatever their race, ethnicity or socioeconomic background. I commend this statement to the House.

1.47 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. It is only right that such a contentious report finally receives time for debate in this House. I have read the report, despite having to wait two weeks for an accessible version to arrive.

Following the Black Lives Matter movement, the commission had an opportunity meaningfully to engage with structural racism in the UK. Instead, it published incoherent, divisive and offensive materials that appear to glorify slavery, downplay the role of institutional and structural racism, and blame ethnic minorities for their own disadvantage. If left unchallenged, the report will undo decades of progress made towards race equality in the UK.

Since publication, the report has completely unravelled. Far from bad-faith actors, this report has been discredited by experts, including the British Medical Association, Professor Michael Marmot, trade unions representing over 5 million workers, human rights experts at the UN and Baroness Lawrence, who said it gives a "green light to racists". Its cherry-picking of data is misleading and incoherent, and its conclusions are ideologically motivated and divisive.

It is absolutely clear to all Opposition Members and those across civil society that this report has no credibility, so I am disappointed to hear the Minister double down

on it here today. How can she stand before us in this House and defend the indefensible? I want to ask one simple question to start: who wrote this report? Four weeks ago, she stood at the Dispatch Box and said:

"It is not the Prime Minister but an independent commission that will be publishing the report."—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 906.]

Despite what she says about unity, can she explain why multiple commissioners have disclosed that No. 10 rewrote parts of the report? What precedent does this cronyism set for future independent commissions? Furthermore, will the Minister explain how the Government came to publish claims that there is a "new story" to be told about slavery and empire, and will she distance herself from those abhorrent remarks?

The Minister says that commissioners followed the evidence, but this report marks a major shift away from the overwhelming body of data on institutional and structural racism. The Office for National Statistics finds that the unemployment rate for black people is now 13.8%—triple the rate for white people—so why does the report conclude that young black people should

"examine the subjects they are studying",

instead of addressing the systemic inequalities within the labour market? Black women are four times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth, but the report says that these numbers are so low that it is "unfair" to focus on this disparity. Does the Minister agree with those findings? Even the example about class B drug use, which she repeated today, is inaccurate, with the Cabinet Office admitting that there was a mistake. I was especially interested to hear the Minister highlight the recommendation to increase funding to the EHRC, given that her Government have slashed its funding by £43 million since 2010.

This report is part of the story that Government Members would like to try to tell about fairness. They say that they are interested in addressing inequalities of geography and class, but the truth is that they are not interested in ending inequality at all. In stark contrast, the Labour party believes in ambition and potential for all, including black and ethnic minority people, but we recognise that we often start from a position of systemic disadvantage.

It is our job as elected representatives to level the playing field, so I want to end by giving the Minister the chance to reject this report and tell the House instead what she is doing to implement the 231 recommendations in the Timpson, McGregor-Smith, Williams, Angiolini and Lammy reviews. What is she doing to comply with the public sector equality duty, and why is she not publishing equality impact assessments? This is what her Government would be focused on if they were serious about ending structural racism. Instead, they have published a shoddy, point-scoring polemic which ignores evidence and does not represent the country that I know and love. It is reprehensible, and I hope the Minister will reject it today, so that we get on with the task of tackling institutional and structural racism, which is the lived experience of many.

Kemi Badenoch: It is quite clear that the hon. Lady did not read the statement, which I sent to her in advance, and she clearly did not listen to it as I read it out. She is clearly determined to create a divisive atmosphere around race in this House and this country, and we will

not stand for it. We continue to push for a fairer Britain and for levelling up. Labour Members continue to look for division. They continue to stoke culture wars and then claim that we are the ones fighting them.

I completely reject all the assertions that the hon. Lady has made—many of them false and many of them hypocritical. Whose party has been determined to be institutionally racist by the Equality and Human Rights Commission? It is not my party; it is hers. She and many of her colleagues are the ones who are complaining about their party's Forde inquiry and claiming that their party has anti-black racism. Why do they not look at resolving the problems in their own house, instead of trying to spread them around the rest of the country?

I will acknowledge some of the questions the hon. Lady has raised and seek to answer them. She asked who wrote the report. The commissioners wrote the report; that is because they were independent. It is simply not true to claim that other people wrote the report. The commissioners have put statements on the—*[Interruption.]* I am afraid I cannot hear myself speak because of the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). It would be nice if she stopped heckling from a sedentary position. Her mouth is covered, so I cannot even hear what she is saying.

If we look at the statements that the commissioners have made on the gov.uk website, they have been united. They have not broken ranks. They have not chosen to dissociate themselves from the report. The only thing that is happening is that Labour Members in particular continue to misrepresent what is happening. Why, for instance, will the shadow Minister not condemn the racist abuse faced by the commissioners? Why will she not condemn her own colleague, the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who posted a picture of the KKK in response to the commissioners? Does she think that that is appropriate behaviour? It is the subject of a complaint to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

We should go back to the substance of what this report is saying, rather than continuing to try to slander the people who have written it. These are professionals and distinguished individuals who gave up their time, and I commend them for their work. I am very proud of it, and of course we will not be withdrawing the report.

It is clear that today's Labour party is functionally innumerate and does not like to see statistics and evidence, so rather than focus on the numbers and the data, they run away. They just want to continue having discussions on racism, which is where they think they are strong, but I am afraid that they are not strong on this issue. We will not sit back and allow divisive rhetoric and misrepresentation to be the story on race. We are determined to create a positive national conversation about this issue based on facts and evidence, fraternity and fairness, not on nonsensical accusations.

So I reject the hon. Member for Battersea's assertions. We will not withdraw the report. We will look at what recommendations to take forward. The Government have still not provided a response, but there are many issues around that structural inequality that we want to have dealt with. However, I reiterate that, just because there is a disparity, it does not mean that discrimination is the cause. If we continue to identify discrimination right from the beginning without looking at the root cause, we will continue to offer solutions that do not

improve the situation. I am very happy to commend the commissioners and I reject the hon. Lady's very divisive rhetoric and assertions to the House today.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House and the country will be glad that the Government have come forward with this positive statement in support of Tony Sewell's and the other commissioners' report.

The commission had to put out a statement on 2 April contradicting most of the ill-informed criticisms. At the end, it said:

"The 24 recommendations we have made will, in our view, greatly improve the lives of millions of people for the better if they are all implemented."

The second sentence of the first paragraph said that the report

"stated categorically that 'we take the reality of racism seriously and we do not deny that it is a real force in the UK.'"

That seems plain and clear.

I came into politics in 1971, when the ethnic minorities in the area where I lived in south London were denied the chance to take O-levels because left-wing goodies asked why people should be forced to take O-levels in the fifth form. I said it was so that they could go on to university. With two West Indian mothers on the governing body, within three years, the first of our black pupils went on to medical school. I think we can dedicate ourselves to making life better.

I say to the Minister that later—not today—I would like to come and talk to her about the treatment of Gurpal Viridi, a very good Sikh officer who four times was badly treated by the Metropolitan police. The fourth time, he was prosecuted for a week and a half for something that could not have happened, following an investigation that should not have happened.

That is one of the things that would help to give weight to the recommendations of the Sewell commission—if things are treated fairly, when they go wrong, they are investigated properly.

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the Father of the House for his question and for his comments, which I completely agree with. The issue he describes around education back in the day is actually something I experienced myself. There is still much to do, but we have come a long way from 25 years ago when I first immigrated to this country. On Gurpal Viridi, I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to fully understand what happened and to see what the Government can do.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. A United Nations working group strongly rejected this report, saying that it

"further distorted and falsified historic facts",

could fuel racism and twists data, among other pointed criticisms. The Minister just spoke about the lack of evidence of institutional racism, but the Runnymede Trust rightly points out that evidence of institutional racism was submitted to the commission. Twenty thousand people joined the Runnymede Trust and Amnesty International in calling for the report's withdrawal, and 36 trade union general secretaries have repudiated the report.

[Kirsten Oswald]

In contrast to the Prime Minister, who said that the report contains “interesting observations”, Scots campaigner Talat Yaqoob called the report a “whitewash of reality” produced only to let the UK Government abdicate responsibility for tackling institutional racism. How can the Minister justify a report that says policies such as the hostile environment were not deliberately targeted at the UK’s ethnic minorities? Leading clinicians have said the report will worsen systemic health inequalities. The NHS Race and Health Observatory has declared that institutional racism exists in the UK, the health and care system and across wider public bodies. In the light of those responses, will the Minister repudiate the report’s glossing over of the impact of covid on ethnic minority groups?

The SNP will always work hard for Scotland to be a global leader in diversity and inclusion. If re-elected, we will introduce a Scottish diversity and inclusion strategy, focusing on institutional barriers and providing education on colonial history. The Scottish Tory manifesto is silent on these issues, but in bringing forward this report, it certainly looks like the UK Government are going in the opposite direction. So can the Minister tell us specifically what the Tories are doing to tackle institutional inequality and to deal effectively with colonial history? Can she understand why so many people will be deeply disappointed with this response, which feels, at best, like a bunch of cans being kicked down the road?

Kemi Badenoch: Before I begin to answer the hon. Lady’s questions, I would like to point out that the PM wrote to devolved Administrations shortly after the commission was established to invite them to engage with this work. It is noticeable that Northern Ireland was keen to take part, and hosted the commission on crime and policing matters. However, the Scottish National party Administration did not engage, so I believe that the words the hon. Lady is now saying about how dedicated they are to fighting racial inequality are completely hollow. When the commission was set up, I am afraid that they did very little indeed to engage.

Regarding the statement by the UN experts, the group grossly misrepresented the commission’s report; the statement is clearly born of the divisive narratives perpetrated by certain media outlets and political groups that are seeking to sow division in our ethnic minority communities. It is also quite clear that the UN experts did not read the commission’s report, judging from some of their statements, which seem to have been cut and pasted from a Labour party press release. The obvious flaw in their critique is that there is no comparison to be drawn with peer countries in Europe, especially because they do not even collect data on race and ethnicity. As such, I share the commission’s disappointment in, and rejection of, yesterday’s statement by the working group of experts on people of African descent, and I will be writing back to them in the strongest of terms.

It is no surprise that the hon. Lady has listed a lot of left-wing groups that disagree with the report. Disagreement and debate is part of politics. We have no issues with people disagreeing with the substance of the report; what we do have an issue with is people misrepresenting it. This report was tasked with finding out why disparities exist. It was not supposed to define where exactly we are

seeing institutional racism, but to call racism out where it exists, and it did that. Perhaps if the hon. Lady spent some time reading the report, rather than remarks on Twitter, she would be better informed about what it actually says.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): The chief economist of the Bank of England has said that

“Published pay gaps are a starting point for corporate and national accountability”.

Business groups have called for mandatory reporting of ethnicity pay gaps. The commission recommended investigating the causes of pay disparities, but then did not recommend mandating the reporting that would identify those disparities, so will the Minister now commit to taking a different approach from the commission, and commit to mandatory reporting of ethnicity pay gaps?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question, and I pay tribute to her for setting up the Race Disparity Unit, which has allowed us to carry out so much forensic research.

On the issue of ethnicity pay reporting, the commission pointed to statistical and data issues that affect ethnicity pay reporting, and makes a recommendation as a way for employers to overcome these challenges and report ethnicity pay accurately. As I say, the Government will consider the report in detail, and we will work with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to assess the implications of this recommendation for future Government policy and respond in due course. However, I take my right hon. Friend’s comments into account, and will make sure that they are addressed in the Government response.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) [V]: The Minister has accused people of criticising the report in bad faith. Is she really saying that Professor Michael Marmot, a world-renowned expert in public health, is acting out of bad faith? Is she really saying that the British Medical Association and other professional associations are speaking in bad faith? It would reflect better on the Minister if she were prepared to engage with genuine criticism by experts.

Nobody denies that there has been progress on racial justice in this country. My parents left school in rural Jamaica aged 14; I am a British Member of Parliament. However, this is widely seen—particularly by people who have been quoted and misquoted—as a shoddy, cynical report that, to quote the UN working group, “repackages racist tropes and stereotypes into fact, twisting data”.

I say to the Minister that surely black and brown British people who have contributed so much to this country deserve better than this report.

Kemi Badenoch: What black and brown British people like myself deserve is better treatment from the Opposition Members who continue to stoke division. Of course I am not accusing Professor Sir Michael Marmot or the BMA of bad faith. The people I accuse of acting in bad faith are the right hon. Lady and her colleagues who are posting pictures of the KKK, and being advertised, as the shadow equalities Minister was, at an event preparing to denounce the report a week before it was even published.

On Professor Sir Michael Marmot and the British Medical Association, I have had meetings with them and we engage with them. We take criticism from them—they are not there to endorse every single thing the Government say; they are there to provide helpful criticism and suggestions where necessary. Sometimes we agree, and sometimes we disagree. Disagreement is not a problem. What we do not want is misrepresentation, which is what the right hon. Lady and her colleagues continue to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Caroline Nokes, may I remind everybody, whether they are virtual or physical, that this is an opportunity to ask the Minister questions about the statement, not to make speeches?

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her statement. She has focused a great deal on evidence. Does she agree that narrative is also important, and that when the Government respond, it is essential that they do so in full to the 24 recommendations and get the tone right? The Women and Equalities Committee has invited Tony Sewell to come and give evidence to us, alongside other commissioners. I hope my hon. Friend will encourage him to do so, so that the Committee can hear at first hand the evidence that was presented to him and how the report was written.

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I agree with her that narrative is important, not just evidence. We in this House have to ask ourselves what story we are trying to tell. In the case of Conservative Members, it is a story of a shared history, shared values, shared culture and a shared future. We want to make sure that we create a sense of belonging for young people in this country, not an environment where they believe they will never be able to succeed because other people continue to tell them so despite the evidence. I will find out about the request she has made to the commissioners, and I am sure that they will respond in due course.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): This is gaslighting on a national scale.

“The New Age of Empire”, page 95, tells us exactly what is happening. On page 103, “This is Why I Resist”, by Dr Shola, explains about racial gatekeepers, which Musa Okwonga from *Byline Times* talks about. My question to the Minister is this. The Government briefed a clear message well in advance of this report landing. Why did they do that?

Kemi Badenoch: I think it is disgusting that a Member of this House will stand up and accuse people of being racial gatekeepers. This is the same nonsense we have heard time and time again—calling people Uncle Toms, calling them house negroes and house slaves, and calling them racial gatekeepers. The fact that the hon. Lady is able to stand here and use that phrase without any shame whatsoever just shows how far the Labour party has fallen.

Dawn Butler: Answer the question!

Kemi Badenoch: I will answer the question, but we in this House have a responsibility to speak about this issue with nuance and responsibility, and the way the hon. Lady has carried out the debate is disgraceful.

In fact, she is one of the many people who continue to stoke division in this country, and I am very sad to hear her remarks. The fact of the matter is that this report was written by professionals and experts who have a view that is different from hers. If she has a view that is not acknowledged by others, she should engage in a sensible debate, not call them racial gatekeepers.

Dawn Butler: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has a responsibility to Parliament to answer the question. The Minister has given a statement, and she is supposed to answer the question. She has not answered this question.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That is a continuation of the question, as the hon. Lady knows.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I want to raise with the Minister concerns about certain organisations prejudging the Sewell report for political ends without fairly assessing the findings. One concerning example was the Runnymede Trust, which organised a campaign against the report over a week before it was published and broadcast a live-streamed event with Patrick Vernon, chair of Labour’s racial equality advisory group, where they argued that the report’s authors were equivalent to holocaust deniers who had been asked to develop a strategy on antisemitism. Does the Minister agree that not only does that kind of bad faith political action undermine the Runnymede Trust’s charitable objective of improved race relations, but that the shameful treatment of the report’s commissioners might actually discourage ethnic minorities from contributing to public life and public debate? I also thank her for her statement.

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. What he has described is part of the climate of intimidation surrounding the report’s authors, which I condemned in my statement and which has just been demonstrated by the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler).

I read in today’s paper that the Runnymede Trust is now the subject of a complaint to the Charity Commission. One complaint refers to the behaviour of the trust’s CEO and staff towards ethnic minorities who have a different approach to racial equality. Some of that behaviour includes calling a black Conservative a “house negro” and horrific views on mixed-race relationships expressed by one staff member, comparing white people having relationships with black people to slave masters sleeping with their slaves. I do not believe that these actions are appropriate for a charity committed to racial equality.

This is a good time to remind the House that the current chair of the Runnymede Trust applied to be the Labour candidate for Poplar and Limehouse in 2019, but failed to make the shortlist. I would be keen to know whether the shadow Minister condemns those sorts of remarks, or believes that they are acceptable so long as they are targeted at people she disagrees with.¹

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Ethnic minority communities have suffered disproportionate numbers of deaths from covid-19. The Sewell report fails to recognise that structural racism underlies many socioeconomic inequalities. There is an interconnectivity between different forms of disadvantage and discrimination but, at the

1. [Official Report, 22 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 5MC.]

[Wera Hobhouse]

heart of it, is structural racism. It is important for the Government to recognise that. Will the Government commit to working with organisations such as Operation Black Vote to implement a covid-19 race equality strategy that looks in particular at health inequalities and makes sure that the lived experience of people from ethnic minority backgrounds is listened to?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady will know that I have been reporting to this House quarterly on the very work that she describes—the effect that covid-19 has had on ethnic minority people and other vulnerable groups. We have explained the reasons for the causes of those disparities. The Public Health England report had a qualitative review, which talked about people's experiences of racism in the system.

What we have to do now, however, is to ensure that we protect people. Our strategy at the moment is around vaccines. We have been doing everything we can to increase vaccine uptake, including significant amounts of work—which I reported to the House in February—on increasing vaccine uptake among ethnic minority groups where a large percentage of vaccine hesitancy remains, again much of it caused by misrepresentation and misinformation. I hope that the hon. Lady and members of her party will work with us in government on tackling misinformation and disinformation and will encourage those vulnerable groups to get vaccinated.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The BBC has now said that, in terms of race and culture, you are what you eat. That clearly has a narrowing implication for playwrights and authors who increasingly feel that they may write only about their personal racial and ethnic experience. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a rather chilling thing in terms of the values that are now being put out?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I believe in freedom of expression. It is important that authors, playwrights and other artists feel free to write about and represent a broad range of people, regardless of their race or ethnicity. That is what we would see in a truly diverse society with a shared culture, rather than a “stay in your lane” approach that assumes our society consists of mutually antagonistic identity groups.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The commission's report used the phrase “Caribbean experience” as a euphemism for the slave trade. In Scotland, if the SNP is re-elected, it will fund the development of an online programme in Scotland and the UK on colonial history throughout the world. It will be able to be used in schools as an educational tool. Does the Minister agree that countries still have to face their colonial history for what it was and to have a mature discussion about its consequences and impacts?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree that we need to have a mature discussion, but I should let the hon. Gentleman know that the commission and its chair have been misrepresented on the comments about slavery. They have stated that any suggestion that they downplayed the history of slavery is “absurd” and deeply “offensive”:

“The report merely says that, in the face of the inhumanity of slavery, African people preserved their humanity and culture.”

The hon. Gentleman might be interested in the commission recommendation on new curriculum resources better to teach this complex history of the people of Britain.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I wish to report to the House and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that 20 Members of the House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) and for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), have written to the Charity Commission complaining about the Runnymede Trust's treatment of the commissioners and its response to the report, which, frankly, reflects the outrage of those who have had their long-standing bourgeois liberal prejudices challenged. It is important that the Minister give me an assurance today that she will make representations across Government to stop the worthless work—often publicly funded—of organisations that are promulgating weird, woke ideas and that, in doing so, are seeding doubt and fear and, more than that, disharmony and disunity.

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend is right. It is important that we in Government do not inadvertently promote people who are pushing divisive narratives, and I will look into his request and see what we can do across the House and across Government.

It is interesting that my right hon. Friend, too, raises the Runnymede Trust. He might not be aware of this, but the Equality and Human Rights Commission has written an open letter to the Runnymede Trust. In its letter of 12 April, its chair states that the Runnymede Trust made “unsubstantiated allegations” about the EHRC, questioned its “impartiality and impact” and impugned its credibility. The letter also said that the Runnymede Trust showed “an apparent misunderstanding” about the EHRC's

“mandate as set out in statute”.

I was really shocked to read the commissioners' letter and to learn that the Runnymede Trust had even asked—or certainly implied—that the EHRC should be defunded, which is surely the opposite of what a charity focused on improving race relations should want, and the complete opposite of its objectives, which goes to the point that my right hon. Friend made.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In the light of the job statistics released this morning indicating that young people and London have been particularly hard hit over the past 12 months, the issue of ethnic minority employment and pay prospects is pressing for many of my constituents. The report paints a largely positive story of an overall convergence between minorities and the white majority when it comes to employment and pay, yet the official data makes it perfectly clear that the situation has not markedly improved when viewed over decades. For example, the unemployment rate for black people has consistently been more than double the rate for white people over the past 20 years. How, then, does the Minister believe that the report's claims in this area can be squared with what the available evidence clearly illustrates, which is that structural racial inequalities remain a stubborn feature of our labour market?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for engaging with some of the contents of the report rather than in divisive rhetoric. The answer to part of the question is that many of those statistics

do not control for age. In this country, black people are much younger than the rest of the population, and that often ends up skewing some of the statistics. The report paints a picture of a continuing improvement and convergence, but the employment section is the bit that highlights the most significant problems, and there is quite a lot to do on that front. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to look at some of the recommendations and to let us know whether he agrees or disagrees. Before Government respond, I would encourage Members to put forward their suggestions, based on the evidence that the commission has produced, for what we should be doing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Video link—Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd. While of course the commissioners must be respected, their report should undergo scrutiny. They say they did not find conclusive evidence of institutional racism in the areas examined. Dr Robert Jones of Cardiff University provides Wales-specific evidence that 36 black people in every 1,000 experience stop and search, compared with five white people; that 91 black people for every 10,000 are in prison, compared with 14 white people; and that prison sentences for black people stand at an average of 30 months, rising to 35 months for mixed people, compared with an average of 20 months for white people. To what other institutional factors does the Minister ascribe the greatest part of those disparities? Will she work with the next Welsh Government to implement Plaid Cymru's manifesto commitment of a race equality action plan to address this issue?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. I think I should again clarify what the commission says on the existence of racism. It states:

“Overt and outright racism persists in the UK. Examples of it loom larger in our minds because we witness it not just as graffiti on our walls or abuse hurled across our streets,”
but even in private settings.

On the over-representation of minority groups in stop-and-search, the commission looks at the causes and at where stop and search happens. It happens in London, which is where the vast majority of ethnic minorities live, compared with the rest of the country. That does have an impact on the data. The commission also puts forward recommendations on things we can do to build trust in the police to reduce the number of stop-and-searches that are required. I have forgotten the second point that the right hon. Lady raised, but I think it was in a similar vein.

Discrimination is not explained by disparities alone. Sometimes it is the case; sometimes it is not. Where it is the case, the commission has identified that; where it is not, it has put forward other potential explanations.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con) [V]: One of the refreshing things about the report is the careful balance between acknowledging the challenges that are still very real and the progress that is happening. Here in Leicestershire, that progress is very visible on wages and employment. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to make further progress it is essential to acknowledge the progress that has been made and to understand the causes—how, why and where this is happening—so that we can go further and make more progress?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, that is absolutely right: I do agree. We need to focus on what works and why, as well as what does not and why, so that we can target our resources where they will be most effective. The report looks at why certain groups that are very similar end up with completely different outcomes, which is why institutional racism cannot be the defining reason. When black African and black Caribbean groups, and Indians and Pakistanis, have diverging outcomes, it is clear that something else is going on. I hope that my hon. Friend will work with Government to try to find out what measures we can put in place to address these disparities.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: The report talks about creating agency so that individuals can take greater control of decisions that impact their lives. In response, will the Minister recommend that English for speakers of other languages funding, which has been cut by more than 50% since the Conservatives came to power in 2010, be reinstated?

Kemi Badenoch: If the hon. Lady has a comprehensive proposal about that, she can write to me and we will consider it in the light of the Government response.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con) [V]: I served on the Youth Justice Board with the chairman of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, Dr Tony Sewell. My experience was that he always acted with integrity and that he had the courage to challenge the conventional wisdom when he found evidence to suggest an alternative perspective. Does my hon. Friend share my abhorrence at how he and his fellow commissioners have been vilified, abused and threatened? Does she share my concern that such a response risks putting off other people from carrying out important work that can help to improve our society for all communities?

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and I thank him very much for telling us about his personal experience working with Dr Tony Sewell. I believe that Keith Fraser, one of the other commissioners, is also a member of the Youth Justice Board. One reason why I believe there has been much push-back against the report is that it has not come from the usual suspects. We did not go to the race relations industry to ask people to tell us the same things they have been telling us for a long time; we went to people who work in the field such as doctors, teachers, policemen, scientists, economists and journalists—including, I might add, a former chair of the Runnymede Trust—to find out what we can do to improve disparities in this country.¹ We went to the people who actually had the experience in doing things rather than just talking, and I am very proud of the commission and the work it has done.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con) [V]: Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of family units and their critical role in our communities up and down the UK. That is why I welcome, in particular, recommendation 19, which outlines seminal plans to understand and take action to address the underlying issues facing families across all backgrounds. Will my hon. Friend put those words into actions and ensure that our local authorities support the most vulnerable families who are experiencing disadvantage and discrimination?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is right that local authorities have a very important role to play in this space. I am very pleased that he has actually read the

1. [Official Report, 22 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 5MC.]

[Kemi Badenoch]

recommendation and not just the reports about the report. Local authorities have played an important part in mitigating the disproportionate impact of covid on some ethnic minorities via the community champion scheme, for which we announced funding last autumn. With regard to his other comments, the Government response is not yet prepared; it will be coming in due course in the summer. We will consider the recommendation that he has made in the light of the full report.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [V]: In her responses, the Minister repeatedly conflates disagreement with this report with misrepresentation or not having read the report, so let us draw a line under that—we have read it, but we know that institutional racism is still felt across every area of the UK and that there is no new story to tell about slavery and colonialism. She may disagree, but does she at least recognise and understand why people—more specifically the people this report is about—overwhelmingly see this report as steeped in denial and why it is viewed as a complete insult to those who have been the victims of institutional racism, such as black women, who are four times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth? Does she recognise that denial is a core mechanism of institutional racism? Can she explain how she plans to push ahead with this report when it is so widely rejected by those it impacts?

Kemi Badenoch: If the hon. Lady reads beyond The Guardian and perhaps statements in the Morning Star, she will realise that the report has been welcomed by many, many organisations, not just the Equality and Human Rights Commission, but even the Royal College of Physicians and many more. I am not here to reel out a list of who supports the Government. It is interesting that she says that I confuse disagreement with divisiveness, because it was her colleague the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) who just stood up there and called people “racial gatekeepers”. I wonder whether the hon. Lady agrees with that comment, which is unbelievably divisive rhetoric. What I would say to her is that she does not speak for all ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities are not uniquely left wing, and to claim that a report about black and brown people can only talk about issues from her perspective completely ignores the fact that there are many of us, of various skin colours—she can see my face and she knows I am a black woman, just like her—who disagree. We disagree. She raises the point about maternal health, and I would like to take the opportunity to make this point: in a debate on 11 March, she said that

“one in four black women dies in childbirth”.—[Official Report, 11 March 2021; Vol. 690, c. 1089.]

That statistic, which thankfully she has now corrected, is completely wrong. The actual figure is not 25% of black women, but 0.34%. It is a very confusing statistic because we often represent the numbers in terms of numbers per 800,000.¹ What I have been doing is working on maternal health. I have spoken to the chief midwifery officer and to Dame Donna Kinnair, the head of the Royal College of Nursing; we in government have had conversations and they all accept that because the numbers are so small, it will often be very hard to target effectively, but that does not mean we will not try. We do have a maternal health strategy, which I know the hon. Lady has seen, and I wish that for once she would acknowledge

the work that the Government have done, rather than repeating false statistics and pretending that nothing is happening, when that is far from the truth.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her statement. The commission's report rightly sets how geography, family make-up and socioeconomics contribute to inequality, but the report is also clear that that does not mean that racism does not exist in our country today. Echoing the McGregor review, the reports shows, for example, racism that people experience when applying for a job. Will the Government include specific policies to tackle racism at work in the response that my hon. Friend talked about in her opening statement, as well as tackling the more general economic inequality, which can affect everyone in society?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. Everyone has a part to play. I cannot outline the Government response now; we are still working on it, as I announced in my statement. However, the report makes recommendations not just for Government, but for the public sector, the private sector, businesses and individuals. There will be plenty that we can do to address those issues, and we will see what the Government have to say on them in their response in the summer.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: The commission's chair says that it found no evidence in Britain of institutional racism, which it defines as

“racist or discriminatory processes, policies, attitudes or behaviours in a single institution.”

How does the Minister for Equalities square that with the policy of holiday park operator Pontins to ban Gypsies and Travellers from its premises? Is not deliberate discrimination on the grounds of race, whether by arms of the state or private corporations, institutional racism in plain sight?

Kemi Badenoch: The commission looked at specific areas; it did not examine Pontins. It did not say that there is no institutional racism in Britain; as I said in my statement, it said that about the areas it looked at. I do not believe that the holiday sector was one of the areas it examined. For what it is worth, no business should discriminate against people on the basis of their ethnicity or background. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and I share that view. I do not know the full details of the Pontins situation, but that is exactly the kind of thing that we want to address in Government, so that we can make sure that communities get fair treatment. What is good about the commission's report is that, unlike many reports that look at race and racism, is actually looks at the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller community, especially in respect of education—many people ignore them because they are classified as white, which I do not think is the right way to go. That is one reason why it is important to disaggregate BAME and talk about specific groups.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: May I thank my hon. Friend the Minister personally for reaching out after the threat that my fiancé and I received last week?

Since the report was published, many Carshalton and Wallington residents have asked to see the Government's response and what action is now going to be taken.

1.[Official Report, 27 April 2021, Vol. 693, c. 2MC.]

Will my hon. Friend confirm that once a response has been issued and work has begun on implementing recommendations, the GEO will begin to establish mechanisms to measure the success of measures and provide regular updates to the House?

Kemi Badenoch: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. This is very much part of the ethos of the equality hub: there is no point in enacting policy and then not checking to see whether it is successful. In fact, too many resources have probably been spent on creating activities but not necessarily checking whether they are generating the benefits that we expect. I thank my hon. Friend for that question and assure him that that is the way we intend to approach these issues.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I put on record my thanks for the work of the Runnymede Trust and declare an interest as a former member of staff there, working as its public affairs manager. The Runnymede Trust is a leading race equality think-tank and has, through some of its quality work and research, helped to identify issues in respect of addressing race equality in this country.

I wish to focus on the commission and the issues around education. The commission focuses a lot on the educational experience of young black and minority ethnic students, but I hope the Minister will agree with me on this. A few years ago a Runnymede Trust article highlighted the fact that when a number of black and minority ethnic students who do well at GCSE and A-level go to university, their degree classifications are much lower, which has a big impact on them securing work when they leave university. Will the Minister agree to look at this issue and not just accept the commission's report in terms of saying that for all black and minority ethnic students educational attainment is going in the right direction?

Kemi Badenoch: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has actually read the report. As I said, I am happy to debate and disagree, but not to be misrepresented.

The hon. Lady raises an interesting point about what is happening in education. I should clarify that the good news that the report highlights is around GCSEs; it probably agrees with her about what is going on in higher education. The report talks about black students being more likely to take poorer quality courses at less prestigious universities, and there is a big disparity in the fact that black students are the least likely to go to a high tariff provider and are 1.7 times more likely than their white peers to attend what the report describes as "low tariff institutions". Part of the difference is due to the high progression rate into higher education for black students, but the report also talks about the sort of advice that they are given. It is very much an issue that we should explore further and I will encourage colleagues from the Department for Education to look into it. If the hon. Lady wants to write to them directly, I encourage her to do that.

I thank the hon. Lady for her question and note her comments about the former Runnymede Trust. We on the Conservative Benches have worked well with people such as Trevor Phillips, and one of the commissioners, Samir Shah, is also a former chair of the Runnymede Trust, but I cannot accept the behaviour of the current chair and some staff members.¹

1. [Official Report, 22 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 6MC.]

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: The Sewell report recognises that issues of mistrust and unfairness, whether they are real or perceived, really matter, especially in policing. Will my hon. Friend engage with her Home Office colleagues to develop proposals to build on the good work that has been done to make local police forces more representative of the communities that they serve and introduce more community oversight of local policing?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, that is one of the recommendations in the report and it is clear from what it says that trust and fairness are key issues for ethnic minority communities, particularly when it comes to policing, as my hon. Friend has just highlighted. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing is already engaging with the commission to discuss its recommendations in that regard and I welcome his early initiative in doing so.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Sorry, Janet, we have lost you.

Janet Daby:...to address structural inequalities of race and ethnicity in the social security system.

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I did not hear most of the question. If the hon. Lady writes to me, I shall send her a comprehensive response in a letter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Janet, the volume went for whatever reason.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con) [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree that, because the children's commissioner for England and the Royal College of Physicians have welcomed recommendations in their respective fields, it is clear that the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities was motivated by outcomes rather than outrage?

Kemi Badenoch: Absolutely. I welcome the support shown by those leading experts in their respective fields and I thank them for their positive engagement with the report's findings and recommendations that pertain to them. The Sewell commission, as I understand it, adopted an approach that was driven by a need for better outcomes, not better process, which is testament to its strong desire to effect change for all, not for a selected few. I am very happy to accept that there will probably never be a race report in this country that everyone will get behind. We have very different views on it, but what we do need is to hear from those people who have different views from what we constantly hear reported.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: Minister, is it common sense to want to ignore the difficult part of our history and withdraw funding from charitable organisations, including the National Trust and the Runnymede Trust, which highlight the consequences of institutional racism, as members of the so-called Common Sense Group is proposing? Is that not divisive rhetoric that stokes culture wars?

Kemi Badenoch: It is interesting that the hon. Lady raises that point. The Runnymede Trust has said, according to a letter from the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, that the EHRC should not have funding. It implied that the EHRC should be defunded, so if she wants to talk about people who want to defund charities and organisations working on racial equality, she should ask the chair of the Runnymede Trust why she made that statement.¹

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: May I begin by commending the Minister for her appearance at the Dispatch Box today, which has been rightly and appropriately robust at times? I very much welcome this report as it is one of the first reports on race that acknowledges the disadvantage experienced by many white working class boys in our country and also acknowledges the geographical disparities that exist. Will she ensure that the recommendations in the Sewell report are brought forward as part of the Government's levelling-up agenda?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the importance of this report and the opportunity it provides for the Government to make Britain a fairer society for all. This report is the first attempt to grip the complex reality of ethnic advantage and disadvantage. Unlike many other reports on race and ethnicity, it is also the first to include some of the profound disparities experienced by the race and ethnic majority in this country. Educational outcomes for children in this group are a critical part of the commission's deliberations and its approach to the 24 recommendations is one that stands to benefit all, regardless of their race, ethnicity or socio-economic background. We want a country that is fair for everyone. The Government are now actively considering this report and the recommendations that it makes and look forward to publishing their full response in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for her statement and for responding to 28 questions.

Point of Order

2.39 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. During the statement, the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), made multiple accusations that I made false statements in my remarks. I want to set the record straight. Nothing in my remarks was false or inaccurate. I seek your guidance on how I can get the record corrected.

I hope that you will indulge me, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I very briefly make a further point. I think it is only right that I do so. When my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) made the error that the Minister mentioned, she was giving a speech sharing her personal experience of baby loss. The Minister knows that. That is why my hon. Friend made the error, and she quickly corrected the record. It was unfair of the Minister to use that in her response to my hon. Friend.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The hon. Lady has put that on the record in making her point of order, but I am sure that there will be many more opportunities for this issue to be further discussed.

We will move straight to the ten-minute rule Bill without any pause, but during that time, may we please have the Dispatch Boxes cleaned, if that is at all possible? I know that the Minister who will take the place of the Equalities Minister will not touch the Dispatch Box; he has given me an assurance.

1. [Official Report, 22 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 6MC.]

Planning (Local Authority Housing Developments)

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

2.40 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish independent local planning processes to determine housing development planning applications submitted by local authorities; and for connected purposes.

This Bill is designed to improve scrutiny and transparency in the planning process, particularly in the light of the growing appetite of local authorities to build more homes for private sale themselves and to act more like private developers than local authorities.

Hon. Members will know that at present, the foundation of our planning system rests with an impartial assessment of a planning application being carried out by the local planning authority. That assessment takes into account the council's own planning policies and the views of a wide range of consultees. In conjunction with bodies such as the Environment Agency, Natural England and the relevant transport authority, a local planning officer will then either determine the application under delegated powers or provide an officer recommendation and allow councillors on the relevant planning committee to make the final decision, with regard to key planning issues at hand.

The fundamental point in the current process is that both the assessment and the determination of a planning application are independent. In the majority of cases, the current system works well, and local planning authorities can deal with the full spectrum of applications they receive from individuals, small and medium-sized enterprises, large private developers, housing associations and other parts of the public sector. Yet in a system that works well, there are examples where local authorities can effectively mark their own homework.

Many local authorities bring forward applications for new council housing or, in the case of unitary authorities, new schools, meaning that the council is, in effect, both the developer and the applicant. Generally speaking, those applications relate to core council and public services, so perhaps these relatively infrequent conflicts of interest could be overlooked. However, as I alluded to, many local authorities are beginning to move away from the provision of just council housing and core public services, and to focus instead on building more houses for private sale. In effect, councils are starting to act more like private developers.

Nowhere is this more evident than in my constituency of Eastleigh. As I have raised in the House previously, the Liberal Democrat council in my area is taking forward a large-scale application for 2,500 houses in the village of Horton Heath, all built on green fields, to the considerable dismay of local residents. The council has borrowed large sums to fund the development. It has bought land from a private developer and expanded the original planning permission for the site from 900 homes to 2,500.

We already know that the profits from that development, which is overwhelmingly for private sale, are built into the council's future budget. I hasten to add that the

borough council currently has a debt of £540 million, or £4,000 for every man, woman and child who lives in my constituency. I would argue that that is not a good business model, but that questionable business model has contributed to Eastleigh's having built 49% more housing than required by Government targets in the last three years, and it is continuing to inspire the council to build 4,311 houses in the next five years, nearly 20% more than targets ask for.

Naturally, this has left many of my constituents feeling angry and let down by the planning system. These plans appear to go through the council's own planning system with ease, given that this level of overdevelopment is the policy of the Liberal Democrat administration. Many residents are rightly asking how this can be right when there is such an obvious conflict of interest.

We must ask ourselves: where is the independent scrutiny that we apply to other planning applications? Is there any realistic proposition that this application would be refused when the council is so heavily invested in a project, both financially and politically? To a lesser degree, would the council treat itself in the same way as a private developer when it comes to issues such as transport, flood mitigation, density or the provision of affordable housing? I say to the Minister that my experience is that it would not. It should also be acknowledged that even if the current system does not generate any difference in the treatment of applicants, the perception of applicants being treated differently is just as damaging to the whole system.

To be clear, I am not saying that local authorities should not be able to build and develop housing themselves. I entirely agree that they should. However, I am concerned about the lack of transparency and the absence of the usual checks and balances afforded to other developers. It stands to reason that if a local authority wants to act as a developer, it should be treated as such and should not take advantage of the fact that it is the local planning authority. That is why I believe that this Bill is absolutely vital to protect the integrity and probity of our current planning system. In simple terms, the Bill would reform the process by which planning applications made by a local authority in its own area would be determined. The process would ensure that any application made had been scrutinised and determined properly.

Before outlining how the reforms would operate, I will first set out the process for triggering the new independent process. The mechanism for determining applications could be triggered in one of two ways. The first way would be if a local authority brought forward any development of 300 units or more in its administrative boundary. That would automatically trigger the independent process.

To supplement this and to provide a mechanism for the public to trigger the process, the second way would require a level of public engagement subject to a threshold. When a local authority submitted a planning application to itself, there would be a grace period of 30 days before a planning application was processed. Local authorities would be obliged to set up an online portal that allowed people to register their request for the independent process to be triggered. If 10% of the electors of a council ward affected by the development signed the petition, the independent process would also be triggered. This would not only provide a safeguard for multiple

[Paul Holmes]

applications just below 300 units, but allow members of the public to direct controversial applications to the independent process if a suitable number of electors was reached. This would then lead to the reforms to the actual process.

Once the independent process is triggered, the first step in it is for the planning application to be assigned to a statistical neighbour planning authority. The neighbouring planning authority would allocate a planning officer to act as the case officer, and the case officer would determine the application in line with host local authority's planning policy and usual consultees. A fee would be paid to the neighbouring planning authority by the host planning authority to cover the costs in officer time. The decision would then be referred to councillors at the host planning authority for determination. The public could be assured, however, that the officer recommendation was based on an independent assessment of the planning merits.

The second part of the independent process would automatically refer any decision made by councillors from the host authority to the independent Planning Inspectorate. In order for the planning application to be approved, it would be necessary for a planning inspector to ratify the decision made by councillors. If the planning inspector disagreed, the application would then be referred to the Secretary of State for a final decision.

I believe that this small but significant reform to our planning system would bring much-needed transparency back to the current system. It would ensure that local authorities submitting their own planning applications were subject to proper scrutiny and would provide reassurance for members of the public and constituencies across the United Kingdom. It would end the conflict of interest that exists in the current system and ensure that local authorities were not granting planning permission to themselves.

The planning system—I say this as a former planning committee chairman—can be a game-changer for house building across the UK. However, many people still see it as opaque and favourable to big developers. This is a small step to correct that view and give our residents the reassurance that they need. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have been given no indication that anybody intends to oppose this motion, and I see no one rising, so I intend to put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paul Holmes, Chris Clarkson, Sara Britcliffe, Robbie Moore, Ben Everitt, Scott Benton, Andrew Griffith and Stephen Hammond present the Bill.

Paul Holmes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 286).

Finance (No. 2) Bill

(Clauses 1 to 5; Clauses 6 to 14 and Schedule 1; Clauses 24 to 26; Clause 28; Clause 30 and Schedule 6; Clauses 31 to 33; Clause 36 and Schedule 7; Clause 40; Clause 41; Clause 86; Clauses 87 to 89 and Schedules 16 and 17; Clauses 90 and 91; Clauses 92 to 96 and Schedule 18; Clause 97 and Schedule 19; Clauses 109 to 111 and Schedules 21 and 22; Clause 115 and Schedule 27; Clauses 117 to 121 and Schedules 29 to 32; Clauses 128 to 130; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to: the impact of any provision on the financial resources of families or to the subject matter of Clauses 1 to 5, 24 to 26, 28, 31 to 33, 40 and 86; the subject matter of Clauses 6 to 14 and Schedule 1; the impact of any provision on regional economic development; tax avoidance or evasion; the subject matter of Clauses 87 to 89 and Schedules 16 and 17 and Clauses 90 and 91; the subject matter of Clauses 92 to 96 and Schedule 18, Clause 97 and Schedule 19 and Clauses 128 to 130)

[2ND ALLOCATED DAY]

Further considered in Committee

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans): I should explain that, in these exceptional circumstances, although the Chair of the Committee would normally sit in the Clerk's chair during Committee stage, in order to comply with social distancing requirements, I will remain in the Speaker's Chair, and I will be carrying out the role not of Deputy Speaker but of Chairman of the Committee. We should be addressed as Chairs of the Committee, rather than as Deputy Speakers.

Clause 30

CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY SCHEME

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 70, in schedule 6, page 121, line 1, leave out "ceases to be" and insert "is not".

This amendment would allow that a de minimis amount of minor works can be disregarded.

Amendment 71, page 121, line 2, after "time" insert ", but the body or person expects it to be met at any time,".

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 70.

Amendment 72, page 121, line 3, leave out "continuing to be" and insert "being".

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 70.

Amendment 84, page 121, line 4, leave out "any further".

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 70.

Amendment 85, page 121, line 5, at end insert "exceeding £3,000,000".

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 70.

Amendment 73, page 121, line 8, leave out paragraph 3.

This amendment would remove the provision making businesses who fall within the current definition, but who would not fall under the new definition of "deemed contractor", to be drawn into the new regime for CIS from 6 April 2021.

Amendment 74, page 121, line 20, leave out paragraph 4.

This amendment would remove the provision requiring that, when a contractor is deducting the relevant percentage from a contract payment made to a sub-contractor, they should first deduct only the cost of material purchased by the sub-contractor from the figure to which the relevant percentage deduction is applied.

Amendment 75, page 123, line 17, leave out “2021-22” and insert “2022-23”.

This amendment would delay commencement until April 2022.

Amendment 76, page 123, line 20, leave out “2021” and insert “2022”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 75.

That schedule 6 be the Sixth schedule to the Bill.

Clause 36 stand part.

Government amendments 17 to 42.

That schedule 7 be the Seventh schedule to the Bill.

Clause 41 stand part.

Clause 115 stand part.

That schedule 27 be the Twenty-seventh schedule to the Bill.

Clauses 117 to 121 stand part.

Amendment 77, in schedule 29, page 319, line 23, at end insert—

“32 After section 280 of Finance Act 2014 insert—

‘280A Treatment of promoters of abusive tax avoidance schemes

(1) In any proceedings for the offence of cheating the public revenue, where—

- (a) the person charged acted as a promoter in relation to relevant arrangements within the meaning of section 235, or the person charged gave in the course of business affirmative advice on the viability of relevant arrangements within the meaning of section 234, and
- (b) the relevant arrangements were abusive tax arrangements within the meaning of sub-paragraph 3(2) of Schedule 16 of Finance (No. 2) Act 2017,

subsection (2) shall apply, subject to subsection (3).

(2) If, at any time that the person charged acted so as to fall within subsection (1)(a), that person was aware of the course of action or intended course of action having the consequence that the relevant arrangements were abusive tax arrangements within the meaning of sub-paragraph 3(2) of Schedule 16 of Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, the actions of that person in respect of the relevant arrangements shall be deemed to have been dishonest.

(3) Subsection (2) shall not apply if the person charged proves that they held in good faith the belief that the course of action or intended course of action was reasonable in the circumstances.”

This amendment would cause promoters of tax avoidance schemes which are abusive (defined in existing legislation to mean schemes where it is not reasonable to regard the scheme as a reasonable course of action) to be treated as acting dishonestly for the purposes of criminal prosecution of tax offences, without dishonesty having to be separately proved by the prosecution.

That schedules 29 to 32 be the Twenty-ninth to Thirty-second schedules to the Bill.

New clause 14—*Review of changes to construction industry scheme—*

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact on investment in parts of the United Kingdom and regions of England of the changes made to the construction industry scheme by section 30 and schedule 6 of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider the effects of the provisions on—

- (a) business investment,
- (b) employment,
- (c) productivity,
- (d) GDP growth, and
- (e) poverty.

(3) In this section—

‘parts of the United Kingdom’ means—

- (a) England,
- (b) Scotland,
- (c) Wales, and
- (d) Northern Ireland;

and ‘regions of England’ has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

This new clause would require a report on the construction industry scheme provisions on various economic indicators.

New clause 15—*Review of effect on tax revenues—*

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the effects on tax revenues of section 115 and schedule 27, and sections 117 to 121 and schedules 29 to 32 of this Act, and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—

- (a) the expected change in corporation and income tax paid attributable to the provisions; and
- (b) an estimate of any change, attributable to the provisions, in the difference between the amount of tax required to be paid to the Commissioners and the amount paid.

(3) The reference to tax required to be paid in subsection 2(b) includes taxes payable by the owners and employees of Scottish limited partnerships.”

This new clause would require a report on the impact of certain provisions of the Bill on narrowing the tax gap by comparing: (a) the expected change in corporation and income tax paid attributable to the provisions and (b) an estimate of any change, attributable to the provisions, in the difference between the amount of tax required to be paid to the Commissioners and the amount paid. In particular, this includes taxes payable by the owners and employees of Scottish limited partnerships.

