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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 22 April 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Food and Drink Exports to the EU

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of UK exports of food and drink to the EU. [914620]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The combination of falling demand in the EU due to coronavirus restrictions and the introduction of new procedures at the end of the transition period meant that exports fell significantly in the first month of January. Exports of food and drink recovered in February, increasing by 77% on the previous month. While official statistics for March are not yet available, we know that the number of applications for export health certificates has continued to grow.

Gavin Newlands [V]: Since the Government's precious Brexit, fish exports to the EU have collapsed and the Government said it was teething problems; cheese exports collapsed and the Government blamed exporters for poor paperwork; seafood exports collapsed and the Government said they might reclassify waters to make them cleaner. But nothing substantive has happened on any of it. What will it take to get action from Ministers, or do we have to wait for a text from a crony?

George Eustice: We have indeed taken action right from the moment that there were teething problems in that first week of January as import agents, exporters and border control officials struggled to get used to the paperwork. As I pointed out, it is an improving situation. The hon. Member asked about trends. The trend is a rising one, increasing by 77% in February, and with export health certificates continuing to grow.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: Scottish exports make up a quarter of the UK's food and drink exports. Those exports have been hammered by Brexit, losing out on hundreds of millions of pounds

in sales in January and February alone, with some products seeing their market all but collapse, and virtually nothing is being done about it. A new Brexit cliff has arrived before we finished plummeting off the last one: composite food products now need export health certificates. The chaos of the last set of regs is still haunting our exports, and this new chaos will further dent them. Vets say they will not have the capacity to deal with this. What plans do the Government have to address that clear danger?

George Eustice: The European Union has changed some of its export health certificates, particularly for composite goods, from 21 April. We have been working very closely with industry and all those affected over the last few months. We knew that this was going to happen. We have worked with it on getting those replacement health certificates and, in some cases, the need for a private attestation. Yes, it is complicated. It is a change in law that the EU has made and always intended to make, but we worked very closely with industry and all those affected to make sure that they were ready.

Dog Thefts

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on reducing dog thefts. [914621]

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on reducing dog thefts. [914635]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I recently met the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor in March to discuss the important issue of pet theft. As a result of that meeting, officials from across the three Departments have been tasked with developing solutions that tackle this issue effectively. The work of the pet theft taskforce has already begun, with officials drawing together available data and evidence.

Alex Cunningham [V]: The Secretary of State, I am sure, has a comprehensive understanding of this issue, which causes undue distress to people and affects dogs, cats and all manner of other pets. This week, for example, Cats Protection told me that cat theft is up threefold since 2015. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will back my amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which deal with pet theft and introduce tough sentences for those whose actions devastate so many families?

George Eustice: We are aware that there are some reports of a significant increase in the incidence of pet theft. A number of organisations say that reports of it are doubling, and the official figures show a sharp increase, albeit from a relatively low base. We are looking at the issue, and that is why we established the pet theft taskforce. There is already the possibility of a maximum sentence of seven years for aggravated offences, particularly where there is emotional distress, which clearly there is in the case of pets. We are reviewing this particular area of law.

Mr Betts [V]: I am sure the Secretary of State recognises that for those committing the theft it may be a financial issue, but for those who have their pets stolen this is really a loss of a valued member of their family. I give credit to *The Star* newspaper in Sheffield, which has highlighted a growing number of these incidents, and the heartbreak and anguish it causes people to lose their valued pet. Will the Secretary of State accept that this is a different sort of crime to the normal theft of a possession, and that, as such, it needs a different, specific offence with specific and tougher penalties enacted for those who commit it?

George Eustice: It is a different type of offence in that there is emotional stress on the owner of the pet, but there can also be stress and effects on the welfare of the animal. That is why, in the current sentencing guidelines, the courts can take account of an aggravated offence with emotional distress, and the maximum penalty could be as high as seven years. We have asked the pet theft taskforce to look at this issue more closely and assemble the evidence to consider whether anything further is required.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Pet theft is on the rise, partly because of the demand for pets through lockdown. When gangs steal a pet, they cause harm not only to the pet, but to the families who miss it. We still do not have the five-year sentencing for animal cruelty, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) has been trying his best to get through. In the next Parliament, can we not only have that five-year sentencing for cruelty but link in dog theft to the legislation?

George Eustice: The legislation on increasing the maximum penalty for animal cruelty is nearing its completion. I have a high degree of confidence that we will be able to get it through before the end of the Session. Indeed, we will say more about that over the next day or so.

Coronavirus Zoo Animals Fund

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the coronavirus zoo animals fund. [914622]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The zoo animals fund has supported a wide variety of zoos throughout the pandemic—56 to date—and it continues to do so. It has helped to ensure the continued welfare of zoo animals and to prevent unnecessary euthanasia. We are really pleased that zoos of all sizes and types have been able to secure funding.

Christian Matheson: The problem is that the £100 million announcement was more froth than substance, with only £5 million or £6 million of it being spent and not returned to the Treasury. Will Ministers now agree to extend the zoos fund to the important conservation, educational and scientific work that is the bedrock of so much of what our zoos contribute to the global situation?

Victoria Prentis: I do not accept that. This is a real fund, which is being used on the ground to help zoos get through the pandemic. I am very pleased, as I know the hon. Gentleman is, that Chester zoo is now open and

that baby Albert the giraffe is open to view. We have extended the fund, for example, to include repairs and maintenance. We continue to work on the fund, but I politely suggest that other Government and UK funds are available to help with the important conservation work done by zoos, such as the Darwin initiative and the green recovery challenge fund. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to work with Chester zoo to look at whether those would be suitable.

Neonicotinoid Alternatives

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What steps he is taking to encourage the use of alternatives to neonicotinoids which do not harm pollinators. [914623]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The Government are committed to supporting alternatives to chemical pesticides. We are currently analysing the responses to our consultation on the national action plan. The proposed plan supports the development of low toxicity methods and improved advice and support for users.

Wera Hobhouse [V]: One hundred and fifty-seven of my Bath constituents have written to me since January to raise this issue. We must remember that we are in not only a climate emergency, but a nature emergency. Given that the Government made an explicit pledge to keep pesticide restrictions in place after Brexit, will the Minister commit to giving the Office for Environmental Protection the powers and resources to hold public authorities to account on environmental standards?

Victoria Prentis: I know that the hon. Lady shares my desire that the world will be in a much better place for our children, and may I congratulate her on the birth of her recent grandchild? The Government are therefore completely committed to reducing chemical pesticide use. Protecting pollinators, for example, is a real priority for the Government. They are an essential part of the environment and play a crucial role in food production. As I said, we are analysing the many responses—probably some of them from her constituents—to our recent consultation and we will set out our proposals in due course.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): There was widespread relief this year that the colder weather meant that the risk of aphids spreading virus yellows was reduced. Before that, the Secretary of State had authorised a neonicotinoid pesticide to be used, and he has indicated that that will be the same again for the next two years. What is worrying is that the expert advice has been hidden from us—it took freedom of information requests from Friends of the Earth to get it. The Health and Safety Executive recommended refusal, so will the Minister explain why the advice was overruled? At a time when the UK is being looked to for global leadership on the environment, hiding that expert advice is not a good look. Who was pressing the Government to overrule that advice and will they do better in future?

Victoria Prentis: The Government are committed to the neonicotinoid restrictions that we put in place in 2018, and to the sustainable use of pesticides. I believe that the hon. Gentleman was a signatory to the letter that we answered in January this year. As we set out in our letter, when making decisions on pesticides we took

advice from the HSE, from the expert committee on pesticides and from DEFRA's own chief scientific adviser. The specific exemption that the hon. Gentleman has referred to was for a non-flowering crop that is grown only in the east of England, to protect against possible aphid predation, which we were very concerned about at the time. I share his relief that it was not necessary to use neonics on that occasion, and I would ask him to welcome the fact that the authorisation was strictly controlled. We put in place a reduced application rate and a prohibition on growing flowering crops afterwards. I am pleased that it was not necessary to use it on that occasion.

Protection against Flooding

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help protect communities against flooding. [914624]

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps he is taking to help protect communities against flooding. [914626]

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to help protect communities against flooding. [914639]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Government are investing a record £5.2 billion to better protect 336,000 properties from flooding and coastal erosion over the next six years. Alongside that, we recently announced that 25 areas will receive a share of a further £150 million for particularly innovative projects dealing with flood resilience and pioneering many things that we think we will learn lessons from. Our long-term policy statement outlines our ambition to create a nation more resilient to flooding and coastal erosion and we are taking a whole range of actions to forward that.

Henry Smith [V]: I pay tribute to this Government for the significant flood mitigation investment that has been delivered. What discussions has my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary had with our right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary about not building new homes on flood-risk areas, such as the proposed west of Ifield development?

Rebecca Pow: As my hon. Friend will know, national planning policy provides clear safeguards for protecting people and property from flooding, and the national planning policy framework is very clear that inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at the highest risk. Where development is necessary in such areas, that development should be made safe for its lifetime without increasing flood risk elsewhere, and should be appropriately flood-resilient.

Jonathan Gullis [V]: Residents of Norton Green and their local ward councillors, Dave Evans, James Smith and Carl Edwards, have regularly raised the issue of flooding. The River Trent and the canal feeder to the Caldon canal both run through Norton Green, yet the river is hardly ever dredged. The river is the responsibility of the Environment Agency, and the canal feeder is the responsibility of Severn Trent Water. If those two agencies co-ordinated their work, they could help to alleviate the problem, so will my hon. Friend work with me to ensure

that the Environment Agency and Severn Trent Water undertake regular dredging to help to improve the lives of Norton Green residents?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is a doughty spokesman for his constituency, and rightly so. I encourage all relevant risk-management authorities to work together on watercourse maintenance, for the benefit of Norton Green's residents in this case. Of course, responsibilities lie with a range of bodies, including the Environment Agency, which is responsible for the main rivers; lead local flood authorities or internal drainage boards, which are responsible for ordinary watercourses; and riparian landowners whose land adjoins a watercourse. My hon. Friend could usefully get all those heads together so that people can work constructively, as they are in many parts of the country, to deal with our flooding issues and keep our communities safe.

James Wild: This year the Burnhams, the Creakes and other villages in North West Norfolk suffered flooding that resulted in sewage coming up through manhole covers due to water infiltrating the sewer system. Things got so bad that foul water had to be pumped into one of our precious chalk streams, so will the Minister ensure that the Environment Agency holds Anglian Water to account so that it puts in place plans and investment to ensure that that does not happen again?

Rebecca Pow: That is a scenario that nobody wants to see repeated. I hope my hon. Friend knows that I am championing his cause, as are the Government. Tackling the harm caused by sewer overflows into rivers, particularly chalk streams, is a top priority for the Government. That is why we established a storm overflows taskforce, made up of the Government, the water industry, regulators and environmental groups, which has set a long-term goal to eliminate harm from storm overflows. The group is considering the problems caused by infiltration, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and last month we announced plans to introduce legislation to address these things. We are moving on this.

Plastic Waste

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle plastic waste. [914625]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We are committed to tackling plastic pollution. We have introduced a ban, with a few very specific exemptions, on the supply of plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds, and reduced single-use plastic carrier bag usage by 95% in the main supermarkets through the 5p charge. This is a great day, and I am pleased my hon. Friend has chosen to raise this subject today, because we are debating increasing the charge to 10p and extending it to all retailers, and we are seeking powers in the Environment Bill to charge for single-use plastic items, making recycling more consistent.

Jacob Young: Plastic waste is a huge problem in coastal communities such as mine, but does the Minister agree that it is not that plastic is the problem but that waste is the problem and we should do all we can to tackle waste? To that end, will she come to Redcar and Cleveland, when restrictions allow, to visit the new site for ReNew ELP at Wilton, which began construction last month and where revolutionary hydrothermal

technology will be used to turn hard-to-recycle plastics back into their component oils, allowing them to be reused?

Rebecca Pow: There is another doughty spokesman for his constituency. My hon. Friend has spoken to me about this matter before. It is vital that we tackle plastic waste by taking a holistic approach, which includes increasing reuse and recycling, in line with our ambition to transition to a more circular economy. More work is required to understand where chemical recycling represents the best outcome for waste and to assess any unintended consequences, but I welcome the invitation and the chance to visit the ReNew ELP site. He should contact my office, and, when time permits, I would be delighted to visit.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is good to be here in the Chamber and see you face to face today, Mr Speaker.

The Joint Unit for Waste Crime is an important component of the fight against waste, fly-tipping and littering. The Peterstone Wentlooge area of Newport West is a good example of an area in dire need of action from this unit, as the “road to nowhere” there, as it is known, is blighted by fly-tipping, including of noxious substances and chemicals. Clean-up costs for more than 1 million fly-tips cost the taxpayer £58 million in 2017-18, the last time the Department published details of clean-up costs. This Government have pushed councils to the brink and removed the funding needed to tackle fly-tipping, so will the Minister tell the House when this Government will finally take the action needed to protect this green and pleasant land?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and I am sorry to hear about that road to nowhere. I would hate my constituency to be described as the “road to nowhere”. I understand what she is getting at, but this Government are tackling litter. We have a whole policy on tackling litter and I have been meeting Keep Britain Tidy regularly to discuss what more we can do. We have had a lot of campaigns, including “Keep it, Bin it”, which has been extremely effective, and we will be working further on measures. We relaunched the countryside code and added to it during lockdown to cut down on the amount of litter that is dumped, and this has had a significant effect. Local authorities have all of their measures that they can put in place—they can take people to court and people can get hefty fines—but they need to take action with the measures at hand.

EU Flowering Bulb Imports

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the domestic inspection process for flowering bulbs imported from the EU. [914628]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): It is important that we maintain our biosecurity. Physical inspections of high-priority plants from the EU, including flowering bulbs, have taken place at their destination since 1 January. This is a temporary arrangement designed to prevent delays at the border, but it is working effectively and has been well received by the trade.

Mrs Latham [V]: Sadly, the bulb organisation that I spoke to told me that a couple of people have left the trade because it is not worth their while. I know that a lot of progress has been made since January on facilitating the trade between the UK and the EU, but there is still a lot of friction in the import and export of flowering bulbs. For instance, the export of bulbs in the green, which have soil on them, is now prohibited except in very specific circumstances, and sometimes 1,000 boxes might need to be inspected, which is not easy. What plans does my hon. Friend have to discuss with her EU counterparts the prospect of simplifying the trade in flowering bulbs with the EU?

Victoria Prentis: It is true that the plant-health requirements for dormant bulbs are different from those for bulbs in growth. My officials and I are willing to discuss directly with my hon. Friend’s constituents the specific issues that she raises. I reassure her that we continue to have discussions with our counterparts in EU about export processes.

Toxic Air Pollutants: Local Authorities

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What discussions he has had with local authorities on preventing toxic air pollutants from affecting children’s health. [914629]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Ministers regularly engage with local authorities to discuss air quality and assess their air-quality plans. I recently met elected representatives from Greater Manchester, Bath and North East Somerset, Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke, and we have made £225 million available to local authorities, via the active travel fund, to deliver safe cycling and walking routes, including school streets. As we review the air-quality strategy, we will include measures specifically to protect children from pollution.

Tony Lloyd [V]: The death of nine-year-old Ella Kissi-Debrah was a family tragedy, but it was made a public scandal when the coroner decided some time ago that her death was caused by air pollution, which was shocking. Yesterday, the coroner decided in his most recent report that there is no safe level of air pollution and called on the Government to bring our air-quality standards up to the World Health Organisation recommended levels, which would mean a significant reduction in pollution. Will the Minister tell the House whether the Government accept that recommendation? If not, we are literally putting the lives of our children at risk.

Rebecca Pow: We are of course taking this issue extremely seriously, and all our sympathies go out to Ella’s family. In fact, the Secretary of State and I were pleased to meet Ella’s mother—for which we thank her—and we listened closely to what she said. The coroner’s report was published yesterday and we will respond in due course. The points made are being taken extremely seriously.

Through our landmark Environment Bill, we will introduce a duty to set a long-term air-quality target and an exposure target. To do that, we are meeting all the scientists and academics and all those who can inform us as to exactly the right level to set. We understand that air pollution is a killer and we need to take it very

seriously. A £3.8 million air clean-up programme is under way and we are working hard to ensure that that money is targeted at the places where it is needed.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): In the Committee on the missing-in-action and elusive Environment Bill, Labour tried to write the World Health Organisation air-quality guidelines into the Bill. Unsurprisingly, the Tories voted us down. Yesterday, in response to the devastating death of Ella Kissi-Debrah in 2013, the coroner published a prevention of future deaths report that recommended that the Government should view the World Health Organisation guidelines for air pollution “as minimum requirements”, because all particulate matter is harmful. The coroner has given a clear recommendation and clearly stated that it would save lives, so when will the Minister commit to setting a PM_{2.5} target that is at least in line with the World Health Organisation guidelines?

Rebecca Pow: The report highlights that there is no safe limit of PM_{2.5}, which is why it is so important that we get it right. That is why we are taking so much advice on it. The WHO has acclaimed our clean air strategy as world leading and

“an example for the rest of the world to follow”.

It sets out the steps that we are starting to take to improve air quality. The Environment Bill will introduce a duty to set a long-term target on air quality and an exposure target, which nobody has done before. We will give the issue all the attention it deserves.

Neonicotinoids

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): What his Department’s policy is on the use of neonicotinoids in agriculture. [914631]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): DEFRA applies the precautionary principle in relation to pesticides. We therefore supported a ban in 2018 on the use of neonicotinoids to treat crops. Given what the current science tells us about these pesticides, they can be authorised for use only on an emergency basis if very specific circumstances are met and with the appropriate environmental safeguards.

Dr Poulter [V]: Farmers in the east of England very much welcome the Secretary of State’s dispensation for the use of neonics in treating aphids. What I want from the Secretary of State is some reassurance for the farmers in the east of England that, until a suitable alternative to neonics that is evidence based is available, he will continue to use the dispensation so that we can properly support our farmers to grow crops and protect them from aphids.

George Eustice: As I said, these are emergency authorisations that we grant on an annual basis. In the case of this application for the current year, we added additional conditions to those that have been proposed by the applicant—in particular, adding another 10 months to the period before a flowering crop could be sown. Also, in this case, the threshold for pests was not met and was therefore not needed, but, of course, if there is an application in a future year, we will look at that again.

Topical Questions

[914579] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Today is Earth Day, an initiative that has been running now every year since 1970 and promotes engagement, awareness and individual action for our environment. The Government continue their own engagement with countries around the world in the build-up to COP26 in Glasgow later this year. As part of that programme, next Monday, along with the World Bank, I will be hosting the first dialogue on sustainable agriculture, setting out how changes to agriculture policy can incentivise regenerative agriculture and enhance environmental assets in the farmed landscape.

Wera Hobhouse: Given that food waste accounts for 19% of the UK’s landfill and that even the proposed targets in the Environment Bill to separate household food waste collections are unlikely to eliminate food waste in landfill by 2030, is it not time that his Department considered a food waste to landfill ban in England for food waste businesses that produce more than 5 kg of food waste per week?

George Eustice: We are obviously looking at this very carefully through our waste resources strategy and through the provisions in the Environment Bill. We will require local authorities to collect food waste through our consistent collections policy; that is an area that we are consulting on at the moment. Obviously, once food waste is collected separately we can treat it separately, and that could involve anaerobic digesters and other ways of dealing with this waste other than landfill.

[914580] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): Pet theft, especially of pedigree dogs, is a major issue in my constituency. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice about introducing new measures to tackle this crime?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, I had meetings in March with both the Home Secretary and the Chancellor on this particular issue. We have set up a pet theft taskforce that is investigating it and, in particular, gathering the evidence to understand the scale of the

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The year 2020 was the warmest year on record; more habitats were lost; more species were facing extinction; and more raw sewage was pumped into our nation’s rivers, seemingly without consequence for the water companies involved. On Earth Day, will the Secretary of State commit to take fast action against water companies that are pumping raw sewage into our rivers, killing fish, killing habitats and killing birds, and do so while committing to no further roll-back of environmental protections?

George Eustice: I have already acted in this area. The Department has established a taskforce to look at combined sewer overflows, which are one of the key sources of sewage pollution, and we are also putting a real focus on tackling sewage incidents in our future water strategy, which will inform Ofwat’s approach to the pricing reviews that it has with water companies.

[914583] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: According to research compiled by the Local Government Association, the manufacturers of food packaging in the UK contribute only about 10% of the cost of recycling their products. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as part of the efforts that we are undertaking to improve the recycling of waste food packaging, we need to see the manufacturers of that packaging contribute much more towards the costs of recycling their products, in line with the contribution they make in other countries, rather than leaving our council tax payers to foot most of the bill?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend on this matter. As he will be aware, the Environment Bill introduces the concept of extended producer responsibility, and we are consulting on that at the moment. In future, the manufacturers and the users of packaging for products will take responsibility for recycling it.

[914581] **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: Waste incinerators emit toxins and pollutants that are harmful to human health and exacerbate climate change. I am pleased to say that local residents in my constituency of Cynon Valley have recently successfully campaigned against a waste incinerator through the Valleys For Tourism Not Trash campaign, and the Welsh Government have recently announced a moratorium on any future large-scale incinerators. Will the Minister commit to reconsidering the Government's decision to exclude waste incinerators from their post-Brexit carbon emissions trading scheme and follow Wales's lead by introducing a moratorium on future incinerators?

George Eustice: This is obviously a contentious area. However, energy from waste can be a way of extracting some use from it. It is often preferable to landfill and often has lower carbon implications because some energy can be generated from it. Nevertheless, there are some environmental concerns around this. That is why in England the Environment Agency has to authorise and license any such facility.

[914584] **Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con) [V]: Charity shops are currently experiencing both a surge in donations and an increase in fly-tipping on their doorsteps. Many of the goods donated are of poor quality and simply cannot be sold on. This is causing significant extra waste disposal costs for charities, which have already seen their incomes diminish during the pandemic. What support can DEFRA offer through its new waste management plan to support the charitable community in this financial challenge?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Fly-tipping has become a scourge in recent years. It has become a growing problem, with organised gangs behind some of these waste crime incidents. We have already taken action to improve our surveillance and to improve the traceability of some of these products so that we can trace them back to the source that they came from and bring those responsible to justice.

[914582] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: A shocking report released by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union has revealed that one in every five people working in the British food sector, which stretches from factories and distribution firms to cafés and supermarkets, live in households that have run out of food because of a lack of money. We live in arguably the sixth richest country on this planet and our workers are going hungry because of meagre wages. Does the Secretary of State agree that access to affordable and nutritious food is a basic human right, and will he commit to ensuring that the right to food is included in next month's Queen's Speech?

George Eustice: The Government monitor household spending on food very closely, and we agree that we want to raise earnings among the lowest paid. That is why it has been a long-standing policy of this Government to first introduce a national living wage and then increase it incrementally year on year, and we have done that to take the lowest paid out of poverty. As a result of that policy, household spending on food among the poorest households has actually fallen from about 16% to under 15%, which is the lowest on record.

[914585] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): I have been working with local councillors in Stoke Bardolph and Burton Joyce to work with residents and partner organisations to set up a flood action group that will help to take some preventive action and provide reassurance in part of the Gedling constituency that occasionally floods. Will my right hon. Friend join me commending those who are volunteering to join this group and tell me what steps the Government are taking to help to prevent flooding in Nottinghamshire?

George Eustice: I commend the work that my hon. Friend and those local volunteers are doing. We have our flood resilience forums around the country. The Environment Agency works with local government on them and on putting them in place so that communities can improve their resilience. More broadly, we have an ambitious capital programme of more than £5 billion over the next five years to invest in flood defences and to protect communities such as his.

[914589] **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: In an earlier exchange about air quality, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), seemed to suggest that because there was no safe level of air pollution in the way it affects in particular our children's lungs, that is a reason for rejecting a move to make legal the World Health Organisation standards. That is patent nonsense of course, but can Ministers look particularly at the position around our schools? It is where our young children are very vulnerable. Traffic idling can make pollution levels intense, particularly in urban areas. Is it not time now to take proper action and not simply hear fine words? Action now, Minister, please.

George Eustice: I am not sure that is what my hon. Friend said earlier, but she was making the point that since there is no safe limit of particulate matter and PM_{2.5}, what we should be doing is focusing on additional measures such as overall population exposure, and that is indeed something we are looking at through the target-setting process in the Environment Bill.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Families and Marriages

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support and strengthen families and marriages. [914539]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): My hon. Friend will be delighted to learn that the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have launched a families and households commission, which will be chaired by Professor Janet Walker, emeritus professor of family policy at Newcastle University, and the Bishop of Durham, who is the Church of England's lead on family policy.

Miriam Cates [V]: This has been a tough year for families, but the strain on family life began long before covid, with policies encouraging parents to work longer hours, the breakdown of family relationships and the toxic effects of social media. In my surgeries, I meet many parents deeply concerned about their children's mental health but not knowing where to turn for help. The local church could be well placed to support families in this area, so what plans does the Church have to encourage, empower and equip parents as they do their best to raise children in such a challenging time?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is right to raise all those issues. We know that it is generally far better for the mental health of children that they are in school, which is why Church schools have stayed open as much as possible. Millions of home-schooled children have also used the "Faith at Home" online resources provided by the Church. Many parishes are now reopening their early years and children's programmes, and the Church is actively working to provide more children's and youth work in future.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Political Literacy: Young People

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps the Electoral Commission is taking to increase levels of political literacy among young people. [914540]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Electoral Commission has an important duty to promote public awareness of the UK's electoral systems. Following the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland and Wales, and ahead of next month's elections, the commission has been working with teachers and youth leaders to support citizenship education and has shared newly developed education resources for young people in Scotland and Wales. These resources will be extended to cover young audiences in England

and Northern Ireland later this year. Alongside that, the commission has developed a new public awareness campaign and online information hub to increase public understanding of political campaigning carried out online.

Vicky Foxcroft [V]: Shout Out UK, the secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group on political literacy, emphasises that political and media literacy go hand in hand. Considering the excessive harm we have seen caused by misinformation, conspiracy theories and low levels of media literacy, how can the Electoral Commission collaborate with organisations working to counter misinformation in order to fulfil its remit to ensure the integrity of the democratic process?

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The commission has recently published political literacy resources to include a module on online campaigning, which provides structured suggestions to help young people assess the information they see online. The commission has collaborated with a range of partners to develop those resources, including teachers, organisations supporting citizenship education, the Scottish and Welsh Governments and their respective Education Departments.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Conversion Therapy

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support the Government's plans to ban conversion therapy. [914541]

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to implement its 2017 commitment to end conversion therapy. [914546]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England's General Synod passed a resolution in 2017 calling on the Government to end conversion therapy, to prevent vulnerable people from being subjected to potential spiritual abuse. The Church remains committed to this and will work with the Government on how it can most effectively be framed.

Aaron Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer and am glad to hear that restatement of the General Synod's position in 2017. Do the commissioners agree that the Church must reject any assumption that any one identity or orientation is preferable to another and that any one-directional pursuit of a particular orientation amounts to conversion therapy?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. The Prime Minister remains resolutely committed to prohibiting the imposition of any harmful and unnecessary practice in this area, without criminalising clergy and Church members for non-coercive pastoral support that individuals ask for.

Peter Gibson [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. However, may I urge him to do all he can in the upcoming discourse on this important ban to which the Government have committed to ensure that religious

freedom and banning this abuse is not presented as a binary choice? Does he acknowledge that many of Christian faith and other faiths want to see an end to this abuse?

Andrew Selous: The Church believes that it is possible to end conversion therapy without outlawing prayer and private conversations with clergy and Church members that an individual has requested. The Church has not requested an opt-out from the proposed law and will look carefully at the detail when the legislation is published.

Online Worship: Church Attendance

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the effect of online worship on church attendance. [914542]

Andrew Selous: The Church has been using all sorts of virtual and digital ways to worship in a highly effective manner, and that will need to continue as we open up again. The Church has reached many more people as a result.

Martin Vickers [V]: While I acknowledge the challenges that churches have faced in organising services of public worship, I am somewhat disappointed with the many weeks that some parishes have gone without services. What concerns me is that, if the Church quite reasonably uses more online resources in coming years, it should not use that to reduce the number of clergy, who have a much wider role in our communities than providing services. Can my hon. Friend assure me that this will not be used an excuse for reducing clergy numbers?

Andrew Selous: Increasing numbers of churches are now open again across the country, and while online services will no doubt continue, they are not seen as a substitute for meeting in person. Clergy have played an essential role during the pandemic, and I thank them warmly for everything they have done. My hon. Friend will be reassured to know that the Archbishop of York told the General Synod in February that the Church needs more priests, not less, and a parish system “revitalised” for its future mission to the nation, building on the work that the Church has done so well to tell the good news of Jesus and to meet need during the pandemic.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Candidates with Disabilities

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What steps the Electoral Commission has taken to support candidates with disabilities. [914543]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The Electoral Commission has supported all three of the UK’s Governments to develop funds to support access to elected office for candidates with disabilities. It provides guidance to candidates with disabilities about how to stand for election and how the spending rules apply to

costs reasonably attributable to their disability. More broadly, the commission works in partnership with a range of organisations to ensure that people with disabilities have the information and support they need to be able to register and vote in elections.

Dr Cameron [V]: The proportion of politicians with disabilities still vastly lags behind that required to reflect our society, causing disadvantage and exclusion. The all-party parliamentary group for disability, which I chair, is undertaking an inquiry into the support required to ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunity to stand for Parliament. Will the commissioners link with the APPG to support implementation of its findings?

Christian Matheson: The House will know of the work that the APPG has done across a range of disabilities, led by the hon. Lady, and is very respectful of the work that she and her team are doing. The commissioners are aware that the APPG will be undertaking this inquiry, and they assure me that not only will they help to inform that inquiry but that the inquiry will help to inform the commission with its outcome. Hopefully that will be a two-way process that will improve matters for people with disabilities in terms of their ability to stand for and participate in elections.

Local Referendums: Local Government Reorganisation

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): What assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the potential merits of using local referendums to inform local government reorganisation. [914545]

Christian Matheson: There are mechanisms in law for holding referendums on a number of local matters. Decisions on whether to deploy such a mechanism are political and not for the commission. It has therefore made no assessment of the merits of using local referendums to inform local government reorganisation.

Mr Liddell-Grainger [V]: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I do not disagree at all, but we have a problem in this country when a body like Somerset County Council, which wants to go unitary, has asked the Government to do a consultation using the citizen space, which is not a consultation—anybody in the world can take part. Surely a referendum is the only way to truly hear what the people of Somerset want to say—under the auspices of the Electoral Commission, so that we have proper democracy, proper accountability? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is the way that government should work? Is that not the way the House should work?

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman has a long history of promoting his concerns on local government in his area, and the House will respect the persistence in his campaign. However, under current legislation, local authority accounting officers would be responsible for running local referendums. The commission’s role would be limited to providing guidance to accounting officers on some aspects of the administration of local referendums, particularly where they are concerned with other events. If we were to achieve what the hon. Gentleman was hoping for, I suspect and fear that a change in legislation would be required.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Persecution for Religion and Belief

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of where people are at most risk of persecution as a result of their religion and belief. [914547]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England is grateful to all those who carry the flame for the freedom of religion or belief. I would point to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom as a reliable source of information in this area. In its 2020 report it singles out China, Eritrea, India, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Russia, Syria and Vietnam as countries of particular concern.

Caroline Ansell [V]: The global pandemic has only exacerbated the persecution of people of faith. I was dismayed to learn from this year's world watch list that Nigeria has become increasingly hostile to Christians. The Anglican Church in Nigeria is its second-largest congregation in the world, so what support is the Church of England providing to raise awareness and to tackle persecution in Nigeria and around the world?