New clause 29—*Review of tax avoidance measures—*

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of sections 117 to 121 and Schedules 29 to 32 of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act, and then annually for five further years.

(2) A review under this section must estimate the expected impact of sections 117 to 121 and Schedules 29 to 32 on—

- (a) levels of tax avoidance,
- (b) levels of tax evasion, and
- (c) reducing the tax gap in each tax year from 2021-22 to 2025-26.”

This new clause would require the Government to review the impact of the provisions relating to tax avoidance and publish regular reports setting out their findings.

2.50 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government remain committed to tackling tax avoidance, evasion and other forms of non-compliance. Since 2010, we have introduced over 150 new measures and invested over £2 billion in additional funding to ensure that the right tax is paid at the right time. These efforts have helped to secure and protect over £250 billion for the UK’s public services that would otherwise have gone unpaid, and they have helped to bring down the tax gap to 4.7% in 2018-19—its lowest recorded rate.

[Jesse Norman]

But there is still work to do. Clauses in this Bill build on our previous reforms in order to clamp down on deliberate non-compliance and make sure that everyone pays their fair share. They include measures to tighten the anti-avoidance rules aimed at those who promote and enable tax avoidance schemes. They also close a loophole in the existing anti-avoidance rule aimed at preventing non-UK resident individuals from claiming relief when they gift business assets to a company controlled overseas.

The clauses support HMRC's strategy on promoting good tax compliance. As an example of that approach, the Government are amending the follower notices regime, which penalises taxpayers who have used avoidance schemes that have been shown to be ineffective, in order to make it fairer for those who comply, while ensuring that the regime remains just as effective at combating avoidance. The Bill also seeks to bring parts of the hidden economy out of the shadows by making some licence approvals conditional on tax registration and compliance. The clauses in the Bill are necessarily technical, which is in part down to the complex rules that are currently in place. Given the number of issues that we are covering and the number of speakers in the debate, I will keep my remarks fairly brief.

Clause 30 and schedule 6 introduce changes to tackle abuse of the construction industry scheme. The construction industry scheme is a revenue protection scheme designed to tackle evasion in the construction sector. The scheme protects approximately £7.1 billion in tax every year by requiring contractors to make deductions from the payments they make to subcontractors that they engage. Those payments count as advance payments towards those subcontractors' tax and national insurance. The changes made by clause 30 will allow HMRC to correct employers' CIS deductions when they are false or incorrect. Clause 30 will clarify the rules on deductions for the cost of materials and change the rules for determining which businesses will need to operate the CIS. It will also expand the scope of the current penalty for providing false information to HMRC.

Scottish National party amendment 74 would remove paragraph 4 of schedule 6 to the Bill, which would have the effect of removing the proposed changes to rules for deductions for materials. However, there is a clear case in public policy for these changes. Some contractors and subcontractors are interpreting the rules incorrectly at present in a way that undermines the purpose of allowing materials deductions within the scheme, which allows some contractors and subcontractors an advantage over others. The proposed rule changes will ensure a clear and consistent approach, providing a level playing field for those involved. I therefore urge the House to reject amendment 74.

Amendment 73 proposes to remove paragraph 3 of schedule 6, which relates to the transitional arrangements between the old and new rules for qualifying as a deemed contractor. This would mean that many businesses would have to change their business arrangements overnight and go through the process of re-registering for the construction industry scheme under the new rules. As this could be more disruptive and confusing than the proposed transitional arrangements, I urge the House to reject the amendment.

Amendments 75 and 76 would delay the commencement of this measure to April 2022 rather than April 2021. Such a delay would not be appropriate, as industry has already been consulted on the changes and any impacts are expected to be limited. Again, I urge the House to reject these amendments.

Clause 36 and schedule 7 amend the corporation tax rules governing so-called hybrid mismatches. These rules are intended to tackle aggressive tax planning by multinational companies that seek to take advantage of differences in how countries view entities and financial instruments. Hybrid mismatches can lead to double deductions for the same expense or deductions for an expense without any corresponding receipt being taxable. The Government have consulted in this area and are amending the rules in several areas so that they remain proportionate and do not lead to economic double taxation. That includes introducing a limited grouping matching rule and a change to the type of income that counteractions under the rules can be set off against.

Government amendments 17 to 42 to clause 36 have been tabled to ensure that the changes provided under that clause work and reflect the underlying policy intent. They address various technical issues that have been raised by external commentators following the publication of the Bill, and mostly change small and technical details.

Clause 41 will close a loophole in the capital gains tax gift holdover relief rules by preventing non-UK residents from being able to claim the relief while transferring a business asset to a company controlled overseas that they personally own. By making this change, the Government are ensuring that the relief is used fairly and only for its intended purpose.

Clause 117 and schedule 29 make changes to the promoters of tax avoidance schemes regime, known as POTAS. The changes allow Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to issue stop notices to prevent the promotion of schemes that it suspects do not work and to obtain information from suspected promoters at an earlier stage of the process than at present. They also prevent promoters from sidestepping the rules by rearranging their corporate structure to carry out activities through different entities. There are a number of other technical amendments to ensure the continued effectiveness of the regime. There are also further measures in the Bill to enhance the operation of the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes—DOTAS—rules.

Clause 119 changes the penalties issued to enablers of tax avoidance schemes that have been defeated in court, at tribunal or otherwise counteracted. The changes will allow HMRC to obtain relevant information from potential enablers at the earliest possible moment so as to be able to consider whether they are liable for an enabler penalty.

Clause 120 and schedule 31 make changes to ensure that the general anti-abuse rule can be used as intended in respect of partnerships that have entered into abusive tax avoidance arrangements.

Finally I turn to clause 121, which from April 2022 makes the renewal of certain licences to trade conditional on licence applicants in England and Wales completing checks with HMRC. The checks will confirm whether applicants are registered for tax, and new licence applicants will be directed to HMRC guidance about their tax obligations.

I turn to the most substantive of the amendments before us today: amendment 77, which relates to the POTAS provisions that I outlined. The amendment seeks to amend schedule 29 so that anyone subject to the promoters of tax avoidance schemes regime, and promoting or enabling abusive tax arrangements, should be deemed to have been acting dishonestly unless they can show that they acted in good faith and believed the arrangements to be reasonable. This would mean, in respect of the criminal offence of cheating the public revenue, that a person would automatically be treated as dishonest where it had been demonstrated that they had promoted abusive tax arrangements as defined in the general anti-abuse rule. As such, there would be no requirement for any prosecution to prove dishonest conduct.

I fully agree that promoters who break the law should face the consequences of their actions. That is why the Government are putting so much emphasis on anti-avoidance measures and measures against promoters of tax avoidance in the Bill and elsewhere. We should be under no illusions about this. It is not honest to market tax schemes or arrangements that are known not to work and that at their heart feature false statements.

3 pm

However, cheating the public revenue is the most serious tax offence, carrying a potential sentence of life imprisonment. It is therefore right that the prosecution should have to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt—the usual standard of proof in a criminal case—and to demonstrate that the person has been dishonest in order to secure a conviction of cheating the public revenue. We all want fraudulent operators to be brought to book, but shifting the burden of proof for such a serious crime on to the defendant to prove their innocence is at odds with the principles of our criminal justice system and would undermine the right of a defendant to remain silent. The burden should be on the prosecution to prove dishonesty to the criminal standard of proof. That is fundamental to the rule of law.

I therefore recommend that amendments 17 to 42 are made to clause 36, and that clauses 30, 36, 41, 115 and 117 to 121, as well as schedules 6, 7, 27 and 29 to 32, stand part of the Bill.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I will speak to new clause 29, tabled in my name and the names of the Leader of the Opposition and other right hon. and hon. Friends. It is timely to consider what the Government are doing to tackle tax avoidance and tax evasion today, with this month marking five years since the publication of the Panama papers. Those papers revealed the true global scale of tax avoidance and tax evasion and the need for comprehensive and effective action to tackle them. Of course, the clauses we are considering are far more limited in scope.

The Minister set out that clause 30 relates to the abuse of the construction industry scheme rules, clause 36 makes amendments to the corporation tax rules for hybrids and other mismatches and clause 41 amends the anti-avoidance rule when claiming relief for gifts of business assets. More widely, clauses 115 and 117 to 121 relate to other measures, including penalties for the promoters of tax avoidance and giving HMRC new powers to obtain information. We will not oppose those measures today.

However, our concern about the Government's approach is centred not so much on what those clauses cover but what the Bill, and the Government's approach more widely, fail to do. Our concern is that, faced with the challenges of tax avoidance and tax evasion, and with the public clearly wanting to see definitive action from the Government, Ministers have presented a Bill of measures that are relatively minor and technical. Indeed, as the House of Commons Library analysis of the Bill concluded, it would seem that the Exchequer impact of these changes will be minimal as they are not included in the Budget report costings.

The truth is that three Conservative Prime Ministers and five Conservative Chancellors have failed to tackle tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance. The Government have repeatedly promised to act, but their proposals in the Bill fall far short of the change we need. That is why our new clause would require the Government to review the impact of provisions in the Bill relating to the levels of tax avoidance and tax evasion and the size of the tax gap, and to publish regular reports setting out their findings. The Government must not be allowed to hide behind warm words on this matter. They need to be transparent about the impact, or lack thereof, that their proposals will have.

We also welcome the amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), which seeks to treat promoters of tax avoidance schemes which are abusive as acting dishonestly for the purposes of criminal prosecution of tax offences. This kind of change is crucial if we are to shift towards more criminal prosecutions for the promoters of tax avoidance schemes, and to shift the gear of the Government's approach.

At the moment, where tax avoidance has occurred, the system lands liabilities on the tax payers, who are usually not tax experts and may have been falsely told that a tax avoidance scheme is lawful. In contrast, the promoters of tax avoidance schemes are allowed far too often to get away with it. We therefore welcome any efforts to strengthen penalties for the promoters of failed tax avoidance schemes. But we have seen nothing from the Government today to raise the stakes and to make greater use of the powers HMRC already has to bring criminal prosecutions against the promoters of fraudulent tax schemes.

We know that HMRC recognises its power to use criminal investigation approaches to tackle the promotion and enabling of tax avoidance schemes, but in a letter the Financial Secretary sent me in January this year, he admitted that, since the formation of HMRC's fraud investigation service in 2016, only 20 individuals have been convicted for offences relating to arrangements that have been promoted as tax avoidance. An average of around four people a year does not feel like a concerted effort.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. Does he agree that it seems disproportionate that more people, in an adjusted sense, tackle benefit fraud than tackle big business or dodgy individuals who are taking money from the public purse?

James Murray: I very much agree. My hon. Friend makes an important point about the Government's priorities, and about the lack of priority they give to going after

[James Murray]

the promoters of tax avoidance schemes and those who evade paying tax, in comparison to other actions in Government. We are seeking to put pressure on them today to address that imbalance.

HMRC's criminal investigation policy states:

"Criminal investigation will be reserved for cases where HMRC needs to send a strong deterrent message".

However, we know that fraud through the promotion of tax avoidance continues at scale, involving at least an estimated £20 billion in 2018-19, so it is hard to imagine why Ministers would not support a stronger deterrent message being sent by the greater use of criminal prosecutions.

Part of the answer may be the understaffing of HMRC. In a response on 11 January this year to a parliamentary question, the Financial Secretary admitted that the number of full-time equivalent employees at HMRC had fallen since 2010 from 67,553 to 58,467. That is a reduction of more than one in seven. The question of capacity in HMRC and the impact that that may have on its ability to tackle tax abuse must not be ignored. The Tax Justice Network refers to the fact that a member of staff in the compliance business stream at HMRC brings in on average over £900,000 a year on a £30,000 salary. It has pointed out that the Chancellor's additional investment in HMRC staffing is directed towards tackling fraud related to covid spending, while previous funding increases have supported HMRC's Brexit capacity. Its view is that the Chancellor must invest further in HMRC's core compliance capacity.

Furthermore, beyond the questions around tackling the promoters of tax avoidance, the Bill is also silent on other important areas that need to be pursued, such as efforts to set up a register of overseas entities. Legislation is needed to establish a register that would show exactly who owns the foreign companies buying up British property. This would serve as a key part of any clampdown on money laundering.

The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, first announced plans for this in 2015, yet more than five years later, the legislation is nowhere to be seen. I bet he has not been in touch with Ministers for action over that. I would welcome the Minister using his speech at the end of this debate as an opportunity to explain whether the promised deadline of introducing legislation to set up a register of overseas entities by 2021 will be missed. If he is silent on this matter, we will take that as a yes.

I would like to use the opportunity of a discussion on tax avoidance to ask the Treasury ministerial team again to confirm whether the Chancellor backs plans for a global minimum corporate tax rate, as proposed by the US President. When I asked the Minister's colleague, the Exchequer Secretary, to address this point during the Bill's Second Reading last Tuesday, she did not respond, which I am sure was an oversight. I would therefore welcome the Financial Secretary addressing this question directly in his closing speech, to avoid any misperception that he and his colleagues are deliberately avoiding the question.

Our criticism of the Government in relation to tax avoidance and evasion centres not so much on what the measures in the Bill would achieve but rather on the ways in which the Bill and the Government's wider

approach fall short. The Government lack a tough and comprehensive approach to prosecuting the promoters of tax avoidance, to going after international money launderers and to pursuing those who seek to evade tax. We know that the impact of the measures in the Bill will be relatively minor and technical. The public deserve to have the Government present clearly and transparently what effect the measures in the Bill will have, and our new clause simply requires that their impact on tax avoidance, tax evasion and the size of the tax gap should be reviewed and laid in public before this House.

Throughout the Minister's statements and comments, there is a clear pattern that the Government favour minor technical amendments to legislation on this matter, rather than upping their game and truly calling time on the practices that the public clearly want to see ended. Today they have an opportunity, by supporting our new clause, to show that they understand the need to be clear with the public, to recognise the need to strengthen their approach on this matter, and to commit to coming back with the resources and legislation that are needed to truly make a difference.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I want to make a few points, principally on amendment 77. Perhaps I can start by saying that I do not agree with the Opposition spokesman, who has just addressed the House so eloquently, that the Government have been slow to tackle tax abuse and tax fraud. I should, at the outset, draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I think the Government have been very good at tackling tax fraud, starting in 2010 when this Conservative Government first came into office. The reforms that were introduced by George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, deliberately targeted tax abuse and set up a number of measures to try to ensure that we clamp down on it, as it is common cause on both sides of the House for us to do.

Where I do agree with the Opposition spokesman is in his reference to the Panama and paradise papers. That excellent work by journalists from, I think, *The Guardian* and the BBC exposed the fact that money laundering, dirty money and abuse in that sector were far more rampant than we realised. That is one of the reasons why the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and I have made so much of an effort in this House, along with colleagues on both sides of the House, to try to clamp down on money laundering and dirty money and ensure that we have sunlight as the best disinfectant on all of this. That is why we introduced the open public registers of beneficial ownership for the British overseas territories, and why we strove so hard to persuade the Crown dependencies—successfully, now—to introduce those same open registers. That is the way in which we stop kleptocrats, bent politicians, warlords and corrupt businesspeople from stealing from the Exchequer but also, of course, from Africa and Africans. That was the great benefit of the paradise and Panama papers: they showed so clearly the extent of what was going on.

I thought that the Financial Secretary made some very good points about amendment 77. In general, I do think that the Revenue has enough power over the private citizen in the laws of the land as they stand at the moment. However, the point I would make to the Financial Secretary—he has been most receptive in

listening to the right hon. Member for Barking and me about this—is that eternal vigilance is required. As we have seen, and as amendment 77 draws attention to, there is an inequality of arms in this matter. Advisers who set up these schemes often have an aura of authority, because they are lawyers, accountants and professional people, which those whom they advise may not be.

I want more to be done to ensure that, where these bad schemes of tax evasion are put together by professional advisers, they do not get off scot-free while the people they put into these devices, or talk into going into them, take the rap. It is not right that they should just lose the fees that they earn, which I think is currently the position: we should toughen the financial penalties. The Minister handles these matters very well, and I know that he wants this to be more than a senior common room debate. I know that he is conscious of the balance between the rights of the individual and making sure that people are not able to evade tax. I know that he does think seriously about that, so I would just urge him to always keep an open mind on this issue.

This is a familiar theme. In this year of Britain's presidency of the G7, we should remember the work that was done by George Osborne for the last G8, at which he championed the open registers that were introduced in Britain in 2016. It is a proud achievement of this Conservative Government that, at the last G8, they moved the world towards focusing on these illicit flows of money, and this year with the G7, I hope that the Minister will consider it important as well. I completely accept that we are not going to divide the Committee on amendment 77. What the Minister said about the amendment was extremely constructive and I hope he will feel it right for the House to return to this matter on very regular occasions, in pursuit of what unites us all: that people should pay their fair levels of tax.

3.15 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), with whom I work very closely on this issue; it demonstrates the best of Parliament that we are able to do so across the House.

I rise to speak in support of amendment 77, which stands in my name and that of members of the all-party group on anti-corruption and responsible tax. Our proposals command support across the House, and I know the Minister will therefore address this issue thoroughly and seriously, not just in his response today but in the work that I know he is doing to bear down on those who enable and support tax avoidance and financial crime. I simply say this to the Minister: he may have reservations about the technicalities of our proposals, but he should at the very least accept the principle that underpins them and say so today.

Big corporations and high net-worth individuals who engage in tax avoidance schemes and financial crime do not dream up these schemes on their own; they are invented and developed by the huge army of tax professionals—accountants, lawyers, banks and advisers—who spend their working life trying to identify loopholes and wheezes. The schemes they devise do not just help but actively encourage people not to pay their rightful contribution through tax to the common purse for the common good.

At present, HMRC may slowly and belatedly catch up, and may deem such schemes unlawful. If it does so, the individuals have to pay up and sometimes face enormous tax demands, but the enablers of tax avoidance mostly get away scot-free; at worst they may lose the fees they earned from setting up the scheme for their clients. Our amendment would hold these enablers to proper account. If advisers and promoters involved in a scheme know that the scheme does not work, they are committing the criminal offence—mentioned by the Minister—of cheating the public revenue. They are breaking the law, so they should be pursued, charged and convicted with a criminal charge.

That does not happen now, and our amendment seeks to make it easier for the enforcement agencies to pursue criminal prosecutions. Not only would they hold the advisers to account, but I am completely convinced that the threat of a criminal prosecution would act as the most effective deterrent and bring to a halt many of the activities of these rogue advisers. It would be the most efficient way of tackling tax avoidance at source. It is a common-sense approach to the problem, and it would be welcomed by all taxpayers, who are so frustrated by paying their tax unquestioningly while seeing others avoid tax or break the law. It would restore confidence in the tax system. It is a good idea, and I hope that when the Minister responds he will say that he shares our view that we need to amend our legislation to make it easier to pursue and prosecute advisers who deliberately promote egregious schemes that are unlawful.

I know from my time chairing the Public Accounts Committee how embedded the culture of avoidance, evasion and financial crime has become in our financial services sector. We saw it plainly with the revelations from HSBC, with the Falciani leaks from its Swiss branch. It was there in the PricewaterhouseCoopers leaks keenly exposing that firm's activities in Luxembourg. The Panama papers uncovered the shenanigans involving the law firm Mossack Fonseca, while the Paradise papers disclosed the nefarious activities of another law firm, Appleby. While it may no longer be seen as cool to be involved in tax avoidance, the latest leak of documents contained in the FinCEN papers spells out the complicity of major global banks in facilitating and enabling financial crime, from tax avoidance through to fraud and money laundering.

Normal working people, however, often suffer the most. The film tax relief that was exploited ruthlessly by the company Ingenious Media left many facing huge tax demands, though the chief executive, Patrick McKenna, is still lauded through public appointments in the creative sector. The loan charge scheme was promoted vigorously by enablers. They walked away scot-free, but left devastation in their wake. I understand from the all-party parliamentary loan charge group that seven suicides have been reported to the group—people driven to suicide because they were conned by enablers into participating in a scheme that later unravelled. That is truly shocking.

I welcome the consultation that the Government have launched on tackling the promoters of tax avoidance. The all-party parliamentary group will be preparing a response to that consultation. Most advisers, of course, work in an honest and straightforward way, and we do not want to pursue with criminal charges those who make an honest mistake, but there are still individuals, companies and organisations who deliberately and wilfully promote egregious schemes that they know do not

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

work. Such enablers move quickly, they are well resourced and they are well capable of outmanoeuvring HMRC. As soon as one wheeze is uncovered, they move on to the next. Worst of all, they act with impunity, safe in the knowledge that they will escape any real punishment if they are ever caught.

Why do these rogue advisers not get prosecuted? The answer lies in what the Minister said: HMRC has to demonstrate dishonesty to proceed against them and it is virtually impossible to do so. The advisers can always claim that they honestly believed that the scheme would work. We therefore want a new test, which makes criminal prosecutions feasible and practical.

We suggest adopting the test that is in place for the work of the GAAR—the bar for prosecution for those ne’er-do-wells should be just as stringent. It would simply make it possible and practical to take action. HMRC would have to demonstrate not simply that the avoidance scheme was not reasonable; it would have to demonstrate that it was not reasonable for anybody to think that the avoidance was reasonable. Sorry for the complication, but that is a double reasonableness threshold. I assure the Minister that that double reasonableness test is in effect the same as the “beyond reasonable doubt” test that he mentioned in his opening remarks. Of course, it would be easy for enablers to avoid prosecution—they just need to stop promoting or recommending tax avoidance that is so aggressive that they know it will fail.

Our amendment tackles a gross injustice in the system. People are completely fed up with reading endless stories about scurrilous tax avoidance schemes promoted by those working in the financial services sector. The perceived difference in the way that hard-working taxpayers and rich individuals are treated breeds mistrust. We suggest a practical change in the law that would make it possible to pursue the enablers, not because we want to see the courts clogged up with prosecutions against bankers, accountants, lawyers and advisers, but because we think that that is the best way of making those advisers think twice before they promote unlawful schemes. It would deter most of them from trying to cheat the public revenue. I urge the Minister, please, to be bold on the issue, to state today that he will tighten up the law and to give us the assurance that, if he does not like our particular solution, he will come forward in a timely manner with his own proposal.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: I am pleased to speak in this debate and to speak to the amendments and new clauses to which I have added my name and which were detailed earlier.

All the SNP amendments relate to schedule 6, under clause 30. Amendments 70 to 72 and 84 and 85 seek to amend subparagraph (3A) of paragraph 2. Taken together, the paragraph would read:

“Where the condition in subsection (1)(l) or (2) is not met in relation to a body or person at any time, but the body or person expects it to be met at any time, the body or person may allow for the condition to be treated as being met until the body or person is not expected to make expenditure on construction operations exceeding £3 million.”

On the face of it, it does not look like a major change, but the amended wording is more in keeping with the spirit of the existing construction industry scheme. It allows, for example, for a de minimis amount of minor works to be disregarded in the operation of the scheme.

Amendment 73 seeks to remove paragraph 3 from schedule 6. I know that the Minister has spoken against this amendment and amendment 74, but we have seen no convincing argument that this change is necessary just now, and we believe that it would be much better for industry to be allowed to continue with the existing scheme for the current year rather than asking it to change the way of doing things. Let us face it, with its being a major part of our recovery from the covid recession, industry has far more important things to concentrate on.

A similar reasoning applies to amendment 74, which seeks to leave out paragraph 4 from schedule 6. That paragraph relates to the way in which the costs of materials purchased for a construction contract are taken into account for tax purposes. The construction industry has had to meet a number of challenges this year. We do not see how changing the way in which it has to account for tax on purchases by a subcontractor for another subcontractor, for example, during this current year will help. We do not see why it needs to be done just now.

New clause 14 requires the Chancellor to report back to Parliament on the impact that the changes proposed in clause 30 and in schedule 6 have had on key economic indicators. One would think that it would be automatic that, when a Government make changes to the tax system, they would go back a wee while later to see whether the changes have had the desired effect. This Government are perennially hopeless at doing that. We seldom if ever see a published assessment of what impact the new legislation or changes to the tax system had. That makes it much more difficult for MPs and the public to hold the Government to account. Even more importantly, it means that, when mistakes are made—that is when, not if—there is no reliable process to identify that and to put things right.

For this Committee sitting alone the Government have had to table no fewer than 22 amendments in order to correct mistakes or to remove inconsistencies and ambiguity from their own Bill which they themselves commended to the House only last week. We can only hope that they have spotted all the mistakes by now, but surely with such an important piece of legislation it makes sense to ask the Chancellor to report back to us to tell us whether it is working, or whether there have been unintended consequences that need to be addressed sooner rather than later.

New clause 15 again requires the Chancellor to report back to Parliament, but this time on the effectiveness of various anti-tax avoidance measures in clauses 117 to 121, and the follower notice penalties in clause 115. I note that the Opposition have tabled something similar, although a bit more restricted in scope.

We welcome the further measures included in this Bill, but they still do not go nearly far enough. Time and again, it has been pressure from SNP MPs that has forced the Government to take any action at all on the scandalous levels of tax avoidance that they continue to tolerate. We still do not have an overarching and workable general anti-avoidance rule. We have an inadequate system of company registration and regulation that makes it far too easy for companies to hide the truth about who really benefits from the profits that they make on the hard work of citizens of these islands and who is really in control of the company. For example, the SNP has highlighted over and over again the need

for legislation to combat the abuses of so-called Scottish Limited Partnerships by money launderers and organised crime. As things stand, almost anybody in the world can set up one or several Scottish Limited Partnerships and then use them to get round even the inadequate regulatory and transparency requirements that apply to other companies.

3.30 pm

Scottish limited partnerships are an almost unique form of company structure, which the Government know make money laundering easier and law enforcement harder, but Ministers have yet again brought forward a Finance Bill that fails to regulate them or to close this loophole properly. At a time when essential public services face yet another financial squeeze, and the only feasible way to pay for the economic costs of the global pandemic is to saddle future generations with eye-watering levels of debt, it must surely be a top priority for the Government to make sure at the very least that those who make billions from their business activities in these four nations are required to pay their fair share of taxes. Why, then, do we allow big Government contracts to be used to line the pockets of people who pay next to no tax in the United Kingdom?

I know that the UK Government will be watching with interest to see who forms the Government of Scotland after the elections on 6 May and which equal-partner Government they will have to deal with for the next few years. Given my comments about the UK Government's failures to clamp down on tax avoidance, it will come as no surprise that if the current Scottish Government are re-elected, they will seek a further transfer of powers to allow them to take action on tax dodgers, whom the British Government have allowed to get away with their activities for far too long. If re-elected, the Scottish Government will also investigate whether their existing powers allow them to levy a higher business rate poundage on properties whose owners are registered in a tax haven. That is also an idea that I commend to the UK Government. It would not have been competent to include it as an amendment to this Bill, but it is well worth looking at.

To sum up, the amendments we have suggested would improve the Bill, although they would not make it a good Bill—there are still far too many omissions and weaknesses in the Government's proposals for tax avoidance prevention. However, because of the way the Bill has been put together, and because of the procedures in the House, it would not be competent to move further amendments at this stage. The SNP will continue to hold the Government's feet to the fire until we get to the day when everybody who makes money from running a business in the United Kingdom pays their fair share of tax to pay for the essential services that all of us enjoy.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this part of the debate, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It was probably 15 years after we set up our business that our own accountants came to us—we were making reasonable profits by then—and suggested that we take advantage of a tax avoidance measure, and a pretty aggressive one in our view. This was not a particularly unusual accountants—it had a decent reputation locally—

but so much money potentially runs through these schemes that some promoters inevitably see an opportunity for themselves.

I must tell the House that we told our adviser that we did not want to take part in such a scheme, and there were two reasons: we believed that people should pay their tax—that we should all pay a fair amount of tax—but also that any person who takes up such measures should be afraid that HMRC will one day come along and say, "Those measures were not appropriate." By that time, a lot of the money that they think they have saved has gone out in costs to promoters and the rest of it, and they are left with a huge bill.

Had the person who promoted that scheme to us—our accountant—thought that he would potentially end up on jail, I do not think he would have come to us and told us about it. This was a reputable local person, and perhaps he did not even think that tax avoidance at that point was fraud. Nevertheless, it certainly can be fraud, and in many cases it is. If we are willing to hold people to account, ultimately through a criminal prosecution—as HMRC can, of course, as the Minister pointed out earlier—there would be a lot less of this kind of promotion and a lot fewer of these activities.

Before I talk in more detail about that, I want to tackle some of the shadow Minister's points. It is a little churlish not to recognise the steps that the Government have taken since 2010. There have been 150 measures to tackle tax avoidance; that was at a cost of £2 billion to the taxpayer, but it brought in £250 billion in contributions to our public services. Of course, the Minister said that we need to go further, but it is wrong to simply say that the Government are not doing enough. Some of those measures, such as the digital services tax and the diverted profits tax, are very significant internationally.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I acknowledge the point that the hon. Gentleman makes and the amount of money brought into the Revenue by the measures, but is he not also conscious that the sheer number of different measures has, for many taxpayers, added to the complexity? We have one of the most complex tax regimes in the world and that complexity often catches people unawares, and costs them lots of money and sometimes their businesses and their homes.

Kevin Hollinrake: I absolutely accept that our tax system is very complex, and I have proposed a number of measures on the Floor of this House to try to simplify it. For example, abolishing business rates and replacing them with an increase in VAT would simplify the tax system, instead of having an online sales tax. However, in terms of this debate I do not think it is the complexity of the issues that catches people out. We can see that 99% of tax avoidance schemes in the UK involve disguised remuneration—these are very contrived schemes. We should look at amendment 77 carefully. As to whether it is unfair on a person who is a promoter of what I would say is an extremely contrived tax avoidance measure, I am not totally sold that that should be a problem.

One of the biggest problems we have is faith in the system. This Government have done a huge amount to reduce the tax gap, which is at a record low of 4.7%, but if there is a £20 billion tax gap from fraud, the person in the street might reasonably say, "Why should I pay my tax?" This creates an incentive then for people to look at

[Kevin Hollinrake]

ways of avoiding tax. As to whether tax avoidance is fraud, the Government's own call for evidence last month says clearly:

"The Government recognises that the design of arrangements that are sold as avoidance schemes may in fact enable fraud."

So there is a good case for being able to take these further measures, as the Government are doing through stop notices, further civil penalties and stopping individuals hiding behind corporate structures.

The trouble is that, as we see in many areas, not least the banking sector, which I am pretty active in through my work in the all-party group on fair business banking, these kinds of organisations see a fine—a civil penalty—as a cost of doing business; the real deterrent for people is a criminal penalty. One of the best examples of this is to be found in a completely different sector, with the personal liability for a director in the construction industry. As soon as that personal liability came in and there was the potential for someone to go to jail if they did not make sure their sites were safe or they did not put measures in place, there was a huge decrease in the number of injuries and fatal incidents in the workplace in construction. That speaks to the point that if there are real criminal sanctions that we are willing to take forward and people think that that is going to happen, this promotion of avoidance schemes will start to drop significantly.

We probably have better resourced areas in terms of the prosecution of avoidance; I believe there are about three and a half times this number of people in the Department for Work and Pensions looking at benefit fraud, despite the fact that it is a much lower level of fraud—the level of benefit fraud is about 10% of that seen by HMRC. A beefing up of the resources in HMRC is therefore something we should consider. We have seen very famous schemes. I believe the Ingenious film scheme cost the taxpayer £1.6 billion, but not a single promoter has been held to account for it. We need more resources, but we should also look at legislation. This country does not have a great record on prosecuting serious fraud. There are a number of examples where the Serious Fraud Office has failed to make charges stick—I think, for example, of cases involving Tesco and Barclays. That is why the SFO wants to bring in more legislation, which the Government have agreed to do, to create a corporate offence of failing to prevent economic crime. This would be a personal sanction on the directors of a corporation that failed to do that. Of course, in banking we now have the senior managers regime that the Financial Conduct Authority put in place following some of the scandals there, when nobody was held to account for the disgraceful abuse of both consumers and businesses through the past couple of decades in the sector. The excellent Minister might say that amendment 77 is not the right vehicle for this, but some beefing up of the legislation to make it easier to prosecute fraud—criminal activity—is something that we should seriously consider.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

I welcome the action that the Government are finally taking against the promoters of tax-avoidance schemes. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I will be supporting

new clause 29, which would require the Government to review the impact of provisions relating to tax avoidance and publish regular reports that set out the findings. We will also support amendment 77, which would cause the promoters of abusive tax-avoidance schemes to be treated as acting dishonestly for the purposes of criminal prosecution for tax offences, without dishonesty having to be proved separately by the prosecution. We believe that the measures we are considering are what the Government should have been doing earlier. The promoters of abusive tax-avoidance schemes have deprived the public purse of millions of pounds and defrauded countless people who thought that their services and the advice offered were legitimate.

The action being taken now comes too late for so many victims of these schemes who had no intention to do anything unlawful or to evade taxes and have already been unfairly penalised. Liberal Democrats are committed to clamping down on tax avoidance, but the retrospective nature of the loan charge is causing uncertainty and financial hardship to ordinary working families, most of whom acted in good faith. Thousands of IT support professionals, social workers, teachers, cleaners and nurses—all of whom acted in good faith, based on professional financial advice that what they were doing was legal—now face immense pressure, which is impacting on their mental health and causing serious financial hardship, which will only be magnified by the economic consequences of covid-19.

Meanwhile, online tech giants and international corporations have been avoiding tax for years but have not been clamped down on in the same way, even internationally. With the loan charge, the Government are going after nurses and teachers. Like many other right hon. and hon. Members in this place, I have a number of constituents who find themselves in exactly the position that I have described, facing retrospective taxation since HMRC changed its rules in 2017. One constituent whom I have been representing has attempted to correspond with HMRC on anomalies in the settlement agreement policies, but to no avail. Although he is categorised as fully compliant and not liable for the loan charge and pre-2010 loans, he is not being refunded any settlements that include pre-2010 amounts. The fully compliant are not benefiting from the pre-2010 amendments, while other categories are.

As I have said, we undoubtedly need to clamp down on tax avoidance—the deliberate evasion of taxes—but we should be clamping down on those who promoted it, not on those who took advice believing that it was lawful. The Chancellor must also go further than his recent decision merely to limit, in the Budget, the retrospective element of the charge to 2010; he must end the retrospective application of the rules altogether so that nobody who fell victim to such schemes before 2017 should be unfairly penalised. The Government must also further re-examine IR35.

I shall end my speech there, but it is important that we recognise that the steps that we must back today should have come before us much earlier.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), but I must pick up on one of her points. She indicated that the Government had done nothing to crack down on online companies, but the evidence

shows that the Government took action to ensure that if we buy something from an online marketplace such as eBay, Wish or Alibaba, the seller charges VAT. That was a significant source of lost income for the Exchequer.

It is right for Opposition Members to raise the Panama papers, because they highlighted to the general public—to residents up and down the country—the actions of a small number of tax-avoidance advisers and very wealthy individuals who did not want to pay their fair share. I think it is right that we should look at that in the context of the action that the Government have taken.

3.45 pm

The latest HMRC figures show that the tax gap and the loss from tax avoidance have been reduced significantly in recent years. That is testament to the more than 150 measures that the Government have taken, as the Minister outlined, and it means that 95.3% of all tax due is being collected. That does not mean that we should not aim to collect that 4.7% and get the figure to 100%. That is what we do in this House: we make laws, and we decide what taxes businesses and people should pay. We should strive to ensure that we hit 100%. I think there is something about low-tax Conservatives advocating exactly that, because if we want a fair and low tax system, we need everyone to pay the taxes we bring in. With that in mind, I support all the measures that the Government are introducing in this Bill.

If any member of the general public wants to understand why it is so important to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion and close the gap, they need look no further than the last 12 months, when we have created such a direct link between tax and spend. With furlough, grants and loans, businesses and people can see exactly what they get when they pay into a system. Only this week, the mortgage guarantee was launched, allowing thousands, if not millions, of young people to get on the housing ladder. We have a tax system that allows us to do that.

Although I particularly welcome the strengthening of the anti-avoidance rules in this Bill, I think we need to focus on the link that we have created in the last 12 months between what people pay into the system and what they get. People realise that the state is there and, if they pay in the right amount of corporation tax or pay-as-you-earn, it will look after them. As much as I think we should focus on cracking down and using enforcement and prosecution, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) said, we should also look to sustain that link in the next couple of years. To ensure that people continue to pay into the system, we should encourage them to remember the support that the Government have been able to give. That will enable us to continue to close that gap and go from 95.3% to 100%.

Catherine West: How delightful it is to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I am very pleased to speak to amendment 77 and new clause 29, and to have listened to the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray). I pay tribute to Members from across the parties who have stood up for those who have been so badly affected by the loan charge scandal, and I was particularly pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) speaking so eloquently on Radio 4 on Sunday evening. We are getting these important messages across.

I also wanted to pay tribute to the important work that is being done by the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, led by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), on simplifying things and making the basics better, for example by improving the Companies House regulations. I understand that some of that is coming forward shortly, but the general picture is that things are quite slow.

It was lovely to listen to the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) speaking about the importance of taxation. Once upon a time, I am sure that would have been quite a tricky topic for certain Conservative Members to talk about, but there is a new wind blowing. It is great to hear President Biden talking about the global minimum corporate tax level and the importance of an online sales tax, and even to hear our own Government leading the charge across Europe on the importance of introducing a digital sales tax and simplifying things to bring in the important public funds that we all need to keep our society going.

The scale of tax offences is clear, with a recent TaxWatch report finding that between 2009 and 2019, the UK prosecuted 23 times as many people for benefits offences as for tax offences—that theme has been echoed in today's speeches—despite the fact that the value of tax fraud is nine times higher than that of benefit fraud. We know that American research has shown that for every \$1 the Internal Revenue Service invests, it gets back \$10 of benefit for the public purse, and I wonder what the consultation the Treasury ran said about incentivising officers based in HMRC so that the more money brought back, the more colleagues come on board to help them in their important work.

We know that a lot of this work is about priorities, and we need to prioritise criminal prosecutions so that there is not a decrease in taxation, as there has been of 39% since 2015. We need to look at the balance of the DWP employing 3.5 times more staff in compliance than HMRC. We know that we have to improve that balance, because quite simply there is much more money to be found in illicit finance and among tax avoiders than from those eking out a living on universal credit or personal independence payments.

The Minister will I am sure make it clear in his remarks that the Bill is intended to tackle some of these issues and to amend that imbalance, and I look forward to hearing that. However, I make the case for quicker progress so that we can move forward as fast as possible, particularly given the fact that, as the hon. Member for Burnley mentioned, the furlough scheme and some of the other schemes are quite expensive, and therefore the need to find more in this way from tax evasion is ever more pressing.

I want briefly to mention the importance of the provisions on freeports and the corporation tax super deduction, which do not appear to come with sufficient tax avoidance and evasion safeguards. I hope that during the debate—perhaps not right at this instant, but over the course of today—we will get some reassurances on that matter. In March, the Financial Secretary was unable to say how many additional staff HMRC plans to recruit to deal with taxation, duty, excise and customs issues pertaining solely to freeports, but I hope that that information is forthcoming. Given the attention and

[*Catherine West*]

focus the Government gave to these announcements, we would have expected them to get the basics right, but we still have some questions that are outstanding.

While the Government are bringing forward—perhaps deliberately, some of us would say—a weak set of measures in the Finance Bill, other tools that we need to tackle evasion and avoidance, such as the draft Register of Overseas Entities Bill, could well sit gathering dust, since they were initially announced quite some time ago. Will the Minister use today as an opportunity to outline his views on that particular Bill?

On the question of illicit money, do not forget that our own Intelligence and Security Committee called London a “laundromat” for illicit and dark finances, often coming from Russia. I would hope that the Minister will redouble his efforts to understand how to clamp down on the facilitation of those finances through the UK financial system. We would have expected such a description of our capital city to force action from the Government, but we are still waiting to see exactly who owns some of the foreign companies buying up British property. Can someone still walk in and purchase a £1 million property in cash, and does the Minister believe such a way of purchasing expensive properties in London is appropriate?

Kevin Hollinrake: I draw the Committee’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Is the hon. Member aware that there are very strict requirements for people involved in the property market to check the identity and the source of funds of those she has just described?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member, and it is always lovely to have an accountant in the room. If there are some improvements, we are very grateful for them.

Ruth Cadbury: If I may intervene, London is one of the few cities that has no residency or nationality rule for owning residential property, and many very high-cost cities for residents to live in, such as Vancouver and Auckland, have such rules. Could this Government consider such rules, because this issue has helped to trigger the explosion in housing prices, particularly in London, but also in our other large cities?

Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I am sure it has not escaped the Treasury’s attention that prices of the top 1% of properties in the country—mainly in London—have been skyrocketing, when everybody else’s house prices have been going up by a little. That differential is quite frightening. In this terrible time when our economy has shrunk by 11%, who can afford to buy properties worth several million pounds, and do we know enough about these individuals? We know that there are big gaps in the way that Companies House operates, in terms of simply understanding who owns what, and simplifying that is the sort of thing that would make the work of HMRC much more streamlined.

I would also like to put on record the wonderful work being done by civic society groups to spread information and education about the importance of understanding taxation, what it does and what it purchases. It is through these campaigns—often outside this House—that we can understand how to change things.

Aside from our international reputation often being questioned on the issue of Russian oligarchs, we know that the lack of action on questioning some people’s contacts with the Kremlin is costing us over £30 billion every year in lost revenue from taxes. That is a lot of money, and it would be better used to pay for the furlough, eliminate child poverty, vaccinate more children in the third world, or pay and equip our NHS staff for the heroic job that they do every single day.

The Government must act without delay and begin by supporting amendment 77 and new clause 29, which are a significant improvement on the weaker proposals put forward by the Government. That would send a signal that the UK will no longer be silent in the face of tax evasion and tax avoidance and is no longer a welcome home for the oligarchs and agents who see the UK as the destination of choice for their ill-gotten gains. I urge the Minister to do the right thing.

Ruth Cadbury: I speak in support of new clause 29 in the name of Her Majesty’s Opposition and cross-party amendment 77. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray), my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on their speeches.

Addressing tax avoidance and evasion is, of course, an important objective of the Treasury, and Finance Bills and other legislation are the vehicles to do that, but as with all tax changes, Government must assess and respond to the unintended consequences of any changes. This Government have a terrible track record on tackling tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance. They have consistently stood in the way of Labour’s calls to clamp down on loopholes and have failed to collect over £30 billion in taxes every year. They have promised to legislate on these issues, but the proposals in the Bill fall far short of any substantive change. Instead, they have been responsible for an increasingly complex system of payment, fraught with difficulties and risks for the unsuspecting worker.

A growing number of working people need to work on a contractor basis, either for personal reasons or because it is the only way of getting work in their sector or with their professional skillset. Increasingly, the alternative to being a contractor is to be a PAYE freelancer—to pay tax in full but without any of the rights of being an employee and all the costs of being self-employed. This is zero-rights employment, and it is unfair.

We need an effective tax avoidance policy that criminalises those promoting tax avoidance, rather than going for the workers inadvertently caught up in them, as this Government and HMRC have been doing with the loan charge in particular. That is the wrong target. While ordinary people who are victims of mis-selling are facing ruin and bankruptcy, the Government have done too little, too late to go after those who promoted the schemes.

I acknowledge that the Bill contains measures to tackle the promoters of tax avoidance and changes the system of penalties, but those measures are extremely limited in scope. Indeed, those changes are not even included in the Budget report costings, which suggests that their financial impact must be minimal. IR35 was enacted 21 years ago to stop the practice of those who,

in reality, were permanent, generally full-time workers being paid as contractors through personal services companies, as many were paying much less tax than if they had been employees. It was right to address that tax avoidance, but the Government must address the unintended consequences for workers and the labour market that have followed since then.

4 pm

Many genuine contractors are advised by accountants to work through disguised remuneration schemes using umbrella companies. Despite HMRC's claiming otherwise, the reality is that it did not act at the time to stop these schemes or tell users not to use them. Then, in 2016, it brought in the loan charge, which it said would stop the operation and use of such schemes, only the worker pays; to date, not one scheme promoter has been prosecuted for promoting these schemes.

Tens of thousands of hard-working people were suddenly hit with, in effect, retrospective taxation of eye-watering sums. It is no coincidence that the all-party parliamentary loan charge group grew in a very short time to be one of the largest APPGs in this Parliament. The evidence clearly shows that people went into schemes not to avoid tax, but to avoid being caught by IR35. They were advised that that was the best way to manage their work and were assured that the schemes were legal and compliant. For too many years, HMRC did not disabuse them or their accountants of that.

Despite the loan charge, disguised remuneration schemes have not gone away. The roll-out of the IR35 off-payroll rules has instead led to the proliferation and increased use of umbrella companies to promote disguised remuneration. Workers, particularly basic rate taxpayers, are seduced by comparison sites into signing up with the umbrella company that offers the best take-home rate, without realising that the correct tax and national insurance is not being paid on their behalf. Often, the worker is given no choice which umbrella company to use. Too often, there is a lack of transparency over deductions, fees and contractor pay and payments, and some recruitment agencies ignore the legal requirement to provide all workers with a key information document, or KID.

HMRC's own figures suggest that disguised remuneration made up 99% of tax avoidance in 2018-19, as opposed to only 60% in 2013-14, and a growing number of individual workers are involved. In the past, disguised remuneration schemes involved mainly better-paid contractors; now, increasingly, those in basic tax bands are affected, in the public sector as well as the private sector. We are talking about people such as nurses, teachers, IT technicians and many more.

The relevant clauses in the Bill do not address the problem of non-compliant umbrella companies, despite being intended to clamp down on tax avoidance by giving HMRC the power to issue stop notices. Those are essentially orders to cease particular avoidance measures, but they carry no other penalty. There is therefore little deterrent from tax avoidance.

A number of clauses attempt to close various loopholes. Schedule 29 and clauses 117 to 120, 115 and 121 bring in penalties for promoters of tax avoidance and give HMRC new powers to obtain information. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North said, those measures are reasonably minor and stop short of

criminalising those encouraging and facilitating tax avoidance, which is what the Government should be addressing in this Finance Bill.

Clause 21 deals with

"workers' services provided through intermediaries".

The legislation, as originally drafted, would have meant that recruitment agencies had to put workers on their own payroll, where they would have enjoyed the protections offered by existing agency legislation. That would also have meant closing the door on many tax avoidance schemes. The Government could simply strike out clause 21. Doing so would ensure that workers got the agency rights they should be getting. Agencies can run their own payroll for their own staff anyway, so they could do so for the workers they take on as contractors.

Alternatively, the Government could amend the Bill to allow only compliant umbrella companies to exist—and there are a number of compliant umbrella companies. Doing that would allow umbrella companies to continue operating, but it would mean that they were no longer able to wrongly skim off money from contractors' pay and that they had to pay holiday pay, and kickbacks between recruitment agencies and umbrella companies would be outlawed. This would stop all dodgy umbrella companies and provide much-needed transparency. The only umbrella companies that would complain, surely, would be the ones involved in the exploitation. It would also put the onus on clients and agencies only to use umbrella companies that were acting properly, because if they did not they would be liable for any tax deemed to be avoided. That is exactly the same rule that is already being used to make other firms properly assess a contractor's status under the new IR35 off-payroll rules. Changing the Bill in this way would stop tax avoidance schemes, stop the covert exploitation of contractors and stop the kickbacks being used that encourage malpractice. It is hard to understand why the Government have not done this. If they really are serious about clamping down on tax avoidance schemes, they must do this now.

Labour's new clause 29 would be a start towards effective tax control while protecting unsuspecting workers. The new clause would require the Government to review the impact of provisions in the Bill relating to tax avoidance and publish regular reports setting out their findings. The review would consider the impact of these provisions on levels of tax avoidance and evasion, and on the size of the tax gap.

Amendment 77, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield have discussed so eloquently, would cause promoters of abusive tax avoidance schemes to be treated as having acted dishonestly for the purposes of criminal prosecution of tax offences without dishonesty having to be separately proved by the prosecution. I fully support these amendments, but at the same time the Government must not miss this opportunity finally to tackle the proliferation of non-compliant umbrella companies and stop tax avoidance schemes in the first place.

It has been 21 years since IR35 first came into law. Instead of achieving its objectives of ending tax avoidance in the contractor market, further Government changes brought us the retrospective taxation of the loan charge, the flawed off-payroll rules and now this industry of

umbrella companies, many of which are withholding the tax and national insurance of contractors. Again and again, hard-working people are paying the price and the Revenue is losing out.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to all those who have spoken in the debate. Let me start with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who, as always, brought a robust common sense, as well as the skills of an accountant, to bear, especially when it comes to holding the Opposition to account for some of their comments.

Mr Mitchell: I should defend our hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). He is not an accountant; he is an estate agent.

Jesse Norman: I have been held to account by my right hon. Friend and I am grateful to him for that, because that power—if I have any power—should always be held to account. Let me put the record straight: my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton is an estate agent, and yet with that estate agency genius he combines the forensic skills of an accountant in holding to account, indirectly, members of the Government and, directly, the Opposition. I thank him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton pointed out that these disguised remuneration schemes are highly contrived. It is terribly important to remind ourselves of that. It is all very well to complain about the loan charge, but these are highly contrived schemes. My hon. Friend reminded us—as, indeed, did my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—of the general rule that all taxpayers are responsible for their own tax, and that if, by implication, a scheme looks too good to be true, it almost certainly is too good to be true. Those are important messages and no Government should wish to weaken that important principle that people are responsible for their own tax.

Ruth Cadbury: I understand what the Minister has said. Of course, most of us are aware of our own tax bands. But how can the Minister expect basic rate taxpayers—a nurse, an IT contractor, somebody working in the film industry, even somebody on minimum wage—to do due diligence when nothing they read or have been sent ever mentions loans, and when they are given a convincing narrative that their tax is being paid for and they do not need to worry? Should not HMRC and the Treasury be addressing this issue, because it is a growing part of the employment market?

Jesse Norman: HMRC is addressing these issues. That is why this Bill has so many measures in it that are focused on the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes, toughening up that regime and improving the regime against the promoters of tax avoidance. But let me say to the hon. Lady that I thought her remark was dripping with condescension towards the ordinary taxpayers of this country. The fact of the matter is that people, from whatever walk of life, are perfectly competent—they do not need to be patronised by Labour Members of Parliament—at working out when something looks too good to be true. That is why so many—such a high percentage; well over 90% of people—do manage to work out what is too good to be true and behave on that basis. To suspect otherwise, when HMRC is absolutely

working as hard as it can to make sure that the truth is out there and well understood, and is closing down opportunities for misleading advertising, in a recent initiative with the Advertising Standards Authority and a whole host of other things, is completely wrong.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) for what I thought was a very robust and thoughtful contribution. He is absolutely right to highlight that HMRC has not been slow in this area. He was right to pick up the point about VAT on online platforms, but, of course, that is merely the tip of the iceberg. The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) somehow suggested that we were failing to tackle this issue. The tax gap, as he pointed out, is 4.7%—a historic low. Let me remind the House and him of some of the actions that the Government have taken—leadership on base erosion and profit shifting over many years, the diverted profits tax, the corporate interest restriction, the tax charge on offshore receipts, hybrid mismatch rules, our new digital services tax.

Kevin Hollinrake: I very much welcome the digital services tax, which is there to try to make sure that everybody pays their fair share, as the Minister said in his opening remarks. Having said that, it does not apply to Amazon's direct sales on that platform. It applies only to third-party merchants, so there is not that much of a level playing field between those two different cohorts. Will he look at that in future?

Jesse Norman: Brilliantly, my hon. Friend has intervened just before I was about to mention that we are consulting on an online sales tax, which is a parallel initiative. Indeed, the digital services tax includes the introduction of a new basis for tax—that is, UK user content. That itself is a flag to the energy and innovation that the Government are seeking to bring to this issue, and I thank him for his comments.

The hon. Member for Ealing North asked about the beneficial ownership registry on overseas companies that own or buy property in the UK. As he will know, the Government published a draft Bill. It has gone through prelegislative scrutiny. The process has, for reasons that the House will not need any reminding of or highlighting, been somewhat interrupted over the past year, but the Government plan to introduce the Bill in due course, so I reassure him on that point.

The hon. Gentleman raised the question about minimum corporate taxation. He should know that the Government have been, as I said, in the international vanguard in trying to drive change on base erosion and profit shifting, and processes of international tax agreement through the OECD. We were also in the vanguard of delivering the creation, originally, of the G20 commitments for a comprehensive global solution to this issue, based on two pillars, and we are leading the way, during our G7 presidency, on this issue, as the Chancellor has made clear. So we absolutely welcome the renewed commitment that the US Administration have made in this area, which we think is a very important change.

Finally, I turn to the important amendment 77, which was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). My right hon. Friend was right to highlight the importance of eternal vigilance—I absolutely share his view on that—and he was right, as the right hon. Lady was, to talk about the ever-shifting and

evolving ways in which some of the malefactors in this area are ceasing to operate, and, of course, that is true. However, if I may say so, he erred in suggesting that the penalty on the enablers—that is to say, a sum equal to the gross fees to be collected in relation—was in any sense modest or small. It is one of the largest charges in the tax system, and because it is a gross fee, it is of course charged on the total amount of income. It is therefore income on which the promoter will have to recognise all their costs, and indeed any profit and any tax they may have paid, so it is actually a fairly formidable penalty.

4.15 pm

The right hon. Member for Barking claims that the double reasonable test that she has advocated is equivalent to the test of “beyond a reasonable doubt”. I am not aware of any evidence, or indeed any legal opinion of a reputable senior authority—such as a QC or similar, or a court judgment—that would suggest that this is the case. It is a claim: it may be right or it may not be right, but it remains to be proved, and I do not think it has been proven.

In relation to amendment 77—this is a fundamental point—no one doubts the importance of addressing this issue, but the means that it adopts are not ones that this Government, or indeed any responsible Opposition, should be associating themselves with. Let me just quote the words of one of the leading firms of solicitors, Kingsley Napley—that

“using the criminal law as an alternative to challenging a scheme in the tax tribunal is not a viable solution. It is certainly”—this is a point that the House might want to reflect on—“not as easy as inserting ‘a simple one-liner’ into the common law offence of cheating the public revenue...A Jury should not be left to interpret whether a particular scheme is reasonable or abusive... and the overburdened criminal justice system is certainly not the place to be resolving complex tax disputes.”

That is a source of expertise that we would do well to heed.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 30 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill. Schedule 6 agreed to.

Clause 36 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 7

HYBRID AND OTHER MISMATCHES

Amendments made: 17, page 123, line 37, leave out paragraph 2.

This amendment removes amendments to Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 relating to the definitions of “hybrid entity” and “investor”.

Amendment 18, page 127, leave out lines 18 to 26 and insert—

“(3) The corporate rescue conditions are—

- (a) that the payer and the payee became connected as a result of an arm’s length transaction, and
- (b) immediately before the payer and the payee became connected it was reasonable to assume that, without the connection and any arrangements of which the connection forms part, there would be a material risk that at some point within the next 12 months the payee would have been unable to pay its debts.”

This amendment makes a minor clarification of what is meant by the “corporate rescue conditions” in connection with the treatment of deductions for the release of a debt.

Amendment 19, page 128, line 23, leave out

“under the law of any territory.”.

This amendment is part of a series of minor amendments to Schedule 7 (Hybrid and other mismatches) that move text for readability.

Amendment 20, page 128, line 24, after “deducted” insert

“under the law of any territory”.

This amendment is part of a series of minor amendments to Schedule 7 (Hybrid and other mismatches) that move text for readability.

Amendment 21, page 128, line 24, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 22, page 128, line 27, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 23, page 128, line 29, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 24, page 128, line 30, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 25, page 128, line 45, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 26, page 128, line 46, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 27, page 129, line 2, at end insert—

“(9A) Section 259B(5) (determination of residence where no concept of residence for tax purposes exists) applies to the reference in subsection (7)(b) to a person’s residence for tax purposes in a zero-tax territory as it applies to references to a person’s residence for tax purposes in Chapter 8 or 11.”

This amendment deals with the possibility that a zero-tax territory may not recognise the concept of residence for tax purposes.

Amendment 28, page 129, line 3, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 29, page 130, line 44, leave out

“under the law of any territory.”.

This amendment is part of a series of minor amendments to Schedule 7 (Hybrid and other mismatches) that move text for readability.

Amendment 30, page 130, line 45, after “deducted” insert

“under the law of any territory”.

This amendment is part of a series of minor amendments to Schedule 7 (Hybrid and other mismatches) that move text for readability.

Amendment 31, page 130, line 45, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 32, page 131, line 1, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 33, page 131, line 3, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 34, page 131, line 4, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 35, page 131, line 19, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 36, page 131, line 20, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 37, page 131, line 22, at end insert—

“(4A) Section 259B(5) (determination of residence where no concept of residence for tax purposes exists) applies to the reference in subsection (2)(b) to a person’s residence for tax purposes in a zero-tax territory as it applies to references to a person’s residence for tax purposes in Chapter 8 or 11.”

This amendment deals with the possibility that a zero-tax territory may not recognise the concept of residence for tax purposes.

Amendment 38, page 131, line 23, leave out “or body”.

This amendment is to ensure consistency with the existing provisions of Part 6A of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010 (where reference to a person includes reference to a body).

Amendment 39, page 144, line 32, leave out subparagraph (2) and insert—

“(2) For subsection (7) substitute—

‘(7) Condition E is that it is reasonable to suppose that the relevant mismatch is not capable of counteraction.

(7A) A relevant mismatch is capable of counteraction to the extent it is capable of being considered, for the purposes of determining the tax treatment of a person, other than P, under the law of a territory that is OECD mismatch compliant.

(7B) If a proportion of the relevant mismatch is not capable of being so considered under the law of any such territory—

(a) Condition E is met in relation to that proportion, and

(b) the remainder of the relevant mismatch is to be ignored for the purposes of this Part.

(7C) A determination about the extent to which a relevant mismatch is capable of being so considered is to be made on a just and reasonable basis.

(7D) A territory is OECD mismatch compliant if under the law of that territory effect is given to the Final Report on Neutralising the Effects of Hybrid Mismatch Arrangements published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development on 5 October 2015 or any replacement or supplementary publication (within the meaning of section 259BA(3)).”

This amendment provides that where a mismatch is capable of being dealt with in a country that has implemented rules in accordance with the OECD’s Hybrid Mismatch Arrangements report, it will not be dealt with by the United Kingdom.

Amendment 40, page 151, line 10, leave out “subsection (4)” and insert “subsections (4) and (7)”.

This amendment corrects a minor error.

Amendment 41, page 151, line 18, after “hybrid” insert “entity”.

This amendment corrects a minor error.

Amendment 42, page 151, leave out lines 22 to 25 and insert—

“(c) that investor in the hybrid entity is an investor in it as a result of an interest (direct or indirect) it has in a transparent fund (“the relevant fund”) that directly holds an interest in—

(i) the hybrid entity, or

(ii) another entity that is not a transparent fund and which holds a direct or indirect interest in the hybrid entity.”—(Jesse Norman.)

This amendment is designed to allow the provision amended to work where other entities are between the hybrid entity and the transparent fund by reference to which the provision operates.

Schedule 7, as amended, agreed to.

Clause 41 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 115 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 27 agreed to.

Clauses 117 to 121 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 29 agreed to.

Schedules 30 to 32 agreed to.

New Clause 29

REVIEW OF TAX AVOIDANCE MEASURES

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of sections 117 to 121 and Schedules 29 to 32 of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act, and then annually for five further years.

(2) A review under this section must estimate the expected impact of sections 117 to 121 and Schedules 29 to 32 on—

(a) levels of tax avoidance,

(b) levels of tax evasion, and

(c) reducing the tax gap in each tax year from 2021-22 to 2025-26.”—(James Murray.)

This new clause would require the Government to review the impact of the provisions relating to tax avoidance and publish regular reports setting out their findings.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 261, Noes 366.

Division No. 267]

[4.19 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah

Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul

Bonnar, Steven
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Callaghan, Amy
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clark, Feryal
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky

Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.

McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz

Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Bambos Charalambous

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi

Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew

Bradley, Ben	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Jack, rh Mr Alister	Morton, Wendy
Bradley, rh Karen	Eustice, rh George	Javid, rh Sajid	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Brady, Sir Graham	Evans, Dr Luke	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Mumby-Croft, Holly
Braverman, rh Suella	Evennett, rh Sir David	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Mundell, rh David
Brereton, Jack	Everitt, Ben	Jenkinson, Mark	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Bridgen, Andrew	Fabricant, Michael	Jenkyns, Andrea	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Brine, Steve	Farris, Laura	Jenrick, rh Robert	Neill, Sir Robert
Bristow, Paul	Fell, Simon	Johnson, rh Boris	Nici, Lia
Britcliffe, Sara	Fletcher, Katherine	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Nokes, rh Caroline
Brokenshire, rh James	Fletcher, Mark	Johnson, Gareth	Norman, rh Jesse
Browne, Anthony	Fletcher, Nick	Johnston, David	O'Brien, Neil
Bruce, Fiona	Ford, Vicky	Jones, Andrew	Offord, Dr Matthew
Buchan, Felicity	Foster, Kevin	Jones, rh Mr David	Opperman, Guy
Buckland, rh Robert	Fox, rh Dr Liam	Jones, Fay	Paisley, Ian
Burghart, Alex	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Jones, Mr Marcus	Parish, Neil
Burns, rh Conor	Frazer, rh Lucy	Jupp, Simon	Patel, rh Priti
Butler, Rob	Freeman, George	Kawczynski, Daniel	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Cairns, rh Alun	Freer, Mike	Kearns, Alicia	Pawsey, Mark
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Fuller, Richard	Keegan, Gillian	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Carter, Andy	Fysh, Mr Marcus	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Penrose, John
Cartlidge, James	Gale, rh Sir Roger	Knight, Julian	Percy, Andrew
Cash, Sir William	Garnier, Mark	Kruger, Danny	Philp, Chris
Cates, Miriam	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Kwarteng, rh Kwasi	Pincher, rh Christopher
Caulfield, Maria	Gibb, rh Nick	Lamont, John	Poulter, Dr Dan
Chalk, Alex	Gibson, Peter	Largan, Robert	Pow, Rebecca
Chishti, Rehman	Gideon, Jo	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Prentis, Victoria
Churchill, Jo	Girvan, Paul	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Pritchard, rh Mark
Clark, rh Greg	Glen, John	Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Pursglove, Tom
Clarke, Mr Simon	Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Levy, Ian	Quin, Jeremy
Clarke, Theo	Gove, rh Michael	Lewer, Andrew	Quince, Will
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Graham, Richard	Lewis, rh Brandon	Raab, rh Dominic
Clarkson, Chris	Grant, Mrs Helen	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Randall, Tom
Cleverly, rh James	Gray, James	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Redwood, rh John
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Grayling, rh Chris	Lockhart, Carla	Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Green, Chris	Loder, Chris	Richards, Nicola
Colburn, Elliot	Green, rh Damian	Logan, Mark	Richardson, Angela
Collins, Damian	Griffith, Andrew	Longhi, Marco	Roberts, Rob
Costa, Alberto	Griffiths, Kate	Lopez, Julia	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Courts, Robert	Grundy, James	Lopresti, Jack	Robinson, Gavin
Coutinho, Claire	Gullis, Jonathan	Lord, Mr Jonathan	Robinson, Mary
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Halfon, rh Robert	Loughton, Tim	Rosindell, Andrew
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hall, Luke	Mackinlay, Craig	Ross, Douglas
Crosbie, Virginia	Hammond, Stephen	Mackrory, Cheryl	Rowley, Lee
Crouch, Tracey	Hancock, rh Matt	Maclean, Rachel	Russell, Dean
Daly, James	Hands, rh Greg	Mak, Alan	Rutley, David
Davies, David T. C.	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Malthouse, Kit	Sambrook, Gary
Davies, Gareth	Harris, Rebecca	Mangnall, Anthony	Saxby, Selaine
Davies, Dr James	Harrison, Trudy	Marson, Julie	Scully, Paul
Davies, Mims	Hart, Sally-Ann	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Seely, Bob
Davies, Philip	Hart, rh Simon	Mayhew, Jerome	Selous, Andrew
Davis, rh Mr David	Hayes, rh Sir John	Maynard, Paul	Shannon, Jim
Davison, Dehenna	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	McCartney, Jason	Shapps, rh Grant
Dinenage, Caroline	Heapey, James	McCartney, Karl	Sharma, rh Alok
Dines, Miss Sarah	Heaton-Harris, Chris	McPartland, Stephen	Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Henderson, Gordon	McVey, rh Esther	Simmonds, David
Docherty, Leo	Henry, Darren	Menzies, Mark	Skidmore, rh Chris
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Higginbotham, Antony	Mercer, Johnny	Smith, Chloe
Donelan, Michelle	Hinds, rh Damian	Merriman, Huw	Smith, Greg
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Hoare, Simon	Metcalfe, Stephen	Smith, Henry
Double, Steve	Holden, Mr Richard	Millar, Robin	Smith, rh Julian
Dowden, rh Oliver	Hollinrake, Kevin	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Smith, Royston
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Milling, rh Amanda	Solloway, Amanda
Drax, Richard	Holloway, Adam	Mills, Nigel	Spencer, Dr Ben
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Holmes, Paul	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Spencer, rh Mark
Duddridge, James	Howell, John	Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Stafford, Alexander
Duguid, David	Howell, Paul	Moore, Damien	Stephenson, Andrew
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Huddleston, Nigel	Moore, Robbie	Stevenson, Jane
Dunne, rh Philip	Hudson, Dr Neil	Mordaunt, rh Penny	Stevenson, John
Eastwood, Mark	Hughes, Eddie	Morris, Anne Marie	Stewart, rh Bob
Edwards, Ruth	Hunt, Jane	Morris, David	Stewart, Iain
Ellis, rh Michael	Hunt, rh Jeremy	Morris, James	Streeter, Sir Gary
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Hunt, Tom	Morrissey, Joy	Stride, rh Mel

Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben

Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Maggie Throup and
Scott Mann

Question accordingly negatived.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Clause 87

TEMPORARY PERIOD FOR REDUCED RATES ON RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 81, in page 49, leave out lines 14 to 27.

This amendment would mean that the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Temporary Relief) Act 2020 no longer applies to additional dwellings.

The Temporary Chair (Siobhain McDonagh): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 87 to 89 stand part.

That schedules 16 and 17 be the Sixteenth and Seventeenth schedules to the Bill.

Clauses 90 and 91 stand part.

New clause 26—*Equality impact analysis* (No. 2)—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the equality impact of sections 87 to 89 and schedule 16 and 17 of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider the impact of those sections on—

- (a) households at different levels of income,
- (b) people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010),
- (c) the Treasury's compliance with the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, and
- (d) equality in England, Northern Ireland and in different regions of England.

(3) A review under this section must provide a separate analysis in relation to each of the following matters—

- (a) the temporary period for reduced rates on residential property,
- (b) increased rates for non-resident transactions, and

(c) relief from higher rate charge for certain housing co-operatives etc.

(4) In this section “regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out and publish a review of the effects of sections 87 to 89 and schedules 16 and 17 of the Bill on equality in relation to households with different levels of income, people with protected characteristics, the Treasury's public sector equality duty and on a geographical basis.

New clause 27—Fiscal and economic impact of 2% non-resident surcharge—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of section 88 and schedule 16 and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act and once a year thereafter.

(2) A review under this section must estimate the expected impact of section 88 and schedule 16 on—

- (a) Stamp Duty Land Tax revenue at the increased rates of 2%, and what the revenue impact would have been if the rate had been 3%,
- (b) residential property prices, and
- (c) affordability of residential property.”

This new clause would require the Government to report on the effect of the 2% stamp duty land tax non-resident surcharge on tax revenues and on the price and affordability of property.

Abena Oppong-Asare: It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition on this group of amendments and new clauses relating to stamp duty. I rise to speak on those in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Amendment 81 will prevent the extension of stamp duty holiday from being used for second homes, buy-to-lets and investment properties. New clause 26 would require the Government to review the equalities impact of this group of clauses, including their impact on households with different income levels and on people with protected characteristics, their compliance with the public sector equality duty and their impact on the different regions and nations of the United Kingdom. New clause 27 would require the Government to review the impact of a non-residential surcharge of 2%, which it is set at in the Bill, and 3%, which, as I shall come on to, the Conservative party previously committed to.

Before I come on to the amendments in more detail, let me say a little about the stamp duty holiday extension. Clause 87 extends the £500,000 nil rate band until 30 June. From July until the end of September, the nil rate band will be £250,000, double its normal level; it will return to the usual level of £125,000 from 1 October. It is estimated that the total cost of this extension will be £1.5 billion by the end of 2021-22. That is on top of the £3.2 billion cost of the initial stamp duty land tax holiday announced in July 2020.

The extension will of course be welcome news for those people in the process of buying a new home who face a cliff edge at the end of March. We know that many people have struggled to complete purchases in time due to the coronavirus restrictions and the significant backlog of pending transactions. In previous debates, Members raised issues of cyber-attacks on council services in Hackney that impacted the planning department and delayed people's securing mortgages.

However, we have concerns about the broader effects of the policy. Our new clause 26 is intended to encourage the Government to be honest about the impact of the

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

stamp duty holiday on the housing market. The Resolution Foundation says that the lower stamp duty liabilities have contributed to house price rises over the last eight months. House prices in England grew 7% between July and December 2020, which is highly unusual behaviour during a recession. In many cases, the rise in house prices over the period will have cancelled out the benefit of the stamp duty holiday. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Resolution Foundation and others have pointed out, the stamp duty holiday has also had the perverse effect of temporarily removing the advantage that first-time buyers had in the market compared with existing homeowners. This, coupled with rapidly rising house prices, has meant that many first-time buyers continue to be priced out of the market. The Bill does nothing to address the housing crisis that affects millions of families across the country—yet again, a wasted opportunity from this Government.

I turn now to clause 88 and our amendment 81. It is unbelievable that, at the same time as the Chancellor is pressing ahead with a £2 billion council tax rise, he has given another tax break to second-home owners and buy-to-let landlords. This half a billion pound tax break for second-home owners and landlords is the wrong priority in the middle of an economic crisis that is hitting family incomes. Instead, this money could have been used to build nearly 3,000 socially rented homes, which is half the total built in England last year. In Wales, the equivalent tax relief has not been extended to property acquired as investment or as a second home. Labour's amendment 81 would ensure that the extended stamp duty holiday in England and Northern Ireland followed that approach. I turn to the non-residential surcharge introduced under clause 88. During the 2019 general election campaign, the Chancellor, who was then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said:

"Evidence shows that by adding significant amounts of demand to limited housing supply, purchases by non-residents inflate house prices."

He went on to announce a Conservative manifesto commitment to introduce a non-resident stamp duty surcharge of 3%, which would have been spent on programmes aimed at tackling rough sleeping. But clause 88 introduces a non-resident surcharge of 2%, rather than 3%. As yet, we have had no explanation from the Government as to why they have watered down that commitment. We estimate that this means the Government could miss out on £52 million a year in revenue that should have been spent on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

Our new clause 27 would require the Government to review the difference between the 2% charge and the 3% charge and to reveal the lost income as a result of that decision. When the Minister stands up, perhaps he will tell us why the Government have moved from 3% to 2%.

We welcome clauses 89 to 91, which provide relief from the annual tax on enveloped dwellings and the 15% stamp duty charge for the ownership and transfer of property by housing co-operatives that do not have transferable share capital. The Treasury has listened to the co-operative housing sector on the issue and that is welcome.

To conclude, we do not believe that the Government's clauses in this group would do anything to solve the

housing crisis we face in this country. Year after year, Government have failed to build the homes we need, especially social and affordable homes. The Government are on track to miss their target of building 300,000 homes by almost a decade. The number of new social rented homes has fallen by over 80% since 2010 and home ownership is down sharply among young people, with 800,000 fewer households under 45 owning their home than in 2010. Without urgent action the housing crisis in the UK will deepen. Instead the Government have decided to give a tax break to landlords and failed to meet their own commitment on the non-residential surcharge. Our amendments will remedy these wrongs.

Jesse Norman: Last spring, we were only just beginning to understand as a nation what the full impact of the coronavirus might mean for us. We were told to stay at home and, for many people, that meant postponing plans that they might have made to move, creating considerable uncertainty. It was evident that the housing market was affected by that and it was made much worse when, on 26 March, buying and selling a property was largely put on hold. While business was enabled to resume from 13 May, there was concern about what the pandemic would mean for the market and for the jobs that rely on the sector.

The Chancellor announced that he would support the housing market through the stamp duty land tax holiday, quadrupling the starting threshold for SDLT to £500,000. That was designed to give a boost—indeed, the boost to the housing market that it needed to thrive through the pandemic. It has thrived: transactions in the last quarter of 2020 were 16% higher than in the same period in 2019. In other words, the SDLT holiday has given hundreds of thousands of families the confidence to buy and to sell their homes at a particularly difficult time. In turn, it has supported the livelihoods of people—tens of thousands of them, or more than that—whose businesses and jobs rely on trade with, through and from the housing market.

Towards the end of last year, it became apparent that the housing industry was struggling to meet the additional demand to move home and that there were delays in processing transactions. That meant that some of those moving home would not be able to complete the transactions that they had entered into until after the holiday ended, through no fault of their own. The Bill therefore extends the stamp duty land tax holiday in order to allow those buyers still to receive the relief. In addition, the nil rate band will be £250,000, double its standard level, until the end of September, in order to allow the market to return smoothly to its normal rates.

The Bill also introduces a non-residential SDLT surcharge. The surcharge will apply to property purchases by non-UK residents who do not come to live and work here, helping to ease house price inflation and to keep housing free for UK residents to buy. Revenue raised from the surcharge will be used to help address the issue of rough sleeping.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) raised the question about the non-resident surcharge. She may not be aware that, at Budget 2018, the Government announced that a consultation for a 1% non-UK resident surcharge would be published. Following the announcement of the surcharge, HMRC and the Treasury carried out a public consultation in

spring 2019. That included questions on whether a 1% rate was set at the right level to balance the Government's objectives on home ownership with those of the UK remaining an open and dynamic economy. Having listened to stakeholders, the Government believe that the 2% surcharge—twice the original amount contemplated—strikes the right balance in this area. That is the basis on which the surcharge has been set.

The Bill will also relieve the 15% rate of SDLT and the annual tax for enveloped dwellings for qualifying housing co-operatives. That change ensures that these measures are fairly targeted at companies that use so-called envelopes in order to avoid tax on their properties.

Amendment 81 would disapply the SDLT holiday to purchases of additional dwellings. As the Committee will know, the SDLT holiday was intended to give a boost to the entire property market, of which developers and landlords are important parts. Although those buying second homes or buy-to-let properties will benefit from that tax change, they will continue to pay an additional 3% on top of the standard SDLT rates.

The Government have maintained the relative advantage that buyers of main homes had before the tax change. For example, the purchaser of a second home worth £500,000 will still pay £15,000 in SDLT, compared with nothing for the purchase of a main residence. It was a Conservative Government who introduced the phasing out of finance cost relief, and the higher rates of SDLT for the purchase of additional property—all steps towards a more balanced tax treatment between homeowners and landlords.

On new clause 26, HMRC routinely publishes information about SDLT, collected by house price bands and by region. Of course, a full tax impact assessment, including equalities impacts, has been published for each measure.

Extending the SDLT holiday ensures that buyers who were affected by delays in the industry will still be able to receive the tax relief.

In the longer term, the Bill introduces a new surcharge that will help more people on to the housing ladder through the new non-UK residents' surcharge. It also ensures that stamp duty and the annual tax on enveloped dwellings remain fair by making certain that only those who the Government intend to pay corporate rates of tax are captured.

4.45 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I am happy to speak in support of clauses 80 to 91 and also new clauses 26 and 27.

Some of the measures in this cluster of schedules and clauses do not apply to Scotland, where the land buildings transaction tax applies instead following the devolution of the stamp duty land tax. That said, I am sure that the extension of the temporary increase to the stamp duty land tax holiday with no rate band for residential property in England and Northern Ireland that will be given effect by clause 87 will be very much welcomed by those who stand to benefit from it. The increased rates for non-resident purchasers given effect by clause 88 and schedule 16 is something that is long overdue. I am also happy to support the relief from annual tax on enveloped dwellings for certain kinds of properties given effect by clauses 89 to 90 alongside schedule 17, as well as the provisions being made under clause 91 for repayment to co-operatives that are also eligible.

I encourage Ministers to look positively on the reforms of property taxation that have taken place in Scotland since stamp duty was devolved. LBTT replaced stamp duty on 1 April 2015. It is very much a progressive tax in that the rates increase more than proportionately in line with the price of the property to which it has been applied. That has a very valuable role in the housing market with regard to easing house price inflation and, at the same time, exempting nearly 80% of first-time buyers from paying any kind of property tax on their first purchase of a home. My party is committed to maintaining current rates and bands within that tax regime while undertaking a review of the effectiveness of the additional allowance supplement that has also been put in place. It is in that spirit of constant review that we find much to welcome in new clauses 26 and 27, which we consider will merit the support of the Committee.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): As the Committee is aware, this year's Finance Bill is presented at an unprecedented time in British peacetime history. The pandemic has hit the economy very hard, and the Government have not stood idly by over the past year. Extensive levels of economic interventions have been introduced to protect jobs, businesses and our people in order to help them through this pandemic. The impact of this on the state of the public finances has been drastic, with the budget deficit rising to £355 million in 2020-21 and our national debt rising to £2 trillion.

That is of course not a sustainable position, but, as we know, the tide is turning. The Government's excellent vaccine planning, procurement and roll-out means that we can now see the end in sight. The economy and society have begun to open up, but we are not there yet. The Budget introduced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in March therefore had to achieve a very delicate balance in maintaining high levels of economic support during the continuing global health crisis while also laying the groundwork to repair the public finances and support our economic recovery.

The part of our economy that is the housing market comes in both property sales and construction. I will address my remarks primarily to the decision to extend the temporary stamp duty land tax holiday. As my right hon. Friend the Minister said, when the pandemic struck and the first lockdown began in March last year, the housing market experienced a sharp decline in sales, falling by 43% in the second quarter of the financial year compared with the same period of the previous year. Historically, a sharp drop in transactions, if left unchecked, has led to a fall in the level of house building. The Government's action in introducing revised thresholds at the lower end of the market, abolishing stamp duty on the first £500,000 of the purchase price and setting the level at 5% for the next £425,000, has greatly alleviated the problem. In my constituency of Orpington, the average house price is currently £528,000, and the Government's intervention has reduced the level of stamp duty on an average transaction by 91%, leading directly to a strong recovery in the local housing market.

That recovery is also reflected in the picture nationally. According to HMRC figures, in the third quarter of the most recent financial year, housing sales increased exponentially on the previous quarter, and in the fourth quarter transactions were at their highest level since 2007. In the short term, that is extremely welcome

[Gareth Bacon]

because the Government have achieved their objective of stabilising the housing market and maintaining confidence in the construction market. By introducing an extension of the initial stamp duty holiday, followed by a tapering of relief, the Government have taken steps both to remove the danger of a cliff edge that could have reversed all the good work done in the latter half of last year and to prevent an unsustainable long-term boom in house prices. I believe that is the right approach at this juncture.

In the longer term, though, I urge the Government to take a long, hard look at the structure of stamp duty. Stamp duty thresholds have not kept pace with the rise in house prices, meaning that stamp duty has become a significant barrier to purchasing. That is particularly true in places such as Orpington, and even more so in other areas of south-east England in particular, where housing shortages are most acute. In the light of the strong link between house construction and housing transactions, coupled with the Government's desire to ramp up house building and level up the country, a review of the wider stamp duty regime would bear consideration. However, that is an argument for another day, once the battle with the pandemic is finally won.

For the moment, I believe that the extension of the stamp duty until the end of June is the right move, and its tapering from the end of June until October is both proportionate and unwelcome. I will support the Government on the issue this evening.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The stamp duty holiday tells us all we need to know about the Government's priorities. Amid an awful pandemic that has seen the highest death rates in the world, when something like 4 million people have been infected and many of them will face long covid, and when something like 7.6 million people are in hunger, we need investment in the wider economy to get us moving again. In fact, with the stamp duty holiday the Government have spent much of £5 billion, over two years, on second homes. That £5 billion could have paid for 5% increases in nurses' salaries over 15 years, given that a 5% increase would cost £330 million after allowing for the recovery of the tax on the money given in the first place.

In any case, it is not clear that the stamp duty holiday was at all necessary to stabilise the housing market, because immediately as the pandemic began to hit, the Bank of England reduced interests rates and in so doing reduced mortgage costs, supported prices and increased landlords' margins at a time when tenants were still required to pay their rents. Given that the Bank of England had already taken action to support the market, the stamp duty holiday simply increased house prices by something like 7% between July and December 2020. That is not the right priority, and it is certainly not the right priority to invest money in second homes for people who are basically making money out of that investment from taxpayers and boosting the prices that first-time buyers face. That is why in Wales, where we have a Labour Government, second homes were not included in the stamp duty holiday, which was quite right. I therefore support amendment 81. Indeed, in Wales, we have made provision so that there are no rough sleepers during this pandemic, whereas in England, of course, there are.

The stamp duty holiday will mean that first-time buyers will find it more difficult to buy a house because deposits will need to be bigger. We are moving to a situation in which young people who want to buy a house will almost always have to depend on their parents to do so, so the distribution of the opportunity to buy a house in Britain is getting worse and worse.

In a nutshell, this Budget should have invested in all our opportunities to raise productivity, increase the number of jobs, focus on the future and keep people healthy. Instead, it has been seen as an opportunity to focus on widening inequality unnecessarily. I very much support the Labour party's amendments.

The Temporary Chair (Sir Charles Walker): We now go to Christine Jardine, who is joining us virtually.

Christine Jardine [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

The Temporary Chair: We will move on to Felicity Buchan.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I speak in support of the Bill and against the amendment. The stamp duty holiday has been an unequivocal success in stimulating the market, and I welcome its extension. Many of my constituents will also welcome the surcharge for non-UK residents. In my constituency, many foreign investors buy flats and houses as financial investments, and often these lie empty; in effect, they are bank balances in the sky. This has real implications for my constituency. It leads to hollowed-out communities, and it makes it very difficult for shops, restaurants and businesses to be viable.

I welcome this Government's focus on house building. Last year, we built 243,000 houses. That is the most in 33 years. For so many of my constituents, buying a house is almost an unobtainable dream. We need to build more houses, and we need to build more affordable housing. That is especially the case in London, where the Labour Mayor's record of building housing has been lamentable. In 2016, he was given a budget of £4.62 billion to build 116,000 houses. How many had he done by December? Only 56,000—less than half. It is lamentable.

I also welcome the Government's new measures on guaranteeing mortgages up to 95%. Again, this will help my young constituents and key workers to get on to the housing ladder. In my borough of Kensington and Chelsea, we have so many private renters. Some 44% of my constituents are private renters, because people cannot afford to get on to the housing ladder. Rent is a huge proportion of my constituents' incomes. Rent is 26% of the median average income nationally. In my constituency, it is a whopping 75%, so I welcome all the support to get young people in my constituency on to the housing ladder.

I support the measures in the Bill, but like my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), I encourage Government to be more radical when it comes to stamp duty and to make a fundamental reform. Stamp duty is essentially a tax on social mobility. It prevents people from moving closer to new work opportunities. It prevents young and growing families from moving from one to two-bedroom flats to bigger family houses. It prevents older people from downsizing.

In my constituency, it has led to very perverse consequences. People cannot afford to move, so they start extending their houses. That has led to an onslaught of basement developments. One house in my street went down an extra three storeys below the lower ground floor. That has now been banned by my council, but this causes undue distress to my constituents and intolerable noise and disruption that goes on for prolonged periods. We have to make it easier for people to move.

5 pm

I would go back to the changes made to stamp duty in 2014, in the autumn statement. It was commendable that we got rid of the slab approach, but we made a mistake on the higher levels of stamp duty, because they are punitive. The average house price in my constituency is £1.25 million. The stamp duty payable, when we do not have the holiday up to £500,000, is £68,750. That is just unaffordable. Average earnings in my constituency are 40% higher than the national average, but property prices are 415% higher, and my constituents simply cannot afford this level of stamp duty. People may well say that this is a specific issue to a few constituencies in central London and ask why this matters to the rest of the country, but I can assure them that it does matter. Transactions over £1 million amounted to only 2.5% of the transactions, but in value they equated to 32% of the transactions. So if we see less activity in the top end of the market, it is bad for the Exchequer, and we have seen that reduction in activity over the past five years, since the 2014 changes. In my constituency, the volume of transactions at the top end is down by 33% and in value they are down by 25%. So this tax is the wrong side of the Laffer curve. In summary, I welcome the Bill and the changes in it, but I ask the Government to go further.

Sir Charles Walker (The Temporary Chair): Christine Jardine, welcome back.

Christine Jardine: Thank you, Chair. Apologies, I do not know what happened just then, but it is now a pleasure to take part in this debate.

I will be supporting amendment 81, as will the Liberal Democrats, which would ensure that the stamp duty land tax holiday no longer applies to the purchase of second homes. I will keep my remarks short, in the light of the earlier mishap. Suffice it to say that we believe that the SDLT holiday is not effective in helping first-time buyers on to the housing market. Giving a tax break to people who have already saved money for their property and can already afford a mortgage does not entirely solve the problem. Extending the SDLT holiday would serve only to avoid a cliff edge, depriving the Treasury of much-needed funds at a time when there are many extremely pressing calls on our public finances. Combined with the new lower deposit mortgage scheme launched in the Budget, its only effect is to increase demand for housing without increasing the supply of homes. For me, and for the Liberal Democrats, that is crucial. Members can see where I am going with this: we need to increase the supply of homes.

The Government need to take steps to increase the number of homes being built. They first must make and then keep to their targets, support local authorities that want to build new homes and enforce affordable homes targets. That must include building 100,000 new social

homes a year. The Liberal Democrats have proposed a new rent to buy scheme, where people can build up shares in housing association homes through their rent. I ask the Government to examine the merits of that proposal. These steps would be more effective in getting people on to the housing ladder. Therefore, I ask that the amendment be supported and I ask the Government to consider the rent to buy scheme as a way of realistically helping people on to the housing ladder without increasing demand for housing that is not there.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I very much welcome many of the measures in the Finance Bill, particularly the measures on stamp duty. Like many people who called for a stamp duty holiday, I welcomed it when the Government announced it and I am glad to see that it has been one of the most successful stimuli to economic activity that the country has seen. The moribund market is now racing ahead, albeit possibly slightly too fast. I recognise that homeowners need certainty—many of them are in the middle of transactions—so this is good. We are not out of the pandemic yet, so I welcome the Government's move to extend the stamp duty holiday to the end of June. I also welcome the fact that they are removing the steep cliff edge and replacing it with a smaller cliff edge by tapering it out and extending it at a lower rate until the end of October. Those are both good measures that will keep the housing market going and give certainty to homeowners.

I do not support amendment 81, which proposes that these measures should not apply to second homes, although I understand the social justice argument behind it. The purpose of the stamp duty holiday is to stimulate economic activity, and whether a home is being bought to live in or as an investment property, that still involves economic activity in the housing market. Our focus here is on stimulating the market, and both those activities have equal effect.

Back in 2012, I co-founded an organisation called the HomeOwners Alliance, Britain's first and only consumer group for homeowners. Our aim was to champion homeowners and aspiring homeowners and to help people to get into the housing market, recognising that home ownership is a valid aspiration for all young people, and indeed older people, and that the primary role of homes is to be lived in. They are not investments or casinos; they are to be lived in, and that should be the role of Government policy.

I wrote various papers on the reform of stamp duty. I will not go on about the details, but there were two particular reforms that I called for. One was an increase in the stamp duty on second homes, investment properties and buy-to-lets. The other was an increase in the stamp duty for non-residential buyers. The Government have already introduced the first of those, and I think they have raised almost as much money from that as they do from residential stamp duty. Now, in this Bill, they are introducing the stamp duty surcharge for non-residential buyers—the people who want to buy homes in this country but who have no intention of living in them. As a country, we have been very generous to such people—far more generous than most other countries—but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) said, this has a real cost in terms of preventing other people from buying a home that they actually want to live in.

[Anthony Browne]

It is very welcome that the Government are introducing the 2% surcharge for non-residential buyers who do not want to live in the UK. It is right that it should start low—2% is quite low; that is often the fee that we pay to the estate agent—but the Government should monitor it. There will be an opportunity to increase that rate, while ensuring that doing so does not have really bad effects on the market but that it does have an effect on demand and helps to free up properties for people who want to buy a home to live in. The money from these measures is being used to house rough sleepers, which is very welcome, but in the longer term as we raise the rate and more money is brought in, I would use that revenue to reduce the burden of stamp duty for those buying homes that they want to live in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington so eloquently said, stamp duty is a big burden for homeowners. Following those thoughts for the future, I will be fully supporting the Government's policies.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on this part of the Finance Bill, and I want to start by saying thank you to the Treasury for listening to people's suggestions relating to the stamp duty land tax holiday and for listening to the voice of the industry, which called for this extension. The original decision at the start of the pandemic to provide that stamp duty holiday was brilliant. It worked. It was the right measure at the right time, and it stimulated our economy and resulted in an almost 33% increase in the amount of home moves. It kept the whole show on the road. Now, as my hon. Friends have mentioned, the decision to extend it will remove the cliff edge that we could have faced when it went away, along with the tapering of other support packages.

These are sensitive times, and there are fiscal measures in place that are carefully balanced to stimulate growth, support people, jobs and businesses, and project confidence to the markets so that we can credibly borrow all this money to invest in our covid response, but this stamp duty holiday cannot go on for ever; it is after all, a revenue-negative intervention from the Treasury, despite the wider economic stimuli that it creates for the painters, movers, builders, white goods salesmen and so on.

So what do we do with a problem such as SDLT? I do not believe that it is simply a case, as some might say, of replacing one tax with another. We do too much shuffling and tinkering with our taxation system and our housing market. As a result, our taxation system is fiendishly complicated. However, this is our opportunity for radical reform, and this clause proves it. We need to look at the role of property values in locally raised revenue. We need to include our commitments on net zero and levelling up, as well as the target of building 300,000 houses a year.

Other interventions, such as the freeport scheme, can provide an excellent place to start. Let us put that idea on steroids. Let us have special economic zones to deliver levelling up and green homes, and sustainable investment in businesses, jobs and homes and the infrastructure that goes with them. With levers such as the super deduction combining with our global Britain approach, we can reach out to the world to get more

foreign direct investment, more onshoring of manufacturing and more global brands relocating to those areas that we will level up.

The property tax element is fundamental here because it relates to the homes that people live in—the people who will do the jobs that will benefit from this investment and whom we will support through the levelling-up agenda. To put it simply, we cannot do levelling up without fixing the housing market, and the way we tax it, and what we disincentivise and incentivise as a result of that taxation, are a great place to start. I therefore fully support this clause.

Jesse Norman: I do not think I will ever give a more popular speech than the one I am going to give now, because I just want to thank everyone who has made comments. I thank the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) for her remarks, which I have already answered. I thank colleagues for the speeches they have made to explore the effects, purpose and potential limits, even, of the stamp duty land tax and the holiday. I ask Members to support the clauses, and I will sit down.

Abena Oppong-Asare: This has been a good debate, and I too thank Members on both sides of the House for their contributions. Members on both sides have spoken on behalf of their constituents about the impact of the stamp duty holiday, the challenges of buying a home and the need for more action to make affordable housing a reality.

As I said in my opening contribution, the Opposition simply do not believe that the Government should be handing a half a billion pound tax break to buy-to-let investors and second home buyers. Once again, this is the wrong priority from a Government who are letting families down. Labour's amendment 81 would end that unfairness, and I want to press it to a vote.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 214, Noes 364.

Division No. 268]

[5.13 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard

Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint

Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca

Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark

Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webb, Claudia
 West, Catherine

Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bambos Charalambous and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William

Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evannett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura

Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert

Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert

Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

**Scott Mann and
 Maggie Throup**

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Clause 87 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 88 and 89 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 16 and 17 agreed to.

Clauses 90 and 91 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 92

EXTENSION OF TEMPORARY 5% REDUCED RATE FOR
 HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM SECTORS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Temporary Chair (Sir Charles Walker): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 64, in clause 93, page 54, line 15, leave out

“substitute for the period for the time being mentioned there such other”

and insert “increase the”.

This amendment would ensure that the Treasury can only increase, and not decrease, the period for which the temporary 12.5% reduced rate of VAT for the hospitality and tourism sectors applies.

Clauses 93 to 96 stand part.

That schedule 18 be the Eighteenth schedule to the Bill.

Clause 97 stand part.

That schedule 19 be the Nineteenth schedule to the Bill.

Clauses 128 to 130 stand part.

New clause 16—*Review of changes to VAT*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact on investment in parts of the United Kingdom and regions of England of the changes made to VAT by sections 92 and 93 of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider the effects of the provisions on—

- (a) business investment,
- (b) employment,
- (c) productivity,
- (d) GDP growth, and
- (e) poverty.

(3) A review under this section must consider the following scenarios—

- (a) the extension of temporary 5% reduced rate for hospitality and tourism sectors is continued until 30th September 2021, and
- (b) the extension of temporary 5% reduced rate for hospitality and tourism sectors is continued until 31st December 2021.

(4) In this section “parts of the United Kingdom” means—

- (a) England,
- (b) Scotland,
- (c) Wales, and
- (d) Northern Ireland;

and “regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

This new clause seeks a review comparing (a) the extension of temporary 5% reduced rate for hospitality and tourism sectors being continued until 30 September 2021, and (b) the extension of temporary 5% reduced rate for hospitality and tourism sectors being continued until 31 December on various economic indicators.

New clause 30—*Review into the effects of replacement of LIBOR*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must undertake a review within six months of the passing of this Act of the effects of sections 128 and 129.

(2) This review must consider—

- (a) the implications for tax revenue,
- (b) effects on financial stability, and
- (c) effects on businesses that use LIBOR as a benchmark, including businesses offering supply chain finance.”

This new clause would require a review into the effects of the provisions of the Bill about replacing LIBOR.

Jesse Norman: May I say how much I love your exuberance, Mr Walker? It is never better in evidence than it was just now. Perhaps we are all getting a bit demob happy after 10 hours of close consideration of the Bill.

The Finance Bill includes clauses that extend temporary VAT relief for the hospitality and tourism sectors; that extend digital record keeping for VAT purposes to all businesses; that give businesses longer to make deferred VAT payments; and that add S4C, the Welsh language television channel, to an existing VAT refund scheme for public bodies. A customs clause will enable businesses that export steel into Northern Ireland from the EU to pay the same tariffs and access the same UK quotas as other UK businesses, instead of facing the prohibitive duties and quotas set out in EU legislation last year. Finally, banking clauses make changes to existing tax rules to ensure that they continue to operate as intended following the transition away from LIBOR and other benchmark rates, and update the powers to make amendments to the bank surcharge, the bank loss restriction, the bank compensation restriction and bank levy rules by regulations made by statutory instrument.

Clauses 92 and 93 ensure that businesses will continue to be supported by the temporary VAT relief for the hospitality and tourism sectors. The relief was introduced as an urgent response to the economic challenges faced by businesses in sectors severely affected by covid-19 restrictions. Together, these clauses will ensure that the relief continues to support the cashflow and viability of around 150,000 businesses, as well as the continued employment of more than 2.4 million people.

Amendment 64 seeks to remove the flexibility in the legislation that would allow for changes in the duration of the relief. As with all reliefs in response to the pandemic, the Government continue to keep the situation under review. It is important that the clauses allow for flexibility in what is, after all, still a rapidly changing environment. I therefore urge Members not to support—indeed, to reject—this amendment.