Andrew Selous: The persistent attacks in northern Nigeria by Boko Haram and Islamist militia are a source of profound concern to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who knows Nigeria well, and to the wider Church. We are in regular contact with the Nigerian authorities and the Foreign Office, and tomorrow the General Synod of the Church of England will be debating freedom of religion and belief, which shows how seriously Church members throughout the country take this issue.

Regenerative Agriculture

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support regenerative agriculture, plant more trees and be effective stewards of hedgerows on its land. [914548]

Andrew Selous: I recently met Environment Ministers to discuss this issue, and the commissioners are working closely with the Forestry Commission and other similar landowners to share best practice to improve the environment of rural let estates. We are encouraging regenerative farming practices, with new farm tenancies including obligations on soil health at the beginning and end of tenancies.

Virginia Crosbie: I thank my hon. Friend very much for his excellent answer. The Church owns more than 100,000 acres of forest land, including large areas in Wales. How are the Church Commissioners ensuring that woodland can be sustainably managed, and that species such as red squirrels and hedgehogs are being adequately protected?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I can tell her that the Church Commissioners own 95,000 acres of forestry across the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States of America and Australia; 2,166 acres of our forestry is in Wales. All our forests conform to the UK woodland assurance scheme and the UK forestry standard and have Forestry Stewardship Council certification, which the World Wide Fund for Nature recognises as the hallmark of responsible forest management.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—

UK Steel: Restoration and Renewal Programme

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote the use of UK steel in the restoration and renewal programme. [914551]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire): The restoration and renewal programme will create investment nationwide through a supply chain involving hundreds of businesses. Building materials will be sourced domestically wherever possible, including high-quality UK steel.

Charlotte Nichols [V]: The Palace of Westminster is our nation's flagship building and the home of UK democracy. It is only right that in procurement for its restoration we do all we can to support UK manufacturing and jobs. At a difficult time for the steel industry, an infrastructure project of this size and profile would no doubt be a huge boost for the sector. Will the right hon. Gentleman please outline what measures will be taken to ensure that steel used in the renovation and restoration of Parliament is bought in Britain?

Damian Hinds: I concur with the hon. Lady, who has consistently championed the UK's high-quality steel sector. We do not yet know the exact steel requirements for the project, but there clearly will be a requirement. The project will obviously comply with public sector procurement rules but within those, as I said in my previous answer, we will seek to source materials domestically wherever possible. I confirm to her today that the programme is planning to sign the UK steel charter, an initiative from the sector that aims to maximise opportunities for the UK economy and UK steel producers.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Social Housing

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What future plans the Church of England has to work with social housing providers. [914553]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Since 2015, the Church Commissioners have secured planning permission for 3,820 new homes, of which 820 are affordable. Across our portfolio, there is

land suitable for the delivery of approximately 28,500 new homes across England, of which we estimate around 8,600 will be affordable.

Stephen Timms [V]: I thank the hon. Member for that answer. He announced a new commission earlier. I welcome very much the bold vision for addressing the housing crisis in the archbishops' housing commission report published in February. How will the Church work with social housing providers to provide desperately needed affordable housing, including in east London?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome for the housing commission report—a sentiment I very much share. The new housing executive team, led by the Bishop of Chelmsford, will focus on implementing the commission's recommendations wherever we are able to do so across England, hopefully including east London.

Landholdings Map

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What plans the Church of England has to make the recently commissioned map of the landholdings of the commissioners, dioceses and parishes publicly available. [914554]

Andrew Selous: I reassure the hon. Lady that the process initiated by the archbishops' housing commission of mapping as much of the Church of England's land as possible has begun. It includes not just the commissioners' landholdings, but land owned by dioceses and parishes, as well as glebe land.

Kerry McCarthy [V]: I thank the hon. Member for that response—it feels like we are starting to get somewhere. As he knows, I am keen for there to be transparency, because it will help campaigners identify sites for rewilding, agroforestry, social housing and other public goods. Accessing maps of all the land held by the Church Commissioners from the Land Registry would cost £37,428. Will he commit to making that information publicly available and free of charge? Will that be on the agenda at the General Synod, which starts tomorrow?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady's intervention is timely, as the housing commission report has been timetabled for debate at the General Synod's July session. The Church Commissioners are in close contact with the housing executive team, who are implementing the housing commission's recommendations, about their plans for the future ownership and use of this map.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Voter ID: Democratic Participation

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the potential effect of Government plans to mandate voter ID in future elections on levels of democratic participation in the UK. [914566]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The commission's independent evaluation of the Government's pilots held in 2018 and 2019 found that a large majority of people already had access to the forms of ID used in the pilots. There was no evidence that turnout in the pilot scheme areas was significantly affected by the requirement for polling station voters to show identification. The commission emphasised that the UK Government and Parliament should carefully consider the available evidence about the impact and proportionality of different approaches on the accessibility and security of polling station voting. If legislation is brought forward, the commission will provide expert advice to parliamentarians on the specific proposals.

Mr Carmichael [V]: I thank the hon. Member for that answer. Notwithstanding the commission's findings, though, it is estimated that it would cost something in the region of £20 million to introduce a measure such as this and there is always the risk of depressing voter turnout. Would he impress on the commission that, if that money is there to be spent, it would be better spent encouraging voter turnout, rather than on measures such as this, which I contend would inevitably depress it?

Christian Matheson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. The commission has a responsibility to maximise voter participation as well as to maintain free and fair elections. I will certainly impress on the commission the necessity of getting the balance right between those two responsibilities.

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

10.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

10.33 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Leader of the House to ask the business question, I should like to remind all colleagues that, today, 22 April, marks the anniversary of the very first hybrid sitting of the House, when for the first time hon. and right hon. Members were able to participate remotely in our proceedings. This innovation helped enable Parliament to continue discharging its key functions of scrutiny, debate and legislation safely, despite the extraordinary conditions imposed by the covid-19 pandemic. On behalf of all Members, I should like to thank all the staff of the House and the Parliamentary Digital Service for their remarkable achievement in making the hybrid House possible. It is a big thank you to everyone.

Business of the House

10.34 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Before I do, may I join you, Mr Speaker, in thanking the digital and broadcasting services? They worked over the whole of the Easter recess last year to make this possible. They gave up most of their holiday during most of last year to make our hybrid proceedings work, and thus ensured that there has been proper parliamentary scrutiny throughout the whole year and that our democracy has remained strong and effective. Our thanks are most sincere and heartfelt because they have done something of the utmost importance for our nation.

On the business statement for the week commencing on 26 April, the business will include:

MONDAY 26 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Financial Services Bill, followed by consideration of Lords message on the Domestic Abuse Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the National Security and Investment Bill, followed by a motion to approve the Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (Amendment) (High-Risk Countries) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 392), followed by a motion relating to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (England) (Amendment) (No. 7) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 150).

TUESDAY 27 APRIL—Consideration of Lords message on the Fire Safety Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve the draft Warm Home Discount (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2021, followed by a motion to approve the Trade and Official Controls (Transitional Arrangements for Prior Notifications) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 429).

WEDNESDAY 28 APRIL—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve the draft Double Taxation Relief (Federal Republic of Germany) Order 2021 and the draft Double Taxation Relief (Sweden) Order 2021, followed by a motion to approve the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Extension of the Relevant Period) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 375), followed by a motion related to the Immigration (Guidance on Detention of Vulnerable Persons) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 184), followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve the House of Commons Commission report on amendments to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme.

THURSDAY 29 APRIL—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

The House will prorogue when Royal Assent to all Acts has been signified.

I am pleased to announce that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the summer recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 22 July and return on Monday 6 September.

Valerie Vaz: I join you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House in the thanks that have been expressed. I want to thank the Clerk of the House for his leadership in ensuring that the whole staff of the House, the

[Valerie Vaz]

broadcasting and everything else enabled us to be the first Parliament in the world to be a hybrid Parliament and to carry on with our business.

I also want to congratulate Lord Fowler on retiring and Lord McFall on becoming the new Lord Speaker. Staying with the Lords, I want to pay tribute to Frank Judd, who served as an MP in Portsmouth from 1966 to 1979 and was a Minister in the Wilson and Callaghan Governments. He was a director of Oxfam before being appointed a life peer in 1991. He was an outstanding Member of both Houses. May he rest in peace.

We had Foreign Office questions on Tuesday, and there was nothing about Nazanin or Anousheh. Mehran Raof's friend has contacted the Foreign Office to ask for help. He has a trial coming up on 28 April, but has not been allowed to see his lawyer. He needs a Foreign Office representative to be at the trial and he also needs a doctor. I wonder if the Leader of the House could ensure that the Foreign Secretary is aware of that. It would have helped if the Foreign Secretary had updated the House on Tuesday about the permanent adjournment—it looked like a continuous adjournment—of the court case, even though a Government Minister has said the debt should be paid. I am not sure why the Foreign Secretary did not update the House on the citizens.

A statement was put out yesterday at 5 pm on the cuts to overseas development aid, and it is quite upsetting really that that was not announced in the House on Tuesday. This is a massive cut and it is going to have a huge effect on the way Great Britain is seen in the world.

I wonder what Her Majesty's official Opposition have done because we do not appear to have received the business, whereas other Opposition parties have. Normally, we get the provisional business the day before, but I think we are off the bcc and cc lists. Would the Leader of the House kindly tell us what we have done wrong when we do not get the business?

Last week, the Leader of the House did not answer my questions on the independent adviser on ministerial standards. There has been no list of Ministers' financial interests for nine months and no list of donor meetings. He will also want to correct the record, I am sure, because he said that Greensill did not get public support, when in fact it did: it got it from the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme. So the lobbying did pay off. Greensill is the only supply chain finance firm accredited for CLBILS, despite not being regulated by the Bank of England or the Financial Conduct Authority. What is so special about Greensill and what is so special about Dyson? He took his business out of the UK.

Now, the Prime Minister was wrong. The shadow Chancellor has asked me to ask the Leader of the House to remind the Prime Minister that there were companies making ventilators in this country—Siemens and Airbus, to name a few—so I wonder if the Leader of the House could pass that on. She cannot find the Chancellor—we would like to know where he is—otherwise she would have passed the message on.

The Government are doing it again. The Cabinet Office and the civil servants are saying, "Please don't do this." They are going to appoint the head of space policy at Amazon to the Government's own OneWeb, in which they have invested £400 million. This person will

be working at Amazon as well as working with the Government. The Leader of the House needs to look at that. They have their own project, Kuiper. They are clearly going to have a competitive advantage. This is another case of fix it and flog it.

It is disappointing that the Leader of the House did not tell the House last week that the Prime Minister might have been in India. We got it from the presidential-style announcement in the £2.6 million press conference room, which is now going to be abandoned. It is good because the Prime Minister is not a president. It is odd to spend £2.6 million, and there is no mirror and no comb. The really nice spokesperson went from announcing geek of the week on "Peston" to leak of the week—effectively, it was a leak because those announcements should have been made in the House. She is now going back to geek of the week at COP26. She will have the same difficulty because she will have to explain contradictory Government policy. While the Government are about to reduce new emissions, they are still considering proposals for the first new deep coal mine in 30 years. Could we have a statement ruling that out before COP26?

It was announced not in Parliament but by press release that mobile phone masts up to 30 metres tall are about to get the green light to be put up in our countryside. That is a 20% increase on the current maximum. The shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), has said rural communities have become an afterthought. He wants everyone to be encouraged to take part in the rural England policy review to protect our countryside. Could we have a statement on that in the House?

I know the Leader of the House eats "Erskine May" for breakfast, but he does not seem to be absorbing anything. He knows that the job of Parliament is to hold the Executive to account, but he has presided over the marginalisation of Parliament. It is not me or the socialists saying that, but a paper by Professor Meg Russell, Dr Ruth Fox, Dr Ronan Cormacain and Dr Joe Tomlinson, which referred to no scrutiny of regulations and no meaningful debate. The House of Commons Library—I would not call it a bastion of socialism—said that Ministers can spend up to £469 billion before they get parliamentary approval of departmental spending plans. It would be interesting to hear what the Leader of the House thinks about that. Could we have a debate on restoring Parliament and the checks and balances on the Executive?

Later, there will be an apology for how black and Asian soldiers were treated. George Floyd is a movement. He died at the age of 46. A knee was on his neck for double the amount of time that I have been speaking. It was the right verdict. A young man who was about to become an architect would have been 46 today. We remember Stephen Lawrence; today is Stephen Lawrence Day.

Mr Speaker, you will be pleased that the fans got it right—no super league. They will be singing "Que Sera, we're on the way to Wem-ber-ley". We will all be going to Wembley, not just Leicester City and Chelsea, but we wish them well for the FA cup.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, of course, we are right to commemorate Stephen Lawrence and Lord Judd—may both their souls rest in peace—and to congratulate

Lord McFall on becoming the Lord Speaker. I am sure that you and he will have an excellent working relationship, to the benefit of both our Houses, Mr Speaker.

I am sorry that the right hon. Lady thinks she has not been doing the job of scrutiny very well over the last year, and that the procedures we have had have not been satisfactory and therefore the Opposition have been incapable of holding the Government to account. That is really the problem of the Opposition, in failing to use the tools to hand, of which there have been many. We have ensured that any serious change in the rules has been subject to a debate and a vote; we have had legislation passed and when it has been emergency legislation it has had the agreement of the Opposition; we have operated by consent—a year ago, when we introduced the hybrid measures, they were with the consent of the Opposition to do that, to ensure that scrutiny could continue. We have had really effective scrutiny available to the Opposition, if only they had chosen to use it. If they have not used it, that is their problem not mine, because we have made sure that Parliament has been at the centre of the national debate and that we have been able to sit. MPs have an unquestioned right to attend Parliament if they wish and if they do not wish to do so, they are able to Zoom in. So I completely dispute the interpretation of the proceedings we have had over the past year, and this is why we were all thanking the broadcasting and digital team for the work they have done.

On Nazanin and Anousheh, I will of course pass on to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary the points the right hon. Lady has raised, but I must make it clear that there must be and is no linkage between the improper, unlawful detention of British citizens and any debt that there may or may not be between the United Kingdom and a foreign state. Those two issues must always be separate.

As regards overseas aid, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is appearing before the Select Committee today, so it is only right that the statement was made yesterday—it will no doubt form the basis for much of the questioning he will face. This is a proper way of ensuring that Parliament is respected and that the rights of Parliament to hold the Government to account are maintained.

On the issue relating to the adviser to the Prime Minister on the ministerial code, an announcement is going to be made on that shortly. A recruitment process has been under way. The key is that the lobbying did not pay off; as was clear from the messages between my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and the former Prime Minister, the lobbying did not lead to any change.

Then we come on to the terrible muddle the Opposition are in about procurement of ventilators. An Opposition spokesman said:

“The Ventilator Challenge is an example of how UK manufacturers, a world class workforce...have come together”.

They were all in favour of it. The Public Accounts Committee said that this national effort is undoubtedly a “significant achievement” and a “benchmark for procurement”. So what the Prime Minister did was to ensure that things happened. This is the dither and delay of the socialists. They do not want to do things; they want to put the process ahead of succeeding. It is not, as used to be the socialists’ mantra, that the end justifies the means, but that the means justify the ends,

so if the ends had been no ventilators but they had followed some endless bureaucratic process that took six months, the socialists would be happy. Instead we got on and did it, and we got 30,000 ventilators in a matter of weeks—that was up from 9,000. It was a phenomenal achievement, and let us praise Dyson for all that he has contributed to British manufacturing, the huge success that he has been and the commitment—£20 million of his own money—that he put towards ventilators. That is a proper patriotic gesture by a man I hold in the highest esteem and we should praise.

As we are praising people, let us also praise Allegra Stratton, who has made a marvellous contribution to the Government and will do so for COP—the conference of the parties—as well. In her various roles, she has succeeded in holding politicians to account. I remember being quizzed by her in one of her various journalistic roles. Indeed, I was “geek of the week” on one occasion on the Peston show. Some Members may think I am geek every week, but I once got that particular award. I note that the office that has been so nicely done up is the Privy Council office. As Lord President of the Council, perhaps I should be putting in a claim to use it for a good and worthy purpose of Privy Council business.

As regards any coalmining planning applications, once called in they are, as the right hon. Lady knows, in a quasi-judicial process and it would be wrong of me to go into the details of them. Let me finish by reiterating the point that if there has not been proper scrutiny, she knows where the failure to scrutinise has come from.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There is widespread dismay and outrage across the Kettering constituency that the organiser of a huge Irish Traveller funeral, held right in the middle of Kettering during the covid lockdown in November and attended by 150 people, in clear and flagrant breach of the pandemic regulations, has not been prosecuted. He was served by police with the notice of a £10,000 fine, but the Crown Prosecution Service this week at Northampton magistrates court decided not to pursue the case, and his legal costs are to be reimbursed. In contrast, hundreds of local families who have lost loved ones over the last year have respected the rules and encountered much distress in limiting the number of mourners at funerals. I have already contacted the Solicitor General about this important issue, but can we have a Government statement on the fact that once again, it appears that there is one rule for Gypsies and Travellers and another for everyone else?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am concerned about what my hon. Friend is saying, because, “Be you ever so high, the law is above you”. That is a fundamental principle of justice in this country. I am obviously not familiar with the details of the case that he raises and the CPS is operationally independent in its charging decisions. Cases ought to be decided by the CPS on their own merits, on the tests set by the code for Crown prosecutors. I note, however, that he has already raised this with the Solicitor General and I will pass on his comments to the Attorney General.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I join the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House in thanking all in the House who have contributed to ensuring that Members have been able to continue to participate virtually. It has not always been a smooth passage and

[Owen Thompson]

there have often been disagreements about the process, but we have got there. Indeed, I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your part in that process, because you have made so much of this possible.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister indicated that he would “immediately” publish his personal correspondence relating to covid contracts, so will the Leader of the House update the House by telling us what the Government consider to be the meaning of the word “immediately”? When will the Prime Minister actually release this correspondence?

Given that the Prime Minister has promised to “fix” tax issues for billionaires over text message, will the Leader of the House also support a full public inquiry into lobbying practices under this Government and potential breaches of the ministerial code? Perhaps the Government could also advise the 3 million left behind and struggling without any support how they can get the ear of the Prime Minister, or is this only for the elite group with the phone number who are able to influence policy?

It is not just Opposition Members who are making suggestions about some of these issues. As a great believer in honest and fair procurement practices in the UK, I have no doubt that the Leader of the House will be alarmed to read the results of the Transparency International UK report, “Track and Trace”, which concluded that the absence of competition in awarding contracts has been “unjustifiable” and that

“arrangements for enabling scrutiny over the use of taxpayers’ money”—

have been “woefully inadequate” due to “systemic deficiencies in how” the Government

“accounts for the use of public funds”.

Will the Leader of the House now champion tougher action from Government, including backing my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill, to ensure that Government contract decisions are not riddled with crony accusations and that decisions are being taken in the best interests of the public purse?

Finally, as a believer in market forces, I am sure that the UK Government will have a view—I would be keen to know what it is—on the supermarket wars that currently threaten the diversity of chocolate larvae lepidoptera. What will the Government do to support the campaign to free Cuthbert, or do they, in fact, back the protection of the species for Colin?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the last matter is clearly one for an Adjournment debate, so that every possible ramification of it can be considered.

If I may come to the mainstay of what the hon. Gentleman raised, it is really important that contracts are awarded properly. That is why correspondence will be published and why the contracts will be published as well. A proper process of transparency is taking place, but it is also worth remembering that there was a great deal of urgency. We went from 1% of personal protective equipment being produced domestically to—I think, excluding gloves—70% of PPE being produced domestically. We managed to have an extraordinary success in our vaccine roll-out programme, where we were fletcher of foot than other countries—indeed, of our neighbours

in the European Union—and that was because we were able to get on with things. That had widespread political support while it was taking place last year, and people from all parties benefited.

It is worth reminding the House that £135.5 million-worth of Chinese ventilators went to a company that was incorporated not that long ago called Excalibur Healthcare Services. Its chairman, Sir Chris Evans, is a very distinguished biotech entrepreneur and a supporter of the Labour party. He is also a very distinguished and successful businessman and is somebody who is held in the highest regard across the House. He got a contract for a newly incorporated company of a very significant amount of public money not because of cronyism—it would be very odd cronyism to stuff the purses of socialists with gold—but because we needed these goods and we needed them quickly.

We have a very good and strong Public Accounts Committee, the most long-standing Select Committee in this House, which has kept a review of public expenditure for now well over 100 years. It is chaired by a distinguished Member of the Labour party, who is respected in all parts of the House, and the Committee brings forward reports to ensure that expenditure is proper, and I am all in favour of that. It is right that we must examine contracts and how they are awarded, but we should not cast aspersions purely for temporary political advantage, undermining the confidence that people can have in the fundamental honesty of the British state.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: Stoke-on-Trent is one of the fastest growing economies and one of the top places for jobs growth in England. Added to that, we have excellent connectivity with the M6 and the A50 corridor; four international airports within 60 minutes; and a 90-minute train ride to London. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, with Staffordshire police, Staffordshire chambers of commerce, and Staffordshire North and Stoke-on-Trent citizens advice bureaux, there could be no better second home for the Home Office other than Stoke-on-Trent under the places for growth programme, bringing high-skilled and well-paid jobs for the Stoke-on-Trent talent pool and seeing a former resident, the Home Secretary, return to her adopted city?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought that my hon. Friend was about to make an application to become the Home Secretary, rather than move the Home Secretary. The Government are committed to ensuring that the administration of government is less London-centric and to locating more civil service roles and public bodies outside London and into the regions and nations of the United Kingdom. The places for growth programme is working with Departments on their relocation plans and a number of announcements have been made. That includes the Cabinet Office establishing a second headquarters in Glasgow; a joint headquarters for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in East Kilbride; the Department for Transport building on its presence in Leeds and Birmingham; and a new economic campus in Darlington. My hon. Friend should keep on campaigning, and I will pass his message on to fellow Ministers, particularly to the Home Secretary.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: May I first pass on my deepest sympathy, love and condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) following the sad passing of her husband, Ray? Mr Speaker, Ray was a long-standing North Tyneside councillor, a fellow Newcastle fan, and a thoroughly lovely man.

Obviously, we are disappointed that there is no time for Backbench Business Committee debates to be scheduled next week, but should any gaps in the Government's schedule occur before Prorogation next week, I am sure that we could organise debate sponsors to be on standby to fill any such void.

Lastly, after this week's so-called big six European super league shenanigans, I was delighted to see the Government make their proposal for a fan-led review of football in England. Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to ensure that the review fulfils the Government's manifesto commitment to being truly fan-led?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I join the hon. Gentleman in passing on our condolences to the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) at a very sad time for her and for her family? We will remember Ray in our prayers.

As regards time for the Backbench Business Committee, next week will really be about sorting out ping-pong. Unless the hon. Gentleman is going to join us in a game of what some call whiff-whaff, we may not necessarily have time for Backbench Business debates.

To come to the fan-led review of football, this will be chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is herself a very committed footballer and fan of football. She knows everything about the subject very much from the point of view of a fan and will cover the financial stability of the men's and women's games, governance and regulation, the merits and the independent regulator, and, crucially to the hon. Gentleman's point, how fans can have a greater say in the oversight of the game. I think, therefore, that it is a case of ask and you shall be given.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) [V]: As we move along the road map towards normality, Ministers are rightly reminding the public of the mantra "Hands, face, space". Does the Leader of the House agree that in future ministerial statements, there should be an additional message to the public, particularly to those visiting tourist areas such as East Yorkshire—namely, "Hands, face, space, but don't be a disgrace. Take your rubbish and litter away and bin it"? Does he agree that we should be keeping Britain tidy as well as safe?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I remember an occasion when Margaret Thatcher went to St James's Park to pick up litter—actually, the litter had to be put down for her to pick up because there was not any immediately to hand—and she had the slogan "Bag it and bin it and that way we'll win it". Those words and the words of my right hon. Friend are ones that we should all bear in mind.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: May I associate myself with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead

(Ian Mearns) on the passing of Ray, the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon)?

The Government's flagship education recovery scheme, the national tutoring programme, has reached 96% of its target numbers in schools in the south-east and 100% in the south-west but under 60% in the north-east. I share concerns expressed by the director of Schools North East that the Government's one-size-fits-all approach does not account for the significantly higher levels of long-term disadvantage in regions such as the north-east or regional variations in how well established tutoring is as an intervention. We must see our recovery from covid-19 closing inequality gaps, not broadening them, so can we have a debate in Government time on making education recovery more responsive to local circumstances and trusting school heads to know the best way to support their pupils?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are very committed to the levelling-up agenda and therefore ensuring that all parts of the country receive their fair share of support. The hon. Lady raises an important point. I ask her to point out to the Government—via my office, if that would be useful—where there are any blockages, so that the Government can ensure that those are removed, because it is fundamental that we should be fair and level up across the country.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: A year ago today, I asked Parliament's very first virtual question, and here I am doing so again. Does the Leader of the House agree that, as society reopens and resumes a closer to business-as-usual model, we in Parliament should be doing the same thing in a safe and secure way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday? I hope that once he has finished Zooming, he will have an appropriate celebration, possibly leading the way as the public houses reopen outside. I agree with his point: Parliament needs to lead the way, and we need to get back to normal as soon as it is prudent and sensible to do so. I congratulate him on his efforts to hold the Government to account and to carry out scrutiny, and I am glad that he has been doing it, even if Her Majesty's Opposition feel that they have not been able to scrutinise the Government, but we want to get back to a proper Chamber as soon as possible.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I have noticed that whenever my colleagues from the SNP have a question for the Prime Minister, regardless of the subject matter, the response always seems to revert at some stage to a tedious and tendentious diatribe against the supposed shortcomings of the Scottish Government. It is quite clear that the Government are keen to unburden themselves in some regards with respect to the Scottish Government's record. Would the Leader of the House be good enough to make time next week for a general debate in the House on Scottish affairs, in order that Members can explore some of the reasons why voters in Scotland seem to be on course to re-elect the SNP Government and sack the Conservative Opposition?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As it seems that the SNP has been doing its best to make the Borgias look respectable in recent weeks, I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

would wish to have such a debate, but it would be an opportunity to point out how the SNP Government are failing Scotland in terms of its education and its policing. The SNP Government recently stated that they would have done just as well with the vaccine roll-out by themselves, when under a year ago, the SNP spokesman was asking why they had not joined the European scheme and whether it was a great failure not to have joined it. So a debate on the failings of the SNP, its lack of success and its lack of drive in its position in charge of the Government of Scotland would be one that would have many speakers and there would be a great deal to say. However, over the next few days we have to deal with ping-pong with the House of Lords, so I regret to say that there will not be time for that pleasurable discussion.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I also wish my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) a very happy birthday? On this celebratory day of the one-year anniversary of the hybrid Parliament, may I thank the digital team, your team, Mr Speaker, the Doorkeepers and the Clerks for remaining physically present in Parliament during the pandemic? Will my right hon. Friend update the House on plans for the physical return of Members to this House so that we can all grace these green Benches?

Mr Speaker: Careful, Leader.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Between now and 21 July, there will be discussions as to what can be done in line with the changes taking place across the rest of the country and whether, when places of entertainment are allowed to have every other place full, this House will be able to do that. However, Mr Speaker will rely on the advice of Public Health England for that. All the restrictions fall by the motions we have in front of us around 21 June, at which point we will be back to normal. However, I would say to Members that they are entitled to come into the Chamber. There is a limit on seating, but that limit is not used on most occasions, and I would no longer discourage anybody from coming into this House. I think this House is better when it is physical. It is more immediate, and the quality of our debate is significantly improved.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I also thank you, Mr Speaker, your team and the House authorities for keeping us all safe during a difficult year?

Too many deaf people are still facing social exclusion, and there is no more timely example of that than our still waiting for a British Sign Language interpreter at Government press briefings more than a year into the pandemic. British Sign Language is used by over 151,000 people in the UK. However, 18 years after it was formally recognised as a language by the UK Government, it has still not received legal status. Will the Leader of the House outline when the Government plan to bring forward legislation finally to give BSL legal status?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is worth pointing out to the hon. Lady that, under your auspices, Mr Speaker, there is sign language for some parts of our parliamentary proceedings, routinely including Prime Minister's questions.

Whether it can be used more, and whether there is sufficient demand to make that worth while, is being looked at. It is taken seriously by the House authorities, and the broadcasters also provide it as a service. Great steps are being made. In terms of the legislative agenda, we will have a Queen's Speech quite soon and that will contain the agenda for the coming Session.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: I congratulate Lord McFall on his election as Lord Speaker and offer my sincere condolences to the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) on the death of her husband Ray. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on funding for research into motor neurone disease and related illnesses? This disease has a devastating impact on the lives of sufferers and their families as I understand from a number of my constituents. Further funding is vital to continue the advances being made in the treatment of MND and to find a possible cure.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising an unquestionably important issue. The Government recognise the immense challenges faced by people with motor neurone disease and are currently working on ways to boost significantly further research into the disease. In the past five years, the taxpayer has spent £54 million on motor neurone disease research through the National Institute for Health Research and UK Research and Innovation via the Medical Research Council. The 2019 Conservative manifesto committed to doubling funding for dementia and neurodegenerative disease research, including motor neurone disease research. The Government are putting plans in place on how to deliver on that commitment, but I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss it further.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In recent summers in Nottingham, our excellent community sector, supported by the city council, has on a shoestring put together brilliant activities and food programmes for local children. This year, the city has secured significant resources to make that programme even better, so that it operates all year round and reaches thousands of local children. We want groups to come forward to be part of it. Can we have a debate in Government time about the importance of excellent holiday activities for our young children?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Holiday activities are extremely important for children, particularly during the long summer holidays, and I am delighted to hear that charitable activity in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is allowing people to do the sorts of things that children want to do and enjoy doing. In my area, Longleat is an enormously popular safari park. People like to see the lions, tigers, giraffes and elephants—[*Interruption.*] I do not think there are any buffalo there, but there may be. Ensuring that there are enjoyable activities for children in school holidays is admirable, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the efforts he is making in that regard.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con) [V]: Over the past few weeks, I have been knocking on quite a few doors in the Chantry area of Ipswich, where the Leader of the House has quite a few admirers, as it happens. The key issue is the growth in antisocial behaviour and potential

drug dealing and taking in the area, particularly in Stonelodge Park. We know that increased police presence and regular patrols are part of deterring that kind of illicit activity, and I welcome the extra 45 police officers, but would the Leader of the House find space in Government time for a debate about the national police funding formula, which I and the police and crime commissioner, Tim Passmore, believe is not fair for Suffolk?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted to hear that I have a following in Chantry. There is also a Chantry in Somerset, so it is clearly a very good name for a place.

The police funding formula remains the most reliable mechanism that we have to distribute core grant funding to police and crime commissioners. The funding settlement will be £15.8 billion in 2021-22, up £600 million on the previous year. Obviously, it is then about how that money is spent, and getting more police on the beat—I am delighted to hear that there are 45 more in my hon. Friend's constituency—is key. The presence of a police officer is a sure way of reducing crime and antisocial behaviour.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On behalf of a constituent battling repeated malicious allegations, and another who, out of the blue, has been deducted for a 30-year-old social fund loan with no proof that it ever existed, can we have an opportunity to press Department for Work and Pensions Ministers on why it is taking, on average, a ludicrous 63 weeks for a complaint to be allocated to a caseworker? If I send the Leader of the House the details of those two cases, would he take it up with a Minister for me?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Of course, I will do whatever I can—63 weeks seems too long.