New clause 16 would require a review of the impact on investment of extending the 5% rate of VAT to the end of September, versus the year end, across the United Kingdom. This is technically not possible, because some of the required data does not exist.

Clause 94 will provide the legislative basis for the changes I announced to the Making Tax Digital for VAT service in July 2020, extending the requirement to keep digital records and submit digital VAT returns to VAT-registered businesses with taxable turnover below the VAT threshold of £85,000 from April 2022. Around 600,000 businesses have deferred VAT payments worth an estimated £34 billion as a result of the coronavirus emergency.

Clause 95 and schedule 18 legislate for a new payment scheme that will allow businesses that defer VAT payments from 20 March through to the end of June 2020, which were previously due by 31 March 2021, longer to pay in up to 11 equal monthly interest-free instalments. The new payment scheme has been available since February and will remain available until late June 2021. As of 19 April, HMRC has collected around £13 billion of the £34 billion that was deferred. Approximately 120,000 payment plans have so far been created, with a further £11 billion committed to being paid in monthly instalments. This means that over £24 billion of the total deferred

[Jesse Norman]

VAT has now been secured as paid or scheduled to be paid. This is proving to be an extremely important and effective intervention.

Clause 96 seeks to add the Welsh language television channel S4C, the recent changes to the operating structure of which mean that it can no longer recover most of the VAT it incurs, to an existing VAT refund scheme for public bodies. That will refund VAT relating to its non-business activities of free-to-air public service broadcasting. The change will come into effect from 1 April 2021.

Clause 97 and schedule 19 ensure that businesses that move steel into Northern Ireland do not have to pay prohibitive safeguard rates as long as there is capacity in the relevant quota. The EU introduced legislation last year that could have led to prohibitive duties being charged on all steel imports into Northern Ireland, making steel more expensive there than anywhere else in the rest of the UK, or indeed in the EU. This outcome would have been quite unacceptable and incompatible with the Northern Ireland protocol. The Government wrote to the UK steel sector in January to communicate a solution that allows Northern Ireland businesses to have access to UK tariffs, including UK quotas instead of EU quotas. This clause and schedule provide the legal basis for that solution.

5.30 pm

Clause 128 amends three statutory references to LIBOR in tax legislation dealing with leases. Clause 130 updates the powers to make amendments to the bank surcharge, bank loss restriction, bank compensation restriction and bank levy rules by regulations made by statutory instruments. These rules contain definitions that refer to regulatory terms defined by the Financial Conduct Authority. The FCA is due to implement the new investment firms prudential regime from January 2022, and the regulatory definitions are therefore changing. The definitions in the bank tax rules therefore need to be amended so that existing bank tax legislation can continue to operate in line with current policy. Without these changes, a number of firms could fall out of the scope of the existing legislation, causing a risk to the Exchequer that HMRC has calculated as being of up to £160 million up to 2026.

I therefore urge that clauses 92 to 97 and 128 to 130, as well as schedules 18 and 19, stand part of the Bill.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I rise to speak to new clause 30 in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and to make a few remarks on the other provisions in this group.

Clauses 92 and 93 relate to the temporary VAT cuts for the tourism and hospitality sectors. These are of course among the hardest-hit sectors of our economy over the past year, and it is absolutely right that this relief is extended. Only today we learned that, of the 800,000 jobs lost in the economy over the past year, 80% are those of people under 35 years old, many of whom previously worked in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Today's unemployment figures show that it is young people more than any others who have borne the brunt of the job loss impact over the past year.

The vaccine programme of course gives us great hope and a platform for the cautious reopening of the economy, but only two in five hospitality businesses have outside space. Most of them are still not able to operate even under the conditions allowed at the time of this debate, so it is still a very tough time for the hospitality industry. After the experience of the past year, with the upsurges in cases in some countries, the emergence of new variants and vaccine resistance levels remaining uncertain, no one would yet say that we were out of the woods or that there was not still a need to support key sectors of the economy for some time yet. That is why it is right to continue the measures in clauses 92 and 93.

Clause 95 relates to payment schedules for VAT. Again, it is important to show some understanding of the difficulties that businesses have faced in the past year, and it is far better to have a measure that approves a realistic repayment schedule than bring support to an abrupt end and cause repayments at a defined deadline, which could have very damaging consequences for some of the businesses concerned.

Clause 97 and schedule 19 relate to steel moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We of course support anything that will make life easier for the steel industry right now. It is the foundation for much of our manufacturing industry, and there is a great deal of uncertainty hanging over various steel plants in the UK right now. It is impossible not to reflect that, while the Government promised us free trade with the rest of the world, we need a clause and a schedule like these precisely because they have not even been able to guarantee free trade within the UK. We hope that this clause and schedule will make it easier to move steel goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but the Minister will be aware that one of the broader uncertainties surrounding UK-made steel is how to avoid its being subject to 25% EU tariffs if quotas are breached in the near future. I wonder whether he will update the House on how discussions on that matter are going and how the Government intend to avoid that. This is particularly important given the wider issues facing the steel industry at the moment.

New clause 30, in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, relates to the transition from LIBOR to other reference rates, and specifically to reviewing the effects on taxation of replacing LIBOR. The new clause would require such a review to take into account the implications for tax revenues of the transition, and the effects on businesses, including those offering supply chain finance.

The new clause relates to clauses 128 and 129, which replace references to LIBOR in legislation with references to an "incremental borrowing rate". The history of this, of course, relates to the long effort to move away from the use of LIBOR in financial markets. The need to do so arose out of the uncovering of attempts to rig LIBOR in the interests of various individuals in the financial services industry some years ago. Indeed, I believe that the Minister and I were colleagues on the Treasury Committee when all that was uncovered.

The uncovering of those practices exposed much that was bad about what was happening in parts of financial trading at the time, with activity being pursued in the interests of traders rather than customers, rates being rigged for the benefit of those traders and their institutions, and bank chief executives professing ignorance about

what was going on inside their own companies. The ability to game the rate was exposed; the use of opinions on cost from submitters to the rate-setting process, rather than its always being based on actual trades, produced the possibility that tiny movements in LIBOR could benefit individual institutions or traders, often by very significant sums given the volumes of trades involved. Potentially, only a tiny movement in rates was needed to generate a very big profit.

However, making a decision to move away from LIBOR to alternative benchmarks based on actual transactions rather than the opinion of traders was, in a sense, the easy part. So far it has taken years; no wonder they are calling it the long goodbye. The difficulty is that LIBOR has been so widely used as a benchmark for contracts around the world. Indeed, the Bank of England estimates that LIBOR has served to underpin contracts worth some £300 trillion across the world and £30 trillion here in the UK. Even in these covid days, those are serious sums.

Moving away from LIBOR without dealing with that contract issue leads to the potential for contractual law disputes. If a deal was agreed based on one interest rate, how will it be affected by the move to another rate? That is not an abstract or unreal problem; it could affect mortgage rates, leases of buildings—all sorts of contracts. Indeed, the issue was highlighted only this morning in the *Financial Times*, in a story headlined “US lawmakers warned of litigation chaos over Libor”.

The Government have attempted to deal with this legacy contract issue through the Financial Services Bill, which is currently ending its proceedings in the other place. How successful that legislative effort will be remains to be seen. The very least we can say is that the reality of moving away from LIBOR has proved to be more complex than the decision in principle to do so. We may not have heard the end of this matter of transitioning away from LIBOR. That is why it makes sense to have a review of the implications, which is exactly what our new clause 30 calls for.

Clauses 128 and 129 deal with the tax implications of this change and replace legislative references to LIBOR with the term “incremental borrowing rate”. They also provide the Government with powers to make tax changes as a result of the discontinuation of LIBOR.

The Government estimate that the impact of all this on Exchequer revenues will be marginal. That could be right, but the sheer volume of contracts involved here suggests that the need for a review of the implications for tax revenue is real, and that is what our new clause 30 calls for. We believe that such a review should take specific account of the impact on businesses using supply chain finance. After all, that has been very much in the news recently, and it ought to be a field with which Ministers are by now familiar. Perhaps the Minister felt special when he got the call about supply chain finance, because it is not every day that someone gets a call from the former Prime Minister, but now we find that he was not the only one. In fact, there were three Ministers in the Department, one in the Department of Health and Social Care and the industry adviser in No. 10, all of whom got the call about supply chain finance. You could be forgiven for thinking that there are few people living west of the Caucasus who have not heard from the former Prime Minister about supply chain finance. After all that, it seems only right to

consider the impact of this provision and on these companies. That is why we have included them in the new clause.

The inquiries on the broader issue will do their work. We may well hear more of this elsewhere, but, for the moment, as regards new clause 30, I look forward to the Minister’s response at the end of the debate.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and it is a pleasure to speak in this debate. As I spoke twice yesterday and I am on the Bill Committee next week, I will keep my remarks a little short and focus on one measure that is important to my constituency.

I know that the Committee will appreciate that Harrogate and Knaresborough has a very significant hospitality and tourism sector. Using data from UKHospitality, we see that before the pandemic, there were 9,464 people employed by the sector. That puts us in the top 10% of constituencies across the country. The sector is not just a Harrogate and Knaresborough one; it is important to the whole of the York and North Yorkshire economy, accounting for over 75,000 jobs. If we look across the UK, we see that the sector accounts for 150,000 businesses and 2.4 million jobs. It is a huge number of people in a sector that has been one of the hardest hit.

As has been mentioned, among the tax measures in the Bill is the extension of the temporary VAT cut of 5% for the hospitality and tourism sectors. That reduction was first announced last July and was very well received by the industry, but this Bill extends that to the end of September and will then bring in a further reduction of a 12.5% rate for the six months to the end of March next year. This is very welcome, and the points that were made by both Front Benchers, my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East, were absolutely correct.

This initiative understands the pressures that businesses will face. The hospitality sector may be starting again but it is effectively running on empty, having had months of either zero or very limited trading. If I may quote a local businessman, Mr Ian Fozard of Rooster’s brewery and taproom—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, Hear!”] Mr Fozard is obviously well known here. He said that “most businesses like ours need a sustained period of good trading to build back some reserves”.

Mr Fozard’s business is an excellent one and he makes a significant point. The industry needs a period of stability where it can rebuild. One challenge will be when businesses have been through the summer and they face the standard seasonal reduction but may not have built up the cash flow in reserve to see them through the leaner months. This initiative recognises that risk, so the continuity of support through the winter is welcome.

The sector is incredibly varied. We tend to focus on—indeed, the publicity tends to be about—pubs and restaurants, but there are also hotels and guest houses, and in Harrogate, we have the convention centre, which is a significant driver of visitors to the area. It has been a Nightingale Hospital for the last few months and while that is being deconstructed, the convention centre team have launched their restart plans, and I know that their good work is seeing the diary filled with bookings. However, my point is that this is a business-to-business

[*Andrew Jones*]

sector, not just a business-to-consumer sector and, as this sector is diverse, so, correspondingly, is its supply chain. It has been very tough for the businesses in that supply chain. I know that, in my own constituency, some businesses in the supply sector will not be reopening, and businesses that have served the industry well for many years are at a crisis point.

I am sure that the safe reopening will release some pent-up demand. There are clear signs of that this week: we have all seen the news coverage and probably seen it in our constituencies, too. However, we should not expect the return of volume international markets any time soon and there will be some domestic customers whose confidence will need rebuilding before they engage with the sector again. For the conference industry, there will be the challenge of knowing just how much of that market will stay online having gone online over the past year. So this is a sector facing huge challenges. It is a sector that clearly interests our constituents and Members here, and it is important for employment, particularly of younger people.

5.45 pm

The measure in this Bill is very helpful. The key point is that it will stimulate demand, especially in the quieter winter season, and that demand will generate the cash flow that businesses need. It is not a cheap measure—it will cost nearly £5 billion—so it is a huge tax cut but, once we are through this pandemic, the sector will resume its central role in our national life, and generate the revenue and job opportunities that we need.

Peter Grant [V]: I seek leave to speak to amendment 64 and new clause 16, which stand in my name and the names of my hon. Friends. We support the cut in VAT to 5% for the hospitality and tourism sectors; in fact, it was pressure from the Scottish National party that initially forced the Government to accept that measure. However, as with much of the Government's support for businesses during the past 13 months, it is not enough.

Although there has been a welcome easing of restrictions in all four UK nations—in Scotland, we are particularly looking forward to next Monday, when the most significant easing of restrictions since December will come into effect—it is unlikely, indeed impossible, that the tourism and hospitality sectors will get back to anything like normal immediately. It is impossible that we will be back to normal by the end of September, and it is therefore completely irrational for the Government to arbitrarily decide that the 5% VAT rate should end on 30 September, but that is exactly what they have decided. The SNP did, in fact, table an amendment seeking to extend that date to 31 December, but that amendment was deemed to be outside the scope of this Bill. I accept that ruling, but I still urge the Government to get real, not only about the difficulties that the tourism and hospitality sectors are facing but about how long those difficulties are going to last.

In new clause 16, we are asking for the Chancellor to report back to Parliament on the impacts that the 5% VAT rate has had, and—very importantly—to compare that with what would have happened if it had been extended, as we have asked. We know what the 5% VAT rate is supposed to achieve, supporting businesses in those sectors, so the Government should have no qualms

about assessing whether or not they have achieved that. Nor should they have any qualms about having their decision compared on an empirical basis with alternatives that have been put forward by other MPs.

The Minister claimed earlier that it is technically impossible to comply with that new clause because the data just does not exist. I find that frankly astonishing. If the political will is there, the data can surely be made available, and if Parliament decides that it is going to pass into law a requirement for that to happen, the job of the Government is to comply with the will of Parliament.

Amendment 64 asks for a minor, but important, change to the wording of clause 93, dealing with the temporary 12.5% VAT rate. Clearly, as I said earlier, we would have preferred that to remain at 5%, but the Government have rejected that proposal and gone for a 12.5% rate until 31 March 2022, presumably with the full 20% rate coming in after that date.

Clause 93, as currently worded, would allow the Treasury by regulation to bring that date forward, so that the tourism and hospitality sector would go back to paying the full 20% VAT rate sooner than the date that this House has agreed. That is not acceptable. Our amendment would allow the March 2022 deadline to be extended if we found—as we may well find—that the sector was taking longer than expected to recover. The only reason for bringing the date forward would be if, by some miracle, the tourism and hospitality sector recovered quicker than expected. I can see no circumstances in which those businesses will have recovered sufficiently for the increase to 20% to be brought forward earlier than March 2022.

In his summing up, may I invite the Minister to contradict me and to tell me that he thinks that that will be possible—that it will be appropriate to bring forward that date? If he cannot see any circumstances in which it will be right for him to use the power to bring that tax increase forward, he should not be asking us to give him the power in the first place.

One consequence of the quaint way that the British Parliament does its business is that, if we want to support businesses by reducing VAT on corporation tax liabilities, it goes in a Finance Bill, but if we want to reduce the liability of other taxes such as non-domestic rates, it does not. The non-domestic rate system is one of the very few parts of the business taxation system that is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government have used that devolved power to ensure that businesses in retail, tourism, hospitality, aviation and newspapers, all of which have been severely hit by covid, will pay no business rates at all during 2021-22. The small business bonus scheme takes around 100,000 businesses out of non-domestic rates altogether and, if the current Scottish Government are re-elected, that will continue for the lifetime of the next Parliament.

In Scotland, we have the lowest business rate poundage in the United Kingdom, the most generous relief schemes and, of course, we have the most progressive income tax system in the whole of the United Kingdom. When we see the benefits that come to the vast majority of people in Scotland from the different approach that our Government have taken using the limited taxation powers at their disposal, I hope the Government will look positively on any request by the new Scottish Government, whoever that might be, to further extend those powers.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: I wish to speak to clauses 92 to 95 relating to VAT. This last year has been exceptionally tough on our hospitality industries and I welcome all measures to support our valuable tourism and hospitality businesses as they tentatively begin to open up after the pandemic. Like many others, I was delighted to be able to visit pubs, restaurants and cafés in my constituency last week. I had a particularly enjoyable Friday night drink at the Black Horse on Kingston Hill and a fantastic Sunday lunch at the Glasshouse in New Malden. I am very much looking forward to getting round to all the other excellent venues in my constituency over the next few weeks and months.

However, it is important to remember that tourism and hospitality will not recover overnight. While there is undoubtedly a great deal of pent-up demand for eating out and visiting the wonderful sights and attractions of our great nation, it will not be possible for all businesses to open immediately and in full. And we do not know whether the Government's road map will be able to progress as planned. Despite the wonderful success of the vaccine roll-out, we are still at risk from new variants and there may still be a need in future to restrict people's ability to socialise indoors. So, although we welcome the cut to the VAT rate on hospitality and tourism sales to 5% until September 2021, the Liberal Democrats argue that the cut should be extended for the whole of the financial year, instead of moving to 12.5% from September to March.

Household incomes also need time to recover, and encouragement to spend on luxuries and leisure such as meals out should be continued for much, much longer. Indeed, the Government could and should have gone a great deal further to support these businesses and to safeguard the jobs that they create. Many businesses are able to partially reopen this month. There are estimates that up to 60% will not be able to reopen because they do not have outside space. But they will all be faced eventually with large VAT bills, deferred over the last 12 months.

A much better way to support businesses would have been to provide relief on the deferred VAT owed. That would have relieved businesses of an immediate cash burden and freed up that cash flow to invest in stock, staff and making their premises covid-safe. Instead, the Government propose to start imposing penalties from June this year on those businesses that have not yet started repaying this VAT. That will fall on businesses that have had extremely limited opportunities to earn any revenue in the last 12 months. The measures to allow businesses to pay this in 11 instalments is welcome, but will not help those businesses that cannot yet reopen and will not have any cash coming in to pay any of those instalments.

Businesses will also be carrying a great deal of debt and it is very disappointing to see a lack of measures in the Budget to address that. In particular, many businesses will be indebted to their landlords and it is disappointing that the Government have done nothing at all to help businesses with those costs. The Liberal Democrats would have introduced a revenue compensation scheme to help businesses with fixed costs such as rent. The burden of repaying those will fall very heavily on businesses that cannot yet reopen fully.

I am probably unique in the House in having direct experience of implementing Making Tax Digital for VAT reporting in my former role as an accountant for a large organisation. While the overall objectives of the programme are sound, I can tell the Minister from personal experience that they are not always straightforward to implement. I am puzzled as to why the Government think it should be a priority for struggling small businesses to deal with the additional administrative burden of implementing Making Tax Digital, at a time when they are having to deal with the huge burden of reopening in a highly uncertain time, and at the risk of further fines if they do not comply. Surely this could have waited another 12 months. The imperative to close the tax gap surely pales into insignificance when compared with the imperative to support precarious businesses at this time. How can additional red tape and administrative burden be the right response to the current crisis?

In short, this is not a Government who understand the needs or priorities of small businesses; it is a Government who choose to impose punitive costs and paperwork rather than provide effective support.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Dame Rosie, my humblest apologies for being late in attending the Chamber. I was badly caught out by the fact that this debate is way ahead of where I thought it would be. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] There is a silver lining to every cloud.

My good friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), has said it all, but I would like to touch on the issue of the hospitality sector. I am sure the Minister is tired of hearing this again and again, but business in my part of the world is very fragile. The hospitality sector depends on making as much money as it can during the short tourist season because the weather can be so inclement—it is like living on the fat you can make in the good times to get through the winter.

I give credit to the Government for the help that has been given, but I am very concerned that some tourism businesses may still yet shut down permanently. I do not know how many times I have said this in the Chamber, but the fact is that, if we lose one business, two businesses or three businesses, we are impoverishing the tourism product that we can offer in a remote part of the British Isles and, if we do that, there is less for tourists to come, see and do, or to eat and drink, and then we do not get as many tourists coming, and it becomes a downward, vicious circle. The VAT reduction we have had so far is welcome, but could we look at extending it a little further, perhaps for as long as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park said? That would be very welcome. I have said several times in this place that it would be helpful if the Scottish Government and the UK Government could look at an overall, longer-term strategy to try to get businesses back on their feet, seeing them through the difficult times and nursing them so that we get to—to quote Churchill—the “sunlit uplands” that surely will come our way.

There is one other issue: we need some form of training element in that package. I was talking to Murray Lamont, who owns and runs Mackays Hotel in Wick, and he said: “Talk about training, Jamie, because we need to keep improving the product and making it still better because the competition is out there.” My hon.

[*Jamie Stone*]

Friend the Member for Richmond Park touched on the revenue compensation scheme, and I would be extremely grateful if that could be looked at.

I am tempted to chance my arm and talk about banks, given the name of this section of the debate. Members will have heard me say many times that we have one branch of the Bank of Scotland in the huge county of Sutherland. That is a massive problem, but rather than incur the yawns of those on the Treasury Bench—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): More, more.

Jamie Stone: I will resist the sedentary comments from the Scottish National party Member and conclude my remarks here.

6 pm

Jesse Norman: Before I wind up the debate, I thank colleagues not only in this debate but in all our previous debates for the engaged and often constructive way in which they have approached the discussion. I also thank my friends on the Opposition Front Bench for their contributions. Let me pick up on some of the themes described.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) raised the question of the Scottish Government's limited tax powers, but I would put it to him that what is so striking is how little the Scottish Government have used the tax powers that they have. We saw that earlier, when the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) invited the Government to extend a relief to antibody tests, whereas of course it is perfectly within the powers of the Scottish Government to use the tax revenue they generate to fund the differential for antibody tests themselves.

David Linden: I suggest that the Government cannot have it both ways. In one respect, the Minister says that we have done nothing with our taxation powers, but his colleagues north of the border would say that we are the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom. Which is it?

Jesse Norman: The Scottish Government are fully entitled to tax the Scottish people as much as they see fit in the democratic exercise of their mandate. The point I am making is that they have the scope to do so, if they wish, so they should not always be looking to the UK Government on matters of tax if the powers to make the change exist within their own competence and power.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) talked about Making Tax Digital for VAT, but she ignored the fact that many small businesses have already joined the Making Tax Digital for VAT programme. The reason they have done so is that they recognise that it gives them a tremendous ability to manage their tax affairs. It also allows them to enjoy the gains of improved IT productivity. We think that those gains are worth having and worth extending to other businesses. That is one of the powerful drivers behind the Making Tax Digital project.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone)—always a delight to see in the Chamber, and I am very pleased that he took off his mask so that we could follow his remarks closely—talked about a revenue compensation scheme. Of course, if he reflects for a moment, he will see that the self-employment

income support scheme is precisely a support scheme designed to assist people's incomes. It has proved to be extremely effective in supporting millions of people on that basis.

I think the hon. Gentleman is right to focus on the sunlit uplands. All I can say is that if we come out of this on anything like the basis that we are projected to do by some of the independent authorities, given that this is the worst economic crisis in recorded history, there will be much to be thankful for. I will be delighted if we can get to those sunlit uplands.

Jamie Stone: I am so sorry that the Minister did not hear the first part of my speech—I could run through it again, if that would be helpful. I will chance my arm here. Last summer, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster met business representatives to talk about the sorts of issues in the hospitality trade that I was raising. I wonder whether I could crave, or look for, the favour of the Treasury Bench. Will someone in the Treasury be willing, when suitable, to meet those representatives if they came down to London, to talk about the issues, further to the discussions they have already had with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster?

Jesse Norman: I am very happy to volunteer the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, if the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to him further to that conversation. We are keenly aware of the problem. As Ministers, we spend our lives engaging with different groups. Of course we will look kindly on any suggestion that he might make, as we would on any suggestions made by any Member of this House, but I do not want him to think for a second that we need to do that in order to be keenly aware and abreast of the actual impacts that this present crisis is having on businesses and individuals.

I come to the points raised by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), which were very important. He rightly noted the impact of job losses on the under-35s. It is important to point that out, and we are keenly aware of that within the Government. He asked for an update on the Northern Ireland steel industry situation. As he will be aware, the Government are engaging closely with the EU on this issue. The Northern Ireland protocol is clear that it should be implemented in a way that has as little impact as possible on the everyday lives of people in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. As I say, there is close and constructive engagement on this topic. I am not in a position to give any more details of conversations that are still under way, but I can let him know that they are in those terms, and there has been reporting on this in the newspapers as well.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the question of LIBOR. As he says, he and I were on the Treasury Committee when the full scale of this scandal became clear. He may recall the cross-examination I gave to Lord Grabiner on his inquiry into this issue, in which it was clear that there had been serious wrongdoing. There has been a slow and stately process of reform in this area, and businesses have been aware of the changes. Since July 2017, there has been a considerable amount of work done by the FCA. There has been a public consultation, extended because of the covid situation. There has been close engagement by a dedicated working

group with industry. The Financial Services Bill reserves powers to the FCA if that is required in order to support an orderly wind-down. A tremendous amount of work has been done and is being done, and we are content with the situation as it stands.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 92 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 93 to 96 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 18 agreed to.

Clause 97 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 19 agreed to.

Clauses 128 to 130 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill to be considered tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Wine) (Amendment, etc.) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 279), dated 9 March 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 10 March, be approved.—(*David Duguid.*)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 7 together.

PETITIONS

Ordered,

That Taiwo Owatemi be a member of the Petitions Committee.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That Shabana Mahmood be discharged from the Public Accounts Committee and Dan Carden be added.

TREASURY

Ordered,

That Emma Hardy be a member of the Treasury Committee.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

British Telecom Group staff redundancies

6.9 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, very nice to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Communication Workers Union and a great many of my constituents have been in touch concerning the plans set out by BT to make thousands of its loyal employees redundant. I therefore rise to present this petition on behalf of my east end constituents who want to see the massive redundancies of BT employees avoided and want to see the BT Group engage constructively in discussions to avoid thousands of people losing their employment in the middle of a pandemic.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to engage with the BT Group to avoid the compulsory redundancies of thousands of hardworking and dedicated staff members.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Declares that, during the coronavirus pandemic, people have undoubtedly spent more time at home with more people using their Wi-Fi for home working and home schooling; further that, throughout the pandemic, BT, Openreach and EE employees have worked tirelessly to keep us all connected and online; further that MPs from across this House will have received countless emails from BT staff and customers who are concerned with the plans set out to make thousands of BT employees redundant, close hundreds of workplaces and give no pay offer; further that the Communications Workers Union is standing by and is ready to hold negotiations with the BT Group on behalf of workers, hoping to find a solution; and further that the UK Government should engage with the BT Group in order to prevent the thousands of redundancies about to hit hardworking individuals whilst we are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to engage with the BT Group to avoid the compulsory redundancies of thousands of hardworking and dedicated staff members.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002660]

Nuclear Test Veterans: Service Medal

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

6.10 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Long ago in a far off place, men who were just a short step from boyhood took risks, without recognising them, as they served their nation. The things they did in those distant days have stayed with them for all the years since. They were the servicemen who are now our nuclear test veterans. What they did for their country in the 1950s was of inestimable value; what we have done for them since pales by comparison.

As a Cabinet Office Minister, I persuaded the then Prime Minister David Cameron and then Chancellor George Osborne to make an *ex gratia* payment—funds of £30 million, indeed—available to nuclear veterans. Those payments were administered through the Nuclear Community Charity Fund, which was established back then, to go some way to recognising the price the veterans paid in declining health and diminished wellbeing. The veterans have struggled with all kinds of conditions attributable to their exposure to radiation during the time of the nuclear tests; worse still is the pain they feel having unknowingly passed those conditions on to their descendants.

I speak today for those aged men and their deserving families to ask for simply this: that the Government recognise Britain's 22,000 nuclear veterans with a much deserved medal to mark their patriotic service. They were at the forefront of Britain's foray into the atomic age. Atomic veterans not only risked life and limb then, during the course of their duties, but those brave British personnel faced radioactive smog and searing nuclear heat which altered their very DNA.

At a time of great scientific advancement, mankind's discovery heralded a destructive power that the world did not then fully comprehend, for the lethal dangers of radiation were not at first fully understood. In the darkness of our ignorance, nuclear test veterans were drafted into a programme in which they stood just a few miles from apocalyptic explosions, flew through nuclear winds, walked through radioactive sand and drank contaminated water.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter forward; he is absolutely right to ask for this medal. Does he agree that it is right and proper that these veterans, like most of our veterans, have appropriate recognition for their service and, further, that although the 2018 reformation of the Advisory Military Sub-Committee was welcome, the delay is not? This must be dealt with as a priority because, as we have seen from the death of one of the last remaining second world war veterans, His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, every month is precious.

Sir John Hayes: Yes, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The debt does not disappear just because the years roll by, and the debt that we owe these people can be marked in precisely the way that I have recommended and that he has endorsed.

Nuclear power is an extraordinary force, sufficient to warp the cellular building blocks of man, but that is something that the veterans now—the servicemen then—could not possibly have understood. This was their

duty. They were part of a mission to develop a safe and effective nuclear deterrent for Britain that would keep the nation safe and strong throughout the cold war; the fruits of that mission defend the realm to this very day. The details of what nuclear veterans endured in service to their country have been set out time and again over the course of a long campaign to grant them appropriate recognition.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done over many years on behalf of the nuclear test veterans. One reason given for not giving these men a very well-deserved medal is that they were not put in any danger. Does he agree that that is obviously ludicrous? These days we would not ask any service personnel to what they did because of the danger posed. It was clearly a dangerous situation and should be recognised as such.

Sir John Hayes: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more, and I thank her for what she said. I will deal with and, indeed, reinforce the point she makes when I come to discuss the consideration of the matter so far and what more now needs to be done. She is quite right, as I shall explain.

For me, this journey began, as the hon. Lady suggested, long ago: I went to see the Labour Defence Minister at the time—so we are stretching back in time, Madam Deputy Speaker—the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who gave the case a good and fair hearing when I took veterans to see him. I know that he was then, and I imagine he continues to be, very sympathetic to the case. Time and again we have been blocked by a combination of the top brass—I do not know whether the Minister regards himself as top brass—and the military establishment in the Ministry of Defence. Politicians from all parties in this House have typically heard the sense that has been offered again today by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and, to a lesser extent, by me in making this argument.

Over the years since then, I have heard heartbreaking stories of lives forever altered by radiation sickness. I have witnessed the tireless efforts of those involved in obtaining formal recognition for the servicemen who selflessly endured the unknown risks of atomic testing. Indeed, I have come to know many such veterans well. There is, of course, a rate of attrition as these people become older and deal with some of the illnesses that I have described, but there are remaining veterans. I have come to know well one of my constituents, Douglas Hern, who was one such person drafted into the south Pacific nuclear testing programme. Every meeting I have attended and every story I have heard reminds me of our moral duty to deliver a suitable emblem of the debt that we owe not only to the more than 1,000 nuclear test veterans who are still with us but to their families. I see no reason—perhaps the Minister will tell me why it is not a good idea—why families should not collect medals on behalf of those they have loved and lost.

In 2019, following a meeting that I led with the British Nuclear Test Veterans Association, the then Secretary of State for Defence announced that he would ask the honours committee to re-examine whether a medal should be awarded to nuclear test veterans. He rightly stated:

“We must never forget their courage and bravery in contributing to keeping their country safe during the Cold War.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that it met only half a dozen times in the two years after he missioned it to look at this matter, and after no testimony whatsoever from veterans or veterans' organisations, the advisory military sub-committee refused to recommend the award of a medal model on the grounds that—the hon. Member for Glasgow North West made reference to this—such service

“did not meet the level of risk and rigour”

required. Not enough risk? These men flew fighter planes through mushroom clouds and felt the heat of nuclear explosions on their bare skin. Knowing what we know now of the life-altering effects of radiation exposure, to state that serving in that environment did not amount to risk and rigour sufficient to deserve a medal is—I put it as mildly as I can—bewildering, baffling, astonishing. There is clear evidence of a legacy of heartache and of pain—literally and metaphorically—that spans generations. There is a legacy of cancers that cut great men down to size before their time, wives who suffered the unimaginable pain of infant mortality, and a generation of children born with life-altering conditions.

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of marking the service of our personnel through the award of medals for particular operations. My father, a second world war veteran, wore them proudly. I do not have them, but I have no doubt that the Minister wears his proudly. Campaign medals have rightly been granted for novel and non-combat operations in the past. The Minister will know of the Ebola Medal for Service in West Africa and the medals awarded to remote drone operators in 2017. There are clearly established precedents for the awarding of service medals for non-combat operations. In 2012, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, personally intervened to secure a medal for Arctic convoy veterans, so there is a specific precedent for the award of a medal long after the event it marks.

The time for excuses has long passed. Now is the time for decisive action. For the veterans and the mothers and fathers, children and grandchildren affected, I urge the Government to act before it is too late. It is time to step up for those who stepped forward when their country needed them. It is time our generation recognised what those generations before did to make us safe. In the twilight of their storied lives, it should be our privilege to present our nuclear test veterans with an emblem of our gratitude for what was endured in the name of Queen and country. Not to honour these good and true people who served their nation would disappoint them, but it would dishonour all of us.

6.20 pm

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for his speech. He has campaigned for a number of years on this and has worked tirelessly to see those who served their country get recognition for their service. I pay tribute to him for his huge efforts.

Ensuring that victims get the recognition they deserve is fundamental to supporting veterans in this country, as is recognised in the strategy for our veterans, and I am determined that we recognise our veterans in the correct way. The Government have committed to veterans in a way that none of our predecessors have, with more money now being spent on the veterans community than ever before. Establishing the Office for Veterans'

Affairs was a systemic change and an indication of the Government's commitment to her veterans. Never before in previous Governments under previous Ministers has there been an Office for Veterans' Affairs to take responsibility for these issues and to champion the needs of veterans across government.

I hope today to assure my hon. Friends that the contributions of those who participated in the nuclear testing programme are not unrecognised, and that the Government continue to acknowledge and thank all service personnel who participated. Importantly, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, they contributed to keeping our nation secure during the cold war and since by ensuring that the UK was equipped with an appropriate nuclear capability. We will never forget their service, and we continue to recognise all that they did for their country.

As hon. Members will be aware, the advisory military sub-committee, which has been mentioned, was established to reconsider historic medallic recognition cases. As has been mentioned, last year the committee considered this case and concluded that participation in it did not meet the committee's criteria. It is important to get across to the House that this is an independent process. It operates to a strict criteria and is outwith ministerial control, and rightly so. It was not a decision that some campaign groups, veterans and their families hoped for. I understand their disappointment—of course I do.

Carol Monaghan: In 2012, David Cameron agreed to award medals—I cannot remember for which campaign; it may have been the Ebola campaign—so Prime Ministers can step in to let their feelings be known and to put pressure on the appropriate people to ensure that medals are awarded. There is a role for Ministers and for Government in this. This would be a very simple way to recognise the specific and dangerous situation that these veterans were put in.

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Member. She is not correct; there is no formal role for Ministers to play in this decision-making process. There never has been for medals. It is important that the AMSC is able to determine for itself which medal claims should be reviewed. The terms of the sub-committee are clearly laid out, and any new submissions that might have been provided have been passed to the sub-committee. The decision on whether the case will be reviewed will be shared with campaigners by the AMSC in due course. This is not the end of the line. Those reasons will be shared.

As I have said, the medallic system is outside the control of Ministers, and it always has been. It is rightly in that position, protecting the integrity of the medals system—this is important—and of those who have received honours in this country. However, I am determined to continue to do all I can to support this cohort of veterans. It is fundamental to me that there is no tiered approach to veterans in this country, that those who have served for any period, in any circumstance, are recognised and supported as veterans. Therefore, although there are no dedicated compensation arrangements for UK nuclear test veterans, all claims have been and continue to be considered under the war pension scheme.

Any veteran who believes they have suffered ill health due to service has the right to apply for no-fault compensation under this scheme, and I encourage them to do so. War pensions are payable in respect of illness or injury as a result of service in the armed forces before

[Johnny Mercer]

6 April 2005, with the benefit of reasonable doubt always given to the claimant. Decisions are medically certified and follow consideration of available service and medical evidence, and carry full rights of appeal to an independent tribunal.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings referred to the risk. I am not sure whether everybody here watches “Call the Midwife”, but on Sunday night past they had an article in the paper and it was about this very thing. I know that it was a drama, but it illustrated the effect on not only the soldiers, airmen and navy personnel, but the families. When it comes down to risk, is there not, as the right hon. Gentleman said, an obligation to deliver?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman gets to the nub of the problem. I have seen some of the drama on Sunday night in “Call the Midwife”, and it is clearly a good and emotive production. The difficulty the Government have is that the evidential basis linking conditions such as that to these tests is with the scientific community and in its opinion it is not of the standard whereby we can draw clear evidential proof. That is the problem we have. That is not a decision for a Minister—that is not a decision for me. I have my own views on medals, and I have worked hard to support this cohort in other ways. That is the nub of the problem, and it is a difficult one, because I know it is frustrating for the families and for campaigners. That is the situation we are in, and work continues to identify the links between illnesses that people think they received from nuclear tests and the actual radiation exposure itself.

Sir John Hayes: The Minister is being extremely generous in giving way, so I am grateful to him. I understand the argument about compensation, which is why of course the then Chancellor George Osborne made an *ex gratia* payment—I did emphasise that—but the medal is a bang to rights case. The fact that this committee suggested an absence of risk and rigour is extraordinary. There can be no greater risk than going into a radiation cloud. Surely the Minister, with his expertise, recognises that. Can he commit tonight to refer this back to that committee and at least ask it to take evidence from the veterans and their representatives, which it failed to do last time?

Johnny Mercer: There is an appeal going into this process, and I will write to the AMSC and ask it to make sure that it has seen veterans and their groups when making the decision in that appeal process.

In addition to maintaining access to compensation for all veterans who have suffered ill health due to service, I am committed to ensuring the provision of excellent wraparound care. That includes access to free confidential advice and support on a wide range of issues through the Veterans Welfare Service; maintaining access to bespoke services such as the veterans trauma network in England; and levelling up veterans’ mental health provision through the launch of Op Courage.

I also recognise that veterans are civilians and most access support through regular NHS services wherever they live in the UK. I am rolling out a veteran-awareness accreditation programme for GP surgeries and hospital trusts, with over 800 GP surgeries and nearly 60 trusts signed up. Let me be clear: there should be no reason in this country today why any GP surgery or NHS trust is not veteran-aware accredited. This is a duty we have to the nation; it is something we all have a responsibility in. I will be relentlessly campaigning for every NHS trust and GP surgery to become veteran-aware.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings for his tireless efforts. Anybody who tirelessly campaigns for veterans is clearly an ally of mine. We are committed as a Government, more than any Government before us, to getting the veterans’ case right, and that includes those who participated in the nuclear test programme. Those veterans made a huge contribution to ensuring the security of each and every one of us by ensuring that we had a capable and resilient nuclear deterrent during the height of the cold war. I reiterate my absolute support for those service people and I pay tribute to their service.

This idea that veterans who served in the nuclear tests are not worthy is completely wrong. There is no hierarchy of veterans in this country. The challenge in this particular case is the causal link between exposure to radiation and the illnesses that then present in individuals—and their families, because this goes on for some time. I am committed to making sure that we achieve fairness. I will make sure that the views of veterans’ groups and their representatives are portrayed to the AMSC. But I also have a duty to maintain the rigour of the system. Awards and medals always have been inherently difficult and at times divisive, but I am sure we will get there in the end—we will arrive at the right answer—and I urge my right hon. Friend to keep going with his campaign.

Question put and agreed to.

6.32 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Owen Thompson

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Con)	Chris Elmore
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Alistair Carmichael (rt. hon.) (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Daly (Bury North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con)	Ben Everitt
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Wendy Chamberlain
Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Heappey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Johnston (Wantage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Langan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Owen Thompson
Damien Moore (Southport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Antony Higginbotham
Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dean Russell (Watford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)	Ben Lake
Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Mark Harper
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)	Ben Lake
Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 April 2021

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

Elected Women Representatives: Online Abuse

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

9.25 am

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been slightly amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will be suspensions between debates. I remind Members participating, physically and virtually, that they must arrive for the start of a debate in Westminster Hall and are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to one another and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room. I remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall—although, of course, not when you are speaking. Members attending physically who are in the latter stages of the call list should use the seats in the Public Gallery initially and move on to the horseshoe when seats there become available. Members can speak from the horseshoe only where there are microphones to facilitate *Hansard*.

It is my pleasure to call Maria Miller to move the motion.

9.26 am

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered online abuse of elected women representatives.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, which was called for by members of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament. It is a great privilege for me to be able to open the debate. May I, in advance, thank hon. Members for their overwhelming support for the debate today? I also thank the organisations that have provided briefings, including the Local Government Association, the Centenary Action Group, the Fawcett Society and Compassion in Politics.

Parliaments are at their best when they are diverse. King's College London's global institute for women's leadership, chaired by Julia Gillard, put it well when it showed the evidence that equal participation of men and women strengthens our democracy. We have made huge progress here: one in three of our Members is now female. Record numbers of women stood for election in 2019, and record numbers were elected to this place. They were inspired to make a difference to their community and their country; inspired not to accept the world as it

is but to put themselves forward, despite the barriers that remain, to be here and to be able to change things; and inspired by many of the right hon. and hon. Members taking part in the debate today. Many Members, including in this debate, do not want to accept politics as it is today—a politics in which aggression and abuse are part and parcel of our working day. That is not the democracy that we have signed up for. We want a democracy that relies not on that, but on reasoned debate.

The evidence is also clear that online abuse is not only a factor in preventing women from taking on careers in politics; it is also cutting short the careers of those who stand and are successful in being elected. Members of the APPG on women in Parliament called for this debate because tackling online abuse, particularly when it impacts the freedom of speech of elected Members, needs to be a bigger priority, not only for the Government but for Parliament.

Mr Speaker has done an incredible amount of work to improve the physical security of Members. I very much welcome in particular the statement on 9 March 2021 by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, updating the House on progress on tackling intimidation in public life, but three years on from the original review, we are still waiting for a cohesive plan, with Parliament and Government working together. We need to redouble our efforts in this area, ensuring that we have a comprehensive package of the right laws to tackle online abuse, the right support and awareness of the law that is in place, the right punishments for those who seek to silence democratically elected representatives, and the right support for staff and colleagues who are victims of these dreadful abuses.

Let us be clear about what this abuse looks like. It is not offensive language. It is not strongly held views in political debate. For some colleagues, online abuse is a threat of rape, murder, stalking, or physical violence towards them or their families. At other times it is mass co-ordinated online harassment by groups. Online anonymity means the police can find it difficult to take action swiftly. Above all, online abuse is an attempt to keep women away from contributing to political life. As elected representatives, we condemn those who take that approach, and we need to redouble our efforts to stop them.

I want to be clear: MP or not, there is absolutely no place for any vile abuse online and the law needs to protect everyone better. I look forward to the introduction of the Government's online harms Bill as soon as possible. Legislation needs to specifically address online abuse, which is designed to bully, intimidate and silence. When it comes to elected representatives, we need to recognise that the impact of that abuse is particularly concerning and unacceptable. In a free and open democracy, no elected representative should ever be intimidated or feel constrained in speaking out on behalf of their constituents, but that, at the moment, is exactly what happens.

This debate is about elected female representatives who endure online abuse disproportionately, but I know that many, including the Local Government Association, are concerned that those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, members of the LGBT+ community and those with disabilities are also being particularly targeted.

The current police advice is to remove victims' social media presence, which is completely unacceptable as it prevents candidates from campaigning online and engaging

[Mrs Maria Miller]

effectively with residents once they are elected. It is clear that action is needed swiftly, well before the next general election, if we are to stop that unacceptable impact on our democracy.

Let us look at the evidence before us. Elected women MPs already report that the levels of online abuse and treatment from the media that they experience would have stopped them putting themselves forward for selection if they had known the extent to which it would affect them and their family lives, according to research from the Fawcett Society, which might help to account for why women's tenure as Members of Parliament is significantly shorter than that of male Members. Unfortunately, the abuse is not limited to them. Family members, children and often staff members are also subjected to harassment, and it puts women off standing in the first place.

In its Equal Power project, the Fawcett Society found that almost 70% of respondents cited abuse or harassment as a reason for not pursuing a career in politics. The evidence is really clear. Although the rise in abuse impacts all candidates, the increase in hate and abuse towards women over the past three general elections was almost double that experienced by men, according to data from the Constitution Unit at University College London. The University of Sheffield's research has shown that rising abuse against women MPs has persisted during the pandemic. The role of online media in delivering that abuse is significant.

The Minister will no doubt say that what is illegal offline is illegal online, so the police can and do take action on threats to murder, rape, sexually assault and stalk. There have been many cases of online abuse involving female MPs and many convictions in the past 12 months. There is no definitive figure, however, on the number of reports, the number of cases taken forward, and the number of convictions. If Parliament is to take its equality duties seriously, it should closely monitor that, and commission research on why male and female elected Members are treated so differently on social media to ensure that measures are in place to deal with it.

This is not just a UK problem. In 2016, a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 82% of women politicians surveyed in 39 countries had experienced some form of psychological violence. Indeed, 44% had received death threats, or threats of rape, beatings or abduction, and 65% had been subject to sexist remarks. In our year of hosting the G7, let us use this opportunity to draw nations together to voice our solidarity with women across the globe by pledging our support for democratically elected women, and to advocate laws and support that stop the abuse worldwide.

Gone are the days when we did not know what to do about online abuse. We know. We need to have clear laws and the Government must not only promptly bring forward the legislation to introduce the new electoral sanction on intimidation, but use the online harms Bill to recognise the harm faced by women and elected representatives when they deal with social media.

Research by the think-tank Compassion in Politics found that more than one in four people is put off posting on social media because of dreadful abuse. We cannot have an open and honest pluralistic political debate online in an atmosphere in which people are scared to speak up. I hope the Government will also

look to tackle anonymous social media accounts in the online harms Bill. I support the idea of giving people the opportunity to create verified accounts by supplying a piece of personal identification, and also of having the ability to filter out unverified accounts. Does the Minister agree that we need to change the culture from the police recommendation that victims move offline, and move to social media platforms banning abusers, with sanctions to incentivise social media platforms to act quickly when abuse actually happens?

The House of Commons itself has a role as an entity to play in this issue. Online abuse must be treated as workplace harassment, a safety hazard by the House of Commons authorities, who should provide training and support—not only to MPs but to our constituency staff, who often have to deal with this abuse on a daily basis—so that we can all feel safer, more prepared and better able to protect ourselves. Political parties have a role, particularly when it comes to candidates. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) has already made significant changes in the support provided by the Conservative party. The House of Commons has a duty to protect our democracy and should routinely collect and analyse data that breaks down why we fail to have a fully representative Parliament, including the impact of online abuse on female MPs.

I want the Government to think about how we fund the programmes to tackle online abuse. According to the Office for National Statistics, the new digital services tax of 2% on tech giants such as Facebook, Google and Twitter raised £29 million in the first month of operation alone. Let us take the polluter pays principle and use the money yielded from that to provide the sort of support against online abuse that women and girls need more generally, but that is also needed to protect democratically elected women both at local and national level.

Sixteen months ago, we celebrated record numbers of women being elected to Parliament and we still celebrate and encourage more women to stand for election. All the main parties agree that a 50:50 Parliament would be a better place, but the facts speak loudly. The Fawcett Society's Equal Power project found that almost 60% of women surveyed said they were unlikely to stand as an MP and 44% were unlikely to stand as a councillor. Nearly a year on from that, those numbers have risen to 74% and 62%, respectively. This is a worrying state of affairs, particularly when we see that 69% of respondents cited abuse or harassment as the key reason for not pursuing a career in politics. Online abuse is a significant part of that. This is a barrier that has to be lifted, for the strength of our democracy. It is in our power to tackle this. Parliament, Government and parties have to work together to do just that.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call our next speaker, who will be Caroline Nokes—just to give her early warning—Members will have four minutes to speak.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Thank you, Mr Paisley. I pay tribute to my near neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for leading this important debate today.

The Women and Equalities Committee has recently launched an inquiry into the cultures underpinning male violence against women and, sadly, I see the online

abuse of female parliamentarians as part of that same culture. Trolling might lead somewhere, and the reality is that none of us either in this debate today or in Parliament more widely knows which of our online trolls might turn into a stalker or who, indeed, might in due course turn into somebody who attends our office, our surgery, our home and threatens us physically. This week's troll could be next week's attacker. While I will always glibly say that the solution to the online abuse that we receive as female parliamentarians is simply to use the block and the mute button, the reality is that we cannot do that in every case and, in so doing, we might miss the person who is a physical threat to us.

I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend talk about diversity, but I regret that she stopped short at one point. We know that female parliamentarians are more abused than their male counterparts, but we also know that black female MPs receive the most abuse of all, and that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) receives more abuse than every other parliamentarian put together. That is a stark reminder that there is still in our country an undercurrent of misogyny and racism. We also know—my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke was right to point it out—that those who have disabilities and are LGBTQ also face more abuse. We have to stamp out these awful discriminatory, bullying, harassing tactics for good.

I do not pretend that the block and the mute button are the solution—they are not. They may be part of it on an individual level, but we need effective legislation. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place, but I have grave concerns that the online harms Bill will not do the job. We know that it aims to crack down on the illegal, which is good, and prevent young people from accessing harmful content on the internet, but we will have to be explicit about what we are trying to achieve when it comes to stopping the abuse that we all receive on a daily basis.

There is real merit in stamping out anonymity. I think that is one of the massive challenges that we face. People are emboldened when they can hide their true identity. We know they are also emboldened when they are behind a screen. While I do not wish today's debate to turn into a whinge-fest of who has the worst story, the thing that struck me about two of my most prolific online abusers was that the day I met them in the street, they stared at the pavement and shuffled past. Of course, that is what we know about bullies—at heart, they are also cowards. If they cannot hide behind anonymity, it will stamp out their cowardice because they will have to reveal who they are and I do not believe they are brave enough to do so.

The problem exists across the globe. I remember meeting female parliamentarians from Jordan who experienced exactly the same as we do in the UK. We have to learn from what is being done internationally and work as a global community to stand up for our democracy. We have to stand up for those women who are brave enough to enter public life, but make sure that the legislation is there to protect them and keep them safe from this sort of abuse.

9.43 am

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I applaud the right hon. Member for Basingstoke

(Mrs Miller) for introducing this debate and once again drawing attention to this important matter. I know she has spoken and written extensively on this subject and we are all grateful for that.

While the debate is focused on elected representatives, perhaps we should again recognise that women across public life are being bombarded by abuse on a daily basis, whether they are journalists, police officers or politicians. On International Women's Day when speaking about cracking the various glass ceilings, my party leader and First Minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster, said:

"The biggest obstacle to being a woman in public life today is the constant stream of commentary on your appearance, the hourly trolling, and monthly idiot who makes a 'this is what I'd like to do to you today' threat. ... What concerns me more is the growing evidence of online lynch mobs controlled by dark forces who are unleashed on female public figures like a pack of lions to do as much damage as they can to the public figure and the cause that they represent."

Such lynch mobs exist to spread misinformation and destabilise their opponents. Their existence is to be condemned, and those who sponsor the mass trolling of women in public office must be exposed and condemned.

Such mobs are able to exist only because social media platforms permit anonymous accounts. I join others in calling for verified accounts, whereby users can interact incognito if they need to, but the platform knows their true identity. Although we have redress through defamation actions in Northern Ireland, we must first identify the troll. Then it is slow and very costly, and the threshold for success is high.

Finally, online abuse directed at females is serious, because in my experience it is like an addiction. The addict needs a monthly fix, then a weekly fix, and eventually an hourly fix. Sadly, as the abuse gets more regular, it also gets more poisonous. We need to send a stern message to those poisoning the public space that they cannot abuse with impunity.

9.46 am

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this really important debate.

How free do we think online speech is at the moment, when posting something on Twitter results in comments such as:

"I'll beat you like a ginger stepchild"

or

"I hope that you have the worst Christmas, you Tory-supporting"—effing—"freak"?

Those are the experiences of my friend Charlotte, who is standing for the council. How often has a woman not posted a thought or view because they cannot be bothered to, or cannot, deal with the fallout? And what greater impediment to their freedoms than dealing with rape threats and death threats, just because they either want a job or have a job?

When Annabel Tall stood in Bath, she received trolling about her son. They said that he looked like he was in the Hitler Youth. Another candidate, standing for the first time in May this year, describes the posts she receives as "eye-wateringly cruel". She removed herself

[Siobhan Baillie]

from Twitter. She is a strong and fantastic military veteran. She is exactly what we need in our local authorities, and exactly what we hope to have in Parliament in the future, if she continues.

Nothing naffs me off more than seeing people with #BeKind or #MentalHealthMatters in their titles who then go on to give people the worst, most vicious attacks just because they do not agree or they are feeling morally superior on that particular day. It absolutely has to stop. People are not applying for these jobs. We heard the figures from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. We have to get those women into Parliament and into our local authorities.

Whenever I visit schools in my constituency, I leave so inspired. The young women from Stroud High, Thomas Keble, Rednock, Maidenhill and Marling—they are fabulous. It is not just because all of us here know that, in local authorities and in Parliament, we can make real changes to our communities and our country; it is because those women are already campaigners. They are already leading the way on so many important issues. They teach me things and they inspire. It is no longer that we want them here; we need their voices here and we need them here, so we have to make changes.

I am very supportive of the proposals that many Members have put forward today. To be honest, I think the Government should be looking at everything, and I really applaud what they are doing. The Minister and I have had lots of conversations about this issue and the online harms Bill. While I do not want to see that Bill dressed up like a Christmas tree so that it falls down, because what it is trying to achieve is too important, it can do more.

One area that I have spoken about on a number of occasions is anonymity, and I support the previous comments about that. I suggest that we should look at verification. I was very disappointed that there was no meaningful consultation on the impact of anonymous abuse accounts or the options to tackle them in the online harms consultations. That is something that should be rectified, however the simple steps that I suggest would not mean banning anonymous accounts or people losing their sassy username—they can be Princess Whatsherchops if they so want to.

In my view, we should do three things. First, we should give all social media users the option to verify their identity. Secondly, we should make it easy for everyone to see whether or not a user has chosen to verify their identity—we have already done that with Twitter's blue ticks, so we know it can happen. Finally, we can give users the option to block interaction with unverified users if that is what they want to do.

This is not about blocking, but about choice and the future of our country and our democracy. We need those women in Parliament and in our local authorities, and do not want them to be put off.

9.50 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on being a

continual champion of women in Parliament and on bringing this extremely important debate to Westminster Hall today.

This debate is timely, of course, because we currently have our elections in the Scottish Parliament, and only recently a survey undertaken by *Holyrood* magazine found that nine out of 10 female MSPs had feared for their safety. These are absolutely catastrophic figures, and I believe that things are only getting worse, so many fine prospective female candidates are likely to be put off entering public life, as we have heard today.

I would also like to draw the Minister's attention to the importance of intersectionality in these matters, particularly with religion. Unfortunately, as a practising Christian and an individual with a Jewish family history, I can speak from personal experience regarding this abuse. Personal abuse and attacks often focus not just on my being a woman, but on those very aspects of my being and religion.

Since 2015, I have received numerous death threats online, like many others who have spoken today. Unfortunately, and unacceptably, this has even extended to death threats towards members of my family. After conscience votes, I have openly been targeted for abuse and harassment. In relation to antisemitism, I recently received an email from an individual citing themselves as SS, saying that Jews are witches and calling for extermination of the Jews as a mandate of the United Nations.

However, this does not just happen online, unfortunately. What I want to emphasise—I hope that the Minister can recognise this, because we are working on the online harms Bill collectively in Parliament—is that online abuse is very much a gateway for some individuals, whose behaviour escalates to direct harm. Online abuse has changed our culture and, with the anonymity that has been spoken about, is now almost considered acceptable, because there are no consequences. People continue, become emboldened, and, for a significant proportion of individuals, it is very much a gateway to behaviour that escalates towards direct harm.

For example, I await the sentencing next month of an individual who harassed me and my staff via emails, then acted aggressively in person at my surgery. During the 2019 election, my election leaflets were posted back through my door to me covered in swastikas. In fact, it was being investigated by the police at the same time that the local newspaper editor wished to run a story on where election candidates lived, and I had to raise fears for my family's safety once again.

Over the last parliamentary term, I have really prioritised my role as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on religion in the media. I would ask the Minister to look at the excellent report published just last week by the APPG. At its launch, I was also heartened that Alison Phillips, editor of Mirror Group Newspapers—the first female editor of such a large corporate newsgroup—will be taking forward training for journalists on diversity and religious inclusion.

We can agree that today it is horrendous. Being a woman in politics carries a risk of violence, and often direct threat to the woman and her family. It puts too many excellent candidates off. Would I recommend a career in politics to my daughters at this point in time? Not a chance. I do hope, however, that the dire risks are

fully addressed and that the Minister can listen to the many poignant experiences of the individuals speaking today and take action, because online abuse is that gateway to actual harm.

9.54 am

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing the debate.

Since my election in December 2019, I have seen horrific abuse of colleagues of both genders, but I have been especially disturbed by the nature of the abuse targeted at my female colleagues. We need to separate the standard political online abuse from the sort of messages that are aimed specifically at women, typically involving threats of sexual violence or insults about their physical appearance, or questioning whether they should be in politics at all because they may want to have children or because of their other family circumstances.

Sadly, it is not just in the UK that female representative face such abuse. A quick bit of internet research shows the extent of abuse faced by female colleagues around the world. I spent a thoroughly depressing evening reading all about it in numerous articles from Canada, Kenya, Finland, the USA, India, Chile and Japan—every single country that I could think of. A study by the National University of Ireland in Galway last year found that 96% of female politicians in the Republic of Ireland had faced online abuse. Shockingly, 40% of those interviewed reported being threatened with sexual violence as part of that abuse.

Study after study shows that such abuse puts decent, community-minded people off politics. I speak to those people regularly. If I meet a fantastic community activist, I will ask them why they do not think about standing as a councillor or Member of Parliament. The abuse is raised as one of the main reasons that they do not step forward. I have faced abuse. I am sure that we all have our little mantras that we repeat. In order for someone to upset me I have to respect their opinion, which wipes out a lot of the abuse, but we all have bad days when we are exhausted and it is difficult to brush it off. Sadly, many women leave politics, and cite the abuse that they have received as the reason.

Another result of the abuse is that it makes politicians more distant from the people we represent. Many people are leaving social media platforms. Social media should and could be a brilliant way to keep people informed and engaged with their community, but I fear that without further action we will have less engaged politicians. What more can social media providers do? I do not support a blanket ban on anonymity. Online anonymity is sometimes very valuable, if someone is seeking help for a highly sensitive matter or is a victim of domestic abuse.

However, perhaps we need better tailoring of regulations, filters and the ability to block, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) referred to. That could go with the blue tick. Perhaps people interacting with verified accounts could have a filter button, to turn them on and off. Perhaps lowering the temperature for public figures will improve the internet for all users, because nobody should face the sort of abuse that we all face very regularly.

This debate should send a message from all parties in Parliament to our colleagues around the world and to those involved, and wanting to get involved, in politics. It was lovely that recently the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) was defended from all corners of the House when faced with a horrific episode of abuse. When all of us call abuse out, especially when it is to Opposition colleagues, that sends a powerful message that we will not tolerate it. We can all do our bit to defend our colleagues in every corner of politics.

9.59 am

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Paisley, for the first time. I echo everyone else's words in thanking the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for all that she does in this area.

Almost six years ago, on 3 June 2015, Jo Cox, our much-missed colleague, made her maiden speech. She famously said that the thing that

"surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

I owe a lot to Jo, from a place on the leadership scheme set up in her name following her tragic murder to the courage to attempt to follow in her footsteps just a few months later. The least I can do is remember her words, and I have done so every single day—a phrase to remember before walking into a room or attending an event, which has never failed me, from the times I have talked with Brexit-voting constituents who share my frustration at the reality to meetings with Conservative parish councillors who share my love of the Kent countryside and also want to protect our green spaces. It is not difficult. We all share something and can empathise with others' stories or their lived experiences.

Against that approach the futility of online abuse is brought into sharp relief. What a moronic and infinitely stupid waste of energy it is for someone to use their precious time to indulge in the equivalent of playground bullying on a keyboard, because they shot to fame on a reality game show or consider themselves an intellectually superior media commentator who is always right. They would be better off challenging themselves to live with Jo's words ringing in their ears, rather than having the baying roar and constant applause of their echo chamber confirming their absolute correctness over and over again in the gladiatorial arena and narcissistic hall of mirrors that is social media.

In 2015, I met Frances Scott, the founder of 50:50 Parliament, and we became firm friends. I became the first 50:50 ambassador to the electors, as an MP. I have hosted, chaired and spoken at many great events where we ask women to stand for public elected office, but this year, for the first time, I hesitated before accepting a place on a panel. I was not completely sure that I wanted anyone to go through what everyone speaking here today goes through in the form of online abuse every day. I was not sure how honest I could be about what it takes to be bombarded with vitriol, sexism and plain spite. Spite is undoubtedly the driver of many comments not remotely related to political issues—as are basic old-fashioned sexism or racism, even when they are disguised and restyled as factional left-wing politics for the many.

[Rosie Duffield]

Sexism online tries to close off female mouths, attempts to no-platform us, and quickly resorts to jibes about dumb blondes or skin colour. Online abuse is not simply nasty name calling. It has grown spikes and evolved into self-indulgent wordy blogs written by those who feel compelled to opine, even libellously, on personal aspects of our lives that have nothing at all to do with the work that we carry out daily. At first that may seem too ridiculous to bother with, but when it is shared by blue-tick bully boys and we have to stop our families reading it, it becomes altogether more sinister.

I urge online platforms, political parties and trolls alike to do better, clean up their platforms and membership lists and start to support women in political life, so that the experiences heard about in the debate will be a thing of the past.

10.3 am

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this incredibly important debate.

As we have heard, social media is getting out of hand, and it is intimidating. It was fine when Facebook and Twitter started—just 17 years ago for Facebook and two years later for Twitter. I mention them as they are the most popular platforms, and have been useful for engagement in discussion—but no longer. Like others, I have come off Twitter. There was no point in looking at comments designed to hurt one personally rather than deal with politics.

I know that Twitter brought in measures to help, but I shall not be returning as a public figure for the foreseeable future. I have learned to hide abusive comments on Facebook and will continue to do so until people write in a polite and considerate way. As the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), has said, we would not be that rude in person, so why do it online? We are all open to criticism, and we accept that others do not agree with our view, but there are ways of putting it.

My concern is that what is happening puts people, and especially women, off entering public life. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke has already mentioned, the Fawcett Society sent some figures this week stating that the number of women unlikely to stand as an MP has risen to 74% from 59% in 2019, and in relation to standing as a councillor it has risen to 62% from 44%, with 69% citing abuse or harassment from the public or other parties as a reason for not pursuing a career in politics. That is appalling. If it stays on that trajectory, we will not have any women who want to stand and we will go back to the days of men dominating the corridors of power, just as we were beginning to make inroads with female representation, even if it is only at 34%.

If a woman raises her head above the parapet, it triggers even more abuse, so many of us wonder whether it is worth talking about a controversial topic. That is stultifying discussion, especially given that the diversity of a woman's perspective is often helpful. The online harms Bill will help, but we need more recognition that online abuse is harassment that is affecting our workplace, our decision making and our wellbeing.

It is not enough to say, "Toughen up. You should expect to be tough as a public person." I have heard that before. We are tough as politicians, but we are also human beings. Many of us have families whom we want to protect as well as ourselves, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). It is the responsibility of everyone, not just the Government and social media companies, to call it out and say it is not acceptable. I challenge every single person to confront this unacceptable behaviour, otherwise we will have to put further consequences in place to combat it.

10.6 am

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing the debate.

When I gave my maiden speech in the House, I made a promise to my constituents that when I saw injustice, I would turn anger into action. What is the point of our being here today if that is not our aim? I do that to the best of my ability. When I do, I often have to advise my staff not to read our emails on a subject, not to check my Twitter mentions and not to take the contents of my postbag to heart. I know that it affects my staff, not just me. We face a sewer of hateful, racist and misogynistic abuse not once in a blue moon or on an individual issue, but regularly. It is normality; it is a fact of life. You get up, you check your phone and you try not to let the hatred get to you.

In research by the Centenary Action Group and the Equal Power campaign, 69% of the women surveyed said that abuse and harassment by the public or other parties was a barrier to pursuing a political career and seeking election. Colleagues have echoed that throughout the debate. In the six weeks before the 2017 general election, Amnesty International found that black and Asian female MPs received 35% more abusive tweets than white women. Online abuse is disproportionately experienced by women from an intersectionality identity. The statistics are alarming and unacceptable. The online harms Bill is a pivotal opportunity to tackle abuse against women and girls. It must include gender-based abuse as a priority harm rather than the categorisation of separate issues.

The Labour Women's Network, which I have worked on, supports and trains women for public office. Half of our gold standard training programmes now focus on resilience and self-care because online toxicity requires it. LWN's campaign to defuse abuse against women in public life calls for cross-party action to stem the escalation of misogynistic abuse, especially that aimed at ethnic minority MPs and councillors. We support calls to use 10% of the digital services tax to fund measures to reduce online hate against women and girls and to support the Jo Cox Foundation's work to improve standards in public life.

I thank organisations such as Glitch, which has been spearheading the campaign against online abuse. It was founded by Seyi Akiwowo, a graduate of the Jo Cox women in leadership scheme. Online abuse has to stop. It is time for action and not anger on this issue. It is time to legislate against the targeted abuse that women have to face. As our sisters have said throughout the history of female political action, it is time for deeds, not words.

10.9 am

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this hugely important debate.

While it is an immense privilege, as a feminist I am conscious of what it means to be the first female Member of Parliament for the constituency of Leicester East in my home city of Leicester, and the first black woman elected to represent the entire county of Leicestershire. The 2019 general election had the highest number and proportion of female MPs ever recorded, yet still only 34% of the House is female. I am incredibly proud to be part of that cohort alongside many inspiring colleagues, but we cannot be complacent. We must ensure that women, women of colour and women from disadvantaged and marginalised communities feel empowered to engage in the political system. Only 35% of local councillors in England and Wales are women.

Women face unique, unacceptable challenges in political life. I have faced horrific, violent, misogynistic and racist online abuse throughout my time in Parliament and in politics. That has intensified since becoming an MP to include death threats, trolling, threats of rape and lynching, targeted far-right hate and organised attacks from the worldwide web. My perpetrators hide behind pseudonyms, and it is even more shocking when the mainstream media embolden and give oxygen to the abuse with attacks that ridicule my politics. History tells us that it does not take long for intimidation, bullying, threats and psychological violence to lead to actual physical harm or even death. They want me to be silent, but while I genuinely fear for my safety every day, I refuse to be silenced.

In 2016, a study for the Inter-Parliamentary Union of 39 countries found that 82% of the women politicians surveyed had experienced some form of psychological violence, 44% had received threats of death, rape, lynching or abduction, and 65% had been subjected to sexist remarks.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Diane Abbott) has been crucial in facing down many of the problems facing women in politics since she was elected as the first black woman MP in 1987, and she is a true giant of the feminist and activist movement. We are all indebted to her. The unprecedented level of vile racist and sexist abuse she endured as shadow Home Secretary accounted for half of all online hate directed at female MPs. That shows how much work there is left to do if we are to end the twin evils of racism and misogyny.

An analysis of tweets undertaken by Amnesty International found that in the six weeks prior to the 2017 general election, women MPs in Westminster from African, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington received 46% of all abusive tweets sent in the run-up to the election.

It is vital that the barriers to women's representation, including the threat of or experience of violence, abuse and harassment, are removed. Diversity thrives more effectively with inclusive policy making, allowing Governments to better represent the populations they serve. Social media companies and the Government

must work together to root out the online abuse that plagues the online political sphere, and that disproportionately targets women. The true identity of those who use social media platforms must be known.

When we look at the gendered and racial inequalities in the UK and across the world, we know that there has been an unacceptable breakdown of our social contract. The Women's Budget Group found that women have shouldered a shocking 86% of the burden of austerity cuts. We face three urgent crises: coronavirus, climate change and crumbling social infrastructure. Women, particularly women of colour, are at the forefront of those crises. Only radical solutions will address the systemic gendered and racial inequalities. We need women leaders with the strength and courage to recognise that our responsibility is not to mediate an unjust system but to transform it.

Online abuse stands in the way of that future. Polling shows that women are often deterred from running for office because of abuse and harassment. We cannot accept that. The time has come for the Government to work seriously with social media giants to bring this epidemic of misogynistic abuse and violence to an end.

10.16 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this debate.

I will quote briefly from a 23-year-old candidate who is standing in the election in Scotland:

"I think that online abuse was one of the biggest things in my mind when I was preparing to stand. I have grown up with the internet and I think I was prepared for what I was getting into, and when I thought about standing I did think that this was going to be quite tough from a social media point of view. This is something that many women will think about, and it's not an easy decision. However, I don't think anyone is quite prepared for the first time you get piled on with abuse on Twitter. I think of myself as being pretty resilient, but who I worry about are my friends and family, because they didn't sign up for any of this."

That person is Molly Nolan and, as I said, she is 23 and a candidate in the Scottish election. Colleagues might be pardoned for thinking that I am making a party political point; I am not and I want to broaden it out.

In 2016, I stood for the Scottish Parliament and was beaten fair and square by the Scottish National party candidate Gail Ross, who for the past five years has served the constituency of Caithness, Sutherland and Ross. The online abuse Gail has suffered is beyond belief. I have seen some of it and it is disgusting. At one point, somebody stole her Facebook identity, masqueraded as her online and started dealing with vulnerable constituents. Nobody like Gail deserves anything like that.

I am glad that Gail and I have stayed friends throughout all this. This morning, I asked her permission to mention her in this debate, which she gave with alacrity. That is the nature of our deep and lasting friendship. She made a point that I had not thought about before. The highlands are made up of small, scattered communities. Wick, where she lives, is one of the bigger ones but most people there know each other. What really hurt Gail and drew blood was the fact that people known to her in her community were saying and doing these dreadful things. That must be a sickening thing to live with.

[*Jamie Stone*]

My second point is brief and I will abuse my position as a Member of this place. In a former existence, I was a councillor in the highlands a long time ago. I suppose I could say that Highland Council was possibly somewhere where misogyny might thrive a bit. I remember that one lady councillor called Mrs Isobel Rhind, a superb councillor who represented Invergordon, was held back because she was female. My point is that misogyny back then has turned into online abuse today; it has been empowered and made worse. I have longed for many years to put Mrs Isobel Rhind's name on the record in *Hansard*. She is probably the best councillor Invergordon ever had—there, I have said it.

Today Molly Nolan, the 23-year-old candidate for my party, soldiers on. She is coping with the abuse. Other candidates of all parties have had similar abuse and are getting on with it, but it is not easy. Gail Ross has just been appointed the communications director for Dounreay, which is new career move for her. I hope we can work together across party boundaries. I will work with Gail and use every means at my disposal to fight this fiendishly awful thing in our society. I hope we can sort it out, because if we do not, as others have said, we are just going to make life a hell of a lot worse.

10.19 am

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing today's debate.

More women stood in the 2019 general election than ever before, and more female MPs came through as a result. This is progress, but to keep more women coming forward, we need to do more urgently to tackle the abuse that politicians have to deal with online. Forty-nine per cent. of candidates in the 2019 election reported that they suffered some form of abuse, harassment or intimidation while campaigning—up 11% from 2017. Worryingly, female politicians face far more abuse than male ones. We also report more acts of intimidation, threats, physical violence and mental abuse. Is it any wonder that the average female MP resigning in 2019 had served a full six years less than the average resigning male MP?

At my selection to represent North Devon, I was given an article entitled "Abuse, stalkers, death threats—who'd be a female MP?". I did not read it. Indeed, that is how so many of us deal with the abuse—we ignore it. Heaven forbid that we should choose not to, read what is written about us, which bears no resemblance to the truth, and attempt to fight back. We do our best to joke with other female colleagues about how many death threats we have received. My voodoo curse was a particularly unusual one. Although MPs have to be thick-skinned, that should not be a normal conversation.

We do our best to laugh it off, but others read the comments. A charity that I was supporting this weekend observed on my arrival how much hatred people must have to write abuse on my Twitter feed following my support of its charitable event. On moving in, my new neighbours popped their head over the wall and said how sorry they were for the dreadful comments I received on Facebook. They could not believe what people wrote. More important still, other women and girls who might

aspire to follow in our footsteps read the comments and have to assess that as part of their decision to put themselves forward.

Local female candidates in North Devon have stood down, and it is pretty hard to get female candidates to stand up in the first place, but why would they want to put their friends and families through such abuse? I speak today not for myself or even for my constituents, but for women everywhere. I am speaking to ensure that our Parliament continues to better reflect the wider population. I am speaking to encourage more to be done to tackle the cowards who hide behind anonymous profiles. I am speaking out because it is the right thing to do. Although I am proud to be the first female MP for North Devon, I do not want to be the last.

The analytical mathematician in me wonders why people do it. It is unpleasant, unnecessary and upsetting. We must call it out wherever we see it. We must not let it go unchallenged. We must not accept that this is normal. As a former teacher, I say that we should call out the online abuse that we all endure as the bullying it truly is. If we want Parliament to better reflect society, retain the additional women elected in 2019 and go on to achieve a 50:50 ratio, we cannot accept that ignoring our social media feeds is the new normal.

The silent majority believes that too. I hope it will find its inner keyboard warrior and speak up, particularly for female politicians of all political persuasions, the great majority of whom work tirelessly for the people who elected them. In the words of the great Michelle Obama,

"When someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don't stoop to their level. No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high."

10.23 am

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for this important debate.

Women are under-represented at all levels of decision making, which means that action is urgently needed from the Government and all political parties to ensure that the voices of women in all our diversity are heard. Only 34% of MPs, and only 35% of elected councillors in England and Wales, are women. Those statistics matter because when women are not equally represented in positions of power, we do not get an equal say in policy making, which inevitably leads to unequal outcomes.

It is crucial that we do all we can to remove the barriers to women's representation in politics, including online threats and the experience of violence, abuse and harassment. Violence and abuse against women in politics, both online and offline, not only prevent women from standing for election; they drive those who have already been elected to leave politics early, as we have heard. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) contributing to this debate. It is a real shame that his is the only contribution from a male colleague, other than my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), of course.

It is a sad fact that women politicians who are black, Asian or from an ethnic minority background face an increased risk of abuse based on their race, as well as their gender. As highlighted by Amnesty International, in the six weeks prior to the 2017 general election women MPs in Westminster from those backgrounds received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs.

Those statistics become even more shocking when we consider that there are just 37 ethnic minority MPs in the House of Commons right now. That is just 5.7% of all MPs. Once again, the well documented disproportionate impact of the pandemic on BAME communities highlights why it is important that barriers preventing women of colour from standing for office are also broken down so that policy can be effectively influenced in this area by those with a diverse lived experience.

I hope that the Minister can share the Government's wider strategy on the increase in online abuse and extremism due to lockdown. It is clear that the increase in online abuse is posing a real threat to democracy and equal participation. Equal Power data shows that there has been a big increase in the number of women saying that they are unlikely to put themselves forward in an election in the space of the last 18 months. In December 2019, 59% of women surveyed said that they were unlikely to stand as an MP, with 44% saying that they were unlikely to stand as councillor. That figure has risen if there were an election within the year—just a year on from the start of the pandemic—to 74% unlikely to stand as an MP and 62% unlikely to stand as a councillor.

I agree with the Centenary Action Group that the online harms Bill is an opportunity to tackle online abuse against women and girls, including elected representatives. However, there is concern that the White Paper falls short when addressing the disproportionate levels of online harm faced by women and those with protected characteristics. I hope that the Minister can agree that the online harms Bill must include gender-based abuse as a priority and recognise the compounding harm experienced by those with multiple protected characteristics rather than characterise them as separate issues. Abuse of any nature, online or offline, is unacceptable. It damages both democracy and equality.

10.27 am

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I was not planning to speak in this debate. It has been my preference not to speak about the online abuse that I face, because frankly I have never really wanted to give these people credence by even acknowledging it. That is my choice, which suits me. Others, as we have heard very eloquently, have chosen differently, and I say good for them. We should all deal with this nonsense in whatever way we feel is best.

I decided to speak today because I had agreed to speak in an event later this week organised by Women 5050. I felt that were I to stand up and tell them that it was all fantastic being a public representative and not mention the cesspit that is online commentary, I would be a bit dishonest and a bit of hypocrite. Just to be clear: I love my job. Let us also be clear that we know, as politicians, that we have chosen to be in public life. That brings with it an acceptance of public criticism, but that should not be an acceptance of threats or abuse.

Although it is the biggest privilege of my life to represent people in my local area and to be part of a party and movement that I believe in so strongly, and I would obviously encourage others to take that step too, it is not all sweetness and light. Maybe calling it out, at least sometimes, makes the road for the next woman coming along a little smoother.

I will dwell a little on Women 5050, whose website makes stark reading. It says:

"Today, despite making up 52% of the population, in Scotland women only make up 42% of public board members, 25% of public board chairs, 35% of MSPs".

That is not good enough, and I am delighted by the steps that the Scottish National party has taken and is taking, whether that be on our gender-balanced Cabinet; Nicola Sturgeon, who works so hard to push on equality; the central focus on women in our Holyrood manifesto; or our gender balance in candidate selection.

Of course, the Westminster Parliament has so much further to go to achieve equality, but whether it is in Holyrood, Westminster or council chambers, or in political discussion anywhere, statistics show us that this is a real issue across the world. We have a problem with online abuse, harassment and worse. If we do not tackle it, we are going to lose out. We need to take steps now and to make our Parliaments look much more like our countries.

When Women 5050 approached me, it mentioned that my colleague Fatima Joji had been involved in its work. That settled it for me in terms of participating in its events and in the debate today. As well as being an excellent candidate in the Holyrood election—she would make an outstanding MSP—as a young black woman in politics, Fatima has been subjected to even more nastiness, bile and abuse than other women in the public eye, but she persists and we are all the better for her participation and that of all the other women we have heard about today.

We have heard clearly today that our female black and minority ethnic representatives in particular experience such a lot of disgraceful abuse—it is not on. Politics is not for the fainthearted, nor should it be for robots devoid of human feelings. It is not just in Parliaments that women are disproportionately impacted by this online bile. Our council chambers and political movements are full of women who are subjected to nastiness, name-calling, lies and threats. It needs to stop. I discussed this yesterday with a woman friend who is a local councillor and the sad thing is that we spoke about it as if it was completely normal. Of course, it is normal in our experience, but it really should not be.

One of the things that can be so difficult is the nameless, faceless nature of a lot of this. Apart from the fact that abusers are clearly complete cowards hiding behind their wee avatars, it is obviously much more difficult to deal with when we have no idea who it is who feels so emboldened by their anonymity to post things that they would certainly never have the balls to say in real life to their wife or with their mum listening in or to their friendly local police officer. As we have heard, it sometimes spills off social media to other corners of the internet, or off the internet completely, which can be very concerning.

I have been actively involved in politics since 2014 and there is no doubt that there is more and worse abuse now than there was then. Rather than the terrible murder of Jo Cox being the catalyst it should have been for a reset, which was surely the only appropriate response to such an awful event, we see now that it has actually been amplified with a good dose of fake news stirred in, because plain abuse on its own is not good enough.

We sometimes know the people online who feed on hate or feel brave enough to send stuff our way would struggle with if it came back in the same direction. Sometimes, there is not a law against it, because it skirts

[Kirsten Oswald]

pretty close, but it is unedifying none the less. Facebook is pretty rubbish, frankly, at dealing with it. It is not really interested in that any more than it is in dealing with the fake news. Twitter is only marginally better.

It was telling at the recent International Women's Day debate, which was a very sombre affair in the shadow of Sarah Everard's murder, there was a palpable scunner—I do not know how better to express that—at the online crap that every single woman in the Chamber that day, no matter our variety of political opinions, knew all about. That day it felt like we were collectively worn down.

We need to do something. I say again, I am fortunate to do the job I do. I know others say they might not have pursued their career again if they had known. I understand that, but I am delighted to be here today. I am delighted to speak, because, although it is against my better judgement in some ways, we have to stand up and say that we will not allow this to prevent women from getting into politics and making a difference. I am also delighted with the work the SNP Scottish Government are doing to try to improve fairness and political representation. It makes a difference and is very powerful.

We support the ambitions of the online harms Bill, especially when it comes to the issues that affect vulnerable people and children. We urge the UK Government to take it further and be stronger. Do not let big tech shirk away from its responsibilities. The points about the ways in which we can clean up the internet—giving people the opportunity to verify their identity and making it easier to block unverified users—are well made, although they do not come without their own challenges. Whatever the solution, not only for elected representatives but for other vulnerable people in danger of harm online, the real danger is that if we do not stand up and take steps, it will only get significantly worse.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I do not know whether *Hansard* reporters know the word “scunner”, but I will try to inform them from across the sheugh what it was you actually said. Thank you for your contribution. I call the Opposition spokesperson, Christian Matheson.

10.35 am

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is always a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in today's debate, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and for Jarrow (Kate Osborne). I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this debate. I pay tribute to the consistent leadership that she has shown in this House and in public over many years. I know it is appreciated by hon. Members across the House.

Let me reflect on two matters. First, the issue goes to the heart of our democracy. If hon. Members in this Chamber went on an election monitoring visit and they were outside a polling station where there was an armed militia outside preventing a section of society from either voting or getting involved in democracy, they would give

a black mark against the quality of democracy in the country they were monitoring. That is exactly what is happening here—a section of our community is being prevented from full participating in our democracy.

Three years ago we remembered the 100th anniversary of universal women's suffrage. That of course referred to women having the vote. I like to think that these days suffrage means full participation as well. If we have not got full participation, we do not have the women's suffrage that we celebrated the 100th anniversary of. It goes to the heart of the quality of our democracy and should be a matter for us all.

I also want to reflect on something that my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow mentioned. I am a white male MP. The truth is that I do not know the half of it. I know there is a problem, but I cannot claim to know the half of it. You, Mr Paisley, and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) might feel the same, but we do not understand the intensity, the ferocity and the incessant nature of the abuse that women and also black and minority ethnic MPs receive day after day. I lay down a challenge to male hon. Members from across the House: let us understand how incessant and ferocious the abuse is, or at least accept the fact that we do not understand it and listen to our female colleagues. Male Members understand there is an issue, but the severity, the ferocity and incessant nature of it is not understood.

We know of the benefits of the internet. During lockdown it has kept us in contact, and we have been able to continue shopping, learning and working, but we also know how dark it can be and how that corrodes society. We have heard reference to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2016 survey: 39 countries found that 82% of women politicians surveyed had experienced some form of psychological violence; 44%—almost half—had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction; and 65% had been subjected to sexist remarks.

As we have also heard today from hon. Members, those from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background face an increased risk of abuse on the basis of their race as well as their gender, and there has been reference to the Amnesty International report and the number of tweets that women from those backgrounds have received. Behind every one of those statistics is an individual, a family or a staff member who faces the abuse, as I say, almost daily. Nobody should have to worry about their safety or their family's safety when they come in to work, but, as we have heard today, that is the reality for women representatives.

Research indicates that Parliaments are much more likely to substantially tackle key issues such as violence and harassment against women when an increased number of female legislators are elected. However, those issues put off many women from standing to be elected. We have heard that 34% of MPs and 35% of local councillors in England and Wales are women. We all want more diversity to drive more effective and inclusive policy making. But we have also heard today about the report from the Fawcett Society on this issue that says that the number of women unlikely to stand as an MP has risen to 74% from 59% and that 69% of respondents said that abuse or harassment from the public or other parties was one of the main reasons for not pursuing a career in politics.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) asked an interesting question about why people carry out this abuse. I know that the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), has talked about facing down bullies involved in it. The mentality behind it perplexes me, but it is something that we need to try to understand. A report from the Centre for Countering Digital Hate shows that there are people who seem to enjoy causing harm to others. That psychological trait is known as negative social potency. When those people see that their abuse has caused someone harm, that gives them the validation that they are looking for. Perhaps more worryingly, the report also talks about purposely organised online hate networks. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate found a playbook, published on a far-right website, that instructed readers to target abuse at high-profile public figures as a way to generate more publicity for their extremist ideas.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter are now part of our daily lives. Yes, they may bring benefits, but we have allowed them to become a safe space for sexism, misogyny and racism. That cannot be the norm. Online, a person can become anyone or no one if they like, with no consequences for their actions. Increased anonymity online leads to increasingly hateful and abusive language. People online feel that they can hide behind a mask and get away with language and actions that they would not otherwise do, as the Chair of the Select Committee illustrated when she faced down some of her abusers in the street.

Tackling abuse and extremism online must mean tackling the worst parts of anonymity online. The hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), who is not in her place, and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) talked about anonymity. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East also talked about some of the benefits of anonymity—for example, for whistleblowers, victims finding online refuge, or children and minorities. There are downsides to banning anonymity, and we have to find a mechanism for exposing identity where that is necessary but protecting anonymity in those cases in which it is important.

The individuals behind online hate and abuse are of course guilty of this unacceptable behaviour, and it is the huge foreign tech giants that need to start taking responsibility for the hate that exists on their platforms. No matter how vulnerable or well informed people are, they have little control over the content, which is curated by tech platforms, allowing the spread of disinformation, sexual exploitation, fake news, extremism, hatred and other harmful content—the misogyny that we are talking about today.

The main reason why tech giants refuse properly to tackle hate on their platforms is clear. Unsurprisingly, that is driven by their financial interests. They are reluctant to spend money hiring moderators, although they accept that that is part of the solution. When Germany passed a law to fine social media companies up to €50 million for failing to take down abusive content within 24 hours of its being reported, Facebook set up the content moderation centre in Germany, its largest in the world, and hired 1,200 moderators to staff it. That proves that it is possible to tackle online hate

if the companies are willing to do so. When there is a financial incentive, they will hire people to remove abusive messages more quickly.

The Government need to stop cradling foreign tech giants and instead take action on online hate, so we are awaiting the online safety Bill and we will support the Government where they take the necessary action. We do feel that it has been too slow, so I ask the Minister whether she can tell us precisely when the Bill will come to the House and when we can crack on with work to support the new legislation.

This is not just about the big tech giants. It is about individuals and their being forced to take responsibility for their actions, and their corroding our democracy, corroding the lives of women who are trying to do their best in whichever area of public life, forcing them to step away from public life, and therefore damaging our democracy. It should not take the death of a young woman on the streets for us to start talking about street harassment towards women. It should not take someone taking their own life because of the online abuse that they have received for us to start talking about online harassment and abuse. This is an issue that is happening now. The Government need to start taking urgent action to deal with it, and we will support them in that urgent action.

The Chair of the Select Committee talked in her speech about abuse that starts online and then becomes physical. It is bad enough to be bullied online and bullied out of public life. We cannot take the risk that that will go further. I therefore challenge male MPs to start taking this more seriously and to start understanding the ferocity and the level of the abuse that women face. I will work with the Minister on the online safety Bill to give maximum protection, for the sake of women everywhere and for the sake of our democracy.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I thank every single Member who has contributed to what has been a powerful debate. These things needed to be said, and they have been very well said.

10.44 am

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this incredibly important debate. I know that she has always been a passionate campaigner in this area, and she is also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, which leads such important work to protect women in Parliament—online and offline. I thank her for everything that she does in this space, and I also thank all Members who have taken part in the debate.

All the speeches were incredibly heartfelt and brave. They show the will across the House to address this pernicious and distressing issue. Sadly, this is one of those issues that bear out the words of our former friend and colleague Jo Cox in a most unpleasant way, because we

“have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Is it not tragic that that is the case? It is sometimes hard to fathom how the faceless and cowardly abuse of those in the public eye has almost become part of the job

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

description. It has become a fact of life. It has become something that almost goes with the territory. How messed up is it that we feel that way?

As many Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, have said, the word “abuse” seems almost insufficient to describe what so many female MPs and others in the public eye experience: threats of rape, violence and death to themselves and their family members. The number of contributions to the debate highlights the scale of the problem. Of course, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who chairs the Select Committee, said, it is always impossible to know whether such online threats will tip over into real life. That is what is most chilling.

The Government are absolutely clear that online abuse, and particularly abuse targeted at women, is utterly reprehensible and completely unacceptable. The abuse can have such a significant impact on female representation in all walks of life. It silences women from speaking out. It prevents them from sharing their experiences online. It deters them from pursuing certain roles or, in this case, from seeking election or office at every single level. It can also hasten an early departure from this job, as we have also heard.

Jamie Stone: When I quoted my friend Gail Ross, I was also thinking about her small boy. I hope he does not know what was said, but if he did, would that not put another generation off politics? They would not touch it with a barge pole.

Caroline Dinenage: That is such an important point, and it is actually something that I was thinking about as I was listening to the contributions to the debate. I took an almost conscious decision not to put my children on my social media, for that very reason. I do not want what I do as a job to have an impact on them. How messed up and crazy is it that we feel that we cannot share things about our lives because of the impact that it will have? Of course, that has a dramatic impact on democracy when it puts people off standing for election at every single level. That affects women and stops their voices being heard in this Chamber and in society more broadly. As other Members have said, our success as a Parliament utterly depends on our having elected figures who better reflect the communities that we represent.

I know there are organisations that have led studies on abuse targeted at women, such as Glitch, Amnesty International and the Centenary Action Group. This work has such an important role to play in strengthening our understanding of the scale and prevalence of abuse targeted at women representatives and others, and my Department has been supporting research led by the University of Sheffield that assessed online abuse during the 2019 general election campaign and the covid-19 lockdown. The findings suggested that abuse directed at MPs has increased. I think we all recognise that. From the 2017 and 2019 general elections it was clear that there are some MPs who are more affected, and that particularly includes, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said, those with intersectionality. Women from minority

backgrounds were particularly targeted. Bizarrely, as we have been sitting here I have noticed that a colleague in Parliament has tweeted:

“Today’s mailbag with photos and photos of beheadings that would make you sick. It’s not unusual for MPs to be dealing with racists and this stuff isn’t new to me, but today I feel exhausted.”

I think that we all feel exhausted by it, Mr Paisley.

As the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) said, the additional research shows that over the lockdown period individuals, and prominent women in particular, were still receiving high levels of abuse. It has got significantly worse. Of the 26 MPs who received sexist abuse only four were men, with women receiving high volumes of personal attacks—attacks on their credibility, and sexually explicit abuse. Although men are a greater proportion of MPs, women get much higher volumes of abuse, which is of course unacceptable. There is some support for Members in managing their online and offline security through the parliamentary channels, but of course much more needs to be done at that level.

All that only goes to underline how vital the Government’s online safety Bill is. It will protect women and all users online. We published the full Government response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation last year, outlining our fundamental commitment to taking forward a new legal duty of care that companies will have towards their users. That will mean that companies must have robust systems and processes in place to tackle illegal content, including illegal online abuse and anonymous abuse. They will need to remove content quickly, or face enforcement action from Ofcom, which will be the new regulator. Companies with the largest audience and the most high-risk features will have to address legal but harmful content for both adults and children. That will include online abuse that does not cross criminal thresholds but is still harmful for users and could leave a significant impact on victims.

Companies will also need to ensure that they have effective, accessible mechanisms through which users can report concerns about harmful content. That has always been a big issue. People do not know how to report such things. It is all very murky and needs to be much clearer. They need to be able to challenge wrongful content take-down as well, and raise concerns that a company has failed to fulfil its duty of care.

I understand clearly, and sympathise enormously with, calls for compulsory user verification for social media, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) raised. However, there are concerns that it would prevent legitimate users such as human rights activists or whistleblowers from protecting themselves, dissuade vulnerable users such as victims of domestic violence from seeking support, or deter young LGBT people who are not ready to come out to their friends and family from seeking the information and support they need. However, I am keen to look at imaginative and innovative ways to tackle the issue. There must be some way to square the circle. I would gently like to say that online platforms do not have to wait for legislation to move on the matter. If they want to put it right, they could start to put their houses in order now, to rebuild the trust. Surely they have a moral duty not to stand by and let such things continue to happen.

We are working at pace to prepare the Bill. It will be ready later in the year. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) asked me about that and we want to get it out as soon as possible. It is, however, vital to get it right, and we want all parliamentarians to contribute to that important work.

I want quickly to mention our work with the Law Commission and how the criminal law will improve protection for women and users online. It is reviewing how the criminal law relates to harmful online communication and has consulted on reforms that include new ways to tackle pile-on abuse, cyber-flashing and self-harm. I know that that will be of interest to Members. The final recommendations will be published this summer and we are looking at where it would be appropriate to bring those things into law.

Finally, the Government will in due course legislate for a new electoral sanction that will help to protect women who contribute to our public life from intimidation and abuse, in person and online. That means that someone convicted of intimidating a candidate, future candidate, campaigner or elected representative will be banned from standing for or holding elected office for five years. That new sanction is just one part of the Government's programme of work against political intimidation. We are working with partners to provide security guidance to support the elections that are coming up next month, ensuring the delivery of a safe and inclusive democratic event.

This Government are absolutely committed to protecting female representatives, both online and offline. The disproportionate abuse that women receive online, which we have heard about today, has absolutely no place in a thriving and tolerant democracy. We will do all we can to protect not only women representatives, but all users, as part of the online safety Bill. We are working at pace to deliver the new electoral sanctions and to prepare that legislation, and we will ensure that Members across both Houses can contribute to those vital pieces of work.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): We normally have to rise at five to the hour, but I will give Mrs Maria Miller one minute to wind up.

10.55 am

Mrs Miller: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in the debate. The Government need to get the law right, and we have heard from the Minister, but Parliament and the House of Commons need to play their role, too. Online abuse is an affront to our democracy, and it is a workplace safety issue. We cannot allow women to be bullied out of public life by online abuse, because that weakens our democracy. The House of Commons needs to up its game in monitoring and supporting Members and their staff, and the APPG stands ready to assist with that work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered online abuse of elected women representatives.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Office for Investment

11 am

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. I remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to one another and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should of course email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall, unless you are speaking.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of the Office for Investment.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and a real pleasure to be able to debate this issue, which is of huge importance to, and presents huge opportunities for, our country's future growth. I am especially pleased to be having this debate not only because foreign direct investment—FDI—is so important to the national economy, but because it is so relevant to many of my constituents. We in Hertford and Stortford are part of the world-renowned innovation corridor, and our local life sciences sector is one area of particular opportunity and attractiveness to foreign investors.

The Government unveiled their plans for the Office for Investment in November last year, specifically designed to attract FDI into the UK. The aim is to connect public and private sector expertise in order to drive investment into all parts of the UK. I am particularly pleased that that has such strong and specific support from the Prime Minister in No. 10 and the Treasury. It is a Government priority at the highest level. We have long been a global centre of FDI in this country. FDI stock levels reached £1.6 trillion by the end of 2019. We have traditionally been the top FDI destination in Europe, and according to the World Bank we are second only to Denmark in offering the best business environment in the world. That has been so crucial to the success of our start-up ecosystem, and it is why so many businesses want to come here.

We have maintained our FDI leadership in Europe when many thought that we could not, or would not, post the EU referendum. FDI markets reported that between July 2016 and September 2020 foreign investors announced nearly 5,000 UK projects, more than Germany and over 50% more than France over the same period. The impact that that success has had on UK venture in particular has been huge. It has helped to fuel a world-beating venture sector that has insulated the UK's start-up and scale-up communities from many of the global shocks of the past decade. Interventions of the past decade to usher in new FDI have made major contributions to our world-renowned and highly enviable start-up and small and medium-sized enterprise ecosystem, which has in turn nurtured and enabled so much growth in new, and sometimes brand new, parts of our economy.