Mr Speaker: Let's have the love-in with Ian Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My right hon. Friend and I are both committed democrats who believe that the voice of the people always deserves to be heard. In the Somerset County Council area, there will soon be a referendum to test public opinion about the rival plans for local government reform. I think my right hon. Friend and I would prefer that it were the whole of Somerset, but that is beyond the power of the council. The Secretary of State, by letter, said that this is a distraction, but I believe he is quite wrong. Elections to the county council have been shelved, and I am afraid the Government's consultation was cheap, unfair and totally indifferent to the views of the residents. The chance to vote is now vital, and the Government ought to listen very carefully to the result before making any decision. Lawyers are spoiling for a fight about this, but democracy is an issue that cries out to be debated as soon as it can in this House first.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Vox populi, vox dei, but I refer my hon. Friend to what I said last week: it does not include the whole county of Somerset, and I think that is a great mistake. Somerset's history goes back into the mists of time. It is one of the oldest counties in the country. As a whole, it is a complete, entire, perfect

county that was cut up by Ted Heath in the 1970s to the disadvantage of people across the whole county. I would like to see the whole thing put back together. If only we could have the expertise of Humpty Dumpty.

Mr Speaker: You can take Lancashire on at the same time.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: May I offer my sincere condolences to the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) on the death of her husband?

I have previously asked the Leader of the House about a promised Bill on access to cash, which has not materialised. Can he confirm that it will be included in the upcoming Queen's Speech to provide certainty to those—mainly vulnerable people—who rely on cash? Will the Government agree to back the Banking Services (Post Offices) Bill, lodged by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), to place responsibility on banks to provide their services through post office branches?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that for me to pre-empt the Queen's Speech would be lèse-majesté, but I can say that the Government recognise the importance of cash to the daily lives of millions of people across the United Kingdom, particularly those in vulnerable groups, and that we are committed to protecting access to cash for those who need it. The Government held a call for evidence on access to cash, which closed on 25 November 2020 and which set out our legislative aims—the legislative aims are there—for protecting access to cash throughout the United Kingdom. It sought views on cash withdrawal and deposit-taking facilities, cash acceptance and regulatory responsibilities for maintaining cash access. Although I cannot give the hon. Lady the direct promise that she asks for, I can say that the issue is very much at the forefront of the Government's mind.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: As we speak, the Foreign Secretary is being held to account by the Select Committee on International Development, following his written statement late last night. One thing in his statement that was rather confusing, because it is difficult to check like with like, is the fact that all budgets are being slashed dramatically. We know that the Foreign Secretary and others have decided that the 0.7%, which is enshrined in law, will become 0.5%, but we really ought to have a vote on that to see whether such an incredible slashing of funds is the will of Parliament. Will the Leader of the House tell us when we can have that vote? I know that various people think that we do not need one, but the 0.7% is enshrined in law. We cannot just say, "It is enshrined in law, but we will take no notice of it." When will we have a vote, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The law is very clear and envisages circumstances in which the 0.7% target will not be possible to reach, for a variety of reasons including economic ones that may affect the Government's ability to meet it. It sets out the requirement for the Secretary of State to make a report to Parliament, to be accountable to Parliament in the event that the target is not reached. The law is being followed—what Parliament decreed is being followed—and that is, of course, the right thing to do.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I have been horrified by reports from constituents—frontline customer-facing service workers across a range of sectors from retail and call centres to rail staff—of the abuse and violence that they have faced from customers. This is not a local issue. In polling commissioned by the Institute of Customer Service in 2020, 1,000 customer-facing workers reported increasing levels of hostility directed towards them in recent years, with more than half having experienced abuse from customers during the pandemic. This is clearly unacceptable. When Parliament is prorogued shortly, the private Member's Bill sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris)—the Assaults on Retail Workers (Offences) Bill—will fall, despite widespread public support. I hope that the Leader of the House will outline when we can have a debate in Government time on increasing protections for service workers in line with protections that emergency service workers receive. Abuse should never be part of the job.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises a point that concerns hon. Members across the House. People working in retail ought to be protected, and are protected, by the full force of the law. The Queen's Speech debate is an opportunity to raise a very wide range of issues; that opportunity will be provided once Parliament is recalled, and there will be a new ballot for private Members' Bills for the next Session. I hope that we will get through all 13 Fridays in more normal time than we have had over the past year.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): May I add my deep condolences to the lovely hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon)?

Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House set out what assessment he has made of the cost and safety of the enormous amount of mechanical and engineering work that is required to restore this beautiful UNESCO world heritage site, the Palace of Westminster? Will he confirm that he agrees that although taxpayers' value for money is absolutely at the heart of the restoration project, so too must be the importance of a contingency arrangement for our democracy to keep functioning should there be a disastrous fire, asbestos leakage or other disaster during such time as any restoration were to take place?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend obviously knows a great deal about this subject. She will be aware that the sponsor body is currently drawing up its business plan, which will take into account all the risks. I can give my right hon. Friend the important reassurance that a great deal of fire safety work has already been done, so there are now 7,112 automatic fire-detection devices, 4,126 sprinkler heads in the basement of the Palace and 8 miles of pipe for a new sprinkler system in the basement, to ensure that in the event of a fire, life can be protected. That work has been completed in recent years to a high standard to ensure safety.

As regards contingencies, it is not normal to discuss their details on the Floor of the House, as my right hon. Friend will know, but obviously there will be some consequences of how we have operated over the past year when it comes to working out how any contingency could or should be carried out.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I too send my love and condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon).

I asked the Lord Chancellor how many civil service jobs were moving to York and was given some vague percentage; however, a subsequent question indicated that the Department did not know. It appears that the Government's distribution of job relocation and funding bids lacks transparency. With the levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund soon to be administered, and with no matrices or frameworks having been published, will the Leader of the House raise my concerns with his Cabinet colleagues and ask them to come to the House before the recess to make a statement on their methodology—if indeed there is one?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As we discussed earlier, Government spending of taxpayers' money is always carefully examined by various Committees in this House and by proper procedures within Government. The £4.8 billion levelling-up fund will be an important way of ensuring that economic prosperity is possible throughout the country and that we build back better.

The hon. Lady made a detailed point on the Ministry of Justice's moving to York and seeks a detailed answer; I will try to help her to get as detailed an answer as is available.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: We have important local elections coming up, which inevitably leads to more residents seeking information and clarity on council services and who is the best value for their votes. In Nottinghamshire, we have contrasting fortunes: the Conservative-run county council has been able to support local people throughout the pandemic, while protecting services and balancing the books, whereas Labour-run Nottingham City Council has just about bankrupted itself, and residents will pick up the pieces. The money that the city council has blown on Robin Hood Energy alone could have built leisure centres in Mansfield or regenerated our high street. Will my right hon. Friend make time to debate these failings at the Labour city council, to aid our understanding of how it managed to make quite such a mess of it, openly assess the impact on taxpayers and ensure that such wasteful incompetence cannot happen again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an exceptionally good point. Every week, business questions throws up another example of appalling mismanagement by socialist councils. It is vital that Members of this House hold their local authorities to account; they have in this place a special and valuable platform that they must use for their constituents' benefit. It is remarkable how many Members happen to complain about hare-brained energy schemes from socialist local authorities of both the red and yellow variety. Perhaps the people suffering under the red yoke in Nottingham might look enviously to the greener grass of the Conservative county council and use their vote accordingly on 6 May.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: The all-party parliamentary group on disability, which I chair, is committed to ensuring that MPs support opportunity in employment for all. As a vital step, in early June we are undertaking an online Disability Confident workshop—supported by the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

and the Department for Work and Pensions—through which we hope to sign up at least 100 MPs' offices as accredited Disability Confident employers. Will the Leader of the House support this work, alongside further progress and debate on disability inclusion in Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be an honour to do so. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this. I do a podcast on why Parliament works, and I did an interview with my noble Friend Lord Hague, who introduced the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, which has been so important in improving disability rights and employment opportunities for the disabled. Anything I can do through the office of the Leader of the House to further the work that he started, I would be privileged to do.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Eston swimming baths have been closed since the start of the pandemic, and will sadly remain closed for at least another year because of the state of disrepair, which it is estimated will cost almost £3 million to put right. I have said from the start that I am committed to having a swimming pool in TS6 for the people of TS6, and I am working with the council on a plan for a brand-new pool there so that everyone in South Bank, Normanby, Teesville, Grangetown and Eston can have a pool that they can use for decades to come. Does the Leader of the House agree with me on the importance of community swimming pools, and will he make time for a debate on this in the next Session?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he has been doing to save the Eston baths, and I know that he has raised this matter with Ministers. He is an absolutely brilliant champion for his constituents in Redcar, and for ensuring that they are kept in the swim, so to speak. This is important work and the Government have provided unprecedented support to businesses throughout the pandemic to ensure that these vital facilities remain for people to enjoy after the pandemic has come to an end. This includes the £100 million national leisure recovery fund and £270 million from Sport England.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) [V]: First, I would like to offer my commiserations and sympathy to my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) on her recent tragic loss.

Over the past few months and years, we have seen the behaviour of Prime Minister Modi of India becoming increasingly violent and aggressive towards the people that he and his Government see as their opponents. There are still eight journalists held in prison on charges of sedition, a number of politicians are also being held, and 100 people are still missing after the farmers' protest. This comes on top of all the appalling behaviour by the Government and the Indian Army in Kashmir. We know that talks are coming up between our Prime Minister and his opposite number, so could the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will be raising human rights issues, as well as trade, at that meeting and that he will then report back to the House of Commons?

Mr Rees-Mogg: India is a most important ally of the United Kingdom. It is the largest democracy in the world, and it has the rule of law in addition to being a democracy. It is a nation with which we want to build and maintain the friendliest relationships in the coming

decades and, indeed, centuries. Of course, with all countries with which we have close relationships and friendships, it is right to remind them of the high standards that are expected of nations of the standing of India, one of the most important nations in the world, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will always mention this when he is meeting foreign leaders.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: May I add my condolences to the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon)? She is a dear friend from across the House.

This week, my constituency celebrates the opening of the Congleton link road. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating and thanking all who have worked on it, including community leaders, past and present councillors, council officers, contractors and the business people who worked so hard to secure it? It will help to reduce congestion, make getting to school safer, shorten commute times and improve air quality, and it was facilitated not least by the investment of some £50 million from national Government. Does not this demonstrate that this Government are committed to delivering infrastructure improvements in the north for the real-life daily benefit of the people who live here?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In the list of people who deserve thanks, my hon. Friend forgot to include the most distinguished Member of Parliament, who worked tirelessly to ensure that the link road was built. She brought people together, campaigned with them and made sure that it happened. She is looking slightly embarrassed as I say this, but I think she really does deserve a good deal of credit herself. This fits in with that the Government are trying to do. We will spend more than £600 billion of taxpayers' money over the next five years, and £19 billion in transport next year alone. This is part of the levelling-up approach and building back better to ensure that the whole country benefits, and I am delighted that Congleton is benefiting from a bypass.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Perfect Getaways, an independent travel agent that is based in my constituency, is a perfect example of how a small family-owned business can grow and be a success, but of course the continued uncertainty around international travel has severely impacted its income. Although being able to access the restart grants for non-essential retailers is welcome, at the moment more holidays are being cancelled than booked, which is obviously causing it real difficulty—far more than for a lot of other non-essential retail outlets. Can we please have a debate on what more can be done to help those in the travel and tourism industry, who really need some sector-specific support for a considerable period yet?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the case of Perfect Getaways. It must be really difficult for people in the travel industry at the moment, because there is still so much uncertainty. We do not know about the progression of the disease in other countries. We do not know clearly how safe it will be to travel. The red list is currently going up rather than down with the addition of India later this week. It is difficult for businesses in that category and he is right to raise the matter. He may want an Adjournment debate in the first instance, but I am sure the House will return to the matter in the new Session.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: Tomorrow, residents in Carshalton and Wallington and across England will celebrate St George's Day. Although many celebrations cannot take place this year due to covid restrictions, could we have a debate to mark this day and celebrate all that is great about this green and pleasant land?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This week is actually a very interesting one for English saints' days, because the 19th is that of St Alfege, who was murdered by the Danes for refusing to pay extra tax—a saint I have always particularly admired—and the 21st is that of St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had a great row with William Rufus over the powers of the Church against the state. Then of course there is St George, who famously slew the dragon and did other great and noble things, and became our patron saint really in the reign of Edward III. He is the patron of the Order of the Garter as well, and a chivalrous saint, or very much thought to be. We should celebrate and discuss the great history of our nation and the interesting agglomeration of saints who pray for us on a daily basis, praying for the success not just of England but of the whole of the United Kingdom. St Andrew, St David and St Patrick—all the great saints—should be celebrated and commemorated.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Today is Earth Day, so it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the environmental damage caused to marine habitats by the clearing of unexploded bombs and mines at sea, which is highly disruptive to marine mammals which rely on their auditory systems for navigation and communication. Indeed, such damage threatens their very survival. Will the Leader of the House make a statement as to when the Government will progress

regulations to favour the deflagration technique, which is several hundred times quieter than the current method of clearing unexploded bombs and mines at sea?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is obviously right to be concerned for marine mammals such as dolphins, whales and porpoises, who, when seen, give such pleasure to people, and are an important part of the marine environment. I know that there are campaigns in relation to how munitions that have been dumped at sea are best destroyed, and I will happily pass on her representations.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con) [V]: Fly-tipping is a blight on all our local towns and villages, from Haslingden to Belthorn and Great Harwood to Huncoat. Locally we have some amazing community groups that are working to keep our streets clean, like the Baxenden Wombles, the Ossy litter pickers and Rossendale's Civic Pride. Unfortunately, our Labour-run councils clean up an area time and again at the expense of the taxpayer, but we fail to see a tough stance taken through fines and prosecutions. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we make sure that our local councils take stronger action against the minority who ruin it for all residents such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a point similar to that raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). Local councils do have that responsibility, and the availability of tips provided by the council can be very important in deterring fly-tipping, because if it is easy to dispose of waste, most people will do it, but if it is difficult and expensive, that may be a more complex issue and may lead to fly-tipping. It is, as I say, a council responsibility; but fly-tipping is wrong, it is illegal, and people should dispose of their waste properly and not put costs on to taxpayers by disposing of it illegally—and the law should of course be enforced.

Speaker's Statement

11.34 am

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make about Select Committees. On 24 March 2020, the House passed an Order allowing for the virtual participation in Select Committee meetings and giving the Chairs associated powers to make reports. Under the powers I was given in the Order, I notify the House that I am extending the Order until Monday 21 June.

Let us now make the necessary arrangements. I suspend the House for three minutes.

11.35 am

Sitting suspended.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Historical Inequalities Report

11.38 am

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the special committee review into the historical actions of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, when it was the Imperial War Graves Commission and subsequently.

I start by placing on the record my thanks and gratitude to the committee that compiled this comprehensive report, especially its chair, Sir Tim Hitchens, and contributing academics Dr George Hay, Dr John Burke and Professor Michèle Barrett. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) who, alongside the makers of the Channel 4 documentary on this subject, provided the impetus for the establishment of the independent committee.

Today the committee's findings are published. They make for sober reading. The first world war was a horrendous loss of life. People of all class and race from all nations suffered a great tragedy, which we rightly remember every year on Remembrance Sunday. Just over 100 years ago, what emerged from that atrocity was a belief by the survivors that all those who lost their lives deserved to be commemorated.

When the Imperial War Graves Commission was established, its founding principle was the equality of treatment in death. Whatever an individual's rank in social or military life and whatever their religion, they would be commemorated identically. Unfortunately, the work of this report shows that it fell short in delivering on that principle. The IWGC relied on others to seek out the bodies of the dead, and where it could not find them, it worked with the offices of state to produce lists of those who did not return and remained unaccounted for.

Given the pressures and confusion spun by such a war, in many ways it is hardly surprising that mistakes were made at both stages. What is surprising and disappointing, however, is the number of mistakes—the number of casualties commemorated unequally, the number commemorated without names, and the number otherwise entirely unaccounted for. That is not excusable. In some circumstances, there was little the IWGC could do. With neither bodies nor names, general memorials were the only way in which some groups might be commemorated at the time.

None the less, there are examples where the organisation also deliberately overlooked the evidence that might have allowed it to find those names. In others, commission officials in the 1920s were happy to work with local administrations on projects across the empire that ran contrary to the principles of equality in death. Elsewhere, it is clear that commission officials pursued agendas and sought evidence or support locally to endorse 67 courses of action that jeopardised those same principles. In the small number of cases where commission officials had greater say in the recovery and marking of graves, overarching imperial ideology connected to racial and religious differences was used to divide the dead and treat them unequally in ways that were impossible in Europe.

[Mr Ben Wallace]

The report concludes that post-world war one, in parts of Africa, the middle east and India, the commission often compromised its principles and failed to commemorate the war dead equally. Unlike their European counterparts, the graves of up to 54,000 mostly Indian, east African, west African, Egyptian and Somali casualties were not marked by individual headstones. Some were remembered through inscriptions on memorials. The names of others were only recorded in registers, rather than memorialised in stone. A further 116,000 personnel, mostly east African and Egyptian, were not named or possibly not commemorated at all.

There can be no doubt that prejudice played a part in some of the commission's decisions. In some cases, the IWGC assumed that the communities of forgotten personnel would not recognise or value individual forms of commemoration. In other cases, it was simply not provided with the names or burial locations.

On behalf of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Government of the time and today, I want to apologise for the failures to live up to the founding principles all those years ago and express deep regret that it has taken so long to rectify the situation. While we cannot change the past, we can make amends and take action.

As part of that, the commission has accepted all the recommendations of the special committee. In the interests of time I will group these into three themes. First, the commission will geographically and chronologically extend the search in the historical record for inequalities in commemoration and act on what is found. Secondly, the commission will renew its commitment to equality in commemoration through the building of physical or digital commemorative structures. Finally, the commission will use its own online presence and wider education activities to reach out to all the communities of the former British empire touched by the two world wars to make sure that their hidden history is brought to life. Over the coming six months, the commission will be assembling a global and diverse community of external experts who can help make that happen.

There is also more the Government specifically can do. The Ministry of Defence I lead will be determinedly proactive in standing for the values of equality, supporting diversity and investing in all our people. There is always more to be done, and that is why I welcome the Wigston review into inappropriate behaviours and recently took the rare decision to let service personnel give evidence as part of the inquiry into women in the armed forces led by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) through the Defence Committee.

Furthermore, to honour the contribution to our armed forces by our friends from the Commonwealth and Nepal, the Home Secretary and I will shortly be launching a public consultation on proposals to remove the visa settlement fees for non-UK service personnel who choose to settle in the UK.

The historical failings identified in the report must be acknowledged and acted upon, and they will be. However, recognising the mistakes of the past should not diminish the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's groundbreaking achievements today. The recommendations of the special committee should be welcomed by us all. They are not just an opportunity for the commission to

complete its task and right historical wrongs; they point out what an amazing thing it is to serve our country and our allies.

The amazing thing I know from being a soldier is the relationships that are forged on operations. True soldiers are agnostic to class, race and gender, because the bond that holds us together is a bond forged in war. When on operations, we share the risk, share the sorrow and rely on each other to get through the toughest of times. The friendships I made in my service are still strong.

It was those common bonds that lay behind the Imperial War Graves Commission's principles, and it is truly sad that on the occasions identified by the report those principles were not followed. I feel it is my duty as a former soldier to do right by those who gave their lives in the first world war across the Commonwealth and to take what necessary steps we can to rectify the situation. The publication of this report is the beginning, not the end, and I look forward to working with my colleagues across the House to ensure that the CWGC receives the support and resources it needs to take forward this important piece of work.

11.46 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for the advance copy of it. I thank the commission for its advance briefing, which a number of hon. Members received before today.

Above all, I thank the Secretary of State for his apology on behalf of both the Government of the time and the commission. This is an important moment for the commission and the country in coming to terms with past injustices and dedicating ourselves to future action.

None of this would have happened without my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). His documentary "Unremembered" laid bare the early history of the Imperial War Graves Commission and exposed its failure to live up to its founding aim of equality of treatment for all war dead. I pay tribute to Channel 4 and David Olusoga for producing the documentary and to Professor Michèle Barrett, whose research underpinned that work.

Perhaps in another era, we would have been tempted to leave it there, but rightly the commission did not. Indeed, my right hon. Friend would not have let the commission leave it there. The report is a credit to the commission of today, but its content is a great discredit to the commission and the Britain of a century ago. An estimated 45,000 to 54,000 casualties—predominantly Indian, east African, west African, Egyptian and Somali personnel—were commemorated unequally. A further 116,000 casualties, and potentially as many as 350,000, were not commemorated by name or not commemorated at all. In the words of the special committee that produced the report, the commission failed to do what it was set up to do:

"the IWGC was responsible for or complicit in decisions outside of Europe that compromised its principles and treated war dead differently and often unequally... This history needs to be corrected and shared, and the unfinished work of the 1920s needs to be put right where possible."

This issue has been part of Britain's blind spot to our colonial past, and we have been too slow as a country to recognise and honour fully the regiments and troops drawn from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Today is a

reminder of the great contribution and sacrifice that so many from these countries have made to forging modern, multicultural Britain.

What matters now is what happens next. The follow-up to the report's recommendations cannot be part of business-as-before for the commission. What role will the Secretary of State play as chair of the commission? Is he satisfied that the commission has sufficient resources to do this additional work and, if not, will he make more available? What role will Britain's embassy staff, including our defence attachés, play in communicating this public apology, researching new names and telling the wider story of the sacrifice that communities in these countries made during world war one? When can we expect the completion of the investigation into the way the commission commemorated the dead from these countries during the second world war, and what commitment will he make today to report to Parliament on the commission's progress on those goals?

Additionally, we welcome the Secretary of State's pre-announcement of the consultation on a scheme to end the injustice of Commonwealth and Nepalese soldiers paying twice for their British citizenship. It is something we and the British Legion have campaigned for, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is not on the call list today, has led and championed that cause. Can the Secretary of State say exactly when the consultation will be launched?

In conclusion, no apology can atone for the injustice, the indignity and the suffering set out in this report. The Secretary of State spoke today as a soldier. It was a soldier, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough West, who, speaking about the commission in this Chamber more than 100 years ago, said:

"We served in a common cause, we suffered equal hardships, we took equal risks, and we desired that if we fell we should be buried together under one general system and in one comradeship of death."—[*Official Report*, 17 December 1919; Vol. 123, c. 500.]

Today, belatedly, we aim to commemorate in full the sacrifice of many thousands who died for our country in the first world war and who have not yet been fully honoured. We will remember them.

Mr Wallace: I thank the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) for both his tone and his support for the whole House's efforts. Obviously, it was the almost single-handed drive of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) that got this higher up the agenda, even though, as I think he rightly credits himself, some of the academics and the programme makers made a step change in that. I want to repeat my regret that it has taken so long. None of us were here in the 1920s, but many of us have been here for the last 30, 40 or 50 years.

It is a deep point of regret for me that, in my own education, what I was taught of the first world war predominately boiled down to the Somme and poets, with very little about the contribution from the Commonwealth countries and the wider—at the time—British empire. As I go around the world as Defence Secretary, it is remarkable to be reminded of those contributions. In some parts of the world, there are graves and places to commemorate them. I went to my own father's base, where he fought during the Malayan emergency—now Malaysia—to see the Gurkha cemetery. Men died both to defeat communism and protect Malaysia,

but also on behalf of Britain, right up until the early 1970s. I think it is important to remember that we have excluded a lot of that from our children's education, and we absolutely must rectify that.

To address the points of the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne, I am absolutely happy to provide regular updates either in written form in the Library or indeed, on occasion, to come to the House to make a statement of update on progress. As the report itself says, some of these recommendations can be quickly delivered, and some will take time. For example, the investigation into the second world war commemoration and everything else is ongoing. I will make sure that the commission knows not only that it has my support, but that we will hold it to account in delivering that. I will seek regular quarterly updates from the commission on the progress it makes, and in turn update the House.

On how we will communicate with and make sure we work with Commonwealth countries, this is not just about an audience here, but about all the people in those countries. Only recently, I was talking to my Kenyan counterpart—I visited Kenya again and, indeed, visited Somalia—and it is important both that the people there understand the sacrifice of their fellow citizens and that we honour them as well.

As we speak, our defence attaché network, ambassadors and other officials around the world are communicating the report to host countries. With some of them we engaged earlier—with countries such as Kenya, for example—and we have already been working on memorials and things we can do together. We have been making sure that they understand the contents of this report, and we will continue to use that network.

As for funding and future steps, I am absolutely open to all suggestions about what more we can do for education and for commemoration. At the moment, the commission says that it is satisfied that it has the budget, but I do not rule out looking at more funding for it if that is required. Its current income is £52 million, with a range of Commonwealth countries contributing to the funding, but I am not ruling that out, and I would be open to sensible suggestions that make the difference.

As I said, I will continue to update the House and make sure that we can hold the commission to account and that the House can hold me to account in my position as chair of that commission. We should take this as the start point, not the end.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): On 15 June 1955, a small force commanded by RAF Regiment officers, including my father, crawled into the Wadi Hatib in Aden protectorate. They were ambushed. The commanding officer was killed. Another British officer was killed, and six Arab soldiers were killed. My father took over command. The six Arab soldiers are unknown, except the Arab officer; he got a posthumous Military Cross, as did the commanding officer and my father. There is no record of the other five Arab soldiers who gave their lives for this country. So I entirely endorse the recommendations and conclusions of the CWGC report. Mindful of the fact that we do not pay any attention to graves from the Boer war or wars before 1900—they are just left to go to rack and ruin—how long will we be able to sustain the brilliant efforts of the commission to maintain graves from the second world war onwards?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He and I share the same thing: some of the sadness and anger that I feel from this report is driven out of being a soldier. He and I know what it is like to be on operations, and it is a great leveller—that is one of the strengths of military service. People you thought were not brave turn out to be brave, and people you thought were brave turn out not to be so. You realise that there are different skills that help you get through things, and it is never linked to your class or your colour; it is linked to all the other qualities that people have. First and foremost, it surprises you. It angers me that brothers in arms in those days—predominantly the brethren—were forgotten, for whatever reason, and that must not happen again.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, as it is today, does an amazing job. Any Members who have attended the numerous graveyards or sites around the world will have seen the effort that has gone into them, sometimes in quite hostile countries. I do not think that there is any ambition to draw that down. In fact, in today's world, we are more and more of the view that commemoration is very important for learning, to avoid problems in the future, so I think it will go on. We will continue to fund it and support it, and I know that Members across the House who sit on its governing body will continue to do a first-class job.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate the former MP for West Dunbartonshire, John McFall, a son of the Rock of Dumbarton, on his elevation to Speaker of the other place? While he knows that I am opposed to an unelected Chamber, he is a dedicated public servant, and I count him as a very good friend.

I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for all the work that they have done and the Secretary of State for his words, which I am sure will start the process of healing for the descendants of those who gave so much for a state that did not seem to value that sacrifice at the time. As the grand-nephew of James Timlin of County Mayo, whose name is found on the war memorial of Tyne Cot, having fallen on 29 December 1918, let me acknowledge the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

That said, there is something of a grim irony in this report coming so close to one on racism, which we heard about just the other week. It makes me wonder about what the Secretary of State just said. I do not believe for a moment that he does not believe that there has been a great wrong committed here. I just wonder whether he can somehow address the distinct cognitive dissonance that all Opposition Members feel when they hear it said.

There is another truth that is revealed in a report such as this one. Although we have become used to the Windrush post-war framing of immigration and diversity on these islands, is it not the case that people of many cultures have fought for, if not enjoyed the benefit of, our freedoms for an awful lot longer than that? We must think of the hundreds of thousands of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and animists, and those of no religion, who have not been commemorated because they did not fit the white ideal of what is supposed to fit into uniform. It is important that those of all faiths and none are assured that they are valued not only in our armed forces but in the police, the NHS or wherever

they serve. The Secretary of State can be assured of the support of all Members of my party should he wish to do that.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments, including those about the elevation of the former Member for Dumbarton. Those of us who knew him in this House will be pleased for him.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I refer him to the points that I made earlier. What conforms to uniform and what makes a good soldier are all the qualities that I talked about earlier. It is not about colour, religion or the many other things that have been used to discriminate in the past. I hope this report is a catalyst that reminds people that many people gave their lives for this country and, supposedly, for the values that should have been agnostic to who they were and where they came from. If we are going to honour them through this report, we must do so by putting it right and making sure it does not happen again.

In the present, as Defence Secretary, I have to do much more to make sure we recruit more people from backgrounds other than the white background that we talk about—from all parts of our culture and society. That actually adds to the capability of our armed forces; it does not detract. We are sorely missing the right numbers of people to continue to make our armed forces the best in the world.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I welcome the statement, and I publicly thank the commission for its excellent work over many years. I, too, have visited several sites. What challenges does the Secretary of State see for sites located further afield? My sense is that the sites in western Europe, the UK and the Falklands are easily maintained and will be safe for the future, but are there particular difficulties that may lie ahead for sites located in Africa, across the far east and in more far-flung places?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend raises one of the key challenges in maintaining sites, sometimes in places that have been quite hostile. One of the strengths of how the modern-day Commonwealth War Graves Commission does its job is that it uses local staff and engages locally. Indeed, it is supported by the Department and the defence diplomatic network in working with host Governments. I am, in a sense, more optimistic, because I think this report will help open the door further for commemorating, finding and maintaining some of those sites. If we come along and say to the host countries, "Hands up, this is what we could have done better. This is what we didn't do right," we have a far greater chance of collectively being able to commemorate those people and educate their populations and our population about the contribution that was made.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): This is most definitely a watershed moment in the life of this country. I put on record my thanks to Professor Michèle Barrett, David Olusoga and Channel 4 for their work on this documentary. I associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), and I thank the Secretary of State for his words.

For all of us in the Chamber—this is still the case in this country—when we think of the first world war, we think of the western front, the poems of Wilfred Owen and the battle of the Somme. We do not think of where the first bullets were fired in the first world war, which were, in fact, in Africa, in the east African campaign. On this sombre, but important, day, I am thinking of the King's African Rifles and the many, many thousands of men who were dragged from their villages to be in the Carrier Corps on behalf of the then British Empire. There is no higher service than to die for your country in war, and it is the case that every single culture on the planet honours those who die in those circumstances. It is a great travesty and a stain and a shame that this country failed to do that for black and brown people across Africa, India and the middle east, but we have come to this very, very important moment, 100 years on, and I thank the Secretary of State for his leadership and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for the work that it has done to get us to this point.

May I just say to the Secretary of State that further resources will be necessary, particularly in those countries, to commemorate in the appropriate way. Necessary resources will also be needed to revisit the archives in those countries to find names where there are names, but to appropriately commemorate where those names do not exist. We use the word "whitewash" for a reason. Let there be no more whitewashing. The unremembered will be remembered and future generations of young people in our own country and the Commonwealth will understand their sacrifice.

Mr Wallace: On the right hon. Gentleman's last point, it is, "will, should and must understand their sacrifice". That is really important. Exactly as he said, it was the east African campaign that saw the early salvos of the first world war. Was I taught about that at school? No. How many in this House were? Probably almost none at all. I have already worked closely with my Kenyan counterpart and I will continue to do so, and I speak regularly to her about this. The report points towards things such as bursaries, education and, indeed, working with the archives. Both the commission and others will have the support of the Department in being able to do that and to follow through on the report. At the same time, if funding is required, I am absolutely supportive of accessing that funding to help deliver what is required in those countries and, indeed, here. They will have the full weight of our defence diplomatic network to make sure that we can be seen to support, and to actually support, delivering on those issues.