However, covid has taken its toll on FDI right across the globe, including here in the UK. There was a 49% global drop in FDI flows in the first half of 2020, which

[Julie Marson]

will already have had profound consequences for our economies and prospects for future growth, but it is true to say that negative trends had already started to emerge before the outbreak. Between 2018 and 2019, the UK's FDI flows had already fallen by £6 billion, well before we had even heard of covid. We cannot blame covid for all of a trend that had already begun, and we have to respond with purpose. That is fundamental to the short-term health and recovery of our economy, as well as to our long-term growth prospects. Central leadership is needed to unblock the most complex cases and put FDI at the top of the UK's agenda. The Government have set out how this new office will provide that leadership, and I am sure the Minister will confirm that the Government will ensure that the Office for Investment is given the necessary prominence to make a real difference and command the authority to work with Departments beyond the Department for International Trade to truly work across Whitehall, catalysing activity across all Departments.

The UK's overall history of FDI is a story of success. Even now we are competing well, despite a recent dip, but a closer look at data reveals a divided country, which poses problems for the UK's future. Since 2016, London and the south-east has increased its share of total FDI projects to more than 51%. That clearly has an impact on regional inequality and the spread of opportunity—an issue that I know the Government and the Minister are well aware of and are determined to address. Could the Minister explain how the Office for Investment will use its influence to guide investment to different parts of the UK? Data also shows that devolved Administrations have an advantage in securing FDI, compared with English regions outside London. I should be very interested to hear how the Minister intends the office to work for the entire country, to elevate areas previously left behind and provide a coherent, co-ordinated strategy.

Bringing new investment to all parts of the UK is at the heart of the Office for Investment's purpose. I am keen to use a little more time to discuss the importance of a regional approach to FDI, because it is in the regions that we will discover the most untapped new potential. Most new wealth over the next few years will be created through emerging industries such as green energy; it will not come from the already saturated markets that make up most of today's FTSE 250. London's market simply does not have as much capacity for new growth as those of the regions. Off the back of the pandemic especially, we have a great opportunity to develop new powerhouse regions to match the might of London. Right now, the gap between the most and least productive local enterprise partnerships is growing, but a balanced FDI strategy can help reverse that trend and level up our economy and regions.

It seems obvious that FDI is one of the keys to scaling the success of the many positive and innovative announcements made in the Budget last month, such as the super deduction and freeports. For every FinTech hub in London we need a thriving life sciences sector somewhere else. With better levels of FDI in regions, skills will follow investment, providing new opportunities to retain the best talent and attract it from afar.

It is equally important to recognise that FDI is not just vital for the start and scale-up sector of business. The biggest and most established companies also seek opportunities to expand and invest around the globe. We are right to demonstrate our ambition and commitment to get them investing here, where their FDI will create more jobs, improve productivity and unleash research and development investment.

As important as a regional approach to FDI is to the future of our economy, equally important are the sectors that the Office for Investment will target. To compete globally in 10 and 20 years' time, we have to pinpoint the right markets that will one day lead the world. It may be that the FTSE is stocked with establishment banks and oil companies at the moment, but it will not be those industries providing the high-growth success stories of the next decade and more. New wealth will rely on fledgling, disruptive sectors—some growing now, some to be established and some just dreamed of. Could the Minister explain how the Office for Investment will better enable the UK to attract FDI in those strategically important sectors for our long-term growth ambitions?

I was extremely pleased to see that we have secured the new sovereign investment partnership with the United Arab Emirates, announced last month. From the Government's £200 million investment in life sciences we have leveraged a further £800 million, giving a total investment inflow of £1 billion, all negotiated through the Office for Investment. This is a blueprint for success, which is so impressive and so important.

As a cricket fan I have used cricket analogies before, but I feel it bears repeating today that the role we play in this place to secure future FDI in growth in strategically important sectors is somewhat akin to that of a cricket groundsman. As I see it, we are the groundsmen and women whose job it is to prepare the wicket for our batsmen to thrive. Cricket fans will recall how England's batsmen felt the wrong end of a rough wicket at the hands of Indian groundsmen recently; the groundsmen prepared their wickets to suit their bowlers and make life harder for our batsmen. In much the same way, it will be the job of England's groundsmen to prepare our wickets to suit our own batsmen, not their bowlers, during the return fixture. That is the home advantage principle, which we should be applying in this place too. It is our job to set up advantages for our businesses, communities and regions by preparing a wicket to suit our ambitions. Admittedly, we are on quite a sticky wicket at the moment, but with every rough patch that emerges, there is an opportunity for the most creative of spinners to take advantage of the new landscape.

That is what I believe the purpose of this office should be, and indeed is, and I read with great interest the initiatives that are being rolled out by the Office for Investment to that end. The foreign investment summit will, I believe, be the largest gathering of investors to meet in the UK ever. Its focus on clean technologies is a clear signal that the Government understand where their attention should be focused in order to capitalise on the biggest future growth opportunities.

When I worked in corporate and international banking, my role was to engage senior investors with high value opportunities, so I understand how important a statement this summit makes in telling the world that the UK is open for business and in nurturing and developing

strategically important relationships. We cannot overestimate the huge dogfight for FDI currently taking place across the world. Global competition for FDI has never been fiercer as countries try to recover from covid-19. It is for this reason that I believe now is the time to prepare our wicket effectively, to make sure that the UK is on top of its game. The Office for Investment and set pieces such as the foreign investment summit can be a central plank of that ambition. With that in mind, would the Minister expand on the single front door strategy, and explain how the Office for Investment will be given the prominence and capacity it needs to lead this work and navigate the UK through the currently incredibly competitive climate?

I welcome the establishment of the office and what it says to the world about the UK's priorities for the future. We are a country that is open for business on a global scale and inviting of others to add value to that endeavour. Given the title the Office for Investment, I wonder whether we might even be practical and prudent to extend or replicate the UK's domestic investment centre. So much wealth is already under management in the UK: nearly £10 trillion worth of assets. To challenge the US as the best place to grow new innovation and technology, we need to encourage more FDI, but we also need to encourage more domestic investment at an earlier stage to catalyse growth.

A relatively small proportion of the £10 trillion-worth of assets under management in the UK is ever directed at UK venture, and yet we still have one of the world's largest venture markets: \$13.2 billion was invested in UK venture in 2019, making it the fourth-largest market in the world by inward investment. Imagine, though, how much potential could be catalysed if we were to channel a larger portion of assets under management into venture. A domestic version of this office, to include examining changes to the domestic regulatory landscape, could encourage a greater flow of capital into UK-backed venture. Various Government-led initiatives could be considered that encouraged or even obliged the biggest investors in the UK, such as institutional pension funds, to include venture as an asset class in all they do. That might fall outside the Minister's current purview at the Department for International Trade, but I would be interested in his thoughts on the potential of a dual approach, to look at foreign and domestic investment.

This is a very positive step forward for the UK's FDI strategy. It will provide clear leadership in Government and a clear and obvious door for foreign investors to go through. The office has my full support and I look forward with great optimism to the foreign investment summit, which I believe will help to position the UK as the natural choice for foreign investors.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): The rules state that with the permission of the Member opening the debate and the Minister, a Member may make a short speech, so I call Marco Longhi.

11.15 am

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

The Office for Investment will bring a real focus on delivery and inward investment. Evidence shows a direct correlation between job creation and foreign investment.

If there ever was a time for that to happen at pace, it is now. Let me draw a loose parallel between the Office for Investment and directly elected Mayors. When they were first proposed in the early 2000s, I was set against them. In most ways I was wrong. I saw the whole thing as a replication of a failed tier of government—county councils—but the proof of the pudding has been in the eating. In the West Midlands we have had a dynamic Mayor in Andy Street. He makes things happen. A straightforward example of that was his intervention in the demolition of a large derelict block of offices known as Cavendish House in Dudley—a blight on the Dudley landscape for 15 years, which nobody was seemingly able to remove.

The creation of the Office for Investment under the leadership of Minister Lord Grimstone, working hand in hand with No. 10 to attract investment, is absolutely key. In some respects, it is a similar functional role—a supermayor, if I may suggest it, although Members of the other place would never think that of themselves. So much depends on the quality of the individual selected. We need only look at London to see the stark difference between the dynamic former Mayor that we used to have and the depressing failed existing one.

The other focus that the Office for Investment can bring is the strategic nature and application of investments around the country. Opportunities in technology, advanced manufacturing, services, green research and development and digital are all strong areas of growth that are aligned with Government priorities for productivity and a greener economy, and their development across the country is key. That brings opportunities to areas where there has been relentless decline over many years—forgotten areas such as mine in Dudley and the Black Country—levelling up.

The Office for Investment has a big job to do and it has my full support. It represents a single front door to the UK for investors, who can confidently look at the UK with deliverability and speed of return at the heart of their investment in UK plc.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): As I would like the Minister to have time to make his speech, I call on the hon. Member for Strangford to make a short contribution.

11.18 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I spoke to the Minister before the debate, but I would like to put it on the record and congratulate him and our Government on their sterling efforts with the Office for Investment. It has created some 2,000 jobs in Northern Ireland. We are eternally grateful for that, because those jobs have been in technology, in the cyber sector and others. As well as my encouragement, I am sure that you, Mr Paisley, as an MP for Northern Ireland, will look forward to seeing how that develops. Some 3,000 jobs were created in Scotland, so Northern Ireland is punching above its weight. We have had opportunities in the past to discuss this issue with the Minister, so I look forward to what he has to say.

In Northern Ireland we are fortunate to have low rates and high skills, particularly among young people, who are eager and progressive in their outlook and wish to succeed. This is an opportunity for them. How can

[Jim Shannon]

we increase those jobs beyond the 2,000? All these points make Northern Ireland the ideal place, with the best people, for increasing jobs, opportunity and investment.

I am very keen to know what the UK-wide strategy will be, as Northern Ireland is ready and waiting and has delivered in the past. There are many young people, and those who are of a middle age as well, who have the wherewithal to be part of the increase in investment jobs through the Office for Investment. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) is right that jobs and skills follow investment. We want to make sure that Northern Ireland is part of that. Perhaps the Minister could indicate in his response how Northern Ireland will be part of that great strategy for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Obviously, as an MP for Northern Ireland and particularly Strangford, I want to see jobs coming to us.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Paisley. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) for securing this debate and for all the contributions, which were focused on the importance of investment to the livelihoods, the prosperity and quality of life of people in Members' constituencies and beyond. It is a privilege for me to be able to speak about the role of the new Office for Investment, a joint venture between No. 10 and the Department for International Trade, to cement the UK as a global hub for investment.

The UK's approach to investment is driven, and needs to be driven, for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford laid out, from the top—from the Prime Minister—who is showing the world that the UK is open to investment, and that Global Britain is a vision and a reality, not just rhetoric. As we seek to build back better in the wake of covid-19, we have to use our newfound freedom to go further and faster than ever to drive jobs and growth across the country.

The Government are determined to secure more investment opportunities in order to level up every region and nation of the UK with new jobs and businesses. The Office for Investment is very much focused on the levelling-up agenda, as the whole of Government needs to be.

We do not in any way want to surrender the power, attraction and magnetism of London and the south-east. When I was Minister for Investment, the majority of investments into the regions came as a secondary investment from companies that had previously invested, often, into London and the south-east. This is about keeping the best of what we have. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford said—she may even have understated the point—not only are we the leading investment destination in Europe, but by size we are probably the most attractive foreign direct investment economy in the world. Only the United States and China-Hong Kong have higher levels of FDI. We know that the FDI tends to lead to more research and development; it leads to more exports; and it leads to higher wages, which we would all support.

The Office for Investment lies at the heart of making that happen, by identifying and tearing down the barriers faced by top-tier investors. It sends a big signal, which is important, and it is tied to the Prime Minister, but the aim is not that it should grow into a behemoth. It is a very small, strategic group, working, through my colleague Lord Grimstone, with DIT, which, in various guises over the years and now as a dedicated trade Department, has been at the heart of delivering the offer to investors. The Office for Investment is bringing that signal, with the imprimatur of the Prime Minister. By being at the top of Government, it brings the convening power that only the Prime Minister's Office has across the rest of Whitehall. As colleagues have suggested, this is about having a coherent offer. It is pointless to have a great initiative here if a very slow response elsewhere ruins the pitch, which should be carefully crafted and prepared, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford pointed out.

It is estimated by industry that in the first three months of 2021 alone, the UK FinTech sector—my hon. Friend highlighted the importance of venture—raised more than £2 billion in more than 100 investment deals. How are we going to be successful in the long term? It seems to me that science, innovation and technology—and I would include education in the piece—are at the heart of how we shall deliver competitiveness for the UK in the longer term. That is at the heart of our offer. Venture is so important. Even last year, in the pandemic, we saw another rise in venture investment into the UK. It is creating that science, innovation and culture here, and having a strong educational offer that brings in the brightest people from around the world, that all adds to the UK having a uniquely favourable role to play. Then what is needed is to put in place the funding to make this the best place in the world from which to start one of those businesses and grow to scale.

We want to put in place those factors and the finance. I think that NASA called the growth path for businesses the “valley of death”. We want to ensure that we have all the steps covered going forward. That is why it is so important that we look to partner with others—the Office for Investment plays a critical role in that—and that the Treasury and others show flexibility in the new sovereign investment partnership with the UAE, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford rightly highlighted. It is precisely in order to put such funds in place to support UK business that the OFI can deliver in a way that we have perhaps not seen before.

The Office for Investment will help drive forward our recovery to the benefit of people up and down the UK. It comprises a crack team of specialists who are working hard to land big investment opportunities. The OFI is there to help influence the overall environment but, in terms of particular projects, it is aimed at the top end. The aim is not to fall. It is working hard to land those big opportunities, while continuing to uphold the highest standards in scrutiny and security. As has been said, officials report directly to my good friend Lord Grimstone, in his role as joint Minister for Investment at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the DIT. The Office for Investment will bring together the best in the business from across Government and around the country to drive forward our investment-led recovery.

The Office for Investment is already delivering results. It was great to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the thousands of jobs that have

been created in Northern Ireland, but we want to go further. That is why we are setting up a DIT trade hub in Belfast to ensure that Her Majesty's Government are working closely with Invest Northern Ireland in a more effective way, to ensure that the global reach of the UK Government and the staff we have in more than 110 countries can maximise the investment that comes into Northern Ireland.

We have seen the UAE investment. We hope we will also see investment from other high-growth markets. If I had to think of what DIT's fundamental role is, it would probably be hitching or aligning—whatever word we choose—the UK with the fastest growing parts of the world. That is what we have the opportunity to do, and we have to use our flexibility. In the same way that that flexibility has allowed us to lead Europe in vaccines, we have to ensure that every time we make the same brave judgments and create the conditions to deliver success.

I should give my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford a minute to reply, but are there any questions I should pick up on?

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): The Minister is not under any obligation.

Graham Stuart: Okay. I think I have touched on the levelling-up point. It is facilitating and helping to package the offer around the country. That is why we have our high potential opportunities scheme, whether that is rail in Doncaster or life sciences in other parts of the country.

I think we have dealt with the fledgling sectors and their importance. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford. She was right to say it is beyond my purview to set out domestic policy, as DIT is entirely internationally focused. However, I am sure colleagues have heard her recommendations of creating frameworks that incentivise more UK investment in those ventures. My hon. Friend asked how the single front door will be resourced. The OFI will continue to be small, elite and strategic, not a big organisation. It relies for most of the work on DIT and BEIS and other Departments across Government, but has that convening and co-ordinating power, with the authority of the Prime Minister behind it.

I think that is enough from me, Mr Paisley. I am delighted to participate in this debate, and it is fantastic to see colleagues getting behind the Office for Investment and all the opportunities it brings to raise livelihoods and the quality of life across the nation.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): As much as I would like to give the Member, Julie Marson, a minute to wind up, I am not able to under the rules for the 30-minute debates. I know she is more than happy with that and does not take it personally from me in the Chair.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Elective Surgical Operations: Waiting Lists

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room, and take the wipes with them and bin them. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall. Members attending physically who are in the later stages of the call list should also use the seats in the Public Gallery and move to the horseshoe when seats become available.

2.31 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered waiting lists for elective surgical operations.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. Covid-19 has had a "calamitous impact" on patient access to surgical care. That is the view of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and it is what I want to focus on today. The Government need to receive that a message loud and clear. It is a message that needs to be repeated time and again, that cannot and should not be ignored, and that resonates with millions of people. I look forward to the response from the Minister, who I know takes this matter seriously.

The Government are not responsible for covid, but it is the Government's responsibility to mitigate its effects through a variety of interventions. The question is whether they have fulfilled that responsibility. I imagine that the independent public inquiry will help us pin down that particular question. Let us hope that, as and when it happens, it is independent and full. The Royal College of Surgeons represents about 30,000 members in the UK and worldwide and, in this respect, it has a pretty good insight into the current calamitous situation facing millions of people, as it puts it.

I am sure it will be helpful if I contextualise the current situation facing patients. The most recent waiting time statistics published by NHS England on 15 April 2021 are worrying, but if taken with the hidden statistics, the position becomes almost overwhelming in magnitude. That is the challenge for the NHS, the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and, of course, for the Government's commitment to ensure that the NHS gets all the resources it needs, as promised by the Prime Minister. I know that trusts and clinical commissioning groups, as well as NHS England, Public Health England, the Department of Health and Social Care and other NHS-related bodies have worked hard over the past year to ensure that services are being delivered as best they can, notwithstanding the unprecedented circumstances. My reason for initiating this debate is to highlight issues of concern. It is a challenge for us all.

[Peter Dowd]

What do the statistics say? A record 4.7 million patients were waiting for hospital treatment in February 2021. There were nearly 400,000 patients waiting for more than a year, which compares with just 1,643 people waiting for more than a year in February 2020. That is a significant rise, if ever there was one. Only 64.5% of patients waiting for hospital treatment were treated within 18 weeks in February against the Government's target of 92%, which was last achieved five years ago. In total, 387,885 people are now waiting for more than 18 weeks. Those patients are our constituents. Each and every one of us will have numerous patients or would-be patients affected by this dire situation.

In my clinical commissioning group area, which covers my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), there were 1,374 people who had been waiting a year or more to be seen in February, compared with eight in April last year. It is a huge increase. All specialties are affected, but notable ones are ophthalmology, trauma and orthopaedics. It is important to note that what is not included is the impact on overdue follow-up activity and routine surveillance outside referral treatment.

We cannot overestimate the strains and stresses that such waiting puts on patients and their families, who do not know whether they will get the operation that is needed, or when it will happen. That point about what the situation means for patients was clearly made by the Royal College of Surgeons. There is a breakdown from NHS England, by specialty, which illustrates the situation that we and, more importantly, millions of our constituents face. In the trauma and orthopaedics surgical specialty that I have mentioned, more than 600,000 people are waiting, including 288,000 who have been waiting for 18 weeks or more and 84,000 who have been waiting a year for treatment. The percentage treated within 18 weeks, compared with the 92% target, is 52%. The figures are much the same for general surgery: 394,000 people waiting, with 60% treated within 18 weeks. I will not go through all the figures—I think hon. Members get the gist.

Such waits affect people in a variety of ways, mentally and physically. There is the obvious issue of pain that can be persistent, draining and debilitating for month after month. Also, of course, there are psychological effects such as distress or worry about deterioration in health, and concerns about the impact on a person's employment status and the financial costs that might follow from the loss of a job, and subsequent loss of income. Of course, there will be an impact on family members or carers, who in turn have to cope or deal with the impact on the patient. There is the worry that an extended wait for surgery will bring more risks of deterioration in the patient's condition. In certain situations the patient might need more complex surgery later. Moreover, there is always the concern that in certain circumstances a patient might die while waiting for an operation or other intervention. Those are serious, substantive and worrying issues that we, and particularly patients, must all face.

The parlous state of pre-covid waiting lists has made the covid situation worse, but it is not just a question of the impact of covid on lists. There is also the matter of underlying issues faced by the NHS, which covid has

greatly exacerbated. In November 2020, making a comparison with 2019, the Health Foundation estimated that there were 4.7 million “missing patients”, as it calls them, who have not been referred for treatment. In other words, if 75% of those patients were included, the waiting list could grow to 9.7 million in 2023-24. That simply reaffirms the point that I made earlier about the need to plan now.

Many people have not referred themselves during covid to their GP. Getting a slot has often been challenging, to say the least. That element could become a significant factor in relation to cancer surgery: it has been estimated that the number of patients with suspected cancer referrals fell by 350,000 compared with the same period two years ago. That point was made not only by the Royal College of Surgeons but by other health-related organisations. The Royal College of Surgeons is not an outlier, and if the Government do not recognise the calamitous situation that patients now face, they will be ill-equipped to resolve it. I do not suggest that they are in danger of putting their head in the sand; but they are, if they are not careful, in danger of underestimating the scale of the crisis facing the country.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I take my hon. Friend's point about the Government not putting their head in the sand, but I think he referred to the need to plan. Is the real issue that while perhaps they are not putting their head in the sand they need to demonstrate that they are starting to plan right now?

Peter Dowd: That is a fair point, and I will touch on it later. I know that the Minister is well aware of the situation and has his own challenges in getting the point home to his colleagues in the Treasury, among others. We will give him the support that he needs when he has those conversations.

In terms of support to weather this crisis, the Government cannot put the brakes on this vital area of public expenditure. Given the figures I have outlined, it is better to pre-empt this tsunami, because once it comes, it will be all the more damaging. Putting it right after the fact will be more expensive, more difficult and lives will be in danger, not to mention the ongoing economic impacts for the nation. If we have learnt anything from the covid-19 crisis, it is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) that assessment and planning, followed by focused, comprehensive action, are required.

I have set out the issues as many in the health field have them set out. They are not my figures, they are not made up, they are in the public domain. The Minister knows the organisations concerned, as do hon. Members, so I will not list them.

I have attempted to be as concise and factual as possible and to set the scene, but there is a second element: how the issue can be tackled. The rest of my time will be spent on that. Again, this is not me making this up—is it not the hon. Member for Bootle's version. It is, in a sense, the health organisations' view. In this respect, the Royal College of Surgeons has set out a clear way in a comprehensive fashion. Other royal colleges and health organisations have expressed their views too. I have no doubt that the Minister will listen to those voices, which will be helpful and constructive. However, they are also unambiguous in their view of the need for

the Government to act now with specific proposals that go beyond a balance-sheet approach. I believe the time for details and proposals is fast approaching.

I want to highlight four recommendations. The first is increasing NHS bed capacity. For many years in the run-up to the pandemic, the NHS was far too close to capacity. It was running hot, to use that phrase. International comparisons, which I acknowledge do not tell the full story, but do give a partial story, show that the UK has 2.5 hospital beds per 1,000 people, which is well below the OECD average of 4.7, and behind countries such as Turkey, Slovenia and Estonia. Remember, beds have been reduced from 108,000 in 2010-11 to 95,000 in 2021.

Secondly, during the pandemic the Royal College of Surgeons of England called for the setting up of green or covid-light sites with a separation of elective surgery from emergency admissions. As the college says, there is, “evidence of the risks to patients if covid-19 is contracted during or after surgery, including a greater risk of mortality and pulmonary complications”. In this regard, covid-light sites are critical to process ongoing planned surgery, given that patients and staff are segregated from situations where those who have the virus are treated. In addition, there is a regime whereby patients self-isolate and test negative before any surgical intervention is in operation. Meanwhile, staff without symptoms are regularly tested.

The third recommendation is for surgical hubs. During the pandemic, professionals have worked in partnership to provide mutual aid during periods of intense pressure, thereby enabling a seamless process of surgical intervention. Because of the multi-agency, multidisciplinary co-operation, trusts have also been able to designate certain hospitals as surgical hubs. As such, a capacity for particular types of elective procedures has been facilitated through skills and resources coming together in one place in covid-secure environments. While this hub model, as it is called, is not a total solution, it is none the less a practical way to enable many geographies and surgical specialities such as orthopaedics and cancer to work together.

The fourth recommendation is support for patients, and I touched on that earlier. Again, the Royal College of Surgeons has welcomed the prioritisation of patients in NHS England’s 2021-22 priorities and operational planning guidance. None the less, I agree that we need to go further and provide more guidance about how to develop and expand the options to address those waiting longest, and to ensure that health inequalities are tackled throughout the plan.

In my view, there should also be cross-departmental work on more comprehensive support for those directly affected by covid isolation requirements and people whose livelihood is threatened by longer waiting lists. Before I go on to summarise the four recommendations I have just put to Members, I emphasise that I am aware, and appreciate, that NHS England and NHS Improvement have been working on an elective recovery framework covering workforce logistics, clinical prioritisation, patient focus reviews, waiting list validation and patient communication. I welcome that, as will other hon. Members. I acknowledge that the NHS has completed almost 2 million operations and other elective care in January and February this year, and non-urgent surgery times have begun to recover.

In summary, there are four recommendations arising out of the narrative. Recommendation one: the Government should urgently invest in increasing bed and critical care

bed capacity across England. Recommendation two: the Government should consolidate covid-light sites in every integrated care system region, and ensure that at least one NHS hospital acts as a covid-light site in each integrated care system in England. Recommendation three: the Government should widen adoption of the surgical hub model across all English regions for appropriate specialities, such as orthopaedics and cancer. Recommendation four: all integrated care systems should urgently consider what measures can be put in place as soon as it is practical to support patients facing long waits for surgery. I would like to put on record my thanks to the Royal College of Surgeons for its advice, information and support in relation to this matter.

Finally, the whole question of workforce-related issues—numbers, pay, conditions at work—needs a comprehensive, fair, equitable and inclusive review. The Secretary of State can initiate a wholesale review of organisational structures in the NHS in the middle of this crisis, which is causing angst and concern across the NHS—we cannot pretend that is not happening. He can therefore initiate a review of the terms that I have suggested.

Many lessons need to be learned from this crisis. I stress the value, commitment and professionalism of all staff in the NHS. Staff across all professions, disciplines and sectors are feeling drained after a year of hard, unrelenting work and we need to thank them for that. Without them, in particular, this country would be in an even worse social and economic predicament than it already is. We owe it to them to ensure that they get all the support they need to support the rest of us. Who could disagree with that?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Before I call Back Benchers to speak, I remind Members that in this 90-minute debate we will be calling the Front Benchers no later than 3.40 pm, and obviously Peter Dowd will be winding up again after the Minister.

2.48 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this very important debate. I fear many of us will end up repeating some of his points, but hopefully I shall be digging into one or two of those points in a bit more depth.

I start by paying tribute to and thanking our incredible NHS staff up and down the country—not least in my constituency—for their incredible commitment, resilience and hard work. Frankly, they have all gone well above and beyond what they are paid to do and what they signed up for throughout this pandemic, both in treating those with coronavirus and in rolling out the phenomenal vaccination programme. Also, despite what we are discussing today, we must not forget that urgent treatment, urgent surgery and A&E visits were still taking place throughout the pandemic. We must not forget that, so a heartfelt thanks to them.

We often hear that the NHS has coped throughout the pandemic. Indeed, we did not see those awful scenes that we saw in Italy of people being treated in corridors and makeshift tents. I would say, though, that the NHS has coped, but at what cost? We have heard the startling figures of 4.7 million people waiting for treatment.

[Munira Wilson]

We know that about 2.3 million of those are for elective surgery, and there are all sorts of estimates, of anywhere between 4 million and 6 million or 7 million hidden patients, or those who have not yet necessarily presented. There is that pent-up demand for treatment. We know that two thirds of those waiting for treatment have been waiting for more than 18 weeks, and just shy of 400,000 have now been waiting for over a year. As has already been outlined, the impact on patients' quality of life, in terms of mental health and excess deaths, cannot be overstated, but I would also like to touch on the workforce impact, before moving to solutions and finance.

As the hon. Member for Bootle has stated, it is estimated that approximately half of those with cancer did not contact their GP in the first wave. In fact, I heard a story the other day, via a friend of a friend, about somebody whose cervical smear test was cancelled last year. She was trying to contact her GP with symptoms earlier this year, and was fobbed off. She has now been discovered with stage 4 cervical cancer. I suspect that those stories will be replicated up and down the country. Macmillan Cancer Support has estimated that there are 15,000 missing diagnoses. We all know the importance of early diagnosis. I used to work for a cancer charity and in a pharmaceutical sector that had a big interest in oncology. We all know that surgery, often combined with early chemotherapy and radiotherapy, is absolutely critical in improving life chances and sometimes in being curative.

On the subject of hip and knee replacements, we know that the second and third most common operations are hip and knee replacements. The vast majority of patients needing that kind of surgery have osteoarthritis. Again, waiting lists in those areas have gone up exponentially. It is clear from talking to health service leaders on the ground that these cases are not necessarily in the priority category, which is understandably where cancer resides. As we have heard, though, there is an impact on quality of life, in terms of pain and reduced mobility. A survey by Versus Arthritis found that over 50% of those waiting had increased pain and reduced mobility, and more than three quarters experienced a deterioration in mental health and wellbeing. The longer-term impacts on the NHS and, critically, the social care sector, which was already struggling and on its knees, will be huge. The direct and indirect cost implications, therefore, will be huge, not to mention further complexity from late surgery.

Although this debate is about surgery, it would be remiss of me not to mention mental health. The Minister knows that I have a personal interest in and passion for mental health. We all know that mental health waiting times were pretty dire before the pandemic, particularly for children and young people. Now they are worse still. I am hearing from parents week in week out about not just children, but young people—often those who have crossed from the CAMHS age to being young adults—who cannot access services and are waiting a year or more for treatment. Again, without early intervention and action on these problems now, we are storing up problems further down the line. We know from the Royal College of Psychiatrists survey that two fifths of those waiting for treatment have ended up contacting crisis services. That is not the best way to treat people with mental health conditions. The hon. Member for Bootle mentioned

excess deaths, and modelling from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies suggests that we could have 18,200 or so excess deaths that are not covid-related. I implore the Minister to make sure that we start to count excess deaths that are not covid-related. At the moment they are hidden by the covid figures, but I suspect that these delays to treatment are causing a huge number of excess deaths.

The other big issue that I want to talk about is the workplace impact. We know that staff morale is through the floor at the moment. I recently had a meeting in south-west London with other south-west London MPs, organised by the local Royal College of Nursing branch, at which we talked to nurses. I heard from one after the other about how they are struggling in terms of their mental wellbeing and morale. We know from an RCN survey that a third of its members are considering leaving. We already had huge numbers of vacancies in nursing and other parts of the NHS before this pandemic, and the turnover will increase. I have made the case, as have many Opposition Members, for a better pay settlement for our NHS workers—1% is frankly an insult and a pay cut, as we keep hearing again and again. I implore the Minister once again: pay is important, but so is greater support for NHS workers' mental health and wellbeing. I know that local NHS leaders are trying to do what they can, but further support and a commitment from the Minister would be welcome.

Finally on the impacts, I want to touch on health inequalities. Covid has massively exposed the health inequalities in our country. The thing that I fear most is that those who know how to shout the loudest and navigate the system, and have access to the sort of remote technology that is being increasingly used, will be able to access the treatment they need. I say that as the MP for a relatively affluent part of London, where I suspect a higher than average number of people have access to private healthcare and health insurance, and will be able to get treated through that route. Those who have been worst hit by covid will be worst hit by these waiting lists.

On solutions, I have touched on the need to treat our staff better in terms of pay and mental health support, and reduce the turnover. Importantly, we need to give staff time to recover. That is what I keep hearing from the chief executives of hospital trusts and community trusts on the ground: they need time to recover.

That leads me to my second point on the solutions. I would love to hear the Minister explain why the block contracts with the independent sector ended at the end of March. I would have thought that continuing to use independent sector capacity in the short term would help. A number of the stakeholders who briefed us for today's debate have raised concerns about the fact that independent sector provision is largely concentrated in the south-east, London, the south-west and the east of England. That is not ideal and could exacerbate the inequalities that I have talked about, but something is better than nothing. If it helps to reduce the pressure on the NHS, it is important that it is looked at as a solution.

Thirdly, I would like to talk about transparency. We need an honest discussion with the public about these waiting lists, and clear reporting about the waiting times for the different waiting lists. We have talked about support for patients who are waiting for treatment,

and good, clear, regular communication is an important part of that. I mentioned the need for transparency about excess deaths as a result of people waiting for treatment. The Government need to level with the public if there are tough choices to be made around the prioritisation of what treatment people will get within a certain period of time, or if they will have to travel for treatment. They need to be up front and honest with the public, because that is the only way we will maintain public trust.

That relates to a point that I want to make about communication. We must continue to communicate with the public about whether it is safe to go to hospital for treatment, and we must look at how we engage hard-to-reach groups that might not be embracing some of the digital technology that is increasingly being used to improve efficiency, not just because of infection control measures.

There must be better local collaboration. I want to thank the two acute hospitals that serve my constituency: Kingston Hospital and West Middlesex University Hospital, which are part of South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust, and London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust respectively. I know they are working incredibly hard on community diagnostic hubs and the surgical hubs that we have talked about, and they are ensuring we have covid-light sites, and so on, in line with the NHS operational guidance. That is to be welcomed, championed and supported. We have touched on having greater support for patients waiting for treatment.

NHS providers have said that we need a bold, transformative approach to tackle these waiting lists, and ultimately that will need to be supported by cash. I will pre-empt the Minister, who will stand up and say, "We have committed £4 billion"—I am sorry to steal his lines. Yes, that is fantastic and to be welcomed, but last autumn the Health Foundation estimated that we will need about £10 billion to deal with the backlog.

We saw in the late 1990s and the early 2000s that the way to bring down waiting lists is huge injections of cash. The Chancellor said he would give the NHS whatever is needed. We know that a lot of these problems come from an underlying lack of funding in the NHS over the long term and that, for four years, the NHS has not met the target in the NHS constitution that 92% of patients should wait no longer than 18 weeks to start elective treatment. That was an underlying problem pre-pandemic, but it has been exacerbated. That is why at the last general election the Liberal Democrats suggested that we should raise income tax by a penny in the pound specifically for the NHS and social care.

I am sure that the Minister has the Chancellor on speed dial, just like the former Prime Minister does, and I know that the Secretary of State has the Chancellor on speed dial. I implore him to make the case for the cash injection needed to tackle waiting times and improve the health of the nation. I am sure he does not need my help, but I and the Liberal Democrats stand ready to help him to make the case, just as the hon. Member for Bootle has already offered.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I intend to make some constructive comments and look forward to the Minister's response. I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for

setting the scene so very well and reflecting the opinion that we all have. The Minister does not have responsibility for health in Northern Ireland, but I will give him a couple of examples from Northern Ireland as they are replicated elsewhere.

As the hon. Member said, the figures, which we are all aware of, were clearly in the press last week. I had the opportunity to ask the Secretary of State about them yesterday. I did so because of the backlog of operations—I mentioned tonsillitis and children waiting for their adenoids to be removed—with waiting lists growing not just here in the mainland but indeed across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Those who have spoken have mentioned the concerns and pressures that I have, and they will be reiterated by those who come after. The Secretary of State in replying said that £7 billion would be made available—the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) will be interested in that figure—and through the Barnett consequential we in Northern Ireland will get some benefit.

The Secretary of State did acknowledge that there is an absolutely massive backlog, but I think that as we slowly get out of covid-19 through the vaccine roll-out—we put on record our thanks to the Minister and the Government for all they have done on that—we need a strategy in place that addresses the backlog of those waiting to be seen. From waiting lists to see consultants to surgery dates being pushed back, coronavirus has brought us from teetering on the brink of surgical collapse to being under the rubble. It is as serious as that, certainly in Northern Ireland, where the waiting lists are gross. The Secretary of State referred to how it is a problem not just in England but in every region in the United Kingdom. We welcome how he and the Government recognise the problems, but we look to the Minister, with no pressure whatsoever, to tell us what is going to happen and how the strategies will address the backlog.

The Secretary of State always tells me that he has regular contact with Health Ministers in the devolved Administrations. I know that he does, and I welcome that close contact, being on the phone every week—maybe two or three times a week—but I want to ensure that the strategy and the co-ordination are working across all the regions. I will give two examples to illustrate what the issues are.

One of those examples happens to be from one of my own staff, who has two wee girls. One of them is a five-year-old, Lily, who was choking on her food and her drink. After another bout, her mum looked into her throat and saw that her tonsils were the size of golf balls. Those are her words. For a wee girl of only five years old, one would panic right away. She rang the GP, was seen and got an urgent referral to ENT. She then paid to go private, which meant she had to borrow money. Not everybody can do that. She was told that the waiting list was over a year long just to get a consultation. She went to the consultant and was sent home with a sleep monitor, to see where the problems were, which would report back to the doctor. She gave back the monitor after three nights, as requested, and was contacted within two days to say that Lily needed urgent surgery, as her oxygen levels had dipped dangerously low during the night.

Lily's mother rang the hospital and was told she would have to have surgery in the first urgent slot in April. We are more than two weeks in from the beginning of April, and it has not happened. Lily is still waiting

[Jim Shannon]

for her surgery and her mother has installed a baby monitor, which speaks, with an on-and-off movement. What a way to live a life, heart in mouth, on eggshells over a five-year-old, listening to the baby monitor all through the night, almost afraid to sleep in case of missing something.

The stress to the family resonates across every one of them. Simple surgery would rectify that. Despite being first on the urgent list, Lily is still waiting. I know the Minister is not responsible for that. The hon. Member for Bootle, who set the scene and had lots of examples, did not go into them all. I suspect that he would have examples very similar to the one I am referring to. Lily's mother has sleep-interrupted nights to ensure that her child is breathing. A simple procedure would be the solution but, for some unknown reason, the year has passed and we do not seem to be any further ahead.

My second example is a 42-year-old market trader who has worn kneecaps. His business employs 13 local people. He has told me that unless he gets his operation, he will have to close one of his shops, as he cannot physically load and unload the vehicles, and he is losing business. The impact of not getting an operation in time not only affects children but those involved in industry and the economy.

The hon. Member for Twickenham referred to cancer diagnosis. I know of people who had cancer in the past year and, unfortunately, because they did not have their operations, they are no longer here. That is a fact. When the hon. Lady mentioned that, I could relate to it and understand, because I know people who are not here today because they were unable to get an operation. I understand that the Government have a responsibility to look after the covid situation, but the time is coming when we need to look beyond that. We need to have a strategy in place, and I look to the Minister for a response on that.

With regard to knee replacements, that 42-year-old market trader is an example of those who need it right now, not years in the future. I also make that point for cataract surgery. Lots of people are not just waiting for the surgery, they are waiting for the appointment to diagnose when it can be done, knowing that they are going blind. Simple cataract surgery can change their lives with real, dramatic and positive effect. We need to be on the ball with these things.

I understand the reference the hon. Member for Twickenham made to mental health. I have seen in my constituency the effect on the mental health of children, some as young as primary age. Schools are suffering tremendous mental health problems. This problem does not only affect Northern Ireland. Just under 4.7 million patients are waiting for hospital treatment in England, as of February 2021. That is the highest number since the referral for treatment data series started in 2007. Although a relatively sharp decrease in numbers waiting was observed from April to June 2020, the numbers have since increased to that record level of 4.7 million in February 2021. It seems likely that the dip from April to June 2020 was due to limited new referrals during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

I always try to be positive when I come to debates. We get the background and examples to set the scene and show what the problems are, but everyone who has

spoken so far has very honestly and admirably put forward solutions. I think we are all in the business of solutions. It is about the glass half full rather than half empty.

We need investment. We also need access to private clinics—at some time we will have to look to them—and facilities, and we need action now. With every day that passes, more people are in need; more are in pain and more are in fear, and we must get a hold on the situation. The lists continue to grow as more people's names are added.

We need a clear strategy that prioritises the backlog of elective surgery. We need the £7 billion that the Secretary of State referred to in the Chamber, which is extra money for this particular purpose. We want to see how that pans out. We need to employ more staff, and extra surgeons as well. What do we have to do to do it? There must be a plan. We have a responsibility. As my party's health spokesperson, I am very keen to see these matters addressed. I know the Government can do it. If they put their minds to the issue, they can make it happen, but each and every one of us in the House wants to see it sooner rather than later.

3.11 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms McVey. I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who opened the debate so well.

Once more the NHS has been pushed to its limits these past few months, and once more it has delivered an unprecedented response. Every single person working for the NHS has strained every sinew at every hour of every day and night to support as many people and save as many lives as they could. I know how staff in York's NHS services have stretched their known capability, skill and knowledge, have extended their capacity to care and support, and have served our community without complaint or restraint. For that reason, I echo hon. Members who have said that those staff need to be justly rewarded with a well-overdue pay rise.

At York Teaching Hospital, 1,974 covid-19-positive patients were treated between September 2020 and the end of March 2021, in a very challenging clinical environment, where infection control measures tested staff and the system. The hospital is already a challenged site, and that experience indicates that conversations must commence on the future of the hospital estate in the city. It serves a growing population, and I hope that the Minister would clock that and be open to early discussions about how, over the next decade, we can develop plans to meet the health needs of our city. Already, year in, year out, over the winter crisis it is challenged, but covid-19 has really pushed it to its limits.

As the latest phase of the crisis abates, the next mountain must be conquered. The pressure it causes is relentless. Elective surgery, which was stood down at the beginning of the pandemic, continued through the rest of the period. However, we know that the number of cases has built up.

In York, the independent sector is used to provide some of the cancer care. Good cancer networks were built with the local establishment. It would be good if the Government would publish the amount they have spent on contracts with the independent sector throughout

the pandemic. Has it been at cost or at an escalated cost to the state? We need that information so that we can understand the extent of the use of the independent sector and so that lessons can be learnt about the need for national contingency in public health facilities, and about how the private sector is drawn on and whether there are better models out there for procuring services.

While staff have had to be redeployed to respond to covid-19 and address clinical priorities, which is absolutely right, York managed to continue with its planned surgery through the national phase 3 elective services restoration period up until March 2021. It has done really well: it has delivered 96% of the planned elective in-patient activity—ordinary elective and day cases—and 108% of the planned out-patient activity. That equates to the delivery of nearly 3,000 ordinary electives, 36,000 day cases and nearly 400,000 out-patient appointments over the six-month period. That is an incredible feat, because of the constraints—indeed, due to the sharp rise in covid cases in York, particularly following the Christmas period, 564 elective procedures were delayed—but those figures dwarf into insignificance compared with the scale of what is needed now. Nationally, there is a reckoning that it could take about five years to clear the list. And of course the Minister is planning a reorganisation of health services in the midst of all that, which may have some implications. I trust that, in his response to the debate, he can say how that will be bridged.

As we went into the pandemic there were already significant backlogs in elective care, as a result of austerity measures—cuts—being applied to services. That has had its implications in York. We have a high level of recruitment and retention in York—the vacancy rate is just 6%—but clearly there are implications due to the rationing that was applied. As a result, our clinical commissioning group, Vale of York, has applied rationing to services, and I want to dwell on that for a moment, because many procedures are no longer available in the city, but also many involve restricted access for those with a BMI over 30—in the case of hip and knee replacement surgery, it has now been lifted to between 30 and 35—and for those who smoke. We know that that discriminates disproportionately against those who experience socioeconomic disadvantage.

I have debated the issue many times in the House, but to this day I hold, as does the Royal College of Surgeons, that these should be clinical decisions, and should not be based on algorithms to weigh the clinical risks. Of course we all understand that smoking and obesity lead to significantly higher risks in surgery, but far more needs to be done to support people with weight loss and smoking cessation. With surgery already significantly delayed because of the pandemic, to deny people access to a waiting list removes the clinical support that they need. They also need additional support to address the risk factors, not least because we know that, for many people who smoke or are overweight, that is the case because they are dealing with the presentation of their illness. For instance, they may not be able to exercise and mobilise because of pain, which makes them more susceptible to putting on weight—or perhaps because of stress and depression.

We need to see those issues addressed. We need to see far more intervention in the form of prevention at these points, but also it needs to be understood that people should not have to wait even longer for the elective

surgery that they need. We know that, over the last 13 months, there has been a serious drop in the number of people accessing diagnostic tests, out-patient appointments and other clinical services, so they are set back even further. And of course it is not just those cohorts of patients who are affected; we know that the effects have gone to so many other areas. As we have heard, the impact on cancer diagnosis has been significant as well. We know that today there are many people living with undiagnosed conditions who will, when they present, have greater risk and poorer outcomes unless this situation is attended to urgently.

Altogether, the waiting lists could double—none of us knows exactly what will happen—for clinical procedures once community referrals catch up. That would just break the system and therefore we need to see more reparation being put in place. I know that the Minister is looking at those issues, but by the time someone receives surgery they are likely to have more complexities, more underlying health conditions and a poorer prognosis. As we have heard in the debate, approximately 18,000 people could also see premature mortality as a result of this. Of course, there is a significant loss to the economy, loss of jobs, loss of income, loss of lifestyle and loss of social connections, leading to mental health challenges as well. We need to make sure that during this period people have access to social prescribing and support for wider needs as well as their clinical needs.

Bearing that in mind, I want to dwell on the issue of diagnostic testing and the fact that attendance in some areas was already low. Will the Minister look at how specialist clinics and testing centres could be set up to screen the population? Just imagine if everyone who had their covid-19 vaccine had a thorough health MOT at the same time. That would have been transformative. I ask the Minister: what can be learned from the vaccine roll-out to be applied to screening programmes and out-patient backlogs, to ensure that the NHS gets back on track with the provision of services as they are needed, and perhaps as a model for the future, too?

I want to raise one more point before I return to elective surgery; that is the issue of research. Research has been significantly shelved over the last year. We know that surgical advances will assist by cutting waiting lists, reducing the risk of procedures and reducing the need for surgery in the first place. I urge the Minister to ensure that there is significant investment in clinical research, and that it is stepped up, not cut back.

To return to elective surgery directly, first, on staffing, we know that we have an ageing workforce and many of those who have stepped up this year are now stepping back. Other staff members are exhausted and, frankly, shattered by their experience over the past year, so we need to ensure that we see that growth in the workforce. I trust that NHS planning and commissioning of training will increase, and not just to ensure that we address the current crisis; that could be extended into the future shape of healthcare. We need to get those figures right and not see the famine and feast that we have often seen in the past—although I cannot quite remember a period of feast. However, we certainly need to see proper provision of staffing.

As for facilities, we cannot dismiss the fact that over the past decade, about 12,500 beds have disappeared from our NHS. Cuts do have consequences and we have paid heavily for that. This is an opportunity to look

[*Rachael Maskell*]

again at how we configure our services, both on the acute side and in rehabilitation, to ensure that facilities meet needs. All surgery carries risk, so critical care support must be available, but we also need to ensure that more is done to support rehabilitation centres of excellence. Often we see patients being discharged far too prematurely, only to bounce back into the system or not fare as well as they could have done, had they had more rehab before going home. I speak as a former physiotherapist, so obviously I am passionate about that, but it really does make a difference.

In the past, patients undergoing hip, knee and other orthopaedic procedures have often gone to rehabilitation centres. Some of those centres no longer exist. For us in our profession to put people through their paces and gain the confidence they need, we need to make sure that they have those skillsets before they are discharged home. That is because we know that when people get home, the biggest risk from those procedures is that they just sit in a chair and do not mobilise at the level that they could, which of course undoes all that has been achieved. What a waste of money, but also what a waste of opportunity in somebody's life.

Community provision is still patchy and we know that the sufficiency is not there to give people the time and investment that they need in a domiciliary setting. Following elective surgery we need to optimise not just acute care but the rehabilitation process, and make sure that post-operative care is at an optimum.

Just before I close: as many have said, the numbers are significant, they have risen sharply and the situation requires significant investment. We are moving into a new model of health provision over the next period. It is really important that we get it right and that we ensure that, before the legislation comes to the House later this year, we have the levers in place to address this form of care, locally as well as nationally. It cannot be business as usual. The next crisis is here and needs as much attention as the Minister and his team have given to the last.

3.25 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this important debate. I agree with much of what has been said. I am particularly happy to follow my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who has spoken so well about assessment, diagnostics and rehabilitation from a clinical perspective—a crucial factor to bear in mind.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about Northern Ireland. In my own work in Northern Ireland looking at health visiting services, the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland history and the ability to make difficult decisions about reconfiguration and so on and to move services on, as well as the legacy of the conflict, meant that there were some severe challenges making it more difficult for people working in Northern Ireland health services to catch up, even before the pandemic.

I pay tribute to the remarkable job done by the NHS, particularly my colleagues in Bristol, and the way that new pathways and new ways of working have been adopted so quickly. We must maintain and build on the

innovation and flexibility that we have seen. As a former manager, one of my previous tasks was to try to get digital technology into the service some 10 years ago, looking particularly at dermatology. It was a gargantuan task. It was not bureaucracy and it was not people not wanting to do it that stopped it happening—it was the way the money works. The way the money works in the system does not always reward innovation. That is one of the things we need to learn from this particular crisis.

I also worked a lot with primary care to try to improve telephone communications, in the days before we had all heard the name Zoom. There is quite a lot of evidence about primary care telephone consultations and how they could help meet the demand for primary care, and about clinicians being willing to undertake them. Patients are often a bit reluctant to undertake them. The evidence has not always been clear. What a massive amount of research opportunity we have now to enable us to understand when people like telephone conversations, when they are helpful, how they support primary care and how we can have new levels of resource.

I know from older members of my family that, despite receiving a lot of phone calls—I have a lot of respect for GPs who have been making those calls—people still want to see people. They want that reassurance. So much of healthcare is about reassurance and making people feel more in control of their healthcare and that they understand what is happening. We need to bear that in mind as well.

We know that we have a large backlog, but we do not know how large. Others have given some estimates. I met leaders at the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire clinical commissioning group last week. They are meeting NHS England this week to talk through the levels of backlog and the size of the recovery. My message to those leaders last week is the same as my message for the Minister: locally, we must have very honest, clear conversations about what that backdrop means. Figures of 5 billion, 7 billion and 10 billion mean nothing to local people. We want to understand the impact on our own healthcare system and what the size of the problem is. That openness and transparency—and involving local people in the difficult decisions that are now with us—is absolutely crucial. It is the only way forward.

I have long advocated open, transparent conversations with the health service, and a more locally accountable NHS. When the Minister is looking at his White Paper in the next few months, he might think about having locally elected leaders on the new integrated care partnerships, to bring some of the local democracy that we need, and the accountability of health services, to local people. Local people understand priorities. They understand what has happened. They understand that there is a huge cost and that difficult decisions have to be made. We need to involve them in those decisions. The answer, unfortunately, for some of this recovery is a huge uplift in staffing, facilities and, of course, money, but that must be offset against what happens if we do not ensure that. I know we are all keen to help the Minister do that.

I was a non-executive director during those days of the Labour Government in the early 2000s, when the effort needed to tackle waiting lists was absolutely phenomenal. There was an enormous effort at both strategic and operational level. The clinical and clerical

assessment of the lists required control both from the centre and locally. I am told that regular assessment of the lists is being done in Bristol, but it requires more managerial, administrative and clinical staffing models. When phoning patients to see whether they still require treatment, sometimes people will have died. The people who are making the phone calls and contacting people on those lists need to be hugely sensitive. They need to have experience, and they need to be skilled.

Doing this sort of work is not a basic, low-level, ad hoc and temporary admin job. We need to train people properly to do it. They will be communicating difficult decisions and trying to secure an understanding of the level of need in a community. Sadly, during the covid crisis we have seen poor communications around “do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation” decisions. It is problematic having difficult conversations with people, but we have to trust patients and involve people, so let us learn some of those lessons.

I am old enough to remember the Tory Prime Minister who proudly told us in the late 1990s that we would not have to wait more than 18 months—imagine—for our treatment. We in the Labour party thought that we had banished those days to history. We do not want to go back. Our constituents deserve much better, and I am worried that we will go back to those days and to those terrible lists.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said, we know that there is a resource issue. We will support the Minister in making those text messages, phone calls and emails—however he decides to communicate with his colleague in an up-front, honest and legal way. We will support him in those discussions with the Treasury. He needs to assure us that he understands the size of the problem, that he will be working with leaders locally, and that when those conversations are happening with NHS England and NHS Improvement, we as local Members of Parliament will have full access and an understanding of the level of need, demand and resource in our communities. That has been my challenge to my local leaders of the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire clinical commissioning group. If they turn around and tell me they cannot tell me that because someone at NHS England tells them they cannot do so, I will get straight back to the Minister, whose phone number I have, by text message and email to demand answers.

3.32 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As a fellow Cheshire MP, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey.

Every Member who has contributed to the debate has spoken with great knowledge and sincerity about the challenge we face as a society. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing the debate and for his excellent introduction. As every Member has pointed out, he was right to say that we have record waiting lists. We should never forget that we had already seen a huge rise of over 40% in the decade before the pandemic. As some Members mentioned, it is possible that covid is masking an even worse situation. We know that the number of referrals plummeted around this time last year, as the NHS rightly focused all its intention on the pandemic.

As Members have said, we know that the NHS aims to ensure that no more than 8% of patients wait more than 18 weeks for treatment. That is a target that has not been met for five years, so this situation cannot be laid entirely at covid's door. Indeed, just over a year ago, in February 2020, 17% of people on waiting lists had been waiting longer than 18 weeks. It is clear that the past year has had an impact, because the figure has now doubled to 35%.

Sadly, it is now the case that over a million people have waited longer than six months for hospital treatment. There are now 388,000 people waiting more than a year. Again, that is the highest number on record. That is nearly 400,000 people waiting for things such as knee and hip replacements. As Versus Arthritis points out, they

“are in extreme distress, with many struggling to cope with pain which is impossible to ignore, worsening mental health and reduced quality of life.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle set out clearly some of the implications not just for physical pain, but for mental health and uncertainty about job prospects. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) eloquently set out the reduced outcomes and difficulties we will face if the process is not followed as well as we would like and patients enter the system at a later date.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle said, this is an issue that cannot and should not be ignored. He described the challenges as possibly overwhelming—an apposite description, given that the Government's strategy for the last year has been to avoid the NHS being overwhelmed. As that challenge was met, we hope that this challenge will be met as well. He also made the important point that, if we do not get this right, it will cost us more in the long run and will have economic and as well as physical and social impacts. The lessons learned from the pandemic ring true in that respect as well.

When we look very closely at the figures, we see that around 18,000 people are now waiting longer than 18 months. The figures we have relate to people waiting more than a year. Obviously, I have discussed this with the Minister on previous occasions and we hope that we will get the official figures shortly. We must remember that at the moment, we only have details for people waiting over a year, but the information I have suggests that more than 175 people have been waiting for more than two years. Those figures are slightly out of date, as they are from January, but that is a horrendous situation and I hope it has got better in the last few months. If it has got worse, I hope and expect that the Minister will be on the phone to those trusts inquiring exactly why people are waiting over two years to receive their treatment.

The importance of dealing with the backlog quickly cannot be overstated, because of the likely pressure that will manifest itself over the coming months. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle said, the Health Foundation has estimated that there could be as many as 4.7 million missing patients. If only three quarters of those are referred to treatment, that would lead to a waiting list of 9.7 million people by 2023-24. Obviously, that is an estimate, but if the Minister has done his own calculation, can he tell us what it is?

Over the last year, the NHS has adapted fantastically to the challenges of covid in a way that has rightly won the respect of everyone in this place and in the country.

[Justin Madders]

That has meant decisions have been taken about how treatments should be prioritised. We have seen appointments cancelled, operations postponed and staff redeployed, but even with those challenges, the NHS managed to carry out 1.9 million operations in January and February this year, which Stephen Powis, NHS England's medical director, said is

"a testament to the hard work and dedication of staff".

I join him in paying tribute to those staff for delivering that. However, even with that fantastic effort—to put into context the challenge that we face—the number of routine operations in January was down 54% on last year and in February it was down 47%.

Thankfully, I think we are past the peak of the third wave and there are only just over 2,000 patients with covid in hospital, which is the lowest since last September. However, the NHS is still under enormous pressure, with so many people now waiting for treatment, stricter infection control measures and, as many Members have referred to, an exhausted healthcare workforce. We have to be realistic: this could take years to address unless there is a credible and costed plan in place at the earliest opportunity.

Modelling by the NHS Confederation suggests that the sustained impact of the pandemic will leave a backlog of care in excess of anything seen over the last 12 years and that to maintain any sense of control over its waiting list, the NHS will need to increase capacity considerably above levels that have previously been sustained. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) referred to the huge efforts that were made by the previous Labour Government to get waiting lists down. It seems that a strategy at least on a par with that will be needed.

The NHS Confederation has said:

"Without a comprehensive new plan, the government faces the...legacy of hundreds of thousands of patients left with deteriorating conditions".

It warns that the additional £1 billion agreed in the spending review will not be enough to clear the backlog. The chief executive of the NHS Confederation Danny Mortimer said:

"health leaders are clear that the NHS will be recovering for years to come, and this must be appropriately resourced in the long-term."

He called for

"investment in growing and maintaining the workforce".

NHS Providers has said that the situation could take three to five years to resolve. Its chief executive, Chris Hopson, said:

"Trusts believe they can clear the backlog within a reasonable period of time",

but that treating this like another waiting list initiative, relying on overtime and private sector use, will be insufficient. He said that the NHS will need to transform "how it provides care" and that the Government will need to provide

"the extra funding required to enable that transformation."

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle set out, a number of practical steps can be taken to deliver transformation, but they come with a price tag. The Prime Minister was quick to pledge that the Government will ensure that the NHS has the funds it needs to beat

the backlog, but how can we have confidence in him when he has already gone back on a promised pay rise for NHS staff? NHS England said that although the £1 billion fund will help, it will not be enough. Of course it will help and it is welcome, but helping is not the same as solving. Nobody, probably not even the Minister, believes that what is on the table represents a solution.

There is no doubt that the NHS has a monumental task ahead of it to restore services, meet demand and reduce the care backlogs, but it also must support staff and take steps to reduce inequality in access, experience and outcomes. Now is the time for the Government to deliver on their promise to deliver to the NHS whatever it needs. It certainly is not the time for another expensive reorganisation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South said. If that is the road we go down, it is important that patients' voices are put front and centre of those new bodies, particularly if they are forced to deal with some of those extremely tricky issues.

As many Members said, 10 years of underfunding have left us in this precarious position. The challenge is there for the Minister. The experts say that we can tackle the backlog, but it will need funding. If the Minister can confirm any specific figures, that would be wonderful. I suspect we will not get that today, but at the very least will he confirm on the record that he agrees that the £1 billion that has been allocated so far is insufficient?

To pick up on what Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, said about relying on the private sector, we know that huge sums were provided last year. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central said, we have never had transparency about what that money was spent on. Can the Minister tell us how many NHS patients were seen in the private sector last year, and how many procedures were carried out using taxpayers' money? I am sure that he is as keen as all of us to ensure that the best value has been achieved.

Many Members said that none of the backlog will be tackled if we do not have the staff to do it. A recent Institute for Public Policy Research report based on a YouGov poll of 1,000 healthcare professionals said that a third more nurses and midwives are leaving the NHS than a year ago. Those figures are scaled up across the workforce—that means 100,000 nurses and 8,000 midwives leaving. With 40,000-plus vacancies already, we cannot afford to lose one more, never mind 100,000 more.

Dame Donna Kinnair of the Royal College of Nursing said that that is

"The reality of a failure to properly invest in the nursing workforce"

and must be a

"wake-up call to the Government."

It should indeed, especially when we are still waiting for the publication of the substantive long-term workforce plans to deliver a lasting solution to recruiting and retaining the workforce and ensuring there are enough skilled staff to provide safe and effective care now and in the future. That is why it is vital that Ministers bring forward a fully funded plan to tackle the backlog—we have been calling for that for a long time: an NHS rescue plan that will bring down waiting lists and ensure that patients can receive the quality of care that they deserve. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central put it, we cannot carry on with business as usual.

Let me end with the important comments from Dr Rob Harwood, the chair of the British Medical Association's consultants committee:

"Without further financial support and investment in increasing staffing numbers, patients will be waiting even longer for care, and there is a risk that patient care becomes unsafe the more exhausted staff become. The future of our NHS, already walking wounded, must not be put in jeopardy."

The NHS is the jewel in our crown, but it needs protecting, sometimes as much as the patients it treats. We need financial support, a detailed people policy and a credible plan to deal with the backlog if we are to avoid coming back in 12 months to talk about an even worse situation.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I call the Minister, mindful that we will have a winding-up speech from Peter Dowd at the end.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

May I start, as other hon. Members have done, by congratulating the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing the debate on this hugely important subject? As colleagues have said, this subject is so important not just to hon. Members, but to all our constituents. Given its importance, I suspect that it will not be in 12 months' time that we next debate it. I would hope that, in the coming weeks and months, we will continue to debate the progress on reducing waiting lists and getting waiting times down, because that is important. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's typically reasonable and measured tone. I know that he takes a close interest in these matters, working with the all-party parliamentary health group. If it is helpful to him, I am happy to meet him outside the Chamber to have further discussions about exactly what he said.

I of course join hon. Members in paying tribute to the amazing work of all those who work in our NHS. Once again, I thank them for their tireless efforts throughout the pandemic. Like other hon. Members, I make no apology for reiterating those thanks every time I have the opportunity to do so.

As the hon. Gentleman set out, and as the House will know, our goal throughout the pandemic has been to protect the NHS and save lives. At the peak of the pandemic, we focused on caring for covid-19 patients, while seeking to continue to prioritise urgent treatments such as surgery for cancer and other life-saving operations. The temporary pauses in other elective activity, and the reduction in the volume of such activity, were put in place to limit the number of patients and to help prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed, as well as for infection control. We have to be very clear, however, as hon. Members have been, about the impact that that necessary action has had on many tens of thousands of our constituents. All hon. Members have alluded to the fact that their constituents have suffered not just pain, but anxiety, nervousness and the impact that such delays can have on mental health.

By the summer of 2020, the NHS had started to recover elective activity after the first wave. Having learned from the first wave, it was able to keep elective activity going at a higher level, albeit not as high as some might have wished, through the second and subsequent waves.

The situation is looking better for our NHS: there has been a huge fall in hospitalisations and deaths from covid-19, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), alluded to in his remarks, and the success of our vaccination programme means that more people now have longer-term protection from the virus.

Once again, the NHS has done incredible work in keeping as many services as possible going at a time of unprecedented strain. Despite the pressure of the pandemic, by December 2020, the NHS has recovered to carrying out nearly 80% of elective treatments compared with the previous year's figures. As we continue on our journey to recovery, we must focus on addressing the pressures beyond covid that have been caused by the pandemic. To do that, we are providing the funding, the support for staff and the legal foundations to help our NHS build back better.

We as a Government, in partnership with the NHS, have turned our focus to recovering the activity that was lost following those necessary reductions in activity and, in some cases, the halting of elective treatments. As part of that, we encourage the public to please come forward, through campaigns such as "Help Us, Help You", and to contact their GP if they are worried about symptoms, especially if they are potential cancer symptoms. The hon. Member for Bootle was absolutely right to highlight that this is not just about surgical procedures in an acute setting, but about the entire patient journey: getting people through the front door of their GP's surgery; giving them a diagnosis or a provisional diagnosis on the phone, with diagnostic tests; and then the treatment that follows.

We know that waiting lists continue to grow for elective services, as all hon. Members have set out, with 4.7 million people currently waiting for treatment. Of course, we and the NHS are working incredibly hard to reduce that backlog. We will rightly continue to prioritise patients according to their medical needs as well as how long they have been waiting.

We have already seen promising recovery in services—the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston alluded to that—but it is also important that we recognise at this point, as hon. Members have done, the huge strain that staff and the NHS workforce have been under throughout this pandemic. As such, it is very important that in seeking to recover levels of activity, we do so in a way that enables those staff to have the time and space they need to recover physically and mentally from what they have been through.

I want to reassure hon. Members about the funding and the fact that there is a plan. That plan is being developed on the basis of evidence and pilots that we saw undertaken in London, for example, which I will turn to a moment. On 18 March, as part of the spending review, we announced a further £7 billion of funding for healthcare services. Over the next six months, the NHS will receive £6.6 billion to support that recovery. That comes on top of the funding increases that are already hard-baked into the NHS Funding Act 2020. At the last spending review, we announced an additional £1 billion investment to further kick-start recovery and begin addressing backlogs and tackling long waits. Looking at the shadow Minister, I reiterate from this Dispatch

[Edward Argar]

Box the words of the Prime Minister making it clear—very clear—that the NHS will have the resources and funding it needs to do the job.

As well as funding, we have been supporting the NHS to innovate because, as has been alluded to, funding alone is not the answer. We need to look at how we tackle the backlog, the care pathways and the approaches we adopt. That planning is already happening, working with the frontline. In elective surgery, the NHS is basing its approach on lessons learned from the London pilot programme that ran in October 2020 to redesign treatment pathways. Of course in that context I pay tribute to Professor Tim Briggs for his work on the Getting it Right First Time programme, which offers a huge opportunity to reform and improve the way we deliver care and those care pathways.

We have seen some great examples of innovation. I spoke to Tim Briggs this morning and he highlighted some of them, such as joint replacements and the impact that treatment can have on people. The Queen's Hospital in Romford, the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre in Oxford, the United Lincolnshire hospitals and the Royal Cornwall Hospital are all using innovative approaches to try to tackle that backlog. Croydon Elective Centre physically separated emergency and elective theatre units in what was the hospital's blue zone, enabling it to run at 120% of pre-lockdown activity levels for routine procedures, including cancer, cardiac and hip operations. It is only one example, but it is an example of what the system is doing to innovate and try to get activity levels back to where we would like to see them.

During the pandemic last year, the out-patients programme avoided 18 million face-to-face appointments through the use of virtual appointments and reduced the number of unnecessary appointments, but I take the point made by the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) that there will always be some people or some people's medical condition that will result in their wanting or needing to see a GP or a practitioner face to face.

On diagnosis, we are rolling out 44 community diagnostic hubs with the plan to deliver over 1 million additional scans and tests across CT, MRI, X-ray, ultrasound and ECGs. These are just examples, but these numbers are already helping the NHS to recover, and they have the potential to play a key part in the long-term approach to tackling waiting lists.

In the few minutes I have before the hon. Member for Bootle winds up, I will deal with some of the specific points he raised on behalf of the Royal College of Surgeons. On the first issue—urgently increasing bed capacity and critical care bed capacity—we continue to work with the NHS very closely to ensure we have sufficient beds to meet future demand, with hospitals flexing their bed capacity as required. It is important to note that one of the points Professor Briggs made to me is that the ability, with modern medicine and approaches, to tackle more elective procedures in day case surgery maximises the use of theatres and eases the pressure on beds. Where previously somebody might have been kept in overnight, the beds can be used for patients having procedures that require overnight stays.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the consolidation of covid-light sites in every ICS region and talked about widening the adoption of the surgical hub model across

all English regions. NHS England continues to design and refine the future operating models in the light of ongoing levels of community infection. The London region pilot has been looking at exactly that model and testing it. We have to make sure it does the job and delivers the results, as we want this to be an evidence-based recovery plan, but the early indications are promising. Using surgical hubs and separating out elective services through hot and cold sites are key components of the London region pilot.

A number of Members rightly said that we must not lose sight of health inequalities in our plan and our approach to tackling the waiting list backlog. We believe that the accelerated restoration of elective services and innovations in primary care will play a key part in improving local health outcomes and tackling health inequalities. That is an explicit part of what I am looking at as I draw up the plan with colleagues.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman talked about ensuring that all ICSs urgently consider what measures can be put in place to support patients facing long waits for surgery. We continue to work very closely on this. The hon. Member for Bristol South is right that many people who are communicating with patients are doing an extremely challenging and sensitive job, so it is absolutely right that we give them the support they need to know how to do it to the best of their ability, so that they, just as much as the patients, do not find it any more difficult than it inherently is. Local systems have been asked to plan their recovery as quickly as possible and in a way that supports those patients through their waits.

On statistics, the shadow Minister was kind to me. He raised a point of order a couple of weeks ago about statistics and over 52-week waits, but he did so very gently. When answering written questions, we are required to use published data, and at the moment it is not cut in the way that he wanted, which is fortnightly or weekly—52 to 53, 53 to 54 and so on. He raises an important point, and I will write to him shortly to set out what we can do to increase the transparency with that level of granular data in the coming months. Again on a point made by the hon. Member for Bristol South, it is absolutely right that everyone can see what the challenge is at a local level, what approach is being taken to address it working in partnership with those local systems, and what progress is being made against the targets and the backlog.

In the 10 seconds or so that I have before I hand over to the hon. Member for Bootle, let me say that recovery of NHS elective services is one of the greatest challenges, but also one of the greatest opportunities that we have to transform patient care. We are completely committed to building the NHS back better, learning the lessons from the pandemic and doing all we can to ensure that patients—our constituents—receive the best possible treatment as quickly as possible, and that we reduce the waiting lists and waiting times.

3.58 pm

Peter Dowd: This excellent debate has brought out so many things. I thank the hon. Members for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol South and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for contributing,

and I thank the Minister for his replies. He has a pretty good feel for the strategic and organisational issues, and the hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friends set the scene for particular areas. This has been a qualitative debate—it has been about the quality rather than quantity of Members, and we have had a rich tapestry.

Finally, I want to say to the Minister that if he wants to include us in his ministerial WhatsApp group, he can do so. If he wants to give us the Prime Minister's mobile number and the number for the Treasury team, we would be happy to take them. We will give him all the backing he needs in continuing to make the case for the resources we all want the NHS to have. Thank you very much, Ms McVey, for the opportunity to speak today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Turing Scheme

4.5 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the scope of the proposed Turing scheme.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. As one of the first beneficiaries of the Erasmus programme, this issue is close to my heart. I spent a year in Italy, where I not only improved my Italian, but made lifelong friends. I played rugby at Benetton Treviso and expanded my understanding of different cultures, not just European ones. As an undergraduate at Exeter University, the opportunity to study at Ca' Foscari at the University of Venice was a huge opportunity for a comprehensive schoolgirl from Llanelli.

Over the past 34 years, Erasmus has given an opportunity to more than 250,000 students from the UK, not including those who have benefited from work placements through Erasmus+. Although it is a predominantly European Union scheme, placements are offered in 190 countries worldwide, whereas Turing is an exclusively inward-focused scheme, so where does that leave inward students? The loss of income from incoming students has been estimated by Universities UK to be £243 million per annum. How can we retain the links that have been built up and nurtured over many years when we go it alone?

In the absence of reciprocal funding, we will also be relying on students at European partner universities to come to the UK, despite the lack of financial support for them. What happens to them? Arrangements collapse or organisations introduce fees for our students. The Minister needs to address whether the costs will be covered for our students. The belief that countries will continue to want to come to the UK when their students already benefit from being part of Erasmus with no extra barriers is naive of the Government, and it will ultimately harm the future of students looking to study abroad. Understandably, the Government have talked up the benefits of the Turing scheme, but when it comes down to it, there will be less funding available for students to study abroad. Instead of £125 million a year as part of a seven-year funding cycle through Erasmus+, UK Universities have access to only £100 million in a single-year cycle.

The application process is very different from Erasmus. The added uncertainty around being selected for funding as a result of a more detailed application will prove a barrier for less advantaged students. If someone does not know whether they will get the funding for their year abroad, they are less likely to apply for a course that requires study in another country. It will be uncompetitive, with relatively limited funding available in comparison with Erasmus. Students from less privileged backgrounds will be penalised.

I think about my son and the many students studying foreign languages at A-level now, who are planning and looking ahead to go to university. What does the future hold for them? The Government have failed to address the issue of visas for students wanting to study and work abroad. Who will be responsible for the associated fees for them? Is there a limit on the number of students who will come to the UK through Turing, and will that ultimately affect UK students wanting to take a year abroad?

[*Tonia Antoniazzi*]

The timing of the announcement caused consternation for many. The announcement of the new scheme so late last year came too late for applications from those wanting to study on their year abroad in 2021. The funding model that the Government have put in place is not fit for purpose. The short-sightedness of a single-year system makes recruitment to modern foreign language degrees and other subjects that offer a year abroad really difficult. As a linguist and a modern foreign languages graduate, I feel for the students. It is an area where we have issues in recruitment and we have to look at that.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. I want to make two points. First, the Government have said that the scheme will be advantageous to disadvantaged students. Does she agree with me that we have not seen any indication of how that is the case? Does she also agree that it is not just language students who benefit from Erasmus? Students like my son, who studied physics in France, had huge benefits. Those collaborations and relationships that are built in other subjects, particularly STEM, are extremely important.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. That is key to one of the points I want to make. I was a pure languages graduate, but is it not wonderful to push girls especially to study STEM subjects? When such a subject is put with a language that allows travel around the world, it is really powerful. We are taking those opportunities away from people with disadvantaged backgrounds because there is less money in the pot, from what we have seen so far. How is it going to work, Minister? For future generations of students across the United Kingdom, I want to know what the Government are doing.

The deadline for applications has been extended twice, which demonstrates the lack of planning and understanding by the architects of the scheme of how it was to work. It seemed like a kneejerk reaction to many of us. The application process is highly complex, not only for educational institutions; imagine what it is like for a student to fill it in. The Turing scheme limits the cohort of people who can apply to study abroad, whereas Erasmus+ also opened up opportunities to those in adult education, in schools and sports courses, and those involved in youth work. The Turing scheme does not cover those areas.

I was a teacher for 20 years and we offered those opportunities and had grants that we were able to access for exchanges. Gone are the days of taking comprehensive school children to France under schemes that I have used for their benefit. Those were children who would not even think about going on holiday there, let alone staying in somebody's house and experiencing school in another country. Those were unique experiences that our children will now miss out on. My good friend Professor Claire Gorrara, who is the chair of the University Council of Modern Languages, said of the Turing scheme:

“The current scheme risks decades-long deeply nurtured partnerships with other European universities for the modern languages community. These partnerships have supported excellent

student exchanges that have transformed young people's lives, improved their languages skills and given them amazing opportunities as global citizens.”

The Turing scheme's lack of reciprocity also risks staff exchanges, which are the bedrock of these exchanges. I benefited from this when I prepared a project working with a school in Treviso. I had the opportunity to visit beforehand, to ensure that everything was in place for the safety of the children and their educational experience. Without long-term and reciprocal arrangements, and relationships for continuing exchanges in Europe and beyond, the Turing scheme will not be able to deliver on the Government's global Britain ambitions, which we fully support.

We are now facing a situation where students in England must work only within the parameters of Turing. The devolved Administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have already said that they will provide additional support. As a Welsh MP, I am obviously interested in Wales. The new international learning exchange scheme in Wales will provide assistance for staff who want to spend time abroad, which is not covered under the Turing scheme.

The exchange of staff not only benefits them, but it leads to a stronger relationship between institutions, with years of relationships from which pupils and students benefit. That provides students with a wider perspective on their learning. The Welsh scheme will benefit from £65 million between 2022 and 2026. That will allow them to try to cover tuition fees when they are imposed on Welsh students—another area where the Turing scheme diverges from Erasmus+. In view of the apparent flaws of the Turing scheme, it seems likely there will be significantly reduced opportunities for learners, seeking to benefit from placements in Europe and elsewhere, and for colleges and universities, hoping to exchange experience and knowledge.

The Government need to rethink their decision to withdraw from Erasmus. Many may think it is futile for me to stand here and ask, given the Government's ambition to create a global Britain. It really is extraordinary to think that we would withdraw from any relationship at all with a programme with 190 full programme and partner countries.

The UK will continue to participate in Erasmus until 2022 through projects that were approved up to the end of the transition period in 2020, but we need to look to the future and to argue for an Erasmus protocol to be drawn up in parallel with the new EU Horizon R&D programme, which could take effect from 2022-23. It seems likely that the Government and the Minister—I hate to say it—will plough on regardless with the Turing programme, but we need to argue for improvements to it. It is not the finished article, and we do not want it to be the finished article. We want to see improvements and to monitor its implementation.

A wide range of concerned people have been raising issues in this paper since the Government took their decision. The all-party parliamentary group on Erasmus is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi). Parliamentary questions have been tabled by the former shadow Minister for further and higher education, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), and others have raised issues about the likely impact of the lack of reciprocity and the income for students in

Turing. What evidence is there that the Government have analysed the extent and impact of withdrawing funding from the really important transfer and development activities funded under Erasmus?

I do not want to be all gloom and doom about the Turing scheme. I want the opportunities that were there for me to be there for all people in the United Kingdom, and especially young people. There could be advantages to it, specifically in the flexibility that the scheme offers, which some institutions have welcomed. However, to provide the certainty that universities and students need, the Minister must address the issues raised by many I have spoken to. There is a pressing need for a resolution that allows for certainty.

I will bring up a few issues raised with me. How soon will it be known whether Turing can be extended beyond its first pilot year? A longer timeframe may help the programme to establish more sustainable international partnerships. Will reciprocity ultimately be considered as a feature for the Turing scheme? Will staff exchanges be considered for any future iterations or Turing? How can global Britain leverage its new international trade connections to help cement Turing mobility partnerships? There is a core of colleges with experience of Erasmus projects and partnerships in Europe but not always further afield. Other colleges are also working worldwide. I hope that the Minister will be able to respond positively.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing the debate on the scope of Turing. As she knows from her membership of the all-party parliamentary group on Erasmus, the Government are committed to international education exchanges. International exchanges and mobilities open up new and exciting possibilities for students, enabling them to develop their cultural awareness and broaden their horizons while also developing transferable skills. That is why we are funding the Turing scheme as an alternative to Erasmus+.

It was always made clear that our participation in the next Erasmus+ programme was the subject of our negotiations on the future UK-EU relationship, and participation in Erasmus+ would have meant us paying in around £2 billion more than we would have got out over the course of the programme. That simply did not provide value for money for the UK taxpayer. Turing, however, is a global scheme backed by £110 million in its first year, which will provide funding for about 35,000 UK students in higher education, further education, vocational training and schools to travel abroad for life-changing educational exchanges from this September.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I just want to point out that 35,000 is actually less than the number of those participating under the Erasmus scheme. Does she agree that that is not good enough?

Michelle Donelan: I am more than happy to send the hon. Member the link to the statistics. If we look back over the last five years, the average was 32,000, and we are pledging around 35,000, which is a similar number to under Erasmus+. It will be demand-led. Our delivery partners are the British Council and Ecorys, who are able to use their experience from having worked on

Erasmus+, which I am sure the hon. Member will welcome. Turing also offers fantastic opportunities for young people across the UK and a key objective of the scheme is to reach areas of the UK that did not engage as much with Erasmus and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as disabled students and students with special educational needs. At its heart, Turing is about inclusivity and opportunities.

We have had some very good responses from the sector—we have worked with them to ensure that the scheme works for all. Members do not need just to take my word for it. Vivienne Stern, director of Universities UK International said:

“The new Turing scheme is a fantastic development and will provide global opportunities for up to 35,000 UK students to study and work abroad. It is a good investment in the future of students—not only those in universities but in schools and colleges, who will also benefit.”

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said:

“The Turing scheme opens the world’s door to work and study placements for college students. This is an important part of ‘levelling up’ the life chances for all of our young people—whatever their background.”

Tonia Antoniazzi: What if other universities are not going to offer places because there is no reciprocity? Is that something that is going to be addressed?

Michelle Donelan: If the hon. Member allows me to make a little progress, I will come on to that point.

Today’s debate is about scope. Turing is truly global and is not limited to the EU, unlike Erasmus+, which was 97% in the EU. Offering a broader range of countries, cultures and languages can only be to the benefit of young people in the UK. We know that there is clear demand. Already, five of the top 10 destinations for UK university students undertaking mobility placements are actually outside the EU.

More than 500 applications have already been started across higher education, further education and schools, showing that there is strong demand from the education sector to take advantage of the opportunities offered, so, far from being naive, as the hon. Member for Gower suggested, universities, further education colleges and schools have been putting in their bids and working with international partners on those relationships, despite the lack of reciprocity. Universities have until tomorrow to apply for the funding.

Carol Monaghan: One of the questions that keeps coming up is how the Government will encourage those from more disadvantaged backgrounds to engage with the Turing scheme. It would be really useful to know what the Government’s plans are to promote it in the sector and to monitor its success within those groups.

Michelle Donelan: I will get to that point. There are several ways in which we are going to achieve that, as it is a key objective of the Government’s Turing scheme.

I am thrilled to say that, at the start of the week, we already had more than 80 applications submitted from universities. Schools and colleges have until 7 May to apply for funding. I strongly invite all UK schools and colleges to bid into the scheme to make the most of these fantastic opportunities available for their learners

[Michelle Donelan]

and pupils. Students do not have to apply using the system that we have created—the hon. Member for Gower suggested that was the case. As with Erasmus, students apply directly to their educational institutions.

Global educational experiences broaden students' horizons, expose them to new cultures and, by doing so, help them to develop crucial new skills. The evidence shows that students who have international experiences tend to do better academically and later in employment. Yet, under Erasmus+, the most privileged students were at least 1.7 times more likely to participate in study abroad. We as a Government believe that is simply not good enough. Mobility and the opportunities it opens up for our young people should not be limited to those from privileged backgrounds. Instead, we have designed a scheme that is for everybody, including the most disadvantaged, because no young person should be excluded from expanding their horizons based on their family's income.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I realise time is tight. It is all well and good talking about engaging with people from different backgrounds, but how will the Government go and find young people and motivate them to want to participate?

Michelle Donelan: I was just getting to that point. The desire to boost participation from disadvantaged backgrounds is one of the fundamental ways that this scheme will be better than Erasmus. We have done that in a number of ways. First, we have made it an objective that providers must meet and prioritise when they put in their bids to be given approval.

Secondly, the scheme provides additional financial support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds by providing an increased grant for living costs. Unlike Erasmus, we will also be introducing funding for travel-related costs for disadvantaged students, no matter the destination. We will also cover things that they might have to pick up, such as visas, insurance and passport costs—all the additional things that can be barriers to some students.

Thirdly, we have reduced the minimum higher education duration of outward mobilities compared with Erasmus+ from one term to four weeks, which we have identified as a barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have other responsibilities, such as caring responsibilities. Additionally, we are focusing extra support and communications in areas of the UK that have traditionally not engaged as much with mobility schemes. That is the work of the Department, the Government and the British Council. There is also funding available to help meet the additional costs for students with disabilities, such as preparatory visits to help ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to suit the individual student's needs.

On how the scheme will actually work, it is, like Erasmus+, demand-led, and providers will have the flexibility to form partnerships that will offer the most benefit to their students. Institutions in all four nations can bid competitively, and those that are successful will receive funding towards the cost of administering the scheme for their students. All participating students will receive grants, dependent on the destination country, to

contribute towards their living costs. The grants are marginally above those given to Erasmus+ students. With Erasmus+, higher education students received a monthly grant equivalent to £320 to £365, with an additional contribution of £105 for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Under the Turing scheme, we will provide a grant of between £335 and £380 per month, plus a disadvantaged supplement of £110 per month. We will also cover the added extras, as I outlined a moment ago.

Although we wanted to devise a flexible scheme, we envisage that the majority of higher education mobilities will be done as exchanges, so there will not be the loss of inward mobility that the hon. Member for Gower identified. To be clear, students will not be faced with additional tuition fee charges. Instead, institutions will waive their fees, which is certainly what is happening on the ground. The institutions telling me that they have put their bids in have managed to achieve that, so we know it is working in practice. This is not a new model, as higher education institutions both in the UK and overseas routinely arrange to waive their tuition fees as part of their exchange partnerships outside Erasmus. All we are doing is scaling up an existing successful model and funding it with additional taxpayer money, to both widen access to opportunities offered to students across the UK and to extend the scope.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Just one question, then: what are the Government going to do? Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are supplementing the scheme. What will the Minister be doing in the UK to make it equivalent to what students in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be having?

Michelle Donelan: I believe that in Northern Ireland it is not being supplemented. There will be access, in part, to the rest of Erasmus, but that has not been ironed out yet. We obviously await what will happen in Scotland, as that is a manifesto commitment and there is an ongoing election. What is happening in Wales is not starting till 2022 and is only £16.5 million per year.

Let me address some of the points that the hon. Member outlined about the differences between Turing and Erasmus. Yes, Turing is an outward mobility scheme for UK participants, but as we will fund UK participants to go abroad, it seems reasonable that we would expect other countries to do the same. Let us not forget that we are the second most attractive destination for international students, and more of the world's top universities are in the UK than in all of the EU combined. A number of countries have schemes that they can use to fund inward mobility, and some Erasmus funding can be used to send students to the UK, as we are a recognised partner country.

I have spoken directly to several international organisations, including the likes of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the USA, Heidelberg in Germany and the Sorbonne in France, as well as many other institutions across the Commonwealth, such as the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, York University in Canada and the University of Sydney in Australia. They are some of the world's best higher education institutions and are eager to learn more about Turing, to engage with it and potentially to participate.

We will harness our appeal as a destination to deliver an international education exchange programme that has genuine global reach. That will strengthen the UK's research and education sector and provide better experiences for students in the UK. International opportunities for young people outside formal education settings and youth activity are being considered as part of a youth review led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, because the Turing scheme is an international educational mobility scheme. That youth review was commissioned by the Treasury in the 2020 spending review.

It is important to note that Erasmus+ Sport is a very small part of the programme, representing only 1.8% of the overall budget in the 2014 to 2020 programme. We are also already investing significant sums of money in sport programmes that align with Erasmus+ Sport themes and objectives. For example, through Sport England, we are investing more than £1.2 billion between 2016 and 2021 in grassroots sport and physical activity programmes.

To address the issue raised about staff mobility, Turing will not fund staff as outlined, apart from those staff who are necessary to chaperone student placements. We have done that because we have decided to prioritise taxpayers' money to ensure that as many students, learners and pupils as possible have access to life-changing mobility to support them in developing the skills that they need to thrive, focusing particularly on enabling those students from disadvantaged backgrounds. That includes young people who have never even left their county let alone their country. The Government think that it is vital that they, too, can experience these life-changing opportunities.

The Turing scheme will ensure continuity of international exchanges while strengthening the UK's educational sector and building on the UK's considerable international appeal as a study destination. The spending review last year was only a one-year spending review, as I am sure hon. Members appreciate, given the pandemic. They will know, however, that the Government are 100% committed to international mobility, so be under no illusion: this is a long-term plan for the Government. That is exactly why we have created a bespoke UK-wide scheme that will support and encourage participation of students from all backgrounds to go across the globe, provide greater value for money to the UK taxpayer, and boost student skills and prospects.

Question put and agreed to.

4.32 pm

Sitting suspended.

Arms Trade: Yemen

4.50 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of the debates in Westminster Hall. Members are also expected to remain for the entire debate. I remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room, and please take wipes with them and put them in the bin. I remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall. Members attending physically who are in the latter stages of the call list should use the seats in the Public Gallery and move to the horseshoe when a seat becomes available. Members can speak from the horseshoe only where there are microphones.

4.51 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the arms trade and Yemen.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms McVey, and I am delighted to have secured this extremely urgent debate on the arms trade in Yemen. I thank hon. Members who are present here, and those attending virtually, for speaking today.

Liverpool is a proudly international city, and I am proud to have grown up in, and now to represent, such a diverse place, where there is a history of solidarity between our many communities. The Yemeni community in Liverpool, as with so many linked to our docks, has a long and rich history. It is often said in the city that Yemenis are the Scousers of the Arab world. Long before the war in Yemen started, Dr Najla Al-Sonboli came to Liverpool to complete her masters and PhD at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, alongside many other Yemeni medical students. She made Liverpool her home for many years, before returning to Yemen. When the war broke out in 2015 some Yemeni medics such as Najla were offered a chance to return to safety in the UK. However she, like the others, decided she had a duty to remain and help treat the sick and suffering in the dire humanitarian crisis brought on by the war.

The community in Liverpool sprang into action. A tiny Liverpool market stall based at Granby Street market in Liverpool 8, run by a small group of fantastic women from Toxteth, began fundraising for the al-Sabeen children's hospital in the Yemeni capital Sanaa. Dr Najla is at the heart of that incredible, selfless work at the al-Sabeen hospital. Her work, supported by staff from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the women running the Habibti stall, has helped to meet the needs of one of Yemen's only remaining free-to-access medical facilities that is still open. The staff there have had no salaries for more than five years. Many have suffered deeply, with some dying of cholera or covid, or from the bombings. They are doing everything they can

[*Kim Johnson*]

to continue serving their patients. Some nurses even walk for two hours to reach the hospital, because they cannot afford the bus fare.

The money that the Habibti stall raises—even moving online to keep funds coming in during the pandemic—keeps the hospital going and ensures access to vital supplies, such as PPE, medicines, blankets and clothes. On top of the humanitarian crisis in hunger and war casualties, the conflict has resulted in a large-scale public health crisis. Severe, acute malnutrition has exacerbated a spiral of infectious diseases including the worst cholera outbreak ever recorded, with more than 2.5 million suspected cases since October 2016. Coronavirus cases are hard to track. Oxfam has reported that thousands of people are likely to be dying from undetected covid cases, as health facilities are overwhelmed and infrastructure is on its knees.

Nearly every patient who comes through the hospital's doors, from neonatal babies in the intensive care unit to children as old as 15, and their families, are in desperate need. When Dr Najla was last asked what support she needed, the Liverpool fundraisers expected calls for PPE, extra antibiotics and perhaps an increase in expenses for the staff; but no, her answer was one word: food. I ask the Minister to take a moment to consider that devastating situation and the road that has led there, including many choices made by the present Government. The hospital has had a massive increase in patient numbers, having taken in people from all over the country, and has been targeted in air raids in which at least four people have died.

I tell this story not just because of the fierce pride that I have in my community and the actions that they have taken to support vulnerable people trapped in a hellish war, but because too often this conflict is reduced to numbers, framed in humanitarian crisis. That conceals the truth of the political decisions that created this catastrophe—political decisions in which our Government have a considerable amount of influence. I turn now to the crux of this debate: this Government's unwavering commitment to keep supplying Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies with arms and training that have repeatedly been proven to violate international law and without a doubt are fuelling this invisible and protracted crisis.

Since the war began six years ago, nearly a quarter of a million people have been killed by the conflict, the blockades and the resulting disease and food shortage. The published value of UK arms export licences to Saudi since the war began is £6.8 billion, but the opaque and secretive open-licence system means that the true value is much higher, with some estimates as high as £18 billion. Research by Oxfam has shown that the medical and water infrastructure in Yemen has been hit hard during air raids—almost 200 times since 2015, equating to one raid every 10 days—affecting hospitals, clinics, ambulances and water drills, tanks and trucks. Dr Najla from the al-Sabeen children's hospital has herself had to move home several times.

Figures from the Ministry of Defence's own tracker database show that the Government are only too aware of these alleged instances of breaches or violations of international humanitarian law. I could take this opportunity to ask why—the evidence is laid bare—this Government continue to sell arms to members of the

Saudi-led coalition even as the US and Italy have suspended their arms sales and several other countries have restricted them, but I have asked them that many times before, as have many of the hon. Members present at the debate today.

I could also ask why, despite the fact that 80% of the population in Yemen need humanitarian assistance, with 50,000 facing famine conditions and a further 5 million only one step away, the UK has taken steps to nearly halve the amount of aid that it has pledged to Yemen. Other G7 countries have increased their aid budgets. The UK Government, faced in Yemen with what they agree is the world's worst humanitarian crisis, have cut their aid budget by 60% this year to £87 million, and £43 million of that will go as cash for food to alleviate the famine and £22 million to address malnutrition. Children now have irreversible stunted development because of malnutrition. The cut in aid will impact seriously on this, with remaining funds going to prevent economic collapse and support the peace process.

The decision to cut 60% of aid was taken by all Ministers in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on the grounds that the UK needed the money to recover from covid expenditure—while the Government were handing out billions of pounds in contracts to Tory donors, family members and their mates. The announcement came mere weeks after they granted £1.35 billion-worth of arms licences to Saudi Arabia. I could ask the Minister whether he considers it the utmost hypocrisy that the UK is the penholder on Yemen at the United Nations Security Council. It has taken food from the mouths of starving children with one hand while, with the other, handing fighter jets, bombs and missiles to Saudi Arabia and its allies—that has resulted in 60,000 airstrikes in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition, and 30% have hit civilian targets—and profiting directly from the unimaginable suffering of the Yemeni people. I could ask the Minister how he sleeps at night, knowing that the Government could do so much more to alleviate the suffering of so many millions.

Funding of relief agencies' work in Yemen ended on 31 March—a decision made in November—and agencies are still waiting to find out what support they will get. But we have asked these questions for years. We know their answers; they have become wearily familiar. Shrouded in spin, they are shameful excuses. The reality is that this Government have a choice—to be part of the problem or to be part of the solution. The fact that the Government continue to license billions of pounds-worth of military equipment and that they continue to cut aid are devastating symptoms of a deeper problem: their lack of interest in ending this conflict. That is what we have to challenge, and I welcome the fact that hon. Members from across the House are here today. That shows that there is a will, and where there's a will there's a way.

As the penholder on Yemen at the UN, the UK is a crucial player on the international stage. With the right political intent, we could make a major stride in ending the fuel blockade, improving the humanitarian situation and getting the key players around the negotiating table to agree the terms of a just, inclusive and sustainable ceasefire.

I want to end my contribution by turning to the escalating situation in Marib, which is teetering on the edge of a cliff and threatening to unleash yet another wave of unimaginable misery, death and protracted conflict.

Two million internally displaced people, most living in refugee camps, are at risk. Hundreds of thousands will be forced to flee, with catastrophic humanitarian consequences. The community of Liverpool understands that. No more excuses. Will the Minister go back to his Government and ensure that they commit aid that will significantly alleviate the humanitarian crisis, and ban arms exports to the Saudi-led coalition?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Before we come to other Back Benchers, I remind everybody that we will start the Front-Bench speeches at 5.30 pm. We have an incredible number of Members who want to speak, so time will be limited in order to get everybody in. We will start with three-minute speeches, but they will probably have to reduce to two minutes.

5.1 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) on securing this debate. As hon. Members know, I have always taken a close interest in Yemen. I was born there and, like many other Members, I have followed the progress of the civil war with horror. Like all civil wars, it is fought by a mix of combatants, following the 2011 Arab spring awakening, including the Houthis in the north, who are dissatisfied with the lack of investment in infrastructure in the north of Yemen.

The legitimacy of the official Yemeni Government response, led by President Hadi, is recognised by the UN under Security Council resolution 2216. The coalition forces of the Yemeni Government have been helped by Saudi Arabia and, previously, by the United Arab Emirates as Gulf Co-operation Council members.

As we move towards the peace process, the country has become increasingly complicated, with the Southern Transitional Council in Aden, another group led by Tareq Saleh, nephew of the ex-President Saleh, in the west, and various tribal militia, all looking for a voice in the peace process. At the same time, we have al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS, so it is not as two-sided as hon. Members may think. In fact, the attack on Marib is largely because the Houthis tried to increase their negotiating power in any future peace process. The Saudis are working with the existing Government to protect the citizens in Marib.

It is a complex situation, but one thing is clear: arms sales by the UK did not start the war, and the UK's export regime is not preventing the Houthis or any other party from accepting a negotiated outcome to it. It is not in the interests of any of the outside powers that the war continues. Our exports to any destination are checked against the consolidation criteria, which are very clear about respect for human rights, preservation of regional peace, security and stability, and the existence of armed conflict.

The granting of licences resumed only after international humanitarian law analysis. Other countries, including the US, continue exports where they judge them legitimate. President Biden has recently reaffirmed US military exports to Saudi Arabia. The Houthis have been firing missiles into civilian areas in Saudi Arabia, which has every right to defend its country and borders.