The right hon. Gentleman's actions on this are to be commended. He has achieved not just a passing thing, but a real thing that starts a process for many, many decades. It will probably affect my grandchildren's education. Not many people in this House can say that they make a real, long-lasting difference. I will be taking that report with me when I go back to Kenya and to other parts of the Commonwealth and I shall reflect on it and seek, when I visit, a place where my counterpart and I can commemorate together and lay a wreath on behalf of all those people.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for raising this important issue and for campaigning so tirelessly to acknowledge the death of all soldiers who

fought in the great war? I thank the Secretary of State for bringing this statement to the House today and for the humility and the acknowledgement of his work as a soldier that has made him realise that death is the great equaliser for us all. I thank him for remembering every soldier across the Commonwealth who gave their life during world war one. Will he join me now in paying tribute to those in our armed forces currently who are bravely serving across the world? Will he acknowledge their sacrifice and thank them for the work they do?

Mr Wallace: Yes. One of the best ways to honour the people in the report is to support, as much as we can, the people serving today and our veterans. I would like to place on record my sadness on losing my colleague yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) the former Veterans Minister, who did contribute to supporting and making Government policy better for our veterans—supported by the wider Government. He will be a sad loss, but I know he will continue to campaign for them. No doubt we will hear him on the issue from the Back Benches. That is why we have set out a whole chapter on our people in the Command Paper and why we are funding such things as wraparound childcare for serving personnel, which has never been done before, to make sure that we demonstrate that support with action and funding.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have the honour of representing this place as a Commonwealth War Graves Commissioner, along with the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne). I thank the Defence Secretary, as the chair of the commission, for what he has said today, and commend the report of the special committee made up of external experts for their diligent and extensive work. As set out in the Kenyon report over 100 years ago:

"It was...ordained that what was done for one should be done for all, and that all, whatever their military rank or position in civil life, should have equal treatment in their graves."

I cannot stress enough just how seriously all commissioners take this matter and how committed we all are to ensuring that we right the historical wrongs of the past, ensuring that we correct errors and omissions. The service of all to our country matters. We will remember them and remember them all.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and Professor Michèle Barrett for their important work on this issue. They provided the vital catalyst for the commission setting up the special committee. Alongside the full and unconditional apology for the wrongs of the past, the commission has already agreed a detailed action plan to address all the special committee's recommendations. I am sure we all want these to be implemented in a timely way, so may I ask the Defence Secretary whether, if needed, there will be additional resources so that we can complete this work as quickly as possible?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her comments. The answer is yes. I ask in return that she, in her role as a commissioner, makes sure that requests match the aspirations and the recommendations in the report. I will be delighted to continue to work with her and the other commissioners on that. I would also like to place on record that the commissioners did an excellent job alongside the independent experts. When

[Mr Wallace]

we met on this a few weeks ago, the commissioners made very clear to me their determination to carry out the recommendations and to put right the issues identified in the report.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to be able to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), with whom I share membership of the commission. I am proud to be a commissioner and I am grateful to the chairman of the commission for his important statement today. I am also proud of the 1,200 people who work in 150 countries around the world tending the memorials, commemorations and gravestones of the many who served and lost their lives for the protection of this country and our values.

Over 100 years ago, the War Graves Commission was established with the specific remit to commemorate the first world war dead of the then British empire and to do so defined by the principle of equality of treatment in death, whatever their rank, religion or race. This happened in Europe and I am not proud that this did not happen across Africa, the middle east and India. I join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North in welcoming the report we commissioned in December 2019, a month following the Channel 4 programme presented by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and featuring the work of Professor Michèle Barrett. The programme acted as a catalyst for this report, based on detailed research through available archives. I can confirm that this issue has been and is being taken extremely seriously within the commission. We are committed to ensuring that we right the historical wrongs of the past. The commission has been working over the last 20 years to ensure that we correct errors or omissions as we find them and that is what we will do on the back of this report.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has confirmed that he will hold the commission to account in delivering the detailed action plan that it has agreed to address the recommendations made by the special committee. However, does he agree that, while we cannot right the wrongs of 100 years ago, the commission can and should recognise that mistakes were made, apologise for them—as he has just done—and commit to doing what we can, where we can, now to renew our commitment to equality in commemoration with all communities of the former British empire touched by both world wars, where this report reveals that that did not take place?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is right to point out the determination of the existing commission—and over the last 20 years—to correct things as it finds them. This is one of those times where it has exposed things going way back. He is also absolutely right that, when you go around the world, you see that that network of people do an amazing job. It is extraordinary where you find in the world, almost like an oasis, well-kept areas of commemoration. You are often surprised that we were even there in the first place and, even now, they are kept and looked after. Some of the volunteers and some of the paid employees do an extremely good job as well.

On the funding, as I said to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), I will absolutely stand by to make sure that we find the

available funding to deliver this. In return, I ask my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) to make sure that these things are properly dealt with, looked at and examined and that they are in accordance with the report's recommendations and further subsequent recommendations.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The revelations set out in this report are unacceptable and it is important that service and sacrifice are properly commemorated for all. Today, a Commonwealth service leaver with a partner and two children will have to pay almost £10,000 to continue to live in the UK, despite those years of service and sacrifice, so will the Government commit to waiving application fees for indefinite leave for all those members of the armed forces on discharge and their families and demonstrate that they really are looking at tackling inequalities?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who prompts me to answer the last question from the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne. We will start the consultation on that at the beginning of May.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): This report's findings make for very uncomfortable reading, but I pay tribute to the special committee, today's commission for its response and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and all those he worked with in drawing a vital spotlight to this issue. This will sadly be impossible in too many cases, but does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that, where the commission can identify descendants of those who were named, it should try to work with them on appropriately commemorating those who gave their lives in the service of this country? It cannot undo what happened then, but it might provide some small comfort today.

Mr Wallace: Absolutely. The report commits to seeking further detail, both through archives and other means, in trying to identify those individuals and therefore to make sure that we try to find a way to commemorate them. The plus side in this day and age is the internet and the ability to communicate. I have already had an email in my inbox this morning from a man in Kenya about his grandfather. I read it with sadness and interest, but it gives people that opportunity to connect. Hopefully, this report will be a catalyst for many of those things and we will be able to follow them up. I will make sure that I pass on the email to the appropriate authorities, but I think it also gives me somebody to visit when I next go back to Kenya.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I first declare an interest as a former commissioner of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and as a current trustee of the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation?

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his work on this issue and I commend the Secretary of State for his statement today. I also pay tribute to the present commissioners, who commissioned this report. It was not an easy task for them to do. Reading the report is not easy. The commission quite rightly in Europe commemorates all those, including those from India and across the Commonwealth, who died in the first world war—whether that be at the Indian memorial at Neuve Chapelle, at the Brighton memorial to Sikhs, or at the Southampton memorial,

where Lord Kitchener's name is alongside those in the South African Native Labour Corps who died. However, that does not take away from the fact that racist attitudes were taken to treat others in other parts of the world differently.

The Secretary of State knows that the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation is working with the Ministry of Defence to promote education among young people on broader issues. Could he act as a catalyst to draw other Departments to work not just in this country but internationally, to ensure that this story is told and that future generations—as I think is his aspiration—recognise our debt to these individuals?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Member is absolutely right and his point about education is true. One answer to why commemoration has taken so long is that, if people had been educated about what we did, the next question would have been “So how do I commemorate it?” but because it was not taught, no one asked the question or created the pressure to find out. I think that that has started now. I would be delighted to speak to my colleagues in the Department for Education to see what they can do in the curriculum and in teaching that. I think the commission's report talks about education in those countries as well to ensure people have access to the history, and we can then incorporate it in our future teaching.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: I thank the Defence Secretary for his important and much-needed statement. Does he agree that the contribution made by soldiers from Commonwealth countries to our current armed forces is still extremely valuable today?

Mr Wallace: Absolutely. It is not only valuable; it makes us who we are. We should continue to do more and more—we recruited more than 1,000 from the Commonwealth this year alone. We should always recognise that our strength is our diversity and our global connections. I think that people from all backgrounds bring real strengths to us. We will continue to do what we can to support them. We have our consultation, and since I have been Defence Secretary, the Home Secretary and I have moved lots of policy issues that were not progressing, such as for interpreters in Afghanistan. That has sent messages about how Britain values people who support it from other parts of the world, and we will continue to do that.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Underpinning all the past commemoration decisions were the entrenched prejudices and rampant racism of imperial attitudes. We know that the empire is over, but those attitudes linger on—if they do not, why does the UK Government's report on racism, which the UN has described as “reprehensible” and an attempt to “normalize white supremacy”, push back against calls to decolonise the curriculum? A landmark decision has already been taken in my constituency by my local authority, North Lanarkshire Council. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should lead the way in anti-racist education, as the SNP has pledged to do in our manifesto for the upcoming election?

Mr Wallace: I think that every political party would support teaching equality and not racism in schools. I am happy to explore further the hon. Gentleman's comments about anticolonialism and decolonising our

education curriculum. My grandfather was a Scot who went to India, and an awful lot of my Scottish family served abroad in the empire. That was how many Scots found success or education: by going afield. It is important to educate people about the role that we all played in the empire, whether good or bad, but we should also recognise all those people who were part of it, the sacrifices that were made and the treatment that they received, good and bad.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: The report makes for uncomfortable reading, and lessons have to be learned. I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for being a leading light in this important matter. May I add my comments and thoughts to those of Members across the House about the need to ensure that education is put at the forefront and that the history curriculum reflects the massive contribution made by our Commonwealth armed forces? Sadly, war memorials and war graves are desecrated, as I saw recently at Tunstall memorial gardens. I thank Macey and Isabelle, aged 10 and five, who were inspired by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and went down to clean them up. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising Macey and Isabelle and celebrating the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's work maintaining the upkeep of 23,000 cemeteries across the world?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I fully support my hon. Friend. An amazing amount of work is done around the world and at home, in some of the smallest graveyards as well as the big ones that we often see on the telly, and they are looked after immaculately. For many people, they are also a place of sanctuary. Connecting young people with those places is a great vehicle to remind them of the sacrifices and horrors of war and why it should always be in our interest to try to avoid it.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his comments and the tenor of them. I am pleased that the commission has fully accepted the special committee's recommendations. If I am able to visit my great-grandfather's headstone in one of the first world war cemeteries in France, equally the great-grandchildren from our west African, east African, Somali, Egyptian and Indian diasporas—among others—should have fitting memorials to honour all their ancestors. We must ensure that there are deeds, not just words, to rectify this historical racism and prejudice and secure justice, so will the Secretary of State commit to take steps to protect and ring-fence any additional funding made available to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission specifically to implement the important recommendations?

Mr Wallace: I would go as far as saying that I can agree to make funding available. I will rely on the commissioners—my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and all the other members of the commission—to be the guardians of the implementation of the report and its next steps. I do not want people to come to this House and say that money was a barrier to something, but I also want to make sure that we do it in an appropriate way that has a lasting impact, to make sure, as I have said, that the start of the process does not end but goes on and on until we not only have commemorated the past but value people in future.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I am sure the whole House would wish to honour the heroism and sacrifice of all troops, whether from the UK or the wider Commonwealth, who have fought for this country. The report certainly makes for sombre reading and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend will take forward its recommendations. However, does he agree that it would be entirely wrong to let the brave African and Asian service personnel of the previous century be dragged into the divisive culture wars of the present day?

Mr Wallace: The only wars that I am interested in are the ones that we can finish or avoid, or that threaten our values. I do not care where the people we will need to protect us come from and I do not care what their orientation is or what colour they are, either.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The failure to formally honour and remember black and Asian service personnel in the same way as white troops is indeed a cause for shame and deep sadness. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has indicated that all the support necessary will be made available to try to do what we can to right this wrong. Will he confirm that that support will be progressed with the utmost urgency and sensitivity, so that all our war dead are finally given the respect that they deserve? I am sure he will understand that any delays will only entrench the sense of hurt and disrespect that this report will inevitably provoke.

Mr Wallace: Yes. The House should be under no illusion: the commission is absolutely determined to see this matter through. There are Members of this House on the commission and they are determined to talk and work together, and we will continue to do that. The weight of the Department will be behind them in achieving their goals.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I join Members across the House in paying tribute to the tireless campaigning work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) that has brought us to this important watershed moment in our nation's history. I welcome the Special Committee's report, which makes for sobering reading in laying bare the historical injustice that meant that tens of thousands of Commonwealth military personnel who made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives for this country in world war one, have been commemorated unequally or not at all. In seeking to right this historic wrong, the Committee's report recommends an

"ongoing commitment to continue the search for the unnamed war dead and those potentially not commemorated".

Can the Secretary of State please outline what resources will be made available to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to make that a reality, to ensure that all our gracious war dead are commemorated equally and that future generations are able to remember them?

Mr Wallace: At present the commission says it is satisfied that its £52 million budget is enough to start that process. However, we will complement that with the time and dedication of our defence diplomatic network involving more than 100 military defence attachés and the supporting staff in the embassies, whose actual presence in country will be there working alongside them. As I have said, I will be happy to review any requests for funding relating to other parts of the report or subsequent investigations.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: A visit to a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery can be very emotional, as the lines of tombstones confront us, with all the fallen honoured in the same way. The commemorative equality given to matters of rank and class is remarkable, and I must congratulate the commission on that, but when it comes to race, the commission has disastrously failed to live up to those principles. The Secretary of State has united the House in the way he has presented his statement today, but can he expand on how the Ministry of Defence will support the commission by way of funding and guidance on implementing the recommendations in the report, and on how this can be made into a continuous process?

Mr Wallace: I would like first of all to place on record that this commission and some of the previous commissions have taken some really strong steps to fix what was wrong when it was identified. The area of regret is that we did not do a lot of this much earlier. I would also like to say that we should not forget that, whatever the circumstances were, many of those people gave their lives to defeat fascism and to defeat people who challenged our freedoms, both for themselves and for us. That sacrifice was, in my view, worth it, given the freedoms that we enjoy. It is really important not to forget, in this report, that it was not for nothing. Those people did not give up their lives, whatever the circumstances were, for nothing. Certainly in the second world war and others, the threat to our freedoms was real.

As I have said in earlier answers, I will continue to ensure that the commission is supported by the Department and by me as its chair and as Defence Secretary, as the members of the commission continue to work to ensure that we always commemorate our dead and those who made sacrifices, whether in the first world war, the second world war or in all the other conflicts. We owe it to them. How we do that sometimes changes. A visit to the national arboretum is also a sobering and emotive experience, as we see individual units, regiments and conflicts celebrated, or commemorated, slightly differently. That is very moving, and it will be a good way to look at how we can unite people around our Commonwealth in the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

Point of Order

12.33 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to be able to raise this point of order in relation to the operating of the quarantine exemptions process. An effective quarantine system is vital to protecting our borders, but there has to be some consideration and compassion for those who are vulnerable, who have disabilities or who have complex health conditions and have medical evidence to prove it. There has been little opportunity to debate these exemptions. This week, guidance appeared on the Department of Health website, but the Commons Library confirms that there has been no written or verbal statement regarding this guidance, which we need to support our constituents' cases.

Despite representations with medical evidence, one of my constituents with complex health conditions who was forced to quarantine alone ended up being rushed to hospital over Easter. Doctors there said that she should not have been in a hotel at all. I now have a 16-year-old constituent, Ms Malik, who went urgently to visit her ill father in Dubai while her mother was at home with her sisters. She has now been stuck in Dubai for weeks, terrified to return. She is a minor, and it is not safe for her to quarantine in a hotel on her own; nor would she be allowed to by law. Her father is in Dubai, and her mother has two other children to look after. She has no one who can quarantine with her. She has a history of self-harming and her GP has asked that she be allowed to self-isolate at home with protections. She is due to come back on Saturday. We had first a rejection and since then nothing but delays and a lack of compassion and support from the Department of Health.

Could I therefore ask your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what process the Government are following? How experienced are the staff making those decisions? I would be grateful to put this on record and seek advice so that we can scrutinise the Government on what is going on, including with those who are fasting due to Ramadan not getting food at the right times, so that there can be some accountability and support for our constituents.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving notice of her point of order. She raised a number of issues about details that I am not in a position to answer, but she is an experienced member of the House and knows the various ways in which she can question Ministers. If there is any doubt about that, she can consult the Table Office. She has obviously made her concerns known about these important matters and cases and brought that to the attention of the House. She has put it on the record. With regard to further information or statements that may be made, I am sure the Treasury Bench will have heard her view that she would like that to happen.

Armed Forces Bill: Special Report

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ARMED FORCES BILL

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. James Sunderland will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and will call James Sunderland to respond to them in turn. I call the Chair of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill.

12.36 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Today, the Armed Forces Bill Select Committee publishes its special report on the new Armed Forces Bill. It is my privilege to present it to the House. Getting to this point has taken significant effort right across Westminster, so it is my duty to express my gratitude to several key stakeholders. I thank first the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make this statement, and the Speaker's Office and the Ministry of Defence for all their staff support and advice, notably on the content and scope of the Bill. I also thank the 16 right hon. and hon. Members of the Committee for their contribution, humour and hard work. We broke new ground as the first Committee of the House to conduct line-by-line scrutiny of a Bill by virtual means and worked intensively in the build-up to that before Easter and during recess to hear from many witnesses. I humbly thank them for putting their trust in me by electing a new MP as Chair. I am proud to represent the 2019 intake at this statement.

I know that I speak for all Members by expressing my gratitude to those who contributed to our inquiry. Their depth of knowledge and professionalism was inspiring. Last but not least, I thank the Committee staff and wider technical teams for their support in the past few months, which has proved invaluable through both virtual and hybrid working. I make no apology for mentioning Ms Yohanna Sallberg and in particular, the presiding Clerk, Mr Matthew Congreve, whose contribution and guidance at the age of 24 have been truly outstanding.

The report, published earlier today, is the key output of the ad hoc Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill. For those interested in the history, the requirement is a procedural anomaly harking back to the 1689 Bill of Rights. Every five years, a Bill must pass through Parliament thereby renewing the Armed Forces Act in statute and enabling the maintenance of standing forces in peacetime. Since 1961, the Bill has led to the creation of a unique hybrid Committee: technically a Select Committee with the power to summon witnesses and hear evidence, but also acting as a Public Bill Committee by scrutinising the legislation line by line. The Bill is not only essential to retaining and resourcing our armed forces but has come to serve as a checkpoint for what works and what is needed in statute.

The Committee was therefore appointed to scrutinise this important legislation. It has done so throughout the past few weeks, and it reported the Bill, unamended, back to the House last week. We inquired into specific areas of the Bill, focusing on the armed forces covenant, the service justice system and the service

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complaints system. We also explored additional areas, including diversity in the armed forces, healthcare and housing.

From the outset, the Committee welcomed the requirement to incorporate the armed forces covenant into law and noted that this change is important for service personnel, veterans and their families. We recognised some concerns on how the duty to have due regard to the covenant will work in practice, the current lack of prescribed outcomes for those entrusted with delivering it, and how the visions in the Bill apply to some areas of the covenant but not others. We also heard concerns about it only applying to some public bodies but not others. We therefore look forward to seeing the statutory guidance, which will be essential for informing public bodies of what is expected of them in applying the duty of due regard. We recommended that the Government conduct a review after two years on how this duty is operating in practice and that the annual report for the armed forces covenant should review its effectiveness and comment on future scope. We also recommended that the Defence Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), should conduct post-legislative scrutiny.

On the service justice system, the Committee found that the Bill demonstrates a commitment to improving the system. This, combined with non-statutory measures being implemented following the Lyons review, should ensure that it has the confidence of those who are subject to it, and also the wider public. We therefore welcome the efforts to reform the service justice system but recognise that some concerns linger on concurrent jurisdiction. We recommended that the Ministry of Defence work quickly to introduce the defence serious crime capability and ensure that clear protocols are in place to allow effective co-operation with civilian police forces and to agree jurisdiction.

Turning to the service complaints system, we welcome the efforts to speed up the process provided that the necessary safeguards remain in place to ensure fair and equal access to all. We found that the current processes do attract criticism, particularly in tackling delays to resolve cases, and we remain cognisant of the heavy workload being placed on individual officers and staff. We also supported the findings of the Wigston review and advised that the Ministry of Defence implement all of its policy recommendations.

On our additional areas of scrutiny, the Committee heard encouraging evidence that the experience of armed forces personnel with protected characteristics has vastly improved, but recognise that there is still more to be done. We welcomed the former Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), committing to “find a mechanism of restorative justice” —[*Official Report, Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill*, 31 March 2021; c. 94.] for veterans dismissed due to their actual or perceived sexuality during the years of the ban on homosexuality in the armed forces. We asked that he report back to the House on progress within three months. We also support the important work of the Defence Sub-Committee on women in the armed forces, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton).

Furthermore, the Committee inquired into the provision of healthcare for veterans, particularly in mental health, and found it encouraging that the provision is getting better but recommended improvements in a number of areas and services. We sought to build on the important work of the Public Accounts Committee on service accommodation and found that the level of satisfaction for personnel and families living in service housing is still low. While work has been undertaken to improve this, we argued that better accommodation is an area that still needs prioritisation within the Ministry of Defence.

On the appointment and remit of our Committee, we found that the convention of committing the Armed Forces Bill to a Select Committee in addition to its usual Committee stage grants the Bill additional scrutiny. Our inquiry was, however, rather rushed due to compressed timelines, and we recommended that future Select Committees on armed forces Bills be given more time to complete their work. Overall, it was a real pleasure to work with hon. and right hon. Members from both sides of the House to deliver this important report. Consensus was achieved in most areas—no easy feat—and we recommended that the appointment of a Select Committee continues to be the convention for future armed forces Bills. I am grateful, again, to all my colleagues from all parties. Consensus is always persuasive and politics is far better for it.

Before I finish, I wish to remind Members of the underlying purpose of all this hard work. This House’s aspiration should be for Britain to maintain the best armed forces in the world and for this to be the best place in the world to be a veteran. Although there is much more to do, I believe we are getting there. We therefore pay tribute to our armed forces for their work, service and sacrifice, and this Bill is a vital part in our meeting our obligations to them. I look forward to working with all Members during later consideration of the Bill in this Chamber, and I commend this special report to the House.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), who, although he said he is new, chaired this Committee excellently? Like him, I pay tribute to the staff who supported the Committee, and I also pay tribute to the witnesses who came before us. He said that this is a unique Committee. It meets every five years, and I think I have served on every one of these Bills for the past 20 years. This was a difficult one because of covid, but it also was not helped by the attitude of the Ministry of Defence on the statutory guidance. Likewise, and I will put this on the record, it was not helped by the attitude of the then Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). Does the hon. Member for Bracknell agree that what needs to change is that in future—the report mentions the length of time the Committee sits—a set period, for example, six months, should be provided for, in order to ensure that detailed scrutiny, which I do not think we did this time, can be guaranteed?

James Sunderland: For me, achieving this outcome was about consensus; it was about all members of the Committee coming together. I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, because I know that in the Command Paper of 2008 the covenant was first mooted; it is a combination of Conservative, Labour, Scottish National

party and other MPs who have made it happen today, although of course a Conservative Government have brought it in. I am happy that the report, as it stands, provides some solid recommendations for the future. I agree that a more consensual approach to a Bill such as this in the future might pay dividends.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), a good friend of mine, on the way he chaired this Committee, which was a difficult one to chair. May I ask him why the Committee did not feel it fit to look at health problems and care problems with regard to Northern Ireland, and at vexatious claims made against Northern Ireland veterans?

James Sunderland: I thank my very good right hon. Friend for his question. The simple answer relating to Northern Ireland is that the legacy issues, very much in the news at the moment, are subject to separate work being led by the Northern Ireland Office, and the Ministry of Defence made it clear to me and the other members of the Committee that that would not be within the scope of this Bill. We divided on that at the beginning of the session. For me personally, the wider issues relating to Northern Ireland and care, and the provisions of the covenant, are catered for in this Bill. I am pleased that the implementation of the armed forces covenant in statute is very much the core feature of this Bill and will happen, for the benefit of all those in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: The Armed Forces Bill is something of a whirlwind, and all on the ad-hoc Bill Committee will have learned so much over the past couple of months, as the Chair—the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland)—the Clerks and the digital support staff, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for enabling the hybrid Committee to function, will know. It would be remiss of me not to congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on his appointment to the Front Bench—Dochertys seem to get everywhere.

It should not come as a surprise to me, I suppose, after a good few years on the Defence Committee, but the armed forces have come on in so many ways in recent years in how they seek to recruit and retain personnel, for which they should be commended. It should also be said that all who were on the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill were resolved to ensure the process continues.

However, while there was much for us to be positive about and agree on, as the Chair of the Committee has stated, I cannot help but feel that we are at a crucial inflexion point in the way the armed forces are perceived. The more I think about those of us in the Opposition who sought to make amendments to bring the armed forces closer to the society they seek to protect, the more I feel the Government favoured measures that keep them remote, discrete and unempowered. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) tabled common-sense amendments on a representative body, gender-neutral language and bringing the age of recruitment in line with that of our NATO allies. We supported other amendments on housing and on terms and conditions, and never really understood why the Government could not.

We use the language of heroes so often to describe those in the armed forces that sometimes we forget that almost all of them just want the simple pleasures of good pay, conditions and terms of service, or at least certainty, and certainly nothing worse than those of their fellow public servants in the NHS or a police force. Let me thank my fellow Committee members for their work, and the Chair and the Clerks for, over the last couple of months, writing this report—and here's to more scrutiny of the work of the MOD on Third Reading.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Just a quick reminder that the idea here is to ask fairly brief questions, rather than to make speeches. I do not know whether James Sunderland needs to respond.

James Sunderland: I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for his kind words, and also for the very positive way in which he and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) have engaged in the whole process. My simple response to his observation is that, in a very objective way, the Armed Forces Bill is notable for what is not in it. I say that because the report we submit today makes it absolutely clear where we feel—the Committee feels—further work is needed. I would refer him back to the report. I think I am with him on many of the areas he describes, and no doubt over the next five years the MOD will do its best to implement those issues.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con) [V]: May I start by saying, on behalf of the 2019 intake, that we are all very proud that our hon. Friend was selected as the Chair of the Select Committee and of his making this statement to the House today, as he is the first of our intake to do this?

Across Hyndburn and Haslingden, we have tremendous respect and support for our armed forces both past and present, not least because we are the home of the famous Accrington Pals, so can my hon. Friend explain in what way the Bill makes life fairer and better for our armed forces?

James Sunderland: I thank my really good friend from Hyndburn for her very generous words. The simple answer is that the Bill does two things. First, it increases and improves the offer to all service personnel and veterans through the armed forces covenant. It provides a statutory requirement on local councils, health authorities and education providers to improve those three areas to make sure there is no disadvantage by virtue of being in the armed forces and, of course, that special regard to disadvantage, injury, death or bereavement may be necessary for families. Secondly, the less well known part of the Bill is the fact that it improves the offer to service personnel in respect of the service justice system and courts martial. I believe that the Bill makes life in the armed forces a lot fairer and a lot better in many ways, and again, I would urge her to read the report.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on setting the scene so well, and I thank him for all the hard work that he and his Committee did. I know the Armed Forces Bill contains the usual provision to deal with posthumous pardons, and I am

[Jim Shannon]

looking to see if there is the possibility of providing for posthumous awards, such as for the legendary father of the SAS from my constituency of Strangford, Newtownards's own Blair Mayne, whose courage, ability and leadership saw the award of the DSO on four separate occasions, yet the Victoria Cross was withheld. Is there scope in this Bill for the MOD, the Defence Committee or indeed the Minister for Defence People and Veterans himself to revisit this travesty, which should be rectified?

James Sunderland: I thank my good friend from Strangford for his question, which is a good one with no ready answer. My simple view is that the honours and awards committee within the MOD provides that particular function. There is definitely a case for looking at what we can do on posthumous awards. There may be a time limit for some awards. Of course, Rorke's Drift was famous many years ago for the fact that awards were given posthumously in many cases, due to public demand. I am sure that my good friend the Minister will take this forward, and no doubt we may see something in five years' time with the next Armed Forces Bill or before.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my hon. and gallant Friend for his statement and congratulate him on chairing the 10 meetings of the Select Committee and on the publication of its 102-page report. I was pleased to note that the Committee says on page 48:

"The level of satisfaction for personnel and families living in Service housing is still too low."

I congratulate him on including that as one of the main recommendations.

I was very disturbed to read on page 10 that the Committee wanted to have a virtual visit with tri-service personnel to discuss single living and service family accommodation on 18 March, but that was cancelled the evening before because

"the Secretary of State had refused authority for Service personnel to speak to the Committee."

My hon. and gallant Friend wrote to the Secretary of State the next day, but according to the report, he has yet to receive a satisfactory explanation. Could he update the House on whether he has received any further correspondence about this matter from the Secretary of State?

James Sunderland: I thank my good friend from Kettering for his question. It is recognised from continuous attitude surveys that members of the armed forces are not fully satisfied with service accommodation. As a former commanding officer, I was very fortunate with what we had in Aldershot—that is an exemplar—but there are other parts of the estate that need work and money, and I know that the Ministry of Defence has got that.

In respect of the request for a visit, I cannot comment on behalf of the Secretary of State as to why permission was refused. I can surmise that it was not a good time because of covid-19 and because it was just before the Easter recess, so units may have been on leave. We wrote to the Minister. We have had a response saying that he would look at it again, and my indications are that the

opportunity of visiting service accommodation for members of the Committee who want to will be made available in due course.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the Chair of the Committee and its members for their work. The Armed Forces Bill does not directly reference enforcement mechanisms for ensuring that public bodies are held to account if a member of the armed forces community feels that they have not been treated correctly. What thought did he and the Committee give, if any, to setting it out in the legislation that existing ombudsmen or commissioners should have such a responsibility?

James Sunderland: Without giving a glib answer, I urge the hon. Member to look at the special report. I believe that there is an obligation on the ombudsman to keep the pressure on the Ministry of Defence. We discussed in great detail the need for independent, impartial pressure being brought to bear on the Ministry of Defence. We discounted the need for a union of troops and other such measures, but no doubt in time the spotlight will fall even more on this area. We also had some expert witnesses appear before the Committee who made similar suggestions, and I have no doubt at all that the MOD has got it.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to thank the Chair, the Clerks and fellow members of the Committee for their dedication and hard work, as well as those who gave evidence to the Committee or responded to the survey? It was vital that the armed forces community had their say, to make this Bill better.

Service charities have pointed out that the narrow focus of the Bill on healthcare, housing and education could create a two-tier armed forces covenant that reduces provision in those areas outside the scope of the Bill. Does the Chair agree with Labour that the Bill must cover all areas of the covenant if it is truly to bring it into law and eliminate the postcode lottery that many veterans face in accessing services?

James Sunderland: I thank my good friend from Portsmouth South for his question and for the very positive way in which he and his party—and, indeed, the SNP—engaged throughout the process. He raises a valid point. The implementation of the covenant in law is restricted at this point in time to the three areas that I mentioned earlier: health, education and accommodation. The report lists those areas in which we feel that more work is needed.

My sense is that the Ministry of Defence, over the next year or so and beyond, will be required to report on the effectiveness of implementation in those three areas. It will also be under increasing pressure to broaden the scope of the covenant in due course. Indeed, why should not social care and other aspects of public service provision be included? As a humble Back Bencher, I am sympathetic to the arguments that have been put forward, and I am sure the future rests with the Ministry of Defence as it take them forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chair of the Committee for his statement.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for taking this point of order. You will be aware that yesterday the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office issued notice of a written statement, confusingly entitled “FCDO Update”, which quite frankly could refer to anything. It was not released until 5 o’clock yesterday and its nature was not clear, but it turned out to be an announcement on some of the detail, but far from all, of the huge cuts in official development assistance, leaving a range of international bodies, partner countries and humanitarian organisations in a totally confusing and unacceptable situation. This was done at the end of the day, beyond the deadline for submitting an urgent question, which of course is 1 pm.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be aware of the deep disquiet in all corners of the House about the nature of the announcement, the way it was made, and the breach of the manifesto promise on 0.7% and the cross-party consensus at a time when we face a global pandemic, millions on the brink of famine, conflict and instability from the Sahel to Yemen, including in regions where our armed forces are stationed, and a climate crisis—it is Earth Day today. The UK is about to host the G7 summit and is, of course, seeking new trading and partnership opportunities around the world. The announcement has been resoundingly criticised today by the former national security adviser, the United Nations humanitarian chief and 200 of our leading humanitarian organisations.

Is it in order to put out an announcement of such magnitude at the end of the day without the ability to scrutinise it in this Chamber? How might Members from across the House—many senior Members from across the House want to ask questions on it—secure the presence of the Foreign Secretary in this Chamber to answer questions at the earliest possible opportunity?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and his courtesy in giving me notice of it. It is for Ministers to decide whether to provide information to the House in person or via a written ministerial statement, as he set out, so that is not strictly a matter for the Chair. However, the hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of the House and has set out some of the ways in which he might seek to find further information. He has also put on the record his disquiet about this matter, and I know those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his comments and will, I am sure, feed them back. I also note that the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs appeared before the International Development Committee this morning, and I suspect the issue may have been raised there.

We will now have a short suspension for cleaning before the next debate.

1.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Backbench Business

Covid-19: Government Transparency and Accountability

1.6 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Eighth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Government transparency and accountability during Covid-19: The data underpinning decisions, HC 803.

I thank the Liaison Committee and the Backbench Business Committee for granting us time to debate this important report this afternoon. I thank the members and staff of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for their extensive service and their efforts to bring about the report. I note that many of them are in their places this afternoon.

Of course, a report about statistics will bring up various quotations from the past. I think particularly of Disraeli’s

“lies, damned lies, and statistics.”

To manipulate Orwellian language slightly, I think too of the idea that language is power. In this circumstance, I would say that data certainly is power.

The past year has seen the Government impose some of the greatest ever restrictions on the people of this country. For those restrictions to have moral and democratic legitimacy, the Government must be able to justify them. At its core, the report asks whether the Government have done that. The aim of the report is not to question the decisions themselves, but to ask whether the data was available for us to understand and to interrogate those decisions.

The report finds that while there has been great progress in collecting data—I emphasise that point most strongly—there have been a number of shortcomings in how the data has been shared, how transparent the decisions have been and how some Ministers have made themselves available—or, sadly, have not done so—to face parliamentary scrutiny.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was slightly disturbed to note in one of the report’s conclusions that Ministers who appeared in front of the Committee in place of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster were not properly briefed to answer its questions. The Committee noted his

“refusal to attend this Committee and account for decisions”

and drew the conclusion that it was

“contemptuous of Parliament.”

In my experience, that is not the usual course of action of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; he is normally very happy to appear in front of Parliament. I wonder whether the Chair is able to furnish the House with any correspondence the Committee has had with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to see whether that lack of accountability might be put right in future.

Mr Wragg: I refer my right hon. Friend to my correspondence with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, which is published regularly on the PACAC website. I would hope that the response to a well-meant, generous invitation to such a senior Minister will promptly

[Mr Wragg]

be put right and that we will be assured of his attendance at our Committee, so that we can do the job we are there to do, which is to scrutinise Ministers and the Government, and indeed to give those Ministers the opportunity to place things on the record—something I think they appreciate.

As we progress through these latter stages of the pandemic, data transparency becomes more crucial. The public must understand the justification for each decision on the road map. I want to dwell on the progress to date; I am a fair-minded person and I like to give as much praise as I do criticism, although sometimes that may not be too apparent. On this occasion, I will dwell momentarily at least on the progress that has been made. The Government have amassed enormous amounts of data from a standing start, making much of it available to the public, including the covid-19 dashboard and through surveys by the Office for National Statistics, including the infection survey. The report pays warm tribute to the work of public servants, indeed echoing the words of Sir David Norgrove who paid tribute

“to all involved in this work, at a time of anxiety for them and their families, with all the disruption caused”.

One of the key messages of the report is in relation to accountability. The Committee has reviewed the common themes across three of our recently published reports. All three of those have highlighted the fact that the governance arrangements have not always been clear. Emphasised in those reports was a lack of clarity over the role of the Cabinet Office, the various covid Committees, and, indeed, the quad in decision making. In addition, as has been highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), we have had concerns over ministerial accountability.

I will, if I may, mention briefly how data have been communicated to the public. The Committee is very clear in its view that statistics should be used for the purpose of genuinely informing the public and that open and honest communication builds trust. Even when the Government have, on occasion, fallen short of their promises, that openness and willingness to share uncertainty certainly builds trust. We should avoid, as one of our esteemed witnesses said, the tendency towards number theatre, where big numbers are bandied around perhaps without very clear context, perhaps seeking to impress, rather than entirely to explain.

The UK Statistics Authority’s code of practice for official statistics promotes the production and dissemination of official statistics that inform decision making. The UKSA’s code of practice framework is based on three pillars: trustworthiness, quality and value. Trustworthiness is about having confidence in the people and organisations that produce statistics and data, and valuing the statistics that supports society’s need for information. We, as a Committee, have concerns that Ministers have not always lived up to the expectations of that code of practice. As a result of the evidence presented to the Committee, we have recommended that the ministerial code is strengthened so that it is clear that Ministers are required to abide by that code of practice in their presentation of data.

On the publication of that data, the Committee outlined clear recommendations. The progress around these recommendations has been varied to date, although I have been keen to emphasise areas of strong progress.

We recommend that the Government should publish the data that underpin the restrictions that will remain in place for businesses at each step and do so as a matter of urgency. It is all very well having the data in the public domain, but we need to know what are the benchmarks. I have likened it in the past to someone taking an examination: they know what mark they got in that examination but they do not know quite what the grade thresholds are. Furthermore, in terms of internet publication, hyperlinks to this data should be included on those pages explaining those restrictions for maximum transparency.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): In my constituency at the moment, we have 16 covid cases per 100,000. There have been no covid deaths in the past 15 days, yet all of my hospitality, certainly that in the city, is still prevented from opening up in any meaningful way. I notice that paragraph 191 of the report says:

“The hospitality and entertainment sectors have not seen sufficient data to underpin decisions relating to their industry.”

That is a point that I have repeatedly asked about in the House—I know that it is also the subject of a live case. Has my hon. Friend and his Committee seen any sufficient data to underpin decisions relating to the hospitality industry, which still remains closed in large part?

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head, and the short answer is no. If the Government were to express the view that these are arbitrary decisions made because this is a difficult situation, that would be a more honest approach than vague references to following the science without bringing forward the evidence to underpin decisions. He hits the nail exactly on the head. I try to say this without sarcasm, which is a great effort for me, but we are surely driven by the data, and not dates.

The report also notes that local leaders did not always have access to the data that they needed to respond quickly at the height of the pandemic. As such, we recommend that going forward, the Government must share all available data with local areas in as much detail as possible, and ideally to patient level. Data that will be key to decision making on the road map should be shared immediately, and the road map indicators should be added to the dashboard with clear links to the data at lower local authority level underpinning each one.

Changing the topic slightly before I conclude, the Committee is now inquiring into the vexed proposal of covid vaccine certification or, indeed, wider covid status certification. The evidence we have heard so far reinforces the importance of transparency and accountability of data, as we highlighted in the report. Before the considerable ethical and legal issues about vaccine certification proposals are even taken into account, the purpose and effect of such certificates must be understood and the data and evidence underlying such a proposal set out. That means that the data needs to be made clear on issues such as transmissibility after vaccination, especially when considering implementing what we heard would be a permanent solution for what may well be a temporary problem.

I should say that I am pro-vaccination. I believe it is for the individual to decide whether they wish to take it. I would encourage them to do so and, indeed, when it is my turn—I am younger than I look, although perhaps not younger than I act—I shall indeed take the vaccine.

I will leave the House with one statistic, which I saw on the pages of *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday. It is that just 32 of some 74,000 hospitalised with covid between September and March had been vaccinated at least three weeks before. If we can get hold of more recent data than that, we will be proving that we can have confidence in the vaccine to deal with the worst aspects of this horrendous pandemic and that we can look forward to unlocking society, regaining our freedoms and allowing this country to move forward. I look forward to hearing the contributions of hon. and right hon. Members this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the next speaker, I emphasise that we have two debates this afternoon and a number of Back-Bench colleagues wish to speak. To save me having to put a time limit on, it would be helpful if speeches were confined to around five minutes. That will enable everybody to get in.

1.18 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). I thank him for the fair and inclusive way in which he has chaired the Committee.

The sense of shock, uncertainty and genuine confusion that the public at large felt as this crisis began was in truth mirrored by the Government. That is at least in part understandable, and I will return to the issues of preparedness later, but the nature, scale and speed of that first wave was unlike anything our Government have ever faced before. It would have tested the boldest of leaders, the best prepared institutions and the most resilient of communities.

My father-in-law died in those early few weeks. I was grateful to be able to attend his funeral, but my children could not. Since last April, tens of thousands of families have faced this trauma, and the loss of life and destruction of our economy is not understandable, nor was it inevitable. The truth is that our leadership was woeful, our institutions already cut to the bone by funding cuts, our communities fractured and frayed, health inequalities widening, and it is no surprise that the poorest have faced the greatest burden.

In a democracy as old as ours, the Government rightly have less power to control us and force compliance than many others across the world, but that means that transparency and accountability are more fundamental to securing our agreement for the common good, and when the very Government who had previously eroded accountability and shirked transparency asked us to make those sacrifices, there were bound to be tensions. The starting point of distrust and dysfunction was made much worse by the unpreparedness with which we entered this emergency.

Emergency preparedness, resilience and response is a term that we use to make sure that we are safe before, during and after an emergency and national disaster. At our Committee session on 29 April the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster appeared to talk about the work of the Cabinet Office, and we looked at preparedness. The pre-2020 timeline to our report is really important. Public Health England's pandemic flu strategic framework in 2014 had as a key principle preparing for the worst. That 2014 document built on work in 2011, which

followed work in 2009 regarding the previous flu crisis. In 2016 Operation Cygnus, the exercise conducted to understand our preparedness and test our resilience in response, was shrouded in mystery, and it was only released in October 2020, as even *The Daily Telegraph* reported, following legal action and the threat of the Information Commissioner. That document really exposed how poorly prepared we were.

In addition, in our meeting with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in April we discussed the national risk register, which had not been published since 2017; it is supposed to be published every two years. I asked him whether the Cabinet Office monitored whether various Departments and agencies had completed the mitigations in previous risk registers. He answered that it was the Cabinet Office's responsibility to do so. He wrote to us later, on 21 May, with less clarity on the Cabinet Office's role, simply stating that work on the risk register for 2019—for 2019—was advanced, but would need to be recalibrated in light of the current pandemic.

Also, we were running the NHS at over 90% of capacity, when the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and many other royal colleges had been warning that 85% was more in line with patient safety requirements. That, plus the additional year-on-year Government cuts, including to public health, all meant that we were not prepared when we could have been, and any look back at this dreadful time in our history needs to expose that failure.

But fundamentally and unforgivably, we were hamstrung by this Government's ideological opposition to the very things that could have helped save lives—an ideological opposition to experts, an ideological opposition to local government and local expertise, an ideological opposition to the principles of good public health. And what was it replaced with? The absurd reliance on mates and acquaintances—approaching a pandemic in much the same way as most of us would look for someone to plaster our bathroom. Underpinning it, the idolatry of the private sector, trumping every time the institutions and people who actually understood the communities we were looking to protect.

Crucially, the Government were bereft of a strategy, with no accountability, and that includes the legislation and our role as Members of Parliament who were presented with that rushed legislation and reliance on ancient public health Acts, rather than the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and the scrutiny that had happened in this place before—a problem that we are still trying to extricate ourselves from.

The key part of that Civil Contingencies Act was the reliance on local resilience forums. None of us live in Whitehall; we live in our communities. That is why local forums are so critical, and any response should have been driven bottom-up and then supported by the national effort—and that is where so much damage has been done, in that local response.

For everything we have learned in our Committee, the transcripts are really quite shocking. As a previous emergency planner and someone who has worked closely with public health, I expected certain things to happen, and they did not. The test and trace debacle is the most obvious case in point—so many lives lost, so much time lost. Why would the Government not trust local leaders, and our colleagues in councils of all political colours, to get the job done that they were trained to do? Over the

[Karin Smyth]

border from me only 20 miles, in Wales, the Welsh Test, Trace, Protect system is run as a public service and has delivered, by any measure, better outcomes for vastly less public money.

Things have got a bit better in terms of the local-national interface and response, but there are still some real issues that are hampering the public health response now and for the future. First, we must not reorganise the organisation that is doing this at national level in the middle of a pandemic and make people fearful of losing their jobs when they are trying to save our lives. Secondly, the consequence of the Lansley Act is that public health expertise in local government does not have the same access to NHS data that previously occurred. That has hampered the public health effort locally. Public health officials in local government need to be able to access data for public benefit and recognise the difference between identifiable personal data and non-identifiable data. That is something the Government can do something about.

We have to use this excellent report to look to the future. Does anyone here think that everything will be normal after 21 June? Again, after everything we have been through, the Government are still not on the front foot. They are still too late, as demonstrated by the decision about India going on the red list this week. I do not think everything returns to normal after 21 June, and the Prime Minister has now started hinting about a third wave. That means he has to take some actions. We are all so very weary. We are desperate to see our loved ones. We are desperate for everyone to get back to work, to go on holiday, to start planning our lives now. Our young people need radical change in our education system to be prepared for the future. Decisions need to be made now. We all want to be able to visit care homes and have people able to leave those care homes. It is an absolute disgrace, but the urgency is missing.

In conclusion, I am very proud to be a part of this Committee. I commend our Chair for the fair and inclusive way he has conducted it. Our Clerks and advisers have been superb in their support and responsiveness to allow us to do some great work in difficult conditions. I thank them for report they produced, and I thank our great witnesses. The Government, however, have not learned the lessons. I am not confident that they have taken on board these recommendations. If we are to secure compliance for the next stage, that really needs to happen: we need honesty and transparency about the data; honesty about the political choices that face us; honesty about the balance of risk; and, frankly, more respect for Parliament and the people we represent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I reiterate that we need to keep to five minutes, otherwise I will put on a time limit.

1.26 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The covid pandemic, as we all know, has had the most devastating impact on the health and economy of our nation. It has also placed the most enormous strains on the administration of government. The pandemic is a phenomenon unprecedented in the lifetimes of most of us who are alive today. There was no real precedent to work to.

There was no playbook. It was therefore inevitable that dealing with it would present huge challenges to medicines, science and Government.

Crucial to the response to the pandemic is the collation and analysis of data. The Committee's report rightly praises the work of those officials who set up new data collection and management systems. In particular, I commend the work of the Office for National Statistics, the central part of which is the community infection survey, which provides a clear picture of the prevalence of the virus across the whole of the UK. Over the period of the pandemic, that picture has improved significantly in clarity.

The report rightly concentrates on and highlights the importance of transparency of data. In any democracy whose citizens are being asked, indeed instructed, to give up a large number of their inherent freedoms to keep their fellow citizens safe, it must be essential that the rationale for such instructions is readily available and understandable. That is only achievable through access to the data that underpin, or are claimed to underpin, the decisions the Government are making. Furthermore, citizens need to be assured that in making those decisions the Government are using the available data for the right reasons and in the right manner.

In this context, the Government have rightly been criticised for the way certain elements of data were used, or indeed misused. Arguably, the most egregious example of what I would categorise as the misuse of data was the press briefing on 31 October 2020, when the second lockdown was announced. Data projecting up to 4,000 deaths a day were cited, even though the data were never intended for public consumption, were based on extreme assumptions and were out of date by the time they were used.

Evidence to the inquiry suggested that on occasions such tinkering with the figures had seemingly been done for political purposes. The Committee heard, for example, that the target of achieving 100,000 tests per day was met by adding tests that had been sent out to tests completed—in other words, double counting.

Whether that was a genuine error or politically motivated, it cannot be acceptable.

The report points out:

“The first principle of the UKSA Code of Practice for the use of statistics is ‘Trustworthiness’.”

The UKSA code requires that

“Statistics, data and explanatory material should be presented impartially and objectively.”

However, the ministerial code requires only that

“Ministers need to be mindful of the UK Statistics Authority's *Code of Practice*”—

it almost invites bending the rules. The report therefore rightly advises:

“The Ministerial Code needs to be strengthened so it is clear that Ministers are required to abide by the UKSA Code of Practice in their presentation of data.”

Of course, there is frequently a temptation for politicians to try to give the impression that they have all the answers. However, one of the most interesting pieces of evidence that the Committee received was that

“admitting uncertainty is unlikely to undermine the public response and might have a positive impact.”

Furthermore, if people have less trust in Government and the science behind the response to the pandemic, they are

“less likely to follow rules and guidance”.

The shocking, perhaps revolutionary lesson is therefore that to transmit most effectively the conclusions of data analysis, honesty is the best policy.

Arguably, data has never been a more important element of the governance of this country than in the past 15 months. I have no doubt that when the pandemic is over, extensive “lessons learned” exercises will be undertaken both by the Government and by various Committees of this House. I very much hope that they will consider not only the extent to which data should underpin decisions, as I believe it always should, but the way in which that data should be communicated.

The fundamental point of the Committee’s report is that absolute transparency in communicating information is essential to provide the best public response. When people are asked to give up their liberties, they need to be told why. Regrettably, for a variety of reasons—which, to be clear, were not always disreputable—that has not always been the case over the past year and a quarter.

1.31 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and his Committee for their work in undertaking the report. To me, it is nothing short of damning, but to those of us who have been paying attention to the Government’s record on transparency and accountability over the past year, it is entirely unsurprising. We have seen the scandal of corona contracts; when processes that ensure fairness and transparency are stripped away, politics is left open to exploitation. The Greensill and Dyson scandals have shown that the Government oversee a culture of taxpayers’ money being allocated through informal back channels, such as texting and WhatsApp—channels protected from public scrutiny.

The report reveals another dimension to the culture of undermining transparency and accountability: the Government have been misusing data to drive their own agendas rather than to reflect reality. They have sought to make the evidence behind their decisions opaque and unobtainable to the public and to Members. Every day it becomes clearer that they have an aversion to transparency that goes right to their very core. In many cases, they have used data not to inform the public, but to emphasise an argument or create a more favourable view of the Government. UK Ministers have cited statistics without providing sources and acted in a manner that falls far short of the UK Statistics Authority’s code of practice. It is clear that the Government think that the public’s heads button up the back. A Minister, a friend, a donor or even a pub landlord can expect unfettered access through unofficial back channels; anyone else can expect to be taken for a fool.

The report notes that the Government have used data to provoke anxiety rather than a realistic understanding of risk. In an age in which fake news and disinformation feed off public anxiety for nefarious political purposes, that is deeply irresponsible. It is also important to note that transparency is not only desirable for its own sake, but critical in maintaining public trust in our political institutions, especially at a time when we face such a national crisis.

The result of these failures has been a breakdown in public trust and the deterioration of the intergovernmental relationships that ensure good decision making. That is why transparency, openness and accountability should always exist, regardless of any crisis at hand. I recognise the need for swiftness in decision making during the pandemic, but speed must not come at the cost of transparency or accountability. It does not have to; balancing speed and transparency better simply requires Governments to start thinking more creatively about how scrutiny is undertaken. One solution would be something like my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill, which hon. Members have heard me mention on a number of occasions. I know that time has run out for that Bill to be given any sensible consideration at this stage in the Session, but it would put in place a mechanism whereby, even after the awarding of such contracts, a scrutiny process could still take place to hold Ministers to account for those decisions.

When it comes to concerns about data in the report, transparency and scrutiny could be delivered by committing to a full public inquiry on the handling of the pandemic, just as the Scottish Government have done. That move was supported by all parties in the Scottish Parliament, including the Scottish Tories, so I see no reason why colleagues in this place would not also support one. After all, if the Government have nothing to hide, there is nothing to fear.

Lastly, it is hard not to contrast that with the approach we have seen from the Scottish Government, where clear and often frank communication has been key. When my constituents see one Government holding daily press conferences, outlining the data and answering questions in a full and frank manner and another hiding from the facts and shielding from transparency, they can certainly make up their own minds.

1.35 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): Without a shadow of a doubt, the nation has lived through a quite unprecedented period that would have tested all Governments of any colour. It is also the case that, for a long time, we did not know exactly what we were dealing with. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) outlined, from a standing start, the Government had to move in a fleet-of-foot manner without being entirely certain and in that respect the leadership and speed with which the Government acted deserves commendation.

The Committee heard from a number of witnesses who acknowledged that, from a standing start, the speed with which the Government compiled a bigger picture of data that enabled us to understand what was happening was impressive. The way in which the Government illustrated how the data informed their decision-making process was equally impressive. What has been lacking, as our inquiry shows, is transparent data that illustrates the efficacy of the measures taken and whether they were delivering their stated outcomes, which were of course to save lives and protect our NHS. There has been rather less of that.

The Government have taken incredible freedoms and liberties away from the public. We in this House are the guardians of the liberties of the people in this country and it is our job to satisfy ourselves that the sacrifices we are asking people to make are proportionate and

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

delivering those outcomes. However, I genuinely fear that over the last year we have come to a situation in which, far from the Government asking us to sacrifice liberties for the greater good, we now have a culture where the Government feel that those liberties are in their gift to give back to us. Nothing is more clear about that than the road map, because having heard the rhetoric from Ministers that we will be driven by data, not dates, we are sticking to the timetable. I got the figures from my borough this morning, where we have 9.2 cases per 100,000. My reaction to that is: let the blooming restaurants open, for heaven's sake. We are doing unparalleled economic harm by not being so fleet of foot to enable our economy to reawaken. From the perspective of doing the best for the citizens of our country, we really should be doing that, because, with every day that goes by without us letting businesses reopen, we are making their long-term sustainability even more difficult.

I went out for dinner on Saturday night—it was so exciting. I was sitting outside my local restaurant. It was six o'clock in the evening, so the sun was going down, and it started to get very cold. I spoke to the owner who, bless him, was very pleased to see us. How can it be sustainable to expect people to eat outside in the current climate? It is not July. I have the utmost respect for everybody who is trying really hard at this moment to sustain a living—we will be dependent on the taxes they will pay to get us out of this—but, for heaven's sake, I cannot believe how out-of-touch I feel we have got with us taking it for granted that these businesses can resurrect themselves on an arbitrary date.

We know that these restrictions have not demonstrated any positive benefit in respect of covid. My local area went into the November lockdown with one of the lowest case rates in the country and came out with the highest. There is a simple reason for that: we restricted legitimate businesses from being able to engage in economic activity while keeping the schools open, so there was social transmission. Lockdowns are effective only if everything is locked down, yet we seem to have locked down the most productive areas of our economy, which, frankly, for a Conservative Government, I find utterly bizarre.

My final point—recognising your strictures on time, Madam Deputy Speaker—is that we need to ensure that when we are asking the public to restrict their freedoms, it must deliver a positive outcome in saving lives and reducing pressure on our hospitals. So why is it that in palliative care wards, people are allowed only one visitor? What risk is there to the people in those wards of dying from covid when they are already dying? What we are doing is being very cruel to people at the end of their lives, because they cannot get comfort from their loved ones. Equally, what positive outcome is there right now when residents in our care homes, who have all been vaccinated—and, as my hon. Friend said, are protected from this disease—still cannot see their loved ones? My grandmother is 95 years old, with dementia. She is in permanent distress because she thinks no one cares about her. She has been vaccinated. I would love to be able to go and see her. She thinks I do not care. I think what we are doing is cruel and delivers no positive benefit to public health.

1.41 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who gave a very passionate speech. It was an honour to serve on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee during this inquiry and to contribute to the production of such an excellent report, and I thank the Committee staff for all their hard work.

The Nolan principles of public life speak of objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership as being core to public office and good governance. However, given the report's conclusions, the Government's stewardship of each of these principles has been brought into serious question. I want to speak specifically to recommendations relating to the Government needing to improve transparency by publishing data and information that underpin decision making.

Throughout the pandemic, when people have died, freedoms have been curtailed, families have been separated and living standards have suffered, the Government should have been more open and transparent about the data and information that have informed the decisions that have asked the public to make such huge sacrifices. There is a moral imperative to justify and evidence these decisions and to clearly show that they are working. When necessary, it is about the Government being honest about the uncertainties in the data, which would help to encourage trust, rather than scepticism. As the report states:

“Transparency builds trust, and trust aids compliance with rules.”

However, the communication has not always been transparent, which has damaged trust in sectors and communities across the UK.

The Committee heard from hospitality business organisations about the impact of the pandemic and I have discussed this with hospitality businesses in Luton South. Employers and employees understand the need for public health restrictions but are frustrated that they were left in the dark by not being provided with the information that underpinned the restrictions that impacted on their business operations. Pubs specifically required further information on the 10 pm curfew and the restrictions on wet-led pubs.

Lessons must be learned, as the Government are still failing to communicate the restrictions effectively with businesses. I have spoken to a number of businesses in the aviation sector that are stuck in limbo. They fully recognise the critical importance of the health restrictions to prevent the importing of cases and variants, but throughout this last year, they have consistently requested clarity on the information informing the restrictions in their sector in order to plan, particularly for the future and the opening up of our economy.

The traffic-light system is welcome, but there are still so many questions left unanswered. What information informs the criteria that places countries in the green, orange or red categories? What information underpins the operation of the green watch list? How will Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office travel advice work alongside the new framework? It is still unclear when further information will be provided. If it is possibly some time in May, business and airports will have such limited time—a week or so—to prepare for the potential introduction of the system on 17 May.

The sector needs certainty. This is not just about people going on holiday; the aviation sector is critical to our economy, supporting local economies and thousands of jobs. I fully support the report's recommendation that the Government should publish, as a matter of urgency, the data that underpins the restrictions on businesses that will remain in place at each step of the road map, along with data thresholds for the road map, which would avoid confusion when decisions are made to move between the steps. I hope the Government will put those recommendations, and others in the report, into action to improve trust and compliance with the regulations.

Although the report focuses on the data, its conclusions reaffirm the Committee's previous call for a public inquiry into the Government's handling of the covid-19 pandemic. I emphasise that the Committee worked collectively on the report, but the Labour party will continue to call for an inquiry to start as soon as possible so that crucial, life-saving lessons can be learned.

1.45 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): As a first-term Member of Parliament, I am relatively new to the work of Select Committees. When I joined the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I expected to undertake important and valuable work scrutinising the heart of Government, but I did not quite expect to have to consider matters that are so crucial to everyday life and, indeed, matters of life and death.

Data—the number of coronavirus cases, where they are occurring and the number of tests conducted and vaccinations administered—have decided whether we can leave the house, go to work, see family or go to the pub. Getting data right is at the heart of getting the Government's response right, so the Committee's inquiry was timely and necessary.

I reiterate my thanks to the Clerk of the Committee and the staff who have done such sterling work in helping to put the report together; to the witnesses for providing their knowledge and insight; and to my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for his chairmanship.

The Committee rightly recognises the efforts that the Government have made in pulling together data from a standing start 12 months ago. Governments do plan for catastrophes and emergencies, but I appreciate that this period has been exceptionally difficult for those in Whitehall. The coronavirus dashboard—to give an obvious, visible example of publicly available data—is very impressive, but for me the inquiry raised two issues on which improvements can be made in terms of the accuracy and certainty of data. The Committee found that the graphics the Government have used to present data have not always met the basic standards that would be expected. I welcome the assistance of the UK Statistics Authority and the Royal Statistical Society in supporting the Government to produce clearer graphics.

There is an understandable desire to present any information in the best possible light—it is a natural human instinct—but the news that we have had over the past year has not been good. We heard evidence that there has been a much greater public appetite for data, with people being willing to study it—particularly data on coronavirus—much more closely than perhaps they

would have done in the past, so it is important that any information produced by the Government is accurate and well sourced. I trust that the report's recommendation that statements on Government websites should direct readers to the detailed data that underpins any numbers will be taken forward.

There is a very human reluctance, particularly among politicians, to answer a question with “I don't know,” but for periods in this pandemic, as we have been learning more about the virus and how it spreads, there have been questions to which we do not necessarily have readily available answers. I found the evidence that we heard from behavioural scientists very interesting. People do respond to open and honest information that is clear about the uncertainties within it, so it is important that Government communication trusts the people and levels with them.

Some thought is required on how information is communicated. I expect that, before this pandemic, few members of the public had heard of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. Members of SAGE now frequently contribute to public debate and are introduced as members of that group. While that is important, and they play an important role in helping to inform public understanding, it might be less appreciated that there are differences of opinion within SAGE. The Committee found that guidance for SAGE members would be helpful.

Steve Brine: One of the most interesting parts of the report is that these advisers, who probably enjoy the media requests that they get—although I can confirm that that wanes—appear as members of SAGE “speaking in a personal capacity”, but the public hear a Government adviser speaking about the subject of covid and draw conclusions from that. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is no wonder the public end up confused?

Tom Randall: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The public perhaps do not appreciate that there are sometimes a variety of opinions within a group such as SAGE. Indeed, within SAGE, debate is encouraged as part of the decision-making process. Sometimes people think that there is a definitive scientific answer to something, which is not always the case. As we heard earlier, the report made further important points about sharing data, trusting bodies to make local decisions and the process of decision making itself.

This is, as I said, a timely report. I know that both the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care have responded to some of its key recommendations, but I urge the Government to take on board all of them, so that, as we enter what is hopefully the final stage of this pandemic, even better decisions will be made.

1.50 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall), who spoke very eloquently about the limits of knowledge and how much we know and do not know.

I thank the Committee for its report, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who was as eloquent as ever, and the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for their leadership on this. The Government have a duty to provide the public

[Bob Seely]

with fair and balanced information. As the report says, at times, the Government have presented data well in very difficult circumstances—the coronavirus.data.gov.uk site and the vaccination daily updates are excellent examples—but it is also clear that they have sometimes used statistics without providing full data, providing context for the data or explaining uncertainties in the data.

The critical thing—I am delighted that we have the Paymaster General listening to this debate, because, as she knows, I hold her in high regard—is to keep trust with the people. The Government need to provide the public with full information and datasets to allow them to understand risk in the round. The use of partial data or data that is presented partially damages public confidence. Frankly, it has damaged my confidence in the Government, which is why I have been less willing to vote for the past couple of lockdowns. I sometimes do not know what the Government's real agenda is. I do not mean that in a silly conspiracy theory kind of way. The pandemic clearly exists. Clearly, there was a very strong case for a harder lockdown earlier, and I think a lot of us now see that case, but at the same time there has been a lack of clarity. I would draw a rough comparison with the Iraq war. Mistruths or non-untruths finally catch up with Governments. At the time, Tony Blair was a highly popular leader, but he is now seen to be a shallow populist. New Labour still has not recovered, partly because of the damage it did to its credibility by not telling the truth and not levelling with people.

I believe there is a strong case, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and others have argued, for fuller and franker datasets. Government can help people to rationalise risk, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling explained, so that we better understand Government policy. They need to explain better what is happening, rather than making a crude attempt at times to manipulate behaviour.

Specifically, it is difficult for us—all of us, whether we are in this House or out working in the country—to contextualise some of the numbers. Numbers of covid deaths were always released without a sense of proportion—without explaining that over 1,000 people die and are born in the country every day, or that between 7,000 and 25,000 people die of seasonal flu every year. In the last decade, that has included both myusb parents, for example. There has been so little contextualisation of the information. I saw not one Government spokesman, be it a Minister or a health adviser, say that the median age of covid death was 83. Why not? Because, as we know perfectly well, the Government feared a lack of compliance. For sure, that is a risk, but there is a greater risk by not being honest. There was a strong argument for saying why we should co-operate anyway; we did not need to have the information manipulated for us by a Government who, no doubt with the best of intentions, were trying to get us to do certain things. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling says, honesty is the best policy, even when we are unclear about the policy. I read some media stories—clearly, with a pinch of salt—suggesting that some Government scientists were happy to go along with this soft manipulation of data. If so, shame on them.

My next point—I promise I will not be too much longer, Madam Deputy Speaker—is that not once was there a realistic attempt to offset covid data with other data to show the cost of lockdown. That may not have changed our opinions, because clearly the saving of life was the significant factor here, but in saving life people have died and it is right for us to be able to understand and see the datasets that explain honestly the true costs. Frankly, we still have not got them a year in.

Sometimes, I do not know what the Government's aims on covid are. We are told repeatedly by the experts and Ministers that we cannot get rid of covid. Well, okay—so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) says, if we cannot get rid of it, why are our restaurants not open? Frankly, so few people are dying of it that more people are now dying on the roads than of covid. More people will be dying from winter flu than from covid. So why are we still in a situation where we are encouraging long-term poverty, which will have a far greater effect on people's lives than a pandemic that—thank God—is no longer killing people in anything other than tiny, tiny numbers? There is a lack of logic and consistency. If the Government had been clearer with the data, more honest and more open—if they had said, “Here's the data. This is what we make of it”—we would have been able to do a better job.

I am happy to accept that the hard lockdown was probably the best option at the time. After that, we could have followed the Swedish model, lived with it and accepted that there were different prices to pay, or we could have continued to have a hard and aggressive lockdown every time covid raised its head. They were both variant options, and we sort of muddled through the middle in a slightly uncomfortable way. There was not great advice initially from Public Health England, but we understand that everybody in the beginning made mistakes, and I do not think that any Government would have done this any differently.

The pandemic created a unique set of circumstances, but I believe that more data and more context would have fundamentally created more trust, both here and, more importantly, out in the rest of the country. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) is a diligent Minister and Member of this House. I urge her to advise the Government that more data and more context equals more trust, and we still need that for the future.

1.57 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). That theme of trust is one that I will return to. I thank the members of the Committee who are present, who, ably led by their Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), produced an excellent report for the House. I certainly endorse all its conclusions and recommendations. It would be welcome if the Government accepted them all and put them all into practice.

One of the points that the Committee makes is that policy based on evidence and data is important, but that has obviously been very difficult in these challenging circumstances. We have learned over time, and Government have not had all the data to hand, particularly at the beginning. I recognise that in the remarks that I will go on to make.

Several hon. Members have talked about being open and transparent about communication and about keeping high levels of trust. That is incredibly important. My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) referenced that back in October. He also referenced the press conference that the Prime Minister had on the Saturday. For me, one of the most important and damaging episodes was the day before, when information about projected hospital capacity was leaked to the media. It was not consistent with what I was being told by my local NHS trust. It turned out not to be true, and it also turned out to be so insubstantial that it was not used at the press conference the day afterwards in setting out the Government's decision making. For me, hospital capacity and the pressure on the NHS would have been incredibly important in my decision making, and I am afraid that that episode significantly damaged the trust I had in Ministers, which informed the trust I was willing to put in them afterwards, which has informed the decisions I have taken.

Bob Seely: Was that the fiasco of the claimed 4,000 deaths, which was bogus data that was already out of date, or was that another example?

Mr Harper: No—my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West referred to that. This was a slide that was leaked to Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC's political editor, which referred to hospital capacity and how quickly we may find the NHS being overwhelmed. That information was not published by the Prime Minister the following day and turned out not to be correct. I felt that that was very damaging. It was intended to set up a debate, but the data actually did not stand up at all.

Steve Brine: The Opposition faced criticism for not asking enough questions. Does my right hon. Friend think that the media asked the right questions or enough questions when incidents such as the one he just mentioned came to light?

Mr Harper: No, I do not think that they did entirely. This also highlights the danger of important decisions being announced at press conferences, not in the House. At that particular time, the House was not sitting, but frankly, given the impact of a decision of that magnitude, the House should have been recalled, and it should have been announced in the House to allow us to ask questions, not on our own account but on account of our constituents. I am pleased that subsequently, when proposals for a third lockdown were made in January, the Government learnt from that episode and recalled the House, so that the decision could be announced here, and we were able to ask Ministers questions, albeit with rather a limited amount of time available to do so.

I mentioned the point about trust because there have been stories in the media—the most recent one being yesterday in *The Spectator* by Isabel Hardman—about the decision that my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove referenced on vaccine passports. There is some suggestion, which I am sure cannot be true, that the Government might attempt to win a vote in the House by linking the case for international vaccine passports, which I think command a large degree of consensus, to the one for domestic vaccine passports. The cases for those are very different and should be set out clearly.

I do not know how Members would vote, but I say gently to the Government that if that were to turn out to be true and they were to win a vote on that basis, it would fracture the trust that many Members have in the Government, and that fracture may not be repairable. That would be very dangerous on a public health matter, where it is so important for the Government to command the trust of the public, particularly when decisions have to be taken quickly with a limited amount of data. It would be helpful if the Minister could confirm that any decisions on international vaccine passports and domestic ones will be set out separately for the House to take. If she were able to say that today, it would get rid of what may turn out to be completely idle speculation by members of the media.

On the core point about data, the House will remember that I and 62 other Members wrote to the Prime Minister on 13 February setting out what we thought was a sensible road map. We said that once the top four groups vulnerable to covid had been vaccinated and their vaccinations were effective by 8 March, we should be able to start unlocking the country. I am pleased that the Government listened to that and kicked that process off on 8 March. We also said that once the top nine groups have been vaccinated and those vaccinations are effective, which they will be by the end of this month, we could relax all restrictions. I will conclude my remarks by setting out where the data sits at the moment and why, although I agreed with the Government when they said “data, not dates”, I share the disappointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove that we seem to be stuck on dates, not data.

We are now in a position where the number of people dying from covid has fallen to around 24 per day, which accounts for around 4% of deaths in England and Wales. That is down from a peak in January of 1,361 per day, which accounted for 45% of deaths—a dramatic reduction. The number of people in hospital has fallen to 2,000 from nearly 40,000. The important thing is that vaccination, which has gone extraordinarily well, with a fantastically high uptake, is breaking the link between cases, deaths and hospitalisations. Since schools have gone back, cases have continued to fall, but even if we were to see cases rising, that would not lead to an increase in deaths and hospitalisations.

I think that the Government could safely go faster. That would have massive economic benefits. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said, there has been a big impact on hospitality, and that is important because the job losses have been largely borne by younger people, who are largely not vulnerable to covid but have undergone tremendous sacrifices to their future prospects for the benefit of others. The sooner we can safely reopen the economy, the sooner we can improve the prospects for the younger generation, who have suffered so dramatically from the steps that have been necessary to deal with the impact of covid.

2.4 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) [V]: As a member of the Select Committee, I acknowledge the hard work done by our Chair, my fellow members and the Committee's staff.

While Committees can rightly attempt to hold the UK Government to account—and this report does just that—there is a wider issue here. As we have heard, the

[Ronnie Cowan]

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster refused to attend. The UK Government's attitude was built on the premise that good enough will do. Attending press conferences and reading out data that, as the report states, was used "to emphasise an argument, rather than genuinely trying to inform the public",

as should be the case, is not good enough.

The Chair quoted Disraeli; I shall quote Rudyard Kipling:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

Too often, UK Government briefings failed to consider those basics of curiosity; they failed to understand that people would be curious as to why they were being asked to stay at home, to wear a mask or to not meet friends and family. Perhaps the UK Government, like Kipling, thought it was prudent to let those serving-men "rest from nine till five".

Well, I don't. When the population of the UK faced a virus unlike anything we have ever encountered, they deserved better. If the UK Government are going to close down businesses, people need explanations. They need to understand the rationale. They need to be shown the figures.

The phrase "Trust me, I'm a politician" does not hold much cachet with the public, and the aversion to the truth and lack of transparency displayed by the UK Government only add to people's mistrust. At times of national crisis, we need people to trust the Government. Big decisions are made that come into effect very quickly, and the normal levels of scrutiny might not be appropriate in the time allowed. It is therefore crucial that the evidence on which decisions—often life-changing decisions—are made is timely, accurate and transparent.

There is no place for blind trust in our society; trust has to be earned. Throughout the covid crisis, the UK Government have failed to do that. The UK Government demanded and expected trust, but failed to earn it. From the dubious contract tendering, which was covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), to the narrowing of the criteria in the definition of coronavirus deaths, the UK Government have played fast and loose with data, while displaying an arrogant, devil-may-care attitude. That point was reflected by the Good Law Project, which condemned the UK Government for being

"contemptuous of transparency and apparently allergic to accountability."

The Select Committee report highlights that UK Ministers quoted statistics without providing sources and acted in a manner that fell short of the UK Statistics Authority's code of practice. The report found that there were not enough explanations of where ministerial responsibility for data lay, that that changed several times throughout the pandemic, and that UK Government delays in sharing data hampered local covid-19 responses. When the UK Government failed to be open and transparent, they fed the conspiracy theories, tested the resolve of responsible citizens and undermined the colossal work being undertaken by frontline workers.

The Prime Minister's former house master once wrote:

"Boris sometimes seems affronted when criticised for what amounts to a gross failure of responsibility... I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else."

Most of us would be affronted by the naivety of our teenage self; it appears that the Prime Minister has not just embraced those attitudes, but encouraged those close to him to do the same and rewarded them for their efforts. As we once again attempt to emerge from the covid restrictions, we cannot allow the UK Government to walk away from this.

I shall close by quoting the conclusions of the report:

"The Ministerial Code needs to be strengthened so it is clear that Ministers are required to abide by the UKSA Code of Practice in their presentation of data. The UKSA Code includes the principle of trustworthiness that builds 'confidence in the people and organisations that produce statistics and data'. Abiding by the UKSA Code of Practice is a statutory requirement for Government Departments. It is simply not enough to ask Ministers to be 'mindful' of the UKSA code."

Unfortunately, principles, conventions and expectations are not enough. Ministers cannot be held to account by a raised eyebrow or a stern letter, which is why it is only right and proper that PACAC holds an inquiry into the propriety of governance, in the light of Greensill.

2.10 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members from across the House who have taken part in this hugely important debate. I thank the Committee for its report, and its Chair, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), for the report and for securing today's debate. I would like to declare that I have been involved in the data collection, as a volunteer in the Office for National Statistics covid survey, which comes to my house regularly—I can see the data being collected.

I stood at this Dispatch Box more than a month ago when the hon. Gentleman first introduced this report to the House, and my alarm at its contents has not subsided. So much has been asked of the British public as a result of the decisions that have been made and are being scrutinised in this report; there are huge implications to staying at home, closing businesses, and people not attending births, marriages, deaths and funerals. We need to know that we can trust these decisions. The Nolan principles of public life speak of "objectivity", "accountability", "openness", "honesty" and "leadership" as being absolutely core to public office and good governance. This report brings the Government's stewardship of every one of those principles into serious question. On both sides of this House, we should be deeply concerned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), with her expertise as a former local emergency planner, talked correctly about preparedness, asking whether we are prepared for what is to come with covid and for future emergencies. She asked what can we learn from the decision making and talked about the ideological barriers to good decision making that have been displayed. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) talked about the impact of the lack of transparency. It is still having an impact on decisions now, for example, in respect of the data behind the traffic lights for travel restrictions. We still need to see data—it is still not good enough.

I wish to focus on three core themes: accountability, clear decision making and transparency. On accountability, I share the Committee's indignation that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster did not appear before the Committee during its inquiry. What has he got to hide? Has he decided that parliamentary scrutiny, the bedrock of our democracy, is just not for him? As the report says, this was "contemptuous of Parliament". Does the Minister know why the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster did not appear?

Continuing on the theme of accountability and openness of information, one area the report does not highlight but which is very relevant is the issue of private contractors. How can Parliament scrutinise the Government's pandemic response when so many essential components of the response have been given to unaccountable private firms? We recently learnt that as well as the Government paying Deloitte £323 million for its role in the test and trace system, it is even being paid to draft Ministers' parliamentary answers, which is ludicrous. Paragraph 96 of the report states:

"Lines of accountability must be clear".

I absolutely agree. But it would seem at the moment that if we need answers we would be better off contacting the chief executive officer of a large consultancy firm than the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

That brings me to the second key theme of the report, which is how decisions are made. I wholeheartedly agree with the report's analysis that it has been very unclear who is responsible for ensuring that decisions are underpinned by data, especially when so much is at stake; that is absolutely right. There has been buck passing between Departments, which is totally unacceptable. One wonders if this could have been avoided and we could have found out more if the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster had bothered to turn up to the Committee in the first place. I am also pleased that the Committee highlighted the issue of local contact-tracing data, which has been raised by Members in this debate. This is a crucial point and it is absolutely correct.

Vital information, which would have helped local leaders to respond quickly to outbreaks, simply did not come quickly enough. Last month, I met local councillors and local authority contact tracers up and down the country and they all reported feeling completely bypassed by the Government. They had the capacity, the tools and the local knowledge to run a highly effective contact tracing system, and many went on to do so, but they were not given the data that they needed fast enough, despite pressing for it. I heard stories of people having to wait five days or longer for the information that was needed immediately.

It is very clear that an ideological reluctance to work with local authorities drives that decision making. Perhaps the Minister could tell me what the reasons were behind the Government's unwillingness to share data with local authorities and local contacts. Does she agree with the report and with my Opposition colleagues that that seriously hindered the ability of local government and local authorities to control the virus at a vital time? Contact tracing is likely to play an important role for as long as we have new cases of covid-19 around the country, so this is important to know now and for the future. It is integral to breaking the chains of transmission. Labour has long been asking the Government to put contact tracing in England into the hands of local

councils and trusted local public health teams who know their own communities better than anyone, rather than into the hands of more and more unaccountable firms. It is not too late to do this.

Finally, let me turn to transparency. Again, I am so glad that the Committee highlighted this crucial issue. A lack of transparency has plagued the Government's response to the pandemic from the off. In particular, I share the Committee's concerns about the obfuscation over the data that we saw during the tier system. This report shows that there were no data thresholds aligned to the indicators for tiering decisions. There simply cannot be a repeat of the shambolic and unfair chaos and confusion that we saw towards the end of last year, as we now move towards the end of the road map and beyond.

The Government's aversion to transparency extends beyond lockdown data, however. Not mentioned in the Committee's report are procurement and the information available on outsourced Government contracts, which is also very relevant. At the latest count, nearly 100 covid contracts awarded to private suppliers last year have still not been published. We simply have no idea how much the contracts were worth, who they were awarded to, and what they were for. This is extremely important information that should be in the public domain to build public trust.

The recent twist in this worrying tale came recently when the High Court found that the Government had acted unlawfully when it came to transparency in contract publishing. In fact, only this week the Good Law Project has uncovered that a £100 million personal protective equipment contract was brokered by a Conservative party donor and good friend of the Government. That information entered the public domain only thanks to an administrative error, which appears to be the only way to get reliable information from the Government these days.

Then we have the murky subcontracting of the Government's contractors. Let us take Test and Trace for an example. My hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster highlighted in the House last October the fact that Serco had subcontracted its work on contact tracing to 29 other companies. The Government have refused to give us the names of these businesses; we simply do not have the transparency that we need. This information about data and taxpayers' money should not be hidden from the public.

In closing, allow me to offer my sympathy to the Paymaster General. She certainly has a lot of questions to answer this afternoon. This report says that it is vital that lessons are learned and that changes are made. This is a Government who refuse to learn and refuse to change. When the chips were down and the stakes could not be higher, this report has shown that many, many times the Government threw openness, transparency and best use of data out of the window, which has undermined public trust in Government decision making.

The Committee has recently recommended a public inquiry and we on the Opposition Benches are also calling for that. It needs to happen urgently so that we can rebuild that essential trust among the public, and it cannot wait until the next Parliament. I hope that when it does arrive, it will address the many questions posed by this report that remain unanswered. The Government simply cannot run from scrutiny forever.

2.19 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I shall certainly do my best to answer as many hon. Members' questions as I can. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate and for their interest in the critical issue of how data has helped to shape our response to the pandemic. I put on record my thanks to PACAC for its work, its report and its very helpful recommendations. The report makes it clear that the Government have

“overseen a remarkable effort pulling together data on Covid 19”, with

“much of this data and analysis available to the public”.

It repeatedly refers to the Government's openness with data, noting:

“The Government has responded to requests for new data and improved access to evidence.”

I also put on record my thanks to the civil servants, scientists and partner organisations that have done incredible work over the past 12 months—I think that the authors of the report and all Members of this House would agree with that. They have had to bring together very complex datasets from very different types of science and fuse them together in a way that enables us to be informed and enables Ministers to make decisions. That has been incredibly difficult and they have done it very well.

Bob Seely: I know that the Minister does her best to listen. Does she accept that a lot was presented without context? This was very complicated, but, looking back, I think it could have been done in a way that gave much greater context and greater openness to the debate.

Penny Mordaunt: Certainly. I shall acknowledge some of the things that hon. Members have raised; I do think we need to learn from the past 12 months and look at how in future we can do this better, although God forbid we are ever in this particular situation again. As a Minister—I know my colleagues feel the same—I am always looking to continually improve and build on what we know works.

I also put on record my thanks to the House of Commons. When I was preparing to come before the Committee, I looked at what the House had done with the data that the Government produce; it has done a fantastic job in trying to inform colleagues about what is going on through the hub on our intranet, so I thank the staff of the House.

The Chair of PACAC, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), raised several points. I will not relive my evidence session with the Committee, but in defence of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, whose attendance several colleagues raised, he has a huge in-tray to deal with—this week he has been overseas as part of his responsibilities with regard to passports. I am developing a complex because every time I come before a Committee or appear in the Chamber, people are always keen to tell me that they are very disappointed to see me. I know that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is very alive to the issues that have been raised; I think he is coming before the Committee soon and has had considerable correspondence with it.

Mr Harper: On ministerial accountability, I accept that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is incredibly busy, but it is the central responsibility of Ministers, however busy they are, to be accountable to this House; that includes the Prime Minister, who spends hours in front of the Liaison Committee. Nothing is more important than Ministers' accountability to the House and Members' responsibility on behalf of the public. Since the Paymaster General mentions the Chancellor of Duchy of Lancaster's trip to Israel, where no doubt he is discussing vaccine passports, could she answer my question about the Government's proposal on the decision that it will put to this House, so that we can rule out any of the shenanigans that we have read about in the newspapers?

Penny Mordaunt: I am fairly confident that I can flatten any suggestion of shenanigans in that regard. These are not only very distinct issues, but conditional on very distinct things. What we do on international travel, over and above our own border controls, is clearly contingent on work with international partners. The World Health Organisation will be developing and thinking about schemes that it might put in place for a covid equivalent of the yellow fever card. Those are clearly very different from the domestic issues that my right hon. Friend refers to; I know that people would not want to conflate them and that it would be unhelpful to do so. I think that I can confidently say that.

Many Members touched on the complex balance between fighting the virus and trying to mitigate its impact on people's livelihoods, mental and physical health, and freedoms. That is why this is obviously such a complex situation.

The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) raised many issues, but two in particular. On preparedness, she will know that I published the latest iteration of the national risk register on 18 December last year. External bodies welcomed that and said it was an improvement on its predecessors. On local information, she will remember from my evidence to the Committee that I was very robust in agreeing with her that people who have been in the frontline of this response are the local resilience forums, the local authorities, and our local health and care services. Giving them the data they need to make decisions is absolutely critical. As the crisis has gone on, we have got better and better about giving them information and sharing information, because this is obviously a two-way process.

It is also vital that members of the public can go on the public health website and look up in their area, right down to ward level, the number of positive cases, virus tests conducted, hospitalisations, death rates, and admission figures for both ordinary bed occupancy and mechanical ventilator bed occupancy. They can see all that data. That is not just good for transparency's sake; it is a hugely motivating factor in getting people to follow the advice of the chief medical officer. Our actions are not just helping the nation; they are helping their neighbours and the nurses who are looking after people in their local hospital. They are helping their friends and neighbours.

Karin Smyth: I am really grateful for the Minister's comments, but may I write to her on the issue I raised with regard to public health clinicians in local authorities being able to access to NHS data? Will she liaise with her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social

Care on that important issue? If she can give me an assurance that she will look at that if I write to her, I would be grateful.

Penny Mordaunt: Certainly. I hope that some of the questions I have already raised with colleagues may pre-empt that. I know there are requests from local authorities on issues such as encouraging people to take up the vaccine, when they want to ensure they are able to get good data and are able to work together to encourage people who have yet to come forward to do that. These issues are very important, and I will be very happy to take up the hon. Lady's suggestions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely)—I thank him for his kind words—raised issues about quality control and how we present data, which I agree with. I think people have learnt all sorts of things about how to present data and slides in a way that is suitable for television, and a whole raft of other issues. My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West reminds us that our audience is sophisticated—they can accept that there will be gaps and that we will learn things as we go through the pandemic—and that we should bear that in mind as well.

A couple of hon. Members raised the issue of lagging data. There will be pieces of information that, by their very nature, have a lag, for example between people being infected and being admitted to hospital. Again, we have to set the context and ensure that we explain what particular information is demonstrating, that we make the best judgments on that, and that Ministers are informed when they are given data.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight framed an argument about covid being a cause of death versus other causes of death. I am very conscious of that. Before this debate I was reading an incredibly sad story of a double suicide. A young woman without access to the post-natal care she needed took her own life. Her mother then took her own life. We are all aware of the incredibly sad stories and the devastating things that have happened to families during this time. Also, the actions we have taken to control the virus are about keeping health services going, as well as covid being a cause of death; I think sometimes we lose sight of that.

I want to turn to some of the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) raised. The impact on businesses is absolutely at the forefront of our mind, and as well as the data we are looking at what more we can do to help businesses to keep going. Just this week, I have been asked to support Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the issue of the wedding sector as we go into this critical period, in order to keep that sector strong and ensure that it has a good summer season. This is not just about the guidance and the rules that we put together; it is also about the lead-in times that people need to make their decisions. Those issues are not lost on us.

Steve Brine: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: Can I just make a little progress?

My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock also spoke about care homes. Since 12 April, people in care homes have been able to have two visitors, but she is right to

say that this has been a really difficult time for those in palliative care and for people with a learning disability or behavioural disabilities. We are in happier times now with regard to care, but the restrictions on care services have been very difficult for many people. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) rightly raised issues around presentation, which I agree with. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) made points about SAGE spokesmen, and I will certainly feed that back.

Steve Brine: My point was around helping to support the hospitality sector and the weddings industry. At the end of the day, the best way we can help them is to let them trade. They have not been able to trade because of the pandemic. Either we believe in the vaccine or we do not. After 21 June, we will have freedom from the regulations, but the Boomtown festival in my constituency has had to be cancelled this summer. It was due to take place in August, and there is no reason whatsoever why it should not go ahead, but the messages it is getting are mixed and no one is sure whether Ministers actually believe in the vaccine. Does the Minister?

Penny Mordaunt: I certainly believe in the vaccine. I am a volunteer on the vaccine programme. There has been a huge effort by science, by manufacturers, by our healthcare services and by the army of volunteers who are not just helping to put the vaccine into people's arms but directing traffic and doing a whole raft of other things. The vaccine is critical to our having the confidence to unlock, and I encourage everyone to come forward to get it. My hon. Friend is right to say that this is not just about the ability of people to trade; it is also about the chilling factor, particularly in sectors such as the wedding sector, where we need not just to get people back trading but to give people confidence that they will be able to have those events. I can reassure him that that is very much our focus, and we hope to be able to say more on that as we progress through the road map.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I will take just one more intervention, because I know we are short of time.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: There is a very specific reason why many of these outside events will not take place this summer. It is because they cannot get commercial insurance. The insurers simply do not believe that they can take the Government's word on trust. There has to be sharing of risk, but the Government have dragged their feet for weeks and unless they make a decision now, we will lose July. If they do not make a decision before May, we will lose August, and so on. This has to happen now, because these events are worth at least £2 billion a month.

Penny Mordaunt: I am glad I took my right hon. Friend's intervention. If the Government have a role in this, it is to create a situation where it becomes possible for the insurance sector to provide products.

Bob Seely: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am not going to take any more interventions; I am sorry.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I am very aware of the issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and I am certainly helping with regard to weddings. I can reassure him that this issue is well understood, and I hope that I will be able to come forward and say a bit more about the wedding sector. I will feed back to my colleagues on the wider insurance point, which I know many colleagues have raised before.

I am going to end there, Madam Deputy Speaker. Forgive me, but I wanted to respond to all the points that I could. I thank colleagues for their interest in this area and the sensible recommendations that have been made. We have acted already on some of them, and we will be bringing forward a response to the full report.

2.34 pm

Mr Wragg: May I just say that we always enjoy my right hon. Friend the Minister's appearances before our Committee, and I would not wish to reduce those in number or diminish them in quality. I say in her defence that we are tired of Ministers being sent to us who have been set up to fail, because they have not been part of the decision-making process. It is not they who are accountable, but rather those who are in more senior positions in those Departments. To continue to treat Committees in such a way is, I am afraid to say—I have resisted saying it so far, although it says it in the report—contemptuous of this House.

This debate has been filled with the usual suspects, and many of us are considered if not slightly eccentric then certainly on the boundaries of madness. We have made these points many times. Fortunately, repetition is not a cardinal sin in this Chamber, otherwise there would be very few of us left.

I thank all members of the Committee for their contribution to this important report, and I thank all those of my hon. and right hon. Friends and, indeed, all hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon. Again in defence of my right hon. Friend the Minister, I am reminded of the words of Teddy Roosevelt in "The Man in the Arena". I would replace the word "man" with "woman" in this context, but he said:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles".

I just wish we were given fewer opportunities to point out those stumbles and give those criticisms. It is a challenge to each of us as a Member of this House, whether Government or Opposition, to provide that legitimate challenge. I have understood the restrictions on how we have conducted our business, but the first rule of the game is to show up, and now that we can do so safely, I urge all Members of the House to start turning up again to this place and to urge the House authorities to get a move on so that we can conduct our affairs properly and hold the Government rightfully to account.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Eighth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Government transparency and accountability during Covid-19: The data underpinning decisions, HC 803.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will briefly suspend the House in order that arrangements can be made for the next item of business.

2.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

Human Rights: Xinjiang

2.41 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are suffering Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide; and calls on the Government to act to fulfil its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and all relevant instruments of international law to bring it to an end.

It is a privilege to open this important debate on an historic motion. I want to put on record my thanks to the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, and in particular Luke de Pulford, for co-ordinating MPs around the world, keeping the Uyghurs high on the agenda of national Parliaments.

Today's historic debate would not have been possible without a key ally to the Uyghurs, and the one sponsor of the debate who would have been so proud of us all here today for doing the right thing—I hope—at 5 o'clock. That is my mentor and dear friend, the late Dame Cheryl Gillan. Dame Cheryl was a phenomenal woman—a woman who kept men in their place, and I wish the record to note that this debate is in her honour. I hope that today this House will do her proud.

I am one of the five MPs sanctioned by the Chinese Communist party. Those sanctions were an attempt to silence and intimidate us, to prevent us from raising the growing evidence of the abuse faced by the Uyghurs.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that when a national Government sanctions one Member of Parliament in this place, that national Government is actually sanctioning all Members of Parliament in this place, and that it is incumbent on us all—all 650 of us—to stand as one at this moment?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend could not have put it more perfectly. I believe that sanctioning five MPs for raising human rights abuses was sanctioning this House and asking it to stop raising human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The whole House needs to act as one.

The fact that we are here today, having this debate, shows that the sanctions simply have not worked. I can only assume that my sanctions followed my campaigning on the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill, and my Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report, which exposed that Xinjiang is a Uyghur slave state, and recommends that we blacklist UK firms putting slave-made products on our shelves. As we all know, basic checks and transparency standards cannot be guaranteed in Xinjiang, so businesses find it difficult to guarantee that they are slave labour-free. Let us just cut to the chase and blacklist firms who are linked to Xinjiang unless they are, uniquely, able to offer adequate proof that they are slave labour-free. The British customer does not want to be duped into putting money in the pocket of firms profiting from slave labour. I hope the Minister can wholeheartedly support the rest of the recommendations in the Select Committee report.

I also want to put on record my thanks and offer solidarity to Dr Jo Smith Finley, a senior academic who was also sanctioned for sharing what she witnessed in Xinjiang, along with a legal firm and research group. When the CCP tries to control UK groups and individuals

speaking freely about their research and legal opinions, it is our responsibility and duty to speak truth to power in this place, where we are afforded protection that others may not have. The sanctions are not only an attack on us as individuals but an attempt to stifle the free and open debate that is at heart of our hard-won parliamentary democracy. If the CCP is still in doubt about what our leadership thinks of the sanctions, let me quote our very own Prime Minister, who said:

“Freedom to speak out in opposition to abuse is fundamental and I stand firmly with them.”

Today, I am asking the House to consider whether the grounds for genocide are met. I know that colleagues are reluctant to use the word “genocide”. For many, the word will be forever associated with the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. I agree with colleagues that we should never diminish the unique meaning and power of the term by applying it incorrectly, but there is a misunderstanding that genocide is just one act—mass killing. That is false. Article 2 of the United Nations genocide convention says that genocide is

“any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

There are three points that I want colleagues to note. First, genocide is measured against intent. Secondly, intent to commit any one of the five acts of genocide is sufficient. Thirdly, and fundamentally, all five acts of genocide are evidenced as taking place in Xinjiang. Therefore, while we must never misuse the term “genocide”, we must not fail to use it when it is warranted.

I will shortly return to the horrific examples to support my motion, but let me first remind the House why we are stuck in the trenches and why I am asking us today to help dig us out and free the Uyghur people. The Government state that genocide can be determined only a competent court. Every route to a court is blocked by China. That means that, despite the Foreign Secretary stating that

“the human rights violations being perpetrated in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslims is...far-reaching. It paints a...harrowing picture”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

our Government are handcuffed, paralysed by the UN. We need to take back control. Our route to declaring genocide cannot be controlled by China.

Let me briefly present the evidence to support my motion: the five acts of genocide. Act 1 is:

“Killing members of the group”.

As Dr Smith Finley notes, in the massacre of 2014, up to 3,000 Uyghurs

“were allegedly killed by security forces”,

according to exiles. Separately, as Essex Court Chambers noted in its landmark 100-page legal case, there were reports that an unknown number of detainees died in the camps due to

“poor living conditions and a lack of medical treatment.”

Following the publishing of that opinion, the CCP sanctioned the chambers.

Act 2 is:

“Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group”.

Fifty legal experts in international law have determined that every marker of genocide is met. The Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy found:

[Ms Ghani]

“Uyghurs are suffering serious bodily and mental harm from systematic torture and cruel treatment, including rape, sexual abuse, exploitation, and public humiliation, at the hands of camp officials and Han cadres assigned to Uyghur homes under Government-mandated programs. Internment camps contain designated ‘interrogation rooms,’ where Uyghur detainees are subjected to consistent and brutal torture methods, including beatings with metal prods, electric shocks, and whips. The mass internment and related Government programs are designed to indoctrinate and ‘wash clean’ brains.”

That is from 50 global experts.

Act 3 of genocide is:

“Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”.

President Xi has said so many words, including about showing “absolutely no mercy”. How is he doing that? Credible reports indicate that up to 2 million people are extrajudicially detained in prison factories and re-education centres, and I dread to think of the impact of a lack of proper medical care during a pandemic.

Act 4 is imposing measures intended to prevent births within a group. Unless the Minister can provide evidence to the contrary, I do not believe there is any other place on earth where women are being violated on this scale. “The Handmaid’s Tale” is a fairytale compared with the reproductive rights of Uyghur women. That abuse is evidenced by the Chinese Government’s own data. In 2014, more than 200,000 birth control devices were inserted in women in Xinjiang, and by 2018 the number had increased by 60%. Despite the region accounting for just 1.8% of China’s population, 80% of all birth control device insertions in China were performed in the Uyghur region. That explains why, in one of the region, birth rates are down 84%. Even more chillingly, China no longer shares the data by ethnicity, as it tries to scrub away the evidence. Time is running out for the Uyghur, especially the women.

Finally, act 5: forcibly transferring the children of the group to another group. This unique barbarism of the CCP is a slow-motion genocide. It is hard to believe that it is doing that as a final act of horror. *The New York Times* reported, from public CCP data, that nearly half a million children have been separated from their families. That is key, as it shows the CCP’s intent to strip children from their parents, basically disrupting intergenerational linguistic, cultural and faith transmission. Let me quote the CCP again:

“Break their lineage, break their roots”.

I do not expect the Minister to have any arguments to dispute any of the evidence that I have put forward today. I do expect to hear from the Dispatch Box, considering the crimes, how the Foreign Office will fully co-operate with the independent Uyghur tribunal of Sirusb Geoffrey Nice, QC.

We are not alone. Countries around the world are declaring genocide, and Parliaments in Europe are watching us today and will take our lead. At a previous genocide debate, when we were shamefully denied a vote, I quoted the late Rabbi Sacks. When he was asked where was God during the holocaust, he responded that the question is not: where was God? The question is: where was man? Men and women in this House—the mother of all Parliaments—will do all we can to ensure that atrocities like the holocaust can never again take place.

2.52 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). I congratulate her on obtaining this debate and on the excellent work she has been doing with the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and on the Trade Bill. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Uyghurs, I pay tribute to the many colleagues who have been working with us over the past few years to raise awareness of the seriousness of the situation in Xinjiang.

This House has repeatedly heard evidence of sterilisation, mass extrajudicial internment, organ harvesting and modern-day slavery. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary himself described them as abuses “on an industrial scale” and as “mass torture”. I will not repeat the stories here, because I know colleagues will be talking about them in detail, but we should not have to tell them again and again to get action. I wish to use my time to put a few questions to the Minister.

First, it has become clear to all of us that the Government’s policy on genocide is untenable. They cannot continue to insist that the determination of genocide is for the courts, knowing that there is no court that can actually hear these cases. The current policy far predates the current Government. We should be honest about this and look beyond party politics. It has become an embarrassment to Ministers. It is patently absurd to insist on this being a matter for courts, which will be blocked from acting. Can the Minister tell us what plans the Government have to review and reform this policy?

Secondly, the Minister will know that Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC, has convened a tribunal to conduct an independent and credible interrogation of the evidence. Will he confirm that the Government will do everything possible to co-operate with the Uyghur tribunal, including providing evidence and agreeing to take seriously what will be a rigorous and impartial judgment when the process is complete? Our all-party parliamentary group has written to the Minister about this twice but so far has received no response.

Thirdly, we know that in 2016 Beijing installed Chen Quanguo as secretary of Xinjiang. Within a year, he had turned it into probably the world’s most heavily policed region. When the Government finally announced the Magnitsky sanctions, why did they leave out the organ grinder, Chen Quanguo? He is believed to be the architect of the Xinjiang atrocities and, indeed, those in Tibet. We are now in a position of having sanctioned the entity he runs and helped to turn into an instrument of oppression—the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps—but not Quanguo himself. Surely the Minister must see that this is not rational. The United States has sanctioned him. Will this Government commit today to sanctioning him as well?

When I set up the APPG on Uyghurs in 2019, I was contacted by an official from the Chinese embassy, who I agreed to meet in order to discuss the then recently built internment camps. The Chinese official was quick to remind me that the west has no moral high ground to lecture China, given our own interventions in history—indeed, he sent me several emails to that effect—but to engage in whataboutery is to deny and distract from the point.

Since 1948, we have witnessed genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, northern Iraq and now China and Myanmar. That is not an exhaustive list. Indeed, some grave crimes against humanity go unreported in the mainstream media and are never classified as genocide. The response to these atrocities has always been inadequate. Whenever a genocide takes place, there is a collective wringing of hands, but the promise to break the relentless and devastating cycle of genocide has never materialised. How many times have we heard the words “never again”?

This has gone on long enough. The Minister will be aware that the United States has recognised this as genocide. The Canadian House of Commons, the Dutch Parliament and others have declared it to be genocide. A 25,000-page report by over 50 international lawyers says that what is happening in Xinjiang is genocide, with every single one of the criteria in the 1948 United Nations convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide being breached. The UK’s policy on genocide risks us defaulting on our obligation under the genocide convention. Let us pass this motion today, and I urge the Government to act on it.

2.59 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this debate and leading on the BEIS Committee inquiry and the excellent report on which this debate is based. It is a remarkable feat to have done both. I concur with my hon. Friend’s tribute to our right hon. Friend Dame Cheryl Gillan: I came into Parliament at the same time as her and she was simply a remarkable woman. It was right to mention her in this debate because she stood with us on every one of the votes that we had in the recent debates on genocide. Even though she was ill and housebound, she stayed with us throughout; that shows some courage and some bravery and I salute her for that.

I want to raise one thing before I come to the other points of debate. I have been listening to people over the past week, and I now worry about the environment, which may seem a peculiar issue to raise first but I would like my hon. Friend the Minister to take note of this. I have noticed a number of people saying how important and vital it is—of course—for China to be involved in and sign up to all these pledges on the environment. My slight worry is that China will use the process to leverage any action that we may wish to take, so I want to make sure that when we talk about China and the environment, we no longer try to use it as a balancing point for why we should not take action against China in areas such as the genocide against Uyghur women, the treatment of Tibetans, the appalling treatment of inner Mongolians, the treatment of Christians, the organ harvesting of the Falun Gong and the treatment of other groups. All are abuses that must be called out: whether or not we need China to co-operate on other matters, we cannot simply say that one matter is worth some sacrifice over the other. It is not, and I for one will continue to call that out.

Let me come back to the main points of the debate, which are the ones raised by the Select Committee. They are really important points and my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden touched on a number of them. I wish to highlight a couple. First, Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, whose inquiry is ongoing, has said that his inquiry is

“certain—unanimously, and sure beyond reasonable doubt—that in China forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience has been practiced for a substantial period of time involving a very substantial number of victims.”

That is the organ harvesting of victims in the power of the state. I thought that we, collectively as nations, decided never ever to see this happen again. In the 1940s, Nazi Germany practised organ harvesting and strange science on people in captivity—mostly the Jewish people, but others, too. How can we hear that and lock it away in a box? It is astonishing that we should even be thinking that it is just an item for debate. It is not. It is redolent of the terrible times that we and others went through, and we decided never again. But it is again, and on an industrial scale.

The Conservative party human rights commission report shows four years of human rights deterioration in China between 2016 and 2020. The Select Committee report clearly identifies how Uyghur slave labour operates in supply chains. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden said, the 84% drop in birth rates is significant and shows categorically that forced sterilisation is taking place.

There are others out there who have been brave enough to call this out. BBC journalists covering mass rape and Uyghur abuse have been driven out of China. I see that even Sky faced up the other day and produced a report about the slave labour and the fact that these people, particularly men, are thousands of miles away from their homes in factories that are hidden from view and denied, but there they are—it is slave labour, forced labour.

The Better Cotton Initiative withdrew from the region in October 2020, citing:

“Sustained allegations of forced labour and other human rights abuses”

leading to

“an increasingly untenable operating environment”.

That is the reality of a wealthy, powerful country that intends to be wealthier and more powerful—perhaps the dominant economy and dominant military power—and that believes it can get away with anything. So far, too often, it has. That is the point of this debate and what the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden was all about. She clearly laid out the definition of genocide: killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent birth within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. These are the definitions of genocide. On every one of those counts we have evidence to show that a genocide is taking place, specifically of the Uyghur people, but very likely, as I said, of others like the Tibetans as well. We know that the Chinese have been killing members of the group and causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group. All these things are going on.

If we believe that there is evidence on every one of those counts, the question is: why have we not declared this a genocide? I urge my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government to rethink their position on this. We will not gain any particular friendship by not calling out genocide from the Chinese. It is simply not a tradeable item. The UK has said endlessly, and I understand this,

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

that only a competent court can declare a genocide. That was absolutely the original plan, but the problem is that getting to a competent court is impossible. At the United Nations it is impossible to get to the International Court of Justice. It is impossible to get to the International Criminal Court because China is not a signatory to that and therefore will not obey it, and anyway we will not be able to do that because it will be blocked in the debates at the UN. The whole purpose of the belt and road project is to protect China from any action taken at the UN. It has now collected a coalition of nations that are being given huge sums of money by it. In many cases, they vote with it in the UN regardless on matters like these.

Therefore, we have a problem—how can we get there? The only way, really, is what other countries have taken to doing now. The United States has made it clear that it believes that this is a genocide. Holland has followed suit and so has Canada. I hope, therefore, that today we will do so too. If we think that the American Administration that has just come in is going to somehow walk away from the previous Administration on this, it is worth quoting what is being said in the United States. The new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said:

“My judgment remains”—

he is referring to the statement by Mike Pompeo, his predecessor—

“that genocide was committed against the Uyghurs and that has not changed.”

So now two Administrations in America line up behind this and still stand up for it. On 22 February 2021, Canada’s Parliament voted unanimously on a motion to declare the situation in Xinjiang a genocide. On 25 February 2021, the Dutch Parliament, the States General, passed a non-binding motion declaring that the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang amounts to a genocide. What do we have to know? We have to have significant reports, witness testaments, satellite imagery and Chinese local governmental data, and we have all of that. It is out there in the public domain now, and more and more is being collated.

Let us think a little bit about the victims, whose relatives are out on the square today protesting about their treatment, and who speak terribly of what has happened. The former detainee Tursunay Ziawudun said that every night they were removed from their cells and raped by one or more masked Chinese men. She went on to say that she was tortured and later gang-raped on three occasions, each time by two or three men. That is the evidence that we need as part of our statement that this is a genocide, and that evidence exists. That is but one of a whole series of people who have given such evidence, so we have to hold China to account.

Others want to speak, so I conclude by saying to my hon. Friend that, today, this Parliament has a historic chance, together—regardless of party difference in most other matters—to hold its head up, stand tall and stand for those who have no voice. We, the mother of all Parliaments, should today take pride in the fact that if this motion goes through unopposed, it is the voice of the United Kingdom Parliament—the Parliament of a free people, who believe in human rights and in freedom and human rights for others around the world. Let us make the statement today,

loud and clear, that the UK has not forgotten the Uyghurs and others, and that we will stand for them and insist that our Government do exactly the same by calling this a genocide.

3.10 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this debate and on all the work that she has been doing on this matter. The most distressing and horrific persecution taking place today is that of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China. I remind the House that Muslims are currently observing the holy month of Ramadan—a month of fasting, reflection, charity and prayer. It pains me that millions of Uyghur Muslims are facing some of the harshest abuses that one can imagine during this holy period.

As vice-chair of the all-party group on Uyghurs, I have been highlighting the plight of Uyghur Muslims for several years and have heard, at first hand, harrowing testimonies from survivors, family members and those who have witnessed what I can only call inhumane and chilling human rights abuses. The Chinese Government appear to be engaged in what some experts are calling a campaign of demographic genocide. I fear that the gravity of my words and efforts are simply not being matched by the world’s reaction and, more worryingly, by this very Government.

Members know already that the persecution of the Uyghurs is not new. For decades, they have faced repression at the hands of the Chinese Government, but it has escalated to an entirely new scale. Report after report has highlighted the mounting evidence of human rights abuses and shown that Beijing has violated each and every act banned by the United Nations convention against genocide. The action that the Chinese authorities are taking in Xinjiang contravenes China’s own constitutional provisions on freedom of religion and its obligation under the 1948 universal declaration of human rights.

The Foreign Secretary said in January that we should not be doing trade deals with countries committing human rights abuses

“well below the level of genocide”—

yet by rejecting the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill, the Government have done everything they can to protect the UK’s right to do trade deals with potentially genocidal states. Global Britain, it seems, is just empty rhetoric, with no substance.

Because the words “never again” are utterly meaningless if we fail to act, history will remember us, and we have a moral duty to step in and stop these heinous crimes. Powerful interventions from faith communities, including the Board of Deputies of British Jews, have passionately called on the Government to support the genocide amendment, and the Jewish community has even drawn a parallel between the horrors in Xinjiang and the holocaust. Despite that, the Government continue to drag their feet on holding China to account. Instead, they put trade above human rights. They must continue to press the Chinese Government to close detention camps, cease indiscriminate surveillance and restrictions on religion and culture, and allow independent experts and UN officials proper access to Xinjiang.

After the genocides in Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur, we said, “Never again.” I hope that we can all agree that

we cannot add Xinjiang to that list. I urge the Government not to turn a blind eye to millions of innocent lives because of economic interest.

3.15 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) [V]: Another day, another debate on the industrial scale of human rights abuses by the Chinese regime. Here we are again, and I am delighted that we are; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who has so championed the cause, and wholeheartedly endorse everything she said. Together with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the rest of the magnificent seven parliamentarians, she and I wear our sanctioning with a badge of honour.

I hope that the message has now got through that the productivity of the seven of us has increased sharply since that inept act by the Chinese regime of putting us on the arbitrary and ridiculous sanctions list. Let me tell the Chinese Government: they ain't seen nothing yet, because this will go on every day of every week that we can possibly raise it in this place and on the platforms afforded to us as parliamentarians. They have really fired us up to make sure that that is a promise we will deliver.

I wholeheartedly support the motion, to which I have added my signature. Although Tibet is not within its strict scope, everything that has been said so far applies to Tibet and its people, who have been oppressed with similar tactics for the last 62 years, since the occupation of that peace-loving people in the Tibetan region of China back in 1959.

I absolutely take up the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green made about the environment. China is guilty of abusing not just its own people, but the planet, more than any other nation on this earth. Neither is acceptable; one is not a trade-off against the other, if that is the attitude that it wants to take when it comes to COP26. Both need to be called out, and on both it needs to mend its ways—they go hand in hand.

It is a shocking reality that genocides have never properly been called out and thwarted at the time that they happen—genocides against the Jews, genocides against the Muslims in Srebrenica, genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia and Darfur, and the many other genocides that go unnamed and are not properly detected, as the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) mentioned. I include in that list the Armenian genocide of 1915 and 1916, when 1 million to 1.5 million men, women and children died at the hands of the Ottomans. On Saturday, in Yerevan and around the world, tributes will be paid and flowers laid; I will do so on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on Armenia at the Cenotaph tomorrow in commemoration of that terrible genocide, which this country needs to recognise, more than 100 years on.

We talk about debating the subject. Under article I of the UN convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, the United Kingdom is obliged, along with all other UN members,

“to prevent and to punish”

genocide—not just to talk about it, although it is good that we are doing that, but actually to do something about it.

We have heard all the clear evidence on what is going on in Xinjiang province; I will not repeat what my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden said. We know that China formally recognised the Uyghurs as an ethnic minority among its exhaustive list of the no fewer than 56 ethnic groups that comprise its population, along with the Tibetan people. Under China's own constitution, those minorities and their cultures and identities should be protected, but they are being obliterated. China is trying to assimilate them within its main population, so whatever we may think in terms of international law, it is falling foul of its own constitution. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) said, the Chinese regime, in doing what it has done to suppress free speech, has committed an act against this Parliament and the privileges that we have in this Parliament. It is a naked act of aggression against free speech.

It is clear that what is happening is genocide. My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden put it starkly: if a state-orchestrated and race-targeted birth rate plunge of two thirds in two years is not genocide, what is? If mass internment, slave labour, systematic rape, torture and live organ harvesting, mass sterilisation, womb removal, forced abortion, secretly located orphan camps, brainwashing camps and the psychological trauma of these combined atrocities do not amount to genocide, under any of the definitions, what does? There is a saying, “If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck and walks like a duck, it is a duck.” This sounds like, looks like and is genocide, and it needs to be called out loud and clear for what it is.

I urge the Minister again, who has been very supportive. We are very grateful for the very supportive words of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister, who I am glad to see here again today, and of the Speaker and the Lord Speaker in support of the magnificent seven. But why, oh why, are we not going further in the sanctions against people who are clearly guilty of waging genocide on other Chinese citizens? Chen Quanguo absolutely needs to be on that list; he has been committing genocide against the Uyghurs since 2016, having learnt and plied his trade in Tibet against the Tibetans before that.

We need to do more to support those businesses that are being thrown out of Xinjiang and that are in some cases taking a stand. We need to have a proper audit of our universities and schools. I hear that the Prebendal School in Chichester, in my own diocese, is now under threat of being taken over by the Chinese, and this is on top of no fewer than 17 senior schools around the UK that are now under the control of senior Chinese figures in the Chinese communist party. This is happening in our country, on our watch. We need to flush it out; we need to put the spotlight on it.

The contacts the Chinese have within our military research and their activities within our infrastructure projects—we have to have a full and thorough audit of the tentacles of the Chinese regime in UK society up and down this country. There are still artificial intelligence firms with links to persecution of Uyghurs funding research at British universities. They are funding places at PhD and post-doctoral research positions at Surrey University, for example, despite having been placed on a US blacklist in 2019. I pay tribute to the University of Manchester, which cancelled an agreement with the Chinese electronic company CETC after warnings that

[Tim Loughton]

it supplied the tech platforms and apps used by Beijing's security forces in the mass surveillance of the Uyghurs. We need to do more to make sure we are not aiding and abetting these parts of the Chinese regime.

Last month, the Foreign Office admitted that the Uyghurs were being harassed and abused in the UK itself, so it is not just happening within China. As the Foreign Secretary said, this is being done to intimidate them into silence, and they are being urged to report on other Uyghurs to the police.

Rahima Mahmut, the UK director for the World Uyghur Congress, who has bravely stood up and is one of the mouthpieces for the Uyghur population here, was in Parliament Square earlier. In an article in *The Telegraph*, she gave some chilling examples of Uyghur exiles in this country being intimidated by the long tentacles of the Chinese regime while in the supposed safety of this country. Those exiles are ominously reminded that they have relatives back in China. A Uyghur woman received texts every day from the Chinese police urging her to spy on other Uyghurs in the UK and saying, "Remember, your mother and your sisters are with us."

This regime does not stop at its own borders and we need to stand shoulder to shoulder and offer whatever support we can to protect those Uyghur refugees, Tibetan refugees and other victims of oppression by China who find themselves in this country. They deserve our safety and our succour, and we need to give them more to protect them from the dangers that they are going through.

I also urge the Minister: we should be encouraging our diplomats to speak out. Last week, I cited the example of the new British ambassador in Beijing who had been hauled over the coals for just mentioning the free press to the Chinese Government. John Sudworth, the BBC correspondent in Beijing, has had to flee from Beijing, after reporting on human rights abuses, because of fears for his own safety and the safety of his family. We must encourage these people to continue to speak out.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Given that list of people and organisations that have called things out, does my hon. Friend not find it strange that no UK university that is receiving funds from the Chinese has condemned any of the action that is going on publicly, or, for that matter, condemned the action of the Confucius Institutes, which spy on Chinese students in universities?

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have long been calling out the Confucius Institutes, which are not only on the campuses of UK universities, stuffing gold into the mouths of vice-chancellors, but, increasingly, in our schools as well. When I visited a secondary school in my constituency, which teaches Mandarin, I was alarmed to see that it now has a Confucius Institute classroom sponsored by the Chinese. The Chinese are not doing this because they just like to be nice to our schools; they are doing it because they have an agenda and they are trying to control people around the world and suppress people who want to speak out against them.

I echo the closing words of my right hon. Friend. Today, we stand up in this place for those without any voice. That is an advantage of being a parliamentarian—we

use our voice to stand up for, speak out for and protect those without a voice and those who are in danger. Let us, with that voice—loudly and clearly—make sure that this motion goes through today to show China once and for all that it has been called out, that there will be consequences, and that there are consequences, for its industrial scale abuse of human rights, and that, in this country at least, freedom and the freedom of speech, of faith and of worship count for something and it had better acknowledge that.

3.27 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on bringing this debate to the House today and on continuing to stand up for what is right.

China's modernisation and rise to being a global power has been the defining phenomenon of the last 40 years, but not all communities and peoples under the control of Beijing have benefited from that rise. The Chinese Communist party has been ruthless in response to any perceived threats to its ideology and control. The tanks in Tiananmen Square were symbolic of a process that has continued largely unnoticed until the very public crushing of Hong Kong's defence of democracy.

Today's debate is about the persecution of the traditionally Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang province. It is about a genocide taking place right now. But, as we have heard, many Members also share concerns about Chinese actions in Tibet and there are close links between the two communities in the UK.

Today, I would like to highlight, yet again, the work of a new campaign group co-founded by my constituent, Kirsty Robson. It challenges us to learn lessons from the holocaust and to break the cycle of impunity for perpetrators that allows atrocities to continue. Its work is very much needed now.

I also want to acknowledge BBC journalist John Sudworth, who was driven out of China last month by harassment following BBC coverage of China's persecution of the Uyghurs. Thanks to John and his work and the bravery of others in speaking out, we know that 1 million or more Uyghurs are interned in detention and re-education camps in Xinjiang province—camps that are dedicated to achieving transformation through education. It is where Uyghur traditions, beliefs and language are intensively undermined and the Uyghur community as a whole is treated like a terrorist network to be squashed.

The existence of those camps is admitted by the Chinese Government, who describe them as "voluntary". That is completely lacking in credibility, and we have heard today the horrific reality of the vast numbers of deaths and the terrible treatment in those camps. Alongside the camps there is widespread slave labour, with hundreds and thousands of Uyghurs and other minorities forced to work in vast cotton fields and factories, the produce of which is undoubtedly—and mostly unchecked—feeding through into major UK stores. I am confident that consumers would be appalled if they realised that.

When bureaucracies and armies are given free rein and there is no accountability, women and children are very often on the receiving end of atrocities. That is what has happened in Xinjiang following a visit by Xi Jinping in 2014, when he urged tough action against the Uyghur population in response to a terrorist attack.

Since then there have been more reports of forced sterilisation as a means of population control, reports of systemic rape, torture of women in camps, and children being taken from their families and sent to state orphanages and boarding schools to break family and cultural ties.

Thanks to the work of Yet Again, I was able to hear the personal story of Uyghur activist Rahima Mahmut, who has lived in the UK since 2000. What she expressed was chilling. She also tells of the crushing of peaceful demonstrations in her home town of Ghulja in the 1990s, and of the pressure on the families of those who have sought refuge abroad. Her report shows that while Chinese authorities claim to target religious extremists, they really see any practising Muslim there as an enemy. Their actions make a real mockery of China's constitutional protection of religious belief.

East Renfrewshire is home to Scotland's largest Jewish community, and every year I join events on and around Holocaust Memorial Day, which is a privilege and always gives me significant pause for thought. That is when we reflect on that dreadful event and say "never again." But here we are, knowing that a genocide is unfolding—let us be clear: that is what it is—and yet the UK Government seem unwilling to do anything about it beyond ritual diplomacy.

We must recognise and act on the atrocities facing the Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in China. They cannot be ignored as the UK scrambles for trade deals. To help achieve that, yet again we are partnering with the Scottish Council for Jewish Communities to hold an event for the Jewish community to find out more about what is happening to the Uyghurs. We should all, including the Chinese Communist party, take a lead from that determination to learn the lessons from history. This must stop, and it is our responsibility to stand up and be counted to make that happen now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): While I am not introducing a time limit at this moment in time, may I ask everybody to look at about five minutes, please? Please do not exceed that, and then we can try and get everybody in.

3.32 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) [V]: In 1948 the UK, along with other countries right around the world, signed the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. It was a commitment that this country made towards ensuring that the atrocities perpetrated during the second world war would never happen again, and yet 73 years later we find ourselves hearing of the horrors facing the Uyghurs in the autonomous region of Xinjiang. Removing the thin guise of tackling terrorism and separatism, we have heard the truth of what is really happening in that region's education—re-education—camps. Numerous robust and independent reports over a number of years lay bare the overwhelming evidence that the Chinese Government are interning the Uyghur people on a mass scale, subjecting them to brutal forced labour and physically and psychologically abusing them.

I pay tribute to my colleagues who, despite intense intimidation, have worked tirelessly to raise the plight of the Uyghurs in this House, and have spoken movingly and with great knowledge and skill, asking the Government to honour their commitments under the Genocide

convention. We are all aware, given the veto that China has at the UN Security Council, of the challenge that the International Court of Justice faces to be able to pronounce that genocide is occurring in Xinjiang. In light of that, like all western countries, we need to think very carefully and critically about our current and future relationship with China. That is particularly so on issues of trade, investment and domestic infrastructure and the relationship between our universities and the Chinese Government.

I am not blind to the fact that China is a major player on the world stage and that we have been told this is an ever-increasingly globalised world, although I think that that is no longer an assertion beyond challenge. However, as British politicians it is our duty to stand up and speak for those who have been silenced. The motion from my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) is an attempt at just that, but it also serves a wider awareness-raising purpose. It ought to prompt the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department for International Trade to reflect on the role that our embassy teams in China have in terms of promoting trade, particularly in sensitive areas.

Digital and energy security are the most obvious of those, and clear moves to reassess the wisdom of our country's links and reliance in those fields are already visible, but another area quite rightly coming under the spotlight is education. It is a mistake to allow action over what is going on in Xinjiang to be restricted to that area alone. It is about China, its economy, its Communist leadership as a whole and about our Government, but it is also about wider British societal responses to those abuses. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) wrote powerfully and convincingly in *The Daily Telegraph* recently about the need for the UK university sector to change its approach to China. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has added to that here today.

The independent international education sector also needs to give the matter serious consideration. I wrote about that for the *Independent School Management Plus* magazine as chairman of the all-party group on independent education some months ago. At the weekend, *The Times* quoted me and others in warning of the dangers, moral and financial, of our independent schools setting up satellite schools in China given the human rights abuses in Xinjiang most starkly of all, but also in Tibet and Hong Kong, and the increasing menace towards Taiwan. It is highly relevant today in terms of what ought to be done.

I have some sympathy for schools that set up in China 10, 15 or 20 years ago when envisaging a different direction of travel in China and when seeking to be part of it was entirely plausible, but it is much harder to have any sympathy for those seeking to do so afresh now because we know, so clearly, what is going on in Xinjiang and beyond in China. We know that it is no longer possible, in anything more than a merely superficial way, to impart the values of British education and those of the schools and their long and worthy traditions: freedom of thought, racial equality, questioning, liberalism in the best sense of that word, and looking at the truth. They are just not possible in China, including nowadays in Hong Kong. It is akin to seeking to set up a British school in South Africa in 1975 and not worrying about the reputational damage, saying that local rules and customs must be respected and adhered to.

[Andrew Lewer]

Elsewhere in the world, of course, there are accommodations and compromises to be made in having satellite schools. I am not one of those people who believes that we can morally trade or share educational practice only in exemplar nations such as those in Scandinavia or Australia, New Zealand and Canada. But when the line between authoritarian government and totalitarian government is not only crossed but, via genocide, left way behind as it has been in China, it is time to think again. It is time for the FCDO to reflect on the embassy's attitude in the educational space in line with that.

I conclude with thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden for all her work in this area and for getting this debate to happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Wind ups will start at 4.36 pm with Chris Law who will have six minutes and then the shadow Minister and the Minister will have eight minutes each. At 4.58 pm, Nusrat Ghani has the final two minutes.

3.38 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this incredibly important debate, and Members from across the House on their moving contributions.

What is happening to the Uyghur people in Xinjiang amounts to genocide as defined under the genocide convention. We are all used to assuming that genocide happens quickly—mass graves come to mind—but genocide can also happen more gradually: one baby not born, one identity forever altered by intimidation or indoctrination. On a mass scale it all leads to one end: the erasure of a people. So whatever its pace, it must be stopped.

We have limited time, so in my remarks I want to focus on women and children. Recent evidence has come to light of how Uyghur are being taken from their relatives and placed in state orphanages while their parents are detained. There are stories of children being taken while in school. Imagine that, Mr Deputy Speaker: one minute they are learning their times tables, and the next they are bundled into a car with a stranger and taken to a boarding school. Once they are there, they are forced to undergo political indoctrination, they suffer neglect and they are denied contact with their families, who are often taken to camps at the same time. According to Human Rights Watch, some children are warned that their behaviour could affect their relatives' prospects of release. There has been a 76% increase in the number of children in Xinjiang's state boarding school facilities since 2017. That correlates with the expansion of detention camps over the same period. As I am sure the House is aware, a prohibited act under the genocide convention definition of genocide is "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

But that is not all; sexual violence is systematically perpetrated on women and girls, as was so powerfully exposed by the BBC. An Associated Press investigation in 2020 found that Uyghur women were subjected to forced regular pregnancy checks, intrauterine devices, sterilisation and abortions. It stated:

"Even while the use of IUDs and sterilization has fallen nationwide, it is rising sharply in Xinjiang."

Some women have reported being threatened with internment if they refuse to undergo the procedures. In some Uyghur regions, birth rates have fallen in recent years by more than 60%.

Of course, Chinese state media dismiss that and argue that population growth is higher in the Uyghur population than the Han population. However, that comparison is nonsensical. The correct comparison is between the Uyghur population before those interventions and afterwards. Critically, the comparison must be recent—within the last five years, not over the many decades that are often cited.

Birth rates depend on many factors, including social structure, religious beliefs and economic prosperity. While we all appreciate the positive effect that family planning can have in empowering women and promoting development, the key thing is that the woman should have full agency over what happens to her body. They should not be coerced or even forced, as many Uyghur women report. This is not the benign-sounding family planning—oh no; this is state-sponsored policy designed to suppress the population of a minority group for political, not public health, reasons.

It is clear to me that the evidence we have does meet the criteria for genocide in demonstrating a clear "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

They take away their children, indoctrinating boys and girls by making them orphans after kidnapping their parents. They erase their ethnicity through forced marriages. They coerce women to undergo procedures that the women feel they have no choice in.

Of course a full determination and prosecution of genocide should be pursued through the United Nations and the international courts—we all agree with that—but while we know that this is going on, how can we ignore it? How can we watch our words and wait until a UN-led investigation is allowed in by a defensive and unco-operative Chinese state? It is not going to happen. Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past, as we did with the Yazidis. In 2016, this place voted to recognise that a genocide was occurring, but then nothing happened and thousands died.

The UK has imposed sanctions on some officials, which is welcome, but the Liberal Democrats want that to be extended. I also want to hear whether the Minister supports a diplomatic boycott of next year's Beijing winter Olympics. That would send a clear message to the Chinese Government. We have to do more: enough with the hand-wringing; enough prevarication.

If we end up being proved wrong because an independent UN inspector goes in and is allowed to do their work, and it is shown that we all got the wrong end of the stick, I would welcome that. I would rather be wrong now than be on the wrong side of history later.

3.44 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to the wonderful and important work that she has been doing on this issue. Human rights abuses in Xinjiang are abhorrent, and I listened painfully to what my hon. Friend said about the disgusting forced sterilisation, and to what my right hon. Friend the Member for

Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said about the equally repugnant organ harvesting. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) spoke with perpetual eloquence on Tibet and other issues related to China.

In the time available, I would like to speak to three brief points: first, the importance of recognising what is happening; secondly, specifically for the Minister, the importance of developing a policy in an inconsistent world that is morally and practically defensible; and, thirdly, what the UK is often very good at, which is building alliances around the world to protect what one might call ethical sustainability for the 21st century.

On the first point—I will be wary of time, Mr Deputy Speaker—we need to recognise the systematic suffering of other human beings whose lives are being damaged because they are being targeted en masse. That is important in itself. As certain Members have already said, we do it for the same reason that we did it in the Balkans and in Syria in recent years. We have done it in past decades in the holocaust and now have started to do with the Ukrainian holodomor—the mass starvation of the Ukrainians in the 1930s by Stalin.

The painstaking recording of death, of lives cruelly ended and of human suffering speaks to a shared ethical core of humanity and our need to record what has happened to other human beings. We do that in memory of the dead, but we also do it in recognition of the living. In relation to Syria, for example, a lot of work done recently by good people tracing the deaths, the murders and the mass slaughters has been funded by the FCDO. I congratulate it on its foresight in that, but it prompts the question whether it will be doing the same in Xinjiang. Might it start doing the same in Tibet, too? That is the first point. We record these things because they need to be recorded.

Secondly, we need a practical policy towards China that is defensible in an inconsistent world. Many improvements have been made to our policy on China in recent years by this Government, and I give them credit. We have moved on from the embarrassment of George Osborne turning up in Xinjiang about 10 years ago—that was just awful. It is nice to have politicians with an ethical strain running through them.

Janus-like, we still have two conflicting policies. One from the Foreign Office pledges to put human rights at the heart of everything we do, but our trade policy seeks to trade without asking too many questions. We have Foreign Ministers, including the Secretary of State, eloquently criticising China while Trade Ministers in the other House ingratiate themselves and dismiss human rights. This is not consistent. We pontificate on Africa, but are strangely silent on central Asia and China. It makes us look foolish and as though our values are somewhat tradeable.

We have heard of the Confucius institutes problem, the endless issues we have with the universities, and the plying for covert influence that China and Russia do in this country. We need policy—domestically and in foreign affairs—that is practical and morally defensible. No one can unilaterally change the world, not even the United States or China and not the UK, but we do have influence, and we need to understand the importance of developing consistency. Okay, we trade with China, but we need to limit our dependency.

I did a report with the Henry Jackson Society. A quarter of our British supply chain is dominated by China. The problem is that if we go further down that route, we end up like New Zealand, in a hell of an ethical mess, with a Prime Minister who virtue-signals while crudely sucking up to China and backing out of the Five Eyes agreement, which is an appallingly short-sighted thing to be doing. On that point, we need to stand shoulder to shoulder with Australia. That is a tired cliché, but the Australians are calling out China, and doing so at trade risk. We need to make sure they do not pay an ethical price, and that brings me to the third point.

The one thing in our strategic culture that we are probably unique at—apart from being an island, which clearly shapes our geography and our outlook on the world—is that we have genuinely been better than any other nation on the planet at building alliances, whether that is from the colonial days or in the days of Europe and Protestants versus Catholics and all that. We need to build alliances for the 21st century. In the 21st century, there are two visions of humanity: there are open and free societies where political leaders are answerable to the people, and there are closed societies, which, through the use of artificial intelligence and big data, are becoming ever-more dominant and threatening to their people. We have to make sure our universal values survive, not only here but globally, so that, despite Russia, China and other regimes, they continue to be the go-to values for humanity for this century.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We have 10 speakers left and there are about 45 minutes, so Members have four and a half minutes. Particularly if Members are speaking remotely, could they please keep an eye on timing devices and bring it in below five minutes?

3.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I stand by the motion before Parliament today and all who are supporting it. The importance of today's debate grows with each contribution made. On our watch, a nation on this Earth is persecuting its people for their culture and faith, for the hope they carry and for the peace they want to extend. Their rights are being replaced by systematic brutality. In this holy period of Ramadan, Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang province in China are being enslaved, tortured and persecuted, away from the public gaze. Technology and testimonies have exposed the zeal of Chinese officials to commit the darkest of atrocities against mankind.

This genocidal state can no longer sweet-talk the world into believing it is a reformed nation, as it has now unmasked its true identity. Through its encroachments in Tibet, Taiwan, Myanmar and now Hong Kong, its true character is being witnessed; it is there for all to see. We are being tested as to how we respond. We in the UK cannot be bystanders, and nor can we let any nation be so. We cannot be content with the few actions taken, since the growing number of horrific testimonies demand our focus and determination.

The Secretary of State says he needs a legal opinion to call China a genocidal state, so without a judgment or a court case, where is his alternative? With all the evidence to determine this genocide, this Parliament must not delay, and nor should this Government; there is no time. Each day, another truck pulls up and someone

[*Rachael Maskell*]

else disappears, then is stripped, then beaten, then electrocuted, then raped, then—the stories are too distressing. Women are reporting that, through sterilisation and abortion, their future is being denied. Their children are being taken; their lives are sucked from them.

We have sanctioned a few actors, but what about the others? What about those complicit with Xinjiang? Where is the curbing of their actions and inactions? We must talk trade, too. I know that the Minister says it is difficult. Of course it is difficult. They have drawn us into the web of their trading landscape and extended their tentacles across the globe, anchoring infrastructure, energy, communications, education, tourism, tech and so much more. It is all part of the plan.

Although this Government and the coalition before them were blindsided, it is time to withdraw, insert our commitment to human rights above trade expediency and take the unity of nations with us. To put the responsibility on companies to declare the source of their cotton is a woeful response. We cannot let China off the hook if one of its regions is prosecuting such violence, as the BEIS Committee report has demonstrated. These are heinous crimes against humanity.

It is not just the Uyghur. Christians have been disappearing for decades across China. Churches have closed and pastors have been jailed. It is now rapidly rising up the Open Doors world watch list as one of the most dangerous places for a person to profess their faith. Those who observe Falun Gong are having their organs harvested, and we now understand that Uyghur Muslims are too.

This June, China seeks to stand on the world stage at the G7 as a superpower state. However, unless human rights are advanced, as they must be, the summit here in the UK will only mock us all for being part of China's pageantry. This is not about companies checking their supply chains; it is about the Government checking their values. It is about the Government holding others to account. It is ultimately about our Government refusing to walk with a regime set on genocide. The chilling, dark history of all genocides resounds in the Uyghurs' story: none of us knows how many, but it is far too many.

This is not about re-education, abhorrent though that is; it is about enslavement and persecution, and it is the role of this Parliament to amplify this, to extend our warmth to the people of China who are suffering under this regime, and to support the diaspora communities the world over. It is also the purpose of this Parliament to stop crimes against humanity, and I trust that the cry from this debate will move the Government to do everything within their power to stop these atrocities being committed against the Uyghur.

3.55 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this debate on one of the most pressing and grave human rights issues of our time.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Those words, often was misquoted and misattributed, can most accurately be traced back to the philosopher George Santayana. They now appear on tablets and

plaques in museums, memorials and historical sites across the world. Most pertinently, they can be observed today in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp—the place where more than 1 million innocent men, women and children tragically lost their lives as a result of state-sponsored wholesale slaughter on an industrial scale. That concentration camp, and the words that can be found in it, should be taken by all of us who value human rights, including me and Members across the House, as a warning of the horror that humans are capable of when we are driven by our most base instincts. Instead of shying away from historical atrocities such as the holocaust, we must all strive to acknowledge and understand how they came to be, so that now and in the future such tragedies can actively be prevented. However, recent history teaches us that that is a lesson that humanity has yet to learn.

Since the holocausts from Rwanda to Cambodia and from Bosnia to Syria, tyrannical and totalitarian regimes have too often been able to discriminate against, persecute and murder segments of their populations with impunity, based on nothing more than someone's ethnicity or faith. Such actions too easily and too often culminate in mass slaughter and genocide. Looking at the world in which we live today, we really need to examine the evidence of human rights abuses taking place. At this very moment, as is being increasingly and commendably recognised by fellow parliamentarians and foreign officials in democracies around the world, like America, Canada and the Netherlands, the persecution of Xinjiang's Uyghur people is being thrust to the centre of the global stage.

Despite the best efforts of the Chinese Communist party's officials and their affiliates via aggressive diplomacy, blatant disinformation, threats and coercion, evidence is mounting that this widespread persecution requires condemnation. From reports of organ harvesting and the forcible sterilisation of women—both heinous in equal measure—to the mass detention of at least 2 million Uyghurs across Xinjiang, which has long been the region of the world that this people called home, the evidence points to the fact that these officials and affiliates have been engaged for several years in verifiable and serious human rights abuses that not only constitute crimes against humanity but contravene article 4 of the People's Republic of China's constitution. That article, which supposedly guarantees the equality of all nationalities in China and prohibits any related discrimination or oppression, is undermined by the reported actions of the Chinese Government. Instead of helping to preserve the Uyghur way of life, culture, traditions and language, as enshrined in the constitution, the Chinese Communist party is reportedly actively seeking to destroy them and all those who claim them as their own. While today's debate rightly focuses on the plight of the Uyghurs, we must not forget the numerous other groups in China also facing persecution, such as the Mongols, the Tibetans and, indeed, the brave Hongkongers.

If we, as Members of this House, wish to demonstrate that we have learnt from the horrors of recent history and show that we understand the meaning of the words “never again”, it is imperative that, where evidence exists of mass human rights abuses and crimes against humanity, such as those against the Uyghur in Xinjiang, it is highlighted, called out, confronted and condemned. That is why this debate, mirroring those being had in other democratic countries, is so important. It is also why I offer my unwavering and wholehearted support

to this motion and to my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden, as well as all those other Members of this House and the Lords, academics, individuals and organisations who have been unscrupulously sanctioned by the Chinese Government.

4 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). All the speeches so far have been moving and powerful. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling the debate and particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on the passion and determination that she has shown on this issue over many months, along with members of the APPG on Uyghurs. I know that this is an issue of great importance for many of my constituents. They want to see MPs and this Government stand up for human rights across the world. One constituent who wrote me to said that we need to

“demonstrate Parliament’s commitment to upholding basic human rights.”

Every year on Holocaust Memorial Day, we confirm that we have a shared responsibility to fight the evils of genocide. Today’s debate is about showing our fundamental commitment to human rights and specifically making clear our opposition to the horrific treatment of the Uyghur people and the other ethnic groups in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. Members have described the state-sponsored arbitrary detention, displacement and forced labour of the Uyghur Muslims and others in the Xinjiang province.

I have time to address only two issues today. The first is the impact of Chinese state policy on women. As was said on foreignpolicy.com,

“Uyghur women are the most vulnerable... Their bodily autonomy has been violated through sexual, medical means and forced labor.”

The evidence is available in numerous reports from many sources which have found that the Uyghur women are raped, sterilised and forced to have abortions. Just reading those reports makes my blood run cold—a feeling that I am sure is shared across the House.

Secondly, I want to touch briefly on trade and the recent report by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee which looked into the supply chain, particularly the concerns that companies across the world were profiting from forced labour in the province of Xinjiang. The link between global consumption and such atrocities is, sadly, not new and has been going on for centuries. I will give just one example. At the turn of the 19th century, we saw slavery in the Belgian Congo, along with forced displacement, arbitrary arrests and many other horrific crimes, while at the same time goods such as rubber flowed out of the Congo into Europe. Back then, campaigners from the Congo and activists across civil society—including, I am proud to say, a member of my family, William Cadbury—stood up in opposition to those atrocities and urged Parliament to act. It is therefore right that today Parliament considers our duty and our role on the world stage in standing up to these horrors.

However, our Government fail to address these serious concerns. On one hand, the Foreign Secretary describes what is happening in Xinjiang as

“barbarism we had hoped was lost to another era”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

and says that we should not be doing trade deals with countries committing human rights abuses

“well below the level of genocide”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 168.],

and yet the Government whipped their MPs to vote against the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill. Furthermore, legislation such as section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 needs to be amended to ensure that all companies have a responsibility to prove that their supply chains are free of forced labour, and we must strengthen the sanctions for non-compliance.

I was pleased that my hon. Friends the Members for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on the Opposition Front Bench called on the Government to impose Magnitsky-style sanctions on officials responsible last year, and the Government finally listened and acted just last month. I welcome the Government’s acting, even if they did take rather a long time to do so, but they need to do more. The Biden Administration have described what is happening in Xinjiang as “acts of genocide,” yet the UK Government struggle to engage constructively in the debate and have to be forced to respond.

If the UK is to be a serious player in the world, our Government need to show leadership, demonstrate our British values and no longer see the issue merely through the prism of protecting the UK’s trade. I will not stand aside and Members here today will not stand aside. Our Government must no longer stand aside in the face of these appalling crimes.

4.5 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing the debate? There are clearly human rights violations taking place in Xinjiang province in China. They are taking place in an otherwise peaceful nation, perpetrated by a cold, calculating state.

We have seen in Xinjiang the dehumanisation of the Uyghurs. They are subject to mass-surveillance; information is collected from and about them, including by teams who visit their homes. Religious activity has been suppressed. They have died in police custody. Women have been forcibly sterilised. Children have been forcibly transferred to what are euphemistically called “child welfare guidance centres”. More than 1 million have been detained without trial. We have seen Uyghurs herded on to trains to be used as forced labour, and there are widespread claims of torture and rape in labour camps. All the while, the Chinese state has used its advanced propaganda techniques to play down events in an attempt to present a false picture of a happy and contented native population.

Those features of Chinese Government action have been compared to the events of Europe in the 1940s. While I hesitate to use words such as fascist, as they are so often used liberally and misleadingly in public discourse, I do not think such comparisons are too wide of the mark. Events in Xinjiang have been condemned by all right-thinking people, and I certainly join in that condemnation.

There is the question of whether that amounts to genocide. I agree that it probably does. My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) set out well and in detail the criteria under the 1948 convention on the prevention and

[Tom Randall]

punishment of the crime of genocide and how they might be fulfilled by what has been done. I slightly hesitate. This might appear pedantic, but it is a technical question that requires a technical answer. Genocide is a crime, and it has been described as the crime of all crimes—it is the most heinous act that man can do to man—but there are limits to a Member of Parliament answering that question with authority. It is a legal question. The genocides of the 1940s and the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda were all adjudicated by courts. This House is not a court. As a Member of Parliament I can express a view on something, but I cannot adjudicate on a matter of genocide in the same way that I cannot adjudicate on, for example, a case of murder. However, I accept that passing a resolution in this House is an important symbolic move, and I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden on bringing the debate to the House.

We have seen action taken by the Government along with international allies to designate individuals responsible for violations and impose sanctions on them, including freezing their assets and travel bans. I appreciate that China's role in the world makes action through the United Nations difficult, but I urge the Government to view the measures taken so far as the beginning, not the end, of those in this matter, to continue to put the maximum pressure on the Chinese Government, and to do everything we can to ensure that those who perpetrate these awful actions will never get away with it.

4.9 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: I absolutely support the motion and congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing the debate. The way China has treated the Uyghur community and other minority groups is abhorrent. That is why I and other hon. Members have spoken in the Chamber again and again to call on the Government to stand up to China and to stand with the Uyghurs.

It is long overdue for the Government to face the fact that what is happening is genocide. The CCP treats the Uyghurs as though they are not human and have no rights. It enslaves them and strips them of their dignity. Its dealings of intimidation and force means that their worth to the Chinese Government is only as much as picking cotton. This is a human rights abuse and must be called out. It is fundamentally wrong that children continue to be kidnapped or stolen from their parents, and women made victims of the most unspeakable and horrific sexual, violent and emotional crimes. This is what we need to do, but what more is happening that we actually do not know about?

This afternoon, we are hearing from hon. and right hon. Members about organ harvesting, rape and so much more. Our country and our Government cannot and must not ignore this, but again and again our country has denied the scale of the atrocities in China. The Government whip their MPs to keep the door open to trading, and have resisted strengthening our anti-slavery laws. After the miserable outcome of the Trade Bill debates, I wondered if our moral credibility could sink any lower, and then yesterday the news broke that the Foreign Office plans to cut foreign aid to China by 95%. Does the Foreign Secretary realise that this is just another blow to the oppressed people already struggling

to survive in China? With one hand we are giving our money through trade to the CCP, and with the other hand we are taking it away from the victims of its regime.

A report published last month by the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy found that the Chinese Government have violated every act in the second article of the Geneva convention. Over 30 global experts contributed to this report, finding China guilty of genocide—we have already heard that in this Chamber—and, in February, a survivor of a Uyghur prison camp said:

“Their goal is to destroy everyone”.

Yet our UK Government think they know best and they know better. The Government must take a stronger stand. Nothing we have said or done so far has made an impact on China's programme of abuse. We must finally have the courage to condemn it as genocide and to take action to show China we will not tolerate it.

4.12 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on her tireless and unwavering support of the Uyghur and her courageous refusal to be silenced, a sentiment that is of course extended to all those who have spoken out, even at their own personal cost.

How could we stay silent when the world is presented with such overwhelming evidence of gross human rights abuses? Nobody can turn a blind eye. There are accusations of torture, the forced abortion of babies, the sterilisation of women and the removal of their wombs. This must be stated for what it is: a genocide of the Uyghurs is happening before our eyes. Recent reports reveal the inhuman actions of Chinese Government officials in visiting the family members of those who have fled the region and then video-calling them from a relative's phone threatening punishment for their family. It is persecution, it is manipulation and it is a horrifying 21st-century oppression. If we look on, history will condemn our unforgivable cowardice and ask why those in power did not act.

Last year, over 130 Members across the House joined me in expressing our horror in a letter directly to the Chinese ambassador. The embassy's reply is truly chilling, stating that we have been “misled by lies of the century, cooked up by anti-China forces”. We are even warned: “It is hoped that UK parliamentarians will see Xinjiang's development achievement from a comprehensive and objective manner. Do not spread or believe lies and do not take Xinjiang issues as an excuse to interfere in Chinese internal affairs.” Interfere? The flagrant denial of oppression in Xinjiang is almost as terrifying as the rare image or video that filters out. The Chinese Government's actions must be stated for what they are—an apparatus of control with a systematic and calculated programme of ethnic cleansing against the Uyghur people.

So outraged was I at the embassy's reply that I shared it directly with the Minister, but his response was just astonishing. He said that he recognised that there were internment camps with over 1 million Uyghurs. He acknowledged reports of forced labour. He noted human rights violations, so he proposed: more research. I say to the Minister that condemning the world's next superpower is easy. Taking action is much harder.

The Foreign Secretary said in January that we should not be doing trade deals with countries committing human rights abuses

“well below the level of genocide”—

yet by rejecting the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill, the Government have done everything they can to protect the UK right to do deals with potentially genocidal states. Can the Minister explain this rank hypocrisy? Why have only four Chinese officials been sanctioned? Why has the Modern Slavery Act not been strengthened to ensure that UK business supply chains do not include workers subject to forced labour in Xinjiang? And why are we not calling this what it is: a genocide? Is it because he knows the international ramifications of arriving at that definition? A cowardly country could hide behind the linguistic excuse. Shame on us if we choose that path, because this time, no one can say that we did not know.

4.16 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: When we discuss genocide, we must understand the horrific ordeal that those who are persecuted suffer. Mr Deputy Speaker, imagine having your family and loved ones torn away from you, imprisoned, tortured, raped, sterilised and murdered, all for the crime of being who they were, or being different. Imagine being discriminated against for your belief or being subject to political or ideological indoctrination. For millions alive today, this shared nightmare is their reality and these horrors are just some of the sickening crimes being inflicted upon the Uyghur people, with knowledge, approval and consent from Beijing and the Chinese Communist party.

This is a genocide. More than 1 million Muslims, most of whom are Uyghurs, have been detained, indoctrinated, sterilised and tortured. We have not seen the systematic detention of an ethnic minority group on this industrial scale since the holocaust. This is not only an evil programme, designed to eradicate an entire culture, but an effort to profit off the back of human slavery, suffering and misery. At least 80,000 Uyghurs were transferred from Xinjiang camps to work in factories across China between 2017 and 2019. The report entitled “Uyghurs for sale”, from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, provides a damning insight into these slave factories. One factory in eastern China that manufactures shoes for Nike is equipped with

“watchtowers, barbed-wire fences and police guard boxes.”

These crimes must cease. We, who live free, possess a moral duty to stand up to the Chinese Communist party and uphold the values of pluralism, decency and human rights. Doing nothing in the face of overwhelming evidence would render us complicit in this most monstrous crime. Enough of words alone. If the United Kingdom is to be regarded as a true defender of liberty, freedom and justice, we must act. The International Court of Justice’s position on genocide could not be clearer: the obligation to prevent arises the instant that a state party believes that there is a risk of genocide. The case law states that we are obliged to do all we can to protect the very moment that we reasonably suspect genocide is a serious risk. As parliamentarians, we must do all we can to stop these atrocities. The time to act is now.

4.19 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this very important debate, which could not come soon enough.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate. I know that I have the full support of hundreds, if not thousands, of residents in Putney and across the country in hearing about these issues today and seeking action. Really, I have had enough of speaking in debates and hearing the words “never again” about genocide. Talk is cheap and of little consequence to those who are suffering in Xinjiang right now. It is time to step up our actions, as we have heard from every speaker in the debate.

I was glad that the Government heeded the Opposition’s call to apply sanctions to Chinese officials who have played a role in the persecution. However, while I welcome that, I still cannot understand why the Government whipped their MPs to oppose the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill and are refusing to engage constructively in this debate today. I may hear otherwise from the Minister later. It is just not good enough. By rejecting the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill, the Government have protected the UK’s right to do trade deals with genocidal states, which I do not think any member of the British public wants to do.

Language is a powerful tool, and we need to start calling the situation what it is: a genocide. Genocide is the intent to destroy a national, ethnic or religious group. That is what is happening in Xinjiang. Hundreds of thousands of women have had birth control forcibly inserted. There is mass organ harvesting, slavery, gang rape and torture of a whole people. Two major independent analyses have investigated reports of alleged genocide in the Xinjiang region, and one of those was a formal legal opinion. Both reports conclude that there is sufficient evidence that the prohibited acts specified within the genocide convention and the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court have been breached with regard to the Uyghurs. How much more evidence do we have to keep on seeking before we declare the situation a genocide? One of the reports, from the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, conducted by over 30 independent global experts, found that the Chinese state is in breach of every act prohibited in article 2 of the genocide convention.

As has been mentioned several times, investigations by the United Nations and international courts are being blocked by China. The system simply is not working. We need another route to legitimately declare the systematic acts by the Chinese authorities as genocide. People’s tribunals such as the Uyghur tribunal led by Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC, are one of the few remaining routes to establish an independent, impartial and informed legal investigation into the suspected crimes taking place right now and to gather evidence for future prosecution so that there can be justice. For that reason, I am very pleased that the Uyghur tribunal has been established. I would like an assurance from the Minister today that the Government will commit to co-operating with, examining and acting on the findings of the tribunal.

Between now and then, though, there are still concrete actions we can take, and I will outline four. First, we must declare this a genocide. We could do that now through this motion, which I will be supporting, or if not, through making Government time for a further debate in which we can make that declaration. America, the Netherlands and Canada have done this.

[Fleur Anderson]

Secondly, the Foreign Secretary has described what is happening in Xinjiang as

“barbarism we had hoped was lost to another era”.—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

Therefore, when will this House be presented with legislation strengthening section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 so that all companies have a responsibility to prove that their supply chains are free of forced labour, and also strengthening sanctions for non-compliance?

Thirdly, in the light of Beijing’s decision to sanction British Members of Parliament, including the hon. Member for Wealden, for raising legitimate concerns around genocide in Xinjiang, does the Foreign Secretary intend to defend our democracy by conducting an audit of every aspect of the UK’s relationship with China? Fourthly, what steps is he taking to make sure that the UK leads international efforts to ensure that the United Nations is given full and unfettered access to conduct investigations in the Xinjiang region?

Enough talk: it is time for the Government to stop tiptoeing around this issue and make a proper stand against the abuses taking place in Xinjiang. That is what the British public want. History will not look kindly on those who look the other way.

4.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on setting the scene, and all her colleagues in the magnificent seven who are prepared to take a stand in this House, in the other House and outside Parliament. Despite the Chinese Communist party’s attempts to conceal the unconscionable human rights abuses carried out in Xinjiang, we hold clear and irrefutable evidence, which hon. Members have referred to, of the atrocities being perpetrated against the Uyghurs there.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. In that role, I am aware of a systematic campaign against freedom of religious belief in China: the religious activities of the country’s more than 70 million Christians, 10 million Falun Gong and 8 million Tibetan Buddhists are also severely restricted, with widespread state surveillance, harassment and detention of religious leaders. The Chinese Government have created a stifling and intimidating environment for Tibetan Buddhists who wish to practise their religion, with surveillance, travel restrictions and re-education programmes.

The independent, London-based China Tribunal has also found that it is beyond reasonable doubt that forced organ harvesting at a commercial level from these prisoners of conscience has been practised in China “for a substantial period of time...by state organised or approved organisations or individuals.”

I believe it is time that the House called again, as it has in the past, for that to be ended as soon as possible.

I ask three things of the Government. First, while I welcome Her Majesty’s Government’s introduction of targeted sanctions, much more needs to be done to hold the Chinese Communist party to account. The Government’s integrated review states that FORB is a priority and they

“will not hesitate to stand up for our values”.

I know that the Government are committed to that and will do that, so as we prepare to host the G7 summit, the UK Government have the perfect opportunity to defend our values on a global stage. I therefore call on the Minister and the Government to lead their foreign counterparts at the G7 not only in demanding foreign access to Xinjiang with a collective voice, but in unequivocally condemning all human rights abuses in China. It is time to show the CCP that its substantial economic might can no longer buy silence from the west. Our values are not for sale.

I echo the request made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) to lead calls for the 2022 winter Olympics to be moved from China. Allowing the genocide games to go ahead as planned is tantamount to the international community condoning the CCP’s actions. Moreover, if the Chinese Government plan to welcome thousands of people to China for the Olympics, perhaps they can first welcome UN human rights observers.

The CCP has already shown complete disregard for media freedoms. The BBC is banned from the country for the supposed crime of reporting on the abuses in Xinjiang province. While the UK Government are committed to protecting our journalists who are set to cover the games, can they ensure that our standards of press freedom are not compromised to spare China’s blushes? I call on Her Majesty’s Government to give public assurances to Britain’s world-class athletes that they will be protected if they choose to champion the cause of those oppressed by the very officials who are charged with their protection.

Finally, I stress that this would not be the first time that the Olympic games were played in the shadow of concentration camps. The 1935 request for a boycott of the Berlin games for the sake of minority and religious groups fell on deaf ears. We knew then, as we do now, the genocidal action that an authoritarian regime was taking against its religious minorities. More than 80 years later, when we see people with shaved heads, stripped of their belongings, lined up at gunpoint and loaded on to trains to dissident camps for no reason other than their peacefully held beliefs, those stark images should serve as a warning. Let us never again be forced to ask how the world could let that happen.

4.29 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: Throughout this debate, we have all heard the harrowing stories of the mass human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. We have heard about the mass detention camps; forced labour; systematic campaigns of rape, sexual abuse and torture; forced sterilisation; the separation of children from their parents; the destruction of mosques; and the erasure of Uyghur culture.

The Chinese Communist party has a shambolic record on human rights, with long-established repression of Christians, Tibetans and Falun Gong. Indeed, the lessons learned from the oppression of Tibetans has been applied in Xinjiang. The Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy has concluded that the Chinese Government have breached every article of the UN genocide convention in their treatment of Uyghurs and bear responsibility for committing genocide. The UK Government cannot continue to appease China, given these crimes against humanity. It is imperative that the UK Government go

beyond words of condemnation and use every possible avenue to end the persecution and punish those who have instigated and participated in it.

Given the overwhelming evidence of genocide, international authorities must be given the unfettered access to establish whether that it is taking place. We welcome the talks that are under way between China and the UN to allow the UN Human Rights Commissioner to visit Xinjiang but, given China's intransigence and crackdown on critical voices from the international community, can we really be anything other than sceptical of China's commitment to transparency? China's delegate to the UN Human Rights Council panel said:

"The door to Xinjiang is always open, and we welcome the High Commissioner to visit Xinjiang",

but we know that the Communist party's attitude is far from welcoming.

In recent months, numerous accredited international journalists have been expelled from China. BBC World News has been banned and, as we heard earlier, the BBC's John Sudworth left Beijing at short notice last month after nine years reporting from China, amid concerns for his family's safety after he reported on the persecution of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. Shamefully, the Chinese Government imposed sanctions on five elected Members of Parliament for simply doing their jobs and speaking out against the horrific human rights abuses that are currently taking place. Who knows whether all of us who have spoken today could be added to that list? I say, feel free—we stand together and will not be silenced.

Given such behaviour, what faith does the Minister have that China will allow full access to the Human Rights Commissioner to visit Xinjiang for a full and robust investigation into the genocide that appears to be taking place? Indeed, what access to Xinjiang has been given to officials in the UK embassies in China? Will the Government support visits by groups of MPs, such as the APPG on Uyghurs and the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, to see the reality for themselves?

Moreover, if China continues to be obstructive, what legislative action will the UK Government take? What can we learn from allies that seek to uphold the international rules-based order? To give one example, the USA enacted the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act 2018, which denies Chinese Government officials access to the US if they are responsible for implementing restrictions on Americans who seek access to Tibet. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has spoken today, has introduced a similar Bill, of which I am a sponsor; I urge the UK Government to give that Bill their full support and extend the legislation to cover other areas of China, including Xinjiang.

The time for appeasement is over. We cannot ignore the reality that the evidence of genocide is overwhelming. We have a moral duty to condemn it and accordingly to support the strongest possible action. The UK Government ought to declare that they regard the situation as genocide—genocide. Will the Minister do that today? The Government seem terrified of living up to their moral responsibilities. Despite lobbying from their own Back Benchers, last month they whipped their Members to defeat the anti-genocide amendment to the Trade Bill. It is inexplicable that the Government wanted to resist that amendment, although as we know from the Foreign Secretary's leaked remarks, the Government

appear to be more concerned with trade deals with the growth markets of the future than the protection of human rights.

The UK must follow other countries and introduce specific legislation to make clear its support for the Uyghurs as a persecuted community. For example, it is estimated that as much as 20% of the world's cotton is gathered in Xinjiang, much of it by prisoners in camps; the Government should legislate to sanction any produce that originates from the province, to ensure that supply chains do not tacitly support slave labour. Furthermore, we need to offer asylum to those who escape persecution in China. If we can do it for those wishing to leave Hong Kong, we can do it for those fleeing genocide in Xinjiang. We need to protect Uyghur communities based here in the UK to ensure that they do not suffer intimidation from Chinese officials for bringing these abuses to light. Can the Minister commit to those measures?

Finally, although China has emerged as a global superpower, we cannot cower in fear as it systematically attempts to destroy the culture and lives