We have to end this civil war now. Britain is the UN penholder and is leading on this. I salute the tireless work of Martin Griffiths, the UN envoy. We need a coherent strategy that aligns every interested party in Yemen. All parties must come to a ceasefire and work on a peace process. That is the only way to bring this conflict to an end and begin rebuilding Yemen.

5.3 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab) [V]: The Saudi-led war in Yemen has been raging since 2015. Since the beginning of the conflict, more than 100,000 people have been killed, including about 20,000 civilians killed or injured in direct attacks. The war has also created one of the worst man-made humanitarian crises in the world today, with about 24 million people in severe need of humanitarian relief and 4 million people displaced from their homes.

Over the course of the conflict, many gross violations of human rights have been committed by both sides. In particular, the Saudi-led coalition continues to carry out indiscriminate attacks on civilians and bomb civilian infrastructure in Yemen. Homes, schools, markets, mosques, weddings and funerals have all been targets. Shamefully, they have been doing so using arms supplied to them by the UK.

As a major defence trade partner, the UK has sold to Saudi Arabia a range of aircraft missiles and bombs that have subsequently been used to attack and kill civilians in Yemen. It is a source of immense shame that the UK has played such a fundamental part in the murder of civilians. That is why I, along with many others in this country, am calling for an immediate end to all arms sales to Saudi Arabia. We must do all in our power to bring this horrendous conflict to an end. Ceasing our arms trade with Saudi Arabia is an obvious and important starting point. The UK should play an active global role in upholding and protecting human rights, and work alongside international organisations to broker sustainable peace in Yemen.

The political and humanitarian situation in Yemen is intolerable for the civilian population, with multiple groups fighting for control of the country at the expense of civilians. That has resulted in serious human and civil rights abuses committed by Houthi groups as well as Saudi-backed forces. With no legitimate democratic solution in sight, it is essential that the United Nations and other international organisations help to build a lasting, peaceful and democratic transition.

It is in our interests to stop all arms sales to Saudi Arabia immediately and unconditionally and, instead, work towards facilitating a negotiated peace between the Houthi rebels in Yemen and the Saudi-backed coalition.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Moving forward, the time limit on speeches will be two minutes. I call Marco Longhi.

5.7 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Where arms are sold, there will always be questions asked, and rightly so. But armaments and technologies are advancing at such a pace that once a country decides to tie itself to another for that supply, the supplying country can exert influence. We account for about 20% of Saudi arms

[Marco Longhi]

imports. I submit to colleagues that it is far better for stability in the region and for jobs at home that it is the UK that has that influence.

I know Labour Members hate capitalism, but if we withdraw sales from Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia will simply seek suppliers from other countries—that could be Russia or even China. Do hon. Members really want Russia and China to fill that supply vacuum? We have seen their behaviour in Crimea and Xinjiang.

The middle east is a highly complex geopolitical arena that requires long-term solutions, not short-term political opportunism. The Government are using all their diplomatic and humanitarian expertise to bring an end to the conflict in Yemen and alleviate the humanitarian crisis. We do not ignore those in need, even when facing domestic financial pressures, with over €1 billion in aid committed to support affected rural households and individuals in Yemen.

The consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria are taken very seriously by the Government when assessing all export licence applications. Every application is assessed on a case-by-case basis, using a range of information, including reports from non-governmental organisations and our overseas network. Those original frameworks were set out in law through Acts of Parliament by the then Labour Government in 2002 and 2008, yet it is the Labour Opposition who now take issue with the frameworks and their application. Is it their own laws that they are unhappy with, or the application of those laws by highly trained civil servants?

5.9 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: Yemen has been and remains the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. Millions have been forced to flee their homes, face severe malnutrition and need urgent assistance. On top of that, Yemen must face the coronavirus pandemic with a broken healthcare system. Far from being a helping hand, or even idly standing by, the UK Government have actively facilitated the conflict time and again by continuing to supply arms, training and technical support to Saudi-led forces perpetrating the Yemeni people's ongoing suffering.

The Government have, on multiple occasions, faced honest and reasonable cause to end the arms trade to Saudi Arabia, they but have consistently failed to act. Last July's decision to blankly dismiss any risk of Saudi Arabia committing war crimes as "isolated incidents", and using such a judgment as a basis to resume selling arms, flew in the face of the comprehensive findings of the UN group of eminent international and regional experts on Yemen, who found consistent breaches of international law through the very real harm being caused to civilians.

With the US now having halted arms sales to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen, the UK is at risk not just of isolating itself internationally, but finding itself on the wrong side of a moral line. This is not a moral line with any ambiguity—there is no grey area here. The suffering in Yemen at the hands of British-provided Saudi arms is plain and clear for all to see.

Finally, halting arms to Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies is a step in the right direction. The UK has a responsibility to do everything it can to bring about a just and lasting peace in Yemen and the wider region.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Colleagues have rightly spoken about Saudi Arabia and the effects of arms sales on Yemen. I agree with the comments of my colleagues on restricting sales, but with time so short, I want to raise the role of the United Arab Emirates, which I do not want to be forgotten in this debate.

The UAE has recently concentrated its efforts in southern Yemen and the island of Socotra, establishing a military presence on Socotra and supplying arms to militias on the island. The Socotra archipelago has a population of 50,000 and an almost unique biodiversity—700 species found nowhere else on Earth. It is a UNESCO world heritage site. The UAE controls maritime access to the island and there are reports that UAE ships supplied military vehicles to local militias as recently as last month.

In the US, Democratic Senators Bob Menendez and Dianne Feinstein have tabled a Bill that could block the sale of F-35 fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates due to their involvement in Yemen. The Bill targets a pending deal that includes 50 Lockheed Martin-made F-35s worth \$10.4 billion. The UAE is one of the UK arms industry biggest customers. The UK's 2015 national security strategy and strategic defence and security review made a commitment to establish a permanent British defence staff in the Gulf, which is based in Dubai. The UK sold £144 million-worth of arms involving 122 companies in the last three years. It would be remiss of the UK Government to consider restricting arms sales to Saudi Arabia, without also considering the UAE.

I beseech the Minister to reverse the decision to almost halve humanitarian aid to Yemen. If any country should be exempt from cuts to aid, it is Yemen, although I absolutely oppose abandoning our commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid. However, with UNICEF stating Yemen is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, with more than 24 million people—80% of the population—needing humanitarian assistance, including more than 12 million children, it is up to us to act. Our country has a noble history of assisting people in countries ravished by famine and war. People in this country have voluntarily donated hundreds of millions of pounds in the past four years to save people from starvation. The Government should back the will of the British people and not cut a penny, especially as the UN penholder.

5.13 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: I thank my good friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) for securing today's debate on this hugely important matter. Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. It is a human crisis that requires every bit of will and determination the international community can muster. We remember those who have been lost in the scourge of this war and redouble our efforts in the fight for the living.

For too long, a once proud people have been pummelled by fear in the form of bombs and pain; starvation and death. It is a real honour for me as a Liverpool MP to extend our solidarity and hand of friendship to the Yemeni people, especially the Yemeni community in my

city of Liverpool. That community has a long and vibrant history in our great city, extending as far back as the 19th century. We recognise their contribution today and every day, as we take a moment to share the great pain they suffer.

As the conflict in Yemen enters its sixth year, I want to take a moment to reflect on the struggle to live a life free from fear, free from the fear of violence on the streets and destruction raining down from the air, and free from hunger, disease and death itself. As human beings, the common bonds that unite us cannot be denied. Whether in Yemen or anywhere else, we all aspire to live a fulfilled life based on love, compassion and family.

It is our responsibility as a former global power and current major player in the arms trade to step up and take our responsibility to preserve human life seriously. That means cancelling all arms sales to Saudi Arabia immediately. Even President Biden has ensured that the arms sales are suspended in America. It is time that we followed President Biden's example on this issue. This country is becoming ever more isolated on the matter. I implore the Minister today to do the right thing and stop the arms sales.

5.15 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.25 pm

On resuming—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I call Mick Whitley.

5.25 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Ms McVey. As hon. Members have said, six long years of war have pushed Yemen into the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands have died, including nearly 10,000 killed by Saudi-led air strikes. Infrastructure has been crippled, and 50,000 people are living in near famine-like conditions while millions of others stand on the brink of starvation.

Since the Saudi bombardment began, the UK has approved £6.8 billion-worth of arms export licences to Saudi Arabia. Planes built in Britain have delivered death from the skies above Marib and Aden. Typhoon fighters, Paveway bombs and Brimstone missiles built here in the UK have all been brought into the service of Saudi Arabia's brutal assault on Yemen, and all while private shareholders grow rich from the suffering of millions and the deaths of thousands.

I have spoken many times about the vital role that defence spending has to play in supporting domestic industries and improving defence capabilities, but this does not blind me to the importance of ensuring that the arms we manufacture should not be handed to the tyrants who have no regard for human life. British trade policy must have respect for human rights at its heart. Ministers can claim to champion international law and promote democracy abroad, but that does not seem to match their deeds. They seem desperate to abandon the UK's long-standing humanitarian commitments. In the past year alone, the Department for International Development has been thrown on the scrapheap, the foreign aid budget slashed to a measly 0.5% of national income, and human rights concerns pushed aside, so that the UK can strike trade agreements with regimes that are responsible for brutal abuses. Of course, the

greatest stain on our international reputation is our continued complicity in the war in Yemen while we are slashing financial aid to the war-torn hell on Earth.

I hope that the United States's recent change in strategy regarding arms exports to Saudi Arabia will have caused our Government to rethink their callous policy on arms sales. Sadly, however, British firms are still allowed to export billions of pounds-worth of weapons for use in Yemen, so I join my hon. Friends in urging the Government to change course now. It is time for Britain to stop reaping profit from this human catastrophe, and to start bringing pressure on all parties involved to broker a just and lasting peace.

5.27 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The ongoing war is intolerable. Although we know that almost £7 billion has been spent on arms sales, the figure is probably more like £20 billion, because many of those sales are not even recorded with the open licences. Even the lower figure means that, on a VAT rate of 20%, £1.3 billion has been gained for the Exchequer, and we have spent only £1 billion on aid. If it is the larger amount, £4 billion has been made by the Exchequer on tax from those deals. The taxpayer has profited directly from the misery and the deaths of people in Yemen, and we have not even bothered to give a scrap of that back, let alone the full amount.

Of course, we now know that many arms agreements were illegally made. The Court of Appeal said that those licences were illegal and required the Government to suspend them. The Government failed to suspend them and broke the court order, so the Court required the Government to go back and apologise. Now, rather than actually changing anything, the Government have found a loophole to continue arms sales, and another court case will have to progress. I am afraid that anyone who says that officials or the Government are following the consolidated criteria—those great criteria that were partly developed by Robin Cook—is delusional. They are on a different planet, because that is not what the courts, the researchers and the people on the ground in Yemen are saying.

Most importantly, our allies are begging us to withdraw. Germany has suspended arms sales, and we saw the disgraceful situation of our Foreign Secretary begging Germany to continue to allow arms sales where parts were made for Britain's weapons. The Biden Administration have now done the right thing and suspended arms sales, but the fact is that we train many of the fighter pilots.

5.29 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: The Saudi-led war in Yemen has continued for more than six years, backed by the sale of British arms to Saudi Arabia. In 2016, my predecessor as MP for Cynon Valley, Ann Clwyd, said:

“Saudi Arabia—using British bombs and planes—may have committed war crimes on Yemeni civilians”

and here I am today in 2021 saying the same. Over the period, there has been much bloodshed. In December 2020, the UN estimated there had been 233,000 deaths in Yemen since the conflict started. Last month, a

[Beth Winter]

health emergency was declared in Yemen due to a second wave of covid-19 infections. Yemen is in no position to cope with a sudden rise in cases.

Yemen is experiencing the world's worst food security crisis, with more than 20 million Yemenis, including 13 million children, facing starvation. Recently, fuel shortages have created difficulties in providing the humanitarian aid on which 80% of the population are dependent. Despite withdrawing many ground troops in 2019, Saudi Arabia has continued its use of airstrikes in Yemen; almost a third of those airstrikes hit civilian targets. In June 2020, the High Court issued a landmark ruling forcing officials to pause arms sales to Saudi Arabia due to concerns that the weapons would be used in violation of international humanitarian law. Despite that, the Government rushed out a report in a matter of months that absolved them of guilt. It seems implausible that the Government were satisfied with the findings and resumed arms sales to Saudi Arabia. In the three-month period following the resumption of sales, the Government authorised £1.4 billion of arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

On a global stage, the UK is isolated in its continued support for the Saudi regime while others such as America and Europe have suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The money gained through those arms sales has been dwarfed by the moral cost of their use. Until now, Britain has been complicit in the war crimes perpetrated in Yemen, but that does not need to, and must not, continue. The UK Government need to act urgently to end their support for Saudi airstrikes and suspend all sales of arms to the Saudi regime.

5.31 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) for securing this important debate. I also acknowledge the vital work of the Campaign Against Arms Trade, which has helped to shine a light on the UK Government's central role in the conflict. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is a tragedy and a stain on the reputation of the UK due to the arms that flow continually from our shores and fuel the unrelenting and one-sided bombardment by the Saudi regime.

Instead of using their place on the world stage to stand up to the atrocities committed by Saudi Arabia, the UK Government have been complicit in those war crimes, all because they profit from every single bomb that is dropped in Sanaa and beyond. Britain's largest arms company, BAE Systems, has a gruesome track record in the region. It has sold £17.6 billion-worth of aircraft, weapons and services to the Saudi military since 2015, when Riyadh first began bombing Yemen. Despite the UK Government's posturing and pronouncements against Mohammed bin Salman following his orders to murder journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the reality is that, just four weeks later, the International Trade Secretary met BAE Systems to discuss how to facilitate further arms sales to Riyadh.

I am sure that the Minister will refer to the temporary embargo that was in place last year on new arms licences. Despite that, a recent report by Declassified UK revealed that sales continued with renewed vigour and helped BAE earn a further £2.6 billion from the

Saudi military last year alone—an increase on its morbid success in 2019. Furthermore, the Campaign Against Arms Trade believes that BAE's total sales to Saudi Arabia over the six years of conflict could total £19 billion when cyber-security deals and the company's share in missile manufacturer MBDA are included. At what point will the Government acknowledge their shameful role in the crisis and stop the relentless flow from British companies who are helping to arm the conflict? It is time for the Government to act. It cannot be left to bloodthirsty companies like BAE, which grow ever larger while supplying the Saudi air force. I urge the Government to take immediate action.

5.33 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Instead of profiteering from the war in Yemen, the Government need to concentrate their efforts on diplomacy and aid. Instead, they have simultaneously continued to trade in arms and slashed their humanitarian aid spending in Yemen by 50%, despite international condemnation and the fact that 80% of Yemenis—24 million people—are in urgent need of food and healthcare. The Government are well aware that the cut in aid will undoubtedly cost Yemeni lives, and their unlawful arms sales to the Saudis continue.

More than 100,000 people have died in the conflict, including tens of thousands from disease and famine. The UN has already reported that the UK is “aiding and assisting” the catastrophe in Yemen. So much for the UK's global sanctions regime when it knowingly arms slaughter.

The Government may feel a little bit like Macbeth: that they are

“in blood

Steeped in so far that, should I wade no more

Returning were as tedious as go o'er”.

But it is not too late. The Government could even now do the decent thing—the moral thing—and suspend all existing contracts and stop this trade in death and human suffering. No other course of action is morally justifiable. The Government should also restore all necessary aid to Yemen.

5.35 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: The Yemeni conflict is not only the world's largest humanitarian crisis but one of the worst atrocities of the modern era. The conflict has displaced more than 4 million people, while 24 million people—a staggering 80% of the population—need aid and protection, 16.2 million people face severe food insecurity, and 20 million people lack reliable access to clean water, making disease prevention almost impossible. In November 2020, the United Nations found that more than a quarter of a million Yemeni people have died over the last six years. This is a disaster.

It is therefore shameful that Britain is complicit in this war crimes atrocity, especially as the UK is a penholder on Yemen at the UN Security Council, and should therefore be ensuring the country's safety, not funding its misery. The UK has licensed at least £6.7 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia since 2015, with Oxfam estimating the true value to be more than £15 billion. In

contrast, at the recent UN high-level pledging event for the humanitarian situation in Yemen, the UK Government's pledge of £87 million was almost half the £164 million pledged at the same funding conference last year, and a reduction of £131 million since 2019.

That is the real-world impact of cuts to the UK's aid budget, which the UN Secretary-General described as a "death sentence" for Yemen. It comes just weeks after the UK Government announced £1.36 billion in new arms licences to Saudi Arabia. The Government's duplicity is shameful. With one hand they sign resolutions and speak of their desire to end the conflict, yet with the other they continue to facilitate the suffering of the Yemeni people by providing the weapons that rain down on civilian houses. Now is the time for all of us in the UK to say, "Not in our name will the unimaginable suffering of the Yemeni people continue."

The Government must accept their complicity in this humanitarian catastrophe. They must follow the lead of countries around the world, ensuring that no weapons made in our country are used in the conflict by doing all that they can on the international stage to bring an end to this horrific war.

5.38 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) on securing this very important debate. The situation in Yemen is truly devastating. According to the UN, 233,000 people have been killed by the war, the blockade, and the resulting food shortages and disease. Estimates state that at least 8,759 civilians have been killed by Saudi-led forces in bombing attacks. The UK Government must recognise that they are contributing to this catastrophe. The Government licensed arms exports worth more than £1.65 billion to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the second half of 2020. That includes £1.4 billion in the ML4 category, covering bombs, missiles, grenades and countermeasures.

Alongside the UK's arms exports to the Saudi-led coalition, the UK aid cuts have undermined the UK's diplomatic efforts towards a political solution. The UK Government's pledge of £87 million in aid at the UN high-level pledging event for the humanitarian situation in Yemen—almost half the funding pledged at last year's conference—came just weeks after the UK Government announced £1.36 billion in new arms licences to Saudi Arabia. The decision to slash humanitarian aid to Yemen is disgraceful. In Yemen, 16 million people live in food insecurity and 20 million people lack reliable access to clean water. Nearly 50,000 already face famine conditions.

The UK is the penholder on Yemen at the UN Security Council. We should be showing global leadership by stepping up to tackle the humanitarian crisis and stopping arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition, as the US and Italy have done already. Will the Minister explain how the Government can justify cutting UK aid when they have issued at least £6.8 billion in arms export licences to Saudi Arabia, thereby directly profiting from this catastrophic war?

5.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) for setting the scene so well. As we are all aware, the UK is

not a member of the Saudi-led coalition. However, we are all equally aware that Saudi armed forces are using UK-built and licensed arms in Yemen, including Typhoon aircraft, missiles and bombs. It seems difficult to reconcile our obligations to Yemen, in terms of human rights aid, with the profit received from the arms trade. The licences include £1.4 billion in the ML4 category, which covers bombs, missiles, grenades and counter-measures—a 500% increase on the previous six months.

At the same time, 16 million Yemenis live in food insecurity, 50,000 are already facing famine and a further 5 million are only one step away from hunger. Two thirds of the population rely on food aid to survive. It is estimated that some 24 million Yemenis—80% of the population—need humanitarian assistance, which is being thwarted by the Saudi-led coalition's air and naval blockade of the country. It is absolutely ridiculous what they are doing.

More than half of Yemen's 30 million population is currently going hungry. UNICEF warned that the number of malnourished children in Yemen could rise by 20% to 2.4 million by the end of 2020 because of the shortfall in humanitarian funding. Some of the television programmes that I watch tell us about the famine and are looking for charitable help. When we see the pictures of those wee children who are on the verge of starvation and dying, we would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved. I want to make a plea today for all those young wee children—those 2.4 million.

Continuing to export arms to the Saudi-led coalition is a direct contradiction of the integrated review's claim that the UK must be a force for good. To make that happen, we must support open societies and defend human rights. That means that steps must be taken to deliver humanitarian aid and stop this arms trade in the interim. I fully support the hon. Lady in what she said.

5.41 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I want to take this opportunity to remind colleagues of the human consequences that the arms trade and conflict in Yemen can have on people. Four years ago, in April 2017, my constituent Luke Symons was stopped at a Houthi checkpoint in Sana'a and detained. He has been held in prison ever since for no reason other than that he holds a British passport.

Luke's is a very typical Cardiff story in many ways. The rapid growth of Cardiff as a coal exporting port in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought many Yemeni and Somali sailors to the city. Luke comes from one of those Cardiff Yemeni families who still have relations in the country. On a visit to Yemen in 2014, he met his future wife and settled there before the conflict broke out. They desperately tried to leave, but were unsuccessful before Luke was detained.

I appeal to the UK Government to redouble the efforts they have already made to secure Luke's release and secure safe passage for him and his wife and child to the UK. I thank the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), for their efforts so far.

I also appeal to Luke's Houthi captors, during this holy month of Ramadan, to release him. His grandfather, Bob Cummings, who has a deep and abiding love for

[Kevin Brennan]

the people of Yemen and the middle east from his time as a merchant seaman, has campaigned tirelessly for Luke's release. Luke's grandmother, Sheila, who played a big part in his upbringing, is very ill and deeply worried about his welfare. It would be an act of mercy and compassion and would show the Houthi leadership in a good light if, after four years of this sad affair, that young man of 29 years, who is simply caught up in events and has committed no crime, could be reunited with his wife and child and wider family. That is the plea from the family to his Houthi captors, and I sincerely hope it will reach them and their hearts.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): We have managed to get all the Back Benchers in, but the Front Benchers will have to shave down their time to four minutes and then eight minutes.

5.44 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I hope that, since my election to this place, I have demonstrated, particularly in foreign affairs, that where I agree with the UK Government's position, I am vocal in that agreement. Equally, where I disagree with the UK Government's position, I will be just as vocal. On arms sales to Yemen, the Scottish National party has a fundamentally different view of the policy being taken forward by the UK Government, and we oppose the direction that the UK is in.

I start by praising what the UK has been doing to foment efforts towards a just peace. I know that significant efforts are being made to try to broker a peace between the warring parties. The UK is a significant donor of aid and there are significant efforts going forward to ameliorate the situation. But that aid is being cut. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has confirmed that the aid is being cut from £164 million to £87 million this year. That is a 50% cut to one of the most war-torn and desperate situations in the world.

Yemen is a humanitarian disaster. According to Oxfam, in a full briefing received by all of us, 24 million people—80% of the population—need aid and protection, and 10 million people are facing severe food insecurity. The conflict has displaced over 4 million people, two thirds of the population are reliant on food aid to survive, 20 million people lack reliable access to clean water, making disease prevention almost impossible, and then there is covid on top of that. It is one of the most desperate situations in the world, and the UK has contributed to it.

The most significant export from the UK to Yemen is, sadly, arms, via Saudi Arabia. I am close to the region: I grew up in Riyadh and I know the region well. I carry no torch for anybody except for a just peace. The fact is that the UK has sent billions of munitions to the region, to a place in the world that has the least possible ability to withstand it. The UK is not a neutral, honest broker in trying to create a just peace. It is a partisan, actively contributing to the disaster. It is shameful that the issue has not been properly looked at in the round.

The UK is also behind the curve internationally on the matter, as several countries have stopped the arms trade to Saudi Arabia precisely because of humanitarian concerns. The US, Germany, Finland, Canada, Denmark,

the UN and the European Parliament have all called for the trade to stop, but the UK stands almost alone in contributing. I take the point that other countries might fill that gap. Indeed they might, and we cannot stop them. But the UK is grossly hypocritical in its stance on Yemen. That is the fact of the matter. I look forward to the Minister's comments. To my mind, the UK should institute an arms embargo to Saudi Arabia, pending these concerns. I disagree with the cut to aid full stop, but the UK should exempt Yemen from those cuts. It is one of the most benighted places in the world, it needs our support, and the UK has not been a force for good in Yemen.

5.47 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) on securing the debate. She is already known in the House for strong and challenging interventions, and her speech today will only add to that reputation.

My hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) all underlined in their contributions the fact that the humanitarian situation in Yemen is desperate. A decade of fighting has produced the world's worst humanitarian disaster, and over 230,000 people have already been killed by the war, and the resulting food shortages and disease. Millions of people are still at risk of starvation and disease.

If the situation in Yemen was not bad enough, covid and the failure thus far of ceasefire negotiations is quite clearly exacerbating the terrible crisis still further, particularly in the oil and gas region of Marib, where up to 2 million people are sheltering from the intensifying conflict. At this stage, I echo the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West that his 29-year-old constituent be released from prison and allowed to return home. I am sure the whole House supports his call for that to happen.

The failure in the beginning of March of the UN's annual appeal for emergency funding to match last year's pledges is deeply worrying. As Members have highlighted, the decisions of UK Ministers to impose an almost 50% cut in our aid to Yemen is striking. Many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world are in Yemen, and our country has a strong and long history with the people of Yemen.

As the House knows, the Government's failure to implement their own laws relating to arms exports led eventually to the Court of Appeal ordering, in July two years ago, the Department to stop granting licences for exports of arms to Saudi Arabia. The Court of Appeal's decision was based on a long catalogue of attacks on the civilian population since 2015. Thousands were killed in air strikes. Weddings, funerals and markets were all targeted. One year after the Court's judgement against the Department, the Secretary of State published a new internal assessment of the Saudi bombing campaign

in Yemen. Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, it was claimed that despite “isolated incidents” where international humanitarian law may have been broken, there was no pattern of activity that would lead her to question the intent or the capacity of the coalition to comply with international humanitarian law.

It is striking that, despite our requests, the Secretary of State has still not published any of the analysis that she undertook on the Saudi bombing campaign. She has repeatedly refused to publish a list of allegations that her new analysis examined. She has also refused to disclose which incidents she classed as possible violations of international law. I urge the Minister to publish that evidence, even at this late stage.

Arms sales resumed very quickly, reaching their highest total compared with any of the previous 19 quarters put together, before the Court of Appeal’s decision. As other hon. Members have made clear, a series of countries—not least the United States—have taken the decision to suspend arms sales. It continues to be surprising that the UK has not followed suit. I look forward to hearing the Minister attempt to justify that decision.

5.51 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey? I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) on securing the debate and, in particular, on her warm words about the Yemeni community in Liverpool, whom the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) also mentioned. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is nothing short of appalling. That is a matter on which all parts of the House will resoundingly agree. The situation was well described by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside, as well as by others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond). The number of civilians killed, and the cholera and covid situations, have piled misery upon misery.

Yemen is a beautiful country of proud people, a point that was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley, who grew up there. Yemen has contributed so much to the historical and cultural fabric of our global community. As all speakers have said, anyone who has heard or read about the harrowing plight of the people of Yemen cannot fail to be moved by the unimaginable suffering experienced there daily. Their dire struggle against a seemingly relentless charge of civil war, natural disaster, hunger and disease is truly unthinkable.

For there to be any prospect of peace or any notion of normality for the Yemeni people, it is clear that there must be a sustainable political settlement. That is the only way to address the worsening humanitarian situation and bring real long-term stability to the country. That is why the UK Government are straining every diplomatic sinew to help to bring an end to the conflict in Yemen. The increased engagement that we are seeing from the US and Oman is certainly timely and welcome, and the UK Government were pleased to see Saudi Arabia making clear its commitment to a peace deal in recent public comments. We continue to provide our full backing to Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy, in his laudable efforts to reach a peaceful settlement, a point that was

well made by many others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley, and the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside and for Enfield North (Feryal Clark).

On overseas aid, despite financial pressures—not least from covid-19, which has stolen lives and livelihoods in this country and across the world—the United Kingdom has maintained its position as one of the leading aid donors to Yemen. In this financial year, UK Aid will feed 240,000 of the most vulnerable Yemenis every month, support 400 healthcare clinics, and provide clean water for 1.6 million people.

We recognise the concerns about our arms sales policy, and I assure hon. Members that the Government take our arms export responsibilities very seriously indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) said. It must not be forgotten that the UK’s defence and security industries make an important contribution to the economy, enhancing our global competitiveness and boosting our economic growth, not to mention sustaining tens of thousands of highly-skilled manufacturing and engineering-based jobs across the UK. A lot of the speakers in this debate come from the north-west region, and many of those jobs are located there, in Lancashire, particularly around Preston, as well as in Cheshire and other areas in the north-west of this country.

Our policy on export control is not to frustrate or hamper the ability of those responsible companies to trade, but to make the world a safer place for us all by operating a clear, proportionate and robust system of export controls in the UK.

We rigorously assess every application on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, known as the consolidated criteria, first introduced by Robin Cook in 2002 under the last Labour Government and updated by Vince Cable in 2014. The consolidated criteria provide a thorough risk assessment framework for evaluating export licence applications and require us to think hard about the impact of providing equipment and its capabilities. As part of the assessment process, we draw on a range of sources and information. That includes insights from non-governmental organisations, international organisations and our overseas network. Decisions on export licences are not taken lightly, and we have been clear that we will not license the export of equipment where to do so would be inconsistent with the consolidated criteria. The Government’s position on arms exports to all countries remains that such exports require an export licence and that all export licence applications will continue to be carefully assessed against the consolidated criteria on a case-by-case basis.

On scrutiny, contrary to what the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said, the UK operates one of the most transparent export licensing systems in the world. We publish official statistics both quarterly and annually of all our export licensing decisions, including details of export licences granted, refused and revoked. UK export licensing is also accountable to Parliament through a statutory obligation to provide an annual report on strategic export controls. Parliamentary oversight is provided through the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which are made up of members of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Trade Committees, as well as members of the International

[Greg Hands]

Development Committee. That arrangement ensures that appropriate scrutiny from a range of perspectives can be applied.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) mentioned the case of Luke Symons. As he knows, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is in contact with the Symons family, and I am delighted that he has had the opportunity to meet the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), and the Foreign Secretary. We warmly endorse his words calling for Luke Symons' release, particularly during this holy month of Ramadan.

I hope, Ms McVey, that I have impressed upon you that the Government take their export responsibilities seriously. The Export Control Act 2002 requires Government to give guidance about the general principles to be followed when exercising licensing powers, which we do through the consolidated criteria. We have been abundantly clear that we will not issue a licence where to do so would be inconsistent with the criteria. For the avoidance of any doubt, our assessment of licence applications also carefully considers our obligations under the United Nations arms trade treaty and other rules of international law.

The Government desperately want to see a long overdue end to the conflict in Yemen. We fully support Martin Griffiths and the United Nations in their efforts to

broker a ceasefire and kick-start the political process to secure a pathway to peace. From the passionate contributions we have heard today, I know that Members from all parties across the House will echo that sentiment and share our high hopes that an end to the conflict in Yemen is on the horizon.

5.58 pm

Kim Johnson: I thank all hon. Members for their impassioned contributions. I disagree with the Minister and the hon. Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) on continuing to support arms sales to the Saudis. The UK has a responsibility to do everything to bring about a ceasefire, and the escalating situation in Marib threatens another decade of destruction. The Government have the power to do the right thing, cease arms sales, increase aid to its full amount—the Minister did not mention that—and not make any more flimsy excuses. If we are not part of the solution, we are going to be part of the problem. We need to make those changes now to stop the destruction and the major humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the arms trade and Yemen.

5.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 20 April 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingencies Fund Advance: Covid-19 Support Packages

The Minister for London (Paul Scully): I hereby give notice of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy having drawn an advance from the Contingencies Fund totalling £1,579,925,000 to enable expenditure on covid-19 support packages for business to be spent ahead of the passage of the Supply and Appropriation Act in March 2021.

The funding is required for the local restrictions support grant (LRSG) (closed) addendum scheme, which provides grants of up to £3,000 per month to businesses which are legally required to close due to covid-19 restrictions.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £1,579,925,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,579,925,000 has been met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Supply and Appropriation Act.

[HCWS924]

Contingency Liability Notification: Baglan Operations Limited and Baglan Group Companies

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring their attention to the details of a contingent liability following the provision of an indemnity from the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Official Receiver acting in the insolvency of Baglan Operations Limited (BOL) and the wider Baglan Group companies.

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute, giving details of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

BOL entered liquidation on 24 March 2021 and owns a site hosting a gas generation plant—now closed—and operates a private wire which provides electricity to the Baglan Energy Park in Port Talbot. The energy park accommodates various businesses—primarily a paper product manufacturer, Intertissue—public sector buildings—local authority offices and a NHS medical centre—and a water pumping station.

The departmental minute I lay today is to notify Parliament retrospectively of the provision of an indemnity to the OR.

Departmental officials and I are aware of the presence of several chemical substances at the site that will require safe disposal. There is also a gas plant and 12 km of pipeline that will require decommissioning. BOL supplies the electricity through a private electricity wire, which is exempt from being licensed. As it is licence-exempt, BOL is not capable of being covered by the energy regulator Ofgem's supplier of last resort arrangements or any energy special administration regime.

My Department has been monitoring this fast-moving situation since December 2020, working closely with the Welsh Government, Wales Office, the Insolvency Service, UK Government Investments (UKGI) and HM Treasury.

My Department has provided the OR with an indemnity in respect of:

- carrying out the proper performance of the OR's duties as liquidator of the Baglan Group companies;
- seeking the appointment of, engaging and instructing the special managers in respect of the Baglan Group companies; and
- maintaining, securing and funding the ongoing operation of the Baglan Group companies undertakings, and distributing the assets of the companies in the ordinary course of the OR's duties as liquidator of the Baglan Group companies.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal and I will be laying a departmental minute today containing a description of the liability undertaken.

[HCWS925]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Regulation of Football Index

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): I am announcing today that DCMS will appoint an independent expert to conduct a review of the regulation of the Football Index gambling product, up to the point where its operator's licence was suspended in March, and to make recommendations to the Government and the regulators.

Football Index's operator, BetIndex Ltd, was granted a licence to provide online betting by the Gambling Commission in September 2015. The Commission began a formal review of this licence in May 2020 and suspended it in March 2021. The company is currently in administration. At the time of suspension, the product allowed customers (called traders) to place bets (shares) on the future performance of footballers. These bets lasted for three years, with payments called dividends being made according to a player's performance. The product evolved to let customers buy and sell bets with prices fluctuating according to demand.

The Government are taking the situation regarding Football Index and the concerns of those affected by it very seriously. It is reported that many thousands of customers are affected by the product's collapse, with some having lost very large sums. This review will aim to establish both how this situation came about and what lessons we can learn from it.

A principal purpose of the review will be to take an objective look at the decisions and actions of the Gambling Commission and any other relevant regulators, to provide

a clear account of how the company's activities were regulated and identify if there are potential areas for improvement in how complex products are treated.

Its findings will form part of the evidence informing the Government's review of the Gambling Act 2005, which was announced in December 2020. The review is considering whether changes are needed to the regulatory framework around gambling, including the Commission's powers and resources and how it uses them. It is also looking at how novel and complex products should be licensed and regulated.

The Commission's regulatory investigation into BetIndex Ltd is continuing. This independent review is separate to that investigation and will be carried out and report in a way which will not compromise it. It will also be without prejudice to the ongoing administration proceedings, which among other things are looking at assets and liabilities of the company and recompense to customers.

Further details of the independent reviewer and terms of reference will be announced in due course. It is intended that the review will report publicly in the summer and will inform the wider Gambling Act Review. The Government aim to produce a White Paper setting out their findings from the review of the Gambling Act 2005 by the end of the year.

[HCWS929]

Supporting the Deployment of 5G and Extending Mobile Coverage

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): Now, more than ever, people need access to dependable and consistent mobile coverage where they live, work and travel.

We have committed to extend mobile geographical coverage across the UK with uninterrupted mobile signal on all major roads, and to be a global leader in 5G. That is why the Government have agreed a £1 billion shared rural network deal with the UK's mobile network operators to extend 4G mobile geographical coverage to 95% of the UK by 2025. The Government are also investing £200 million in a programme of 5G testbeds and trials to encourage investment in 5G so that communities and businesses can benefit from this new technology.

It is essential that the planning system can effectively support the delivery of the mobile infrastructure that we need. That is why in 2019 the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published an in-principle consultation on proposed reforms to the permitted development rights governing deployment of mobile network infrastructure. We concluded that the proposed reforms would have a positive impact on the Government's ambitions for the deployment of 5G and extending mobile coverage, particularly in rural areas, where mobile coverage tends to lag behind more urban areas.

In July 2020 we announced that we would take forward the reforms, subject to a technical consultation on the detail of changes and including the appropriate environmental protections and other safeguards.

The Government have now published a technical consultation, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-permitted-development-rights-for-electronic-communications-infrastructure-technical-consultation>, seeking views on proposals to:

Enable the deployment of small radio equipment cabinets without the requirement for prior approval in article 2(3) land (which includes national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and conservation areas), and allow greater flexibility for installing equipment cabinets in compounds;

Allow for the strengthening of existing masts by permitting greater increases in the width and height of existing masts outside of article 2(3) land, and the width of existing masts in article 2(3) land, without prior approval; and further increases with prior approval;

Enable building-based masts to be deployed closer to the highway on unprotected land; and permit smaller masts and poles to be installed on buildings without prior approval outside of article 2(3) land; and,

Enable taller new ground-based masts to be deployed on all land subject to prior approval, with greater permitted heights outside of article 2(3) land; and permit the deployment of monopole masts up to a height of 15 metres without prior approval outside of article 2(3) land.

The proposed changes will not apply to land on or within sites of special scientific interest, to listed buildings and their curtilage, or sites that are or contain scheduled monuments.

The consultation will run for eight weeks, closing 14 June 2021.

These changes will support wider and enhanced coverage that will ensure all communities benefit, and will give greater certainty and speed over deployment of infrastructure, increasing investor confidence. They also aim to encourage the use of existing infrastructure and promote site sharing to reduce the impacts of new deployment.

We believe these proposals achieve an appropriate balance between supporting the Government's ambitions for 5G and mobile coverage, and ensuring that the appropriate environmental protections and safeguards are in place, particularly for protected landscapes.

Alongside the technical consultation, we will work with industry representatives, Ofcom, local authorities and rural stakeholders to develop a new code of practice on mobile network development in England, to ensure the impact of new and upgraded mobile infrastructure is minimised and that appropriate engagement takes place with local communities.

As planning law is a devolved matter, any future legislative changes will apply to England only, but we will continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the planning regime continues to support the deployment of mobile infrastructure across the United Kingdom

[HCWS930]

EDUCATION

Skills Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): As we build back better from the pandemic, we are announcing plans which build on the reforms set out in the skills for jobs White Paper, putting employers at the heart of plans to make sure people have the skills they need to get good jobs.

Today we are launching a consultation on flexi-job apprenticeships which will make it easier for employers from all sectors of the economy to benefit from the impact that apprenticeships can bring to their business. The consultation is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/flexi-job-apprenticeships-reshaping-the-role-of-apprenticeship-training-agencies>.

Since 2015 we have transformed apprenticeships into a prestigious technical education programme that is launching people's careers, upskilling and retraining workers, and helping employers develop the skills they need to thrive. Apprenticeships are at the heart of the Government's plans to drive economic recovery, and we are already making £3,000 available to employers for each new apprentice they recruit until 31 September.

In September 2020 the Prime Minister set out his ambition to make apprenticeships more portable, reflecting the varied and flexible models of employment that we see in dynamic sectors such as the creative industries, digital and construction. The consultation we are launching today sets out our vision for flexi-job apprenticeships as a means to achieve this and to unlock the potential of apprenticeships in these sectors. We want to seek views on this vision, and on how flexi-job apprenticeships can meet the needs of employers and provide a high quality experience for apprentices.

At Budget on 3 March the Chancellor announced a new £7 million fund for flexi-job apprenticeship schemes. This consultation is an important step in preparing to launch this fund in July and ensuring that it delivers a vital skills boost to sectors which need it.

Skills accelerator launched

As part of the skills for jobs White Paper, we have launched the skills accelerator. This is central to the White Paper's aim to give employers a central role working with colleges, other providers, and local stakeholders to shape technical skills provision so that it meets labour market needs. It will be piloted in 2021-22 to test how we can enable a shift towards the White Paper's vision of a more collaborative post-16 system with employers at its heart. During the pilot:

Local plans will be developed by employer representative bodies in collaboration with colleges and other providers and through engagement with key local stakeholders. They will provide a framework to help colleges and other providers reshape their offer to tackle skills mismatches and ensure they are responding effectively to labour market needs. Employer representative bodies are invited to come forward to lead these plans and will have access to funding to help them to do so. Applications to pilot these plans close on 25 May and successful applicants will be announced thereafter.

£65 million will be made available to local areas as a one-year pilot, to facilitate changes to provision that have been endorsed by local employers. Providers and employers will work together to increase the level of skills in the workforce, stimulating demand for better jobs and leading to increased innovation and productivity. The fund will provide capital and revenue for collaborative projects that will build providers' capacity to meet locally agreed skills priorities. Applications for pilot projects close on 25 May, with successful projects announced thereafter.

[HCWS927]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Antivirals Taskforce

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to update the House on the establishment of the Government's new covid-19 antivirals taskforce.

Following the success of the vaccines and therapeutics taskforces, Her Majesty's Government are seeking to remain at the forefront of the battle against covid-19 and further develop our standing as leaders in the life sciences sector. The new team will lead the search for novel oral antiviral treatments to provide additional protection for the UK population, particularly those currently deemed most vulnerable, and relieve pressure on the NHS.

The UK's vaccine programme, whilst immensely successful and vital in pandemic recovery, will not protect everyone. Vaccine effectiveness is not established in all groups of the UK population, and there will be some groups for whom vaccines may not be effective protection, so antiviral treatments will provide an alternative form of protection.

The aim of the antivirals taskforce is to search for the most promising novel oral antiviral medicines and speed up the process of development, manufacture and deployment, with the goal of having at least two of these drugs ready to deploy by the autumn.

We are still at a relatively early stage of the vaccine deployment programme. Our understanding of the implications that mutations of the virus may have on vaccine efficacy is developing all the time. Antivirals can be used for two key purposes: first, to inhibit the virus at an early stage to stop mild disease becoming serious illness. By inhibiting the virus at this stage, the drugs also prevent replication—both within an individual and from person to person—limiting the impact of and spread of covid-19, relieving pressure on the NHS and supporting our ongoing return to normal life.

Secondly, antivirals may also be able to be used as post-exposure prophylactics, to minimise the spread of the disease where there has been contact with known, positive cases.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the UK has proven itself a world-leader in identifying and rolling out effective covid-19 treatments, including the world's first treatment, dexamethasone, which has saved 22,000 lives in the UK so far and an estimated million worldwide. These treatments help the recovery of patients who have been hospitalised with covid-19. The aim of an oral antiviral treatment is that it will be readily available for use outside of these settings, for example, in a patient's own home.

Building on the successful work of the therapeutics and vaccines taskforces, the antivirals taskforce is bringing together the brightest minds from medicine, industry experts and across Government and the life sciences to find a new, innovative treatment for patients to take at home. A short competition will be run to identify a suitable chair for the taskforce.

We are already engaging with industry to identify antiviral compound candidates which could be ready for deployment in the autumn, and will update the House with the taskforce's progress in due course.

[HCWS932]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

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

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

TPIM notices in force— as of 28 February 2021	3
Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 28 February 2021	3
TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period	1
TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period	0
TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period	2
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period	0
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during this the reporting period	2

On 22 February 2021 TPIM subject LF was sentenced to two years and four months having pleaded guilty to six counts of breaching his TPIM notice.

In accordance with the Act, Section 9 reviews of the TPIMs against JM and LF were heard at the High Court between 30 October and 10 November 2020. In a judgment published on 10 February 2021, the Court upheld the necessity and proportionality of the TPIM notice and all of the measures specified within it against JM. LF only challenged the necessity and proportionality of two of the measures specified within the notice. In the judgment the court upheld the necessity and proportionality of both measures. This judgment can be found at:

www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2021/266.html

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. First quarter TRG meetings will be held between 16 and 23 March 2021.

[HCWS926]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Change: GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland Campaign

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of Government change.

Policy responsibility for the GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland campaign will transfer from the Department for International Trade to the Cabinet Office. This change will be effective immediately.

[HCWS928]

TRANSPORT

Highways England First Year Progress Report on Smart Motorways Stocktake

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The House will know that this Government take the safety of our roads very seriously and has invested heavily in improvements to help prevent deaths and injuries. Great Britain has some of the safest roads in the world and, although per 100 million miles driven there are fewer deaths on smart motorways than conventional ones, we are determined to do all we can to help drivers feel safer and be safer on our roads—all our roads.

In March 2020, I published a smart motorway safety evidence stocktake and action plan. The safety improvements in the 2020 action plan consisted of a package of 18 actions, costing £500 million, including the rollout of radar-based stopped vehicle detection (SVD) technology across the ALR motorway network and an additional £5 million on national and targeted communications campaigns to ensure drivers receive advice to help them keep safe. Furthermore, we have changed the law to enable automatic detection of vehicles driving in closed lanes, known as red x violations. Highways England is upgrading all enforcement cameras across the smart motorway network to enable automatic detection of red x violations which can then be enforced by the police.

One year on from the publication of the 2020 action plan, I commissioned a report from Highways England which sets out its progress on these 18 actions along with proposals about how those actions could be accelerated. Today Highways England has published its "Smart Motorways Stocktake First Year Progress Report 2021" which I will place in the Libraries of both Houses. The report contains the latest safety data, which updates analysis contained in the 2020 stocktake report.

The report demonstrates significant progress against the 18 actions, which when delivered in full, will raise the bar on motorway safety. Over the past 12 months Highways England has launched a major road safety campaign to give drivers clear advice about what to do in the event of breaking down; completed work to turn emergency areas orange so they are more visible to drivers and improved the signage letting drivers know how far they are from the next place to stop in an emergency; installed 10 more emergency areas on the M25 around London; held a public consultation on proposed changes to the highway code that will provide more information about motorway driving; continued to upgrade cameras so they can automatically detect red x violations; and introduced radar-based stopped vehicle detection technology on stretches of the M3 and the M20, with work under way on the M1.

Highways England is now accelerating a number of actions so that the completion dates set out in "Highway's England Strategic Business Plan 2020-25" are brought forward.

Most significantly, radar-based stopped vehicle detection technology will now be installed on all operational ALR motorways by September 2022, six months earlier than planned. Highways England has also made a

commitment that no all lane running motorways will open without radar technology to spot stopped vehicles, enable lanes to be closed where necessary, and get help to drivers quickly.

The data contained in the Highways England progress report continues to show that fatal casualties are less likely on all lane running motorways than on conventional ones, but we know drivers can feel less safe on roads without hard shoulders, which is why the progress report published today intends to accelerate a number of actions to provide reassurance to drivers. My statement of 24 March 2021 confirmed that the Office of Rail and

Road is carrying out an independent review of the data to provide further analytical assurance and ensure that the conclusions arrived at are robust.

I would like to pay tribute to all those safety campaigners, in particular those who have lost loved ones, on their efforts to ensure that changes are made. The Government and Highways England will continue to work hard to improve road safety.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-04-20/hcws931>

[HCWS931]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 20 April 2021

EDUCATION

University Students: Compensation for Lost Teaching and Rent

The following is an extract from the urgent question on 15 April 2021.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: North Devon is the first place in England to record no covid cases for a week this year, and our students are keen to return to campus. Will my hon. Friend detail what measures are in place to ensure that they can do so safely, as they will inevitably be travelling to an area with higher rates of infection?

Michelle Donelan: Universities continue to make significant investments in student and staff safety—including updated risk assessments, assessments of adequate ventilation and covid-secure measures such as mandatory

social distancing, hand washing and face coverings—and testing is available to all students, who should currently be tested twice a week at their university test centre. From 17 May, we will move to home testing, with students first asked to take three PCR tests at their university test centre.

[Official Report, 15 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 489.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby).

The correct response should have been:

Michelle Donelan: Universities continue to make significant investments in student and staff safety—including updated risk assessments, assessments of adequate ventilation and covid-secure measures such as mandatory social distancing, hand washing and face coverings—and testing is available to all students, who should currently be tested twice a week at their university test centre. From **May**, we will move to home testing, with students first asked to take three **LFD** tests at their university test centre.

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**not later than
Tuesday 27 April 2021**

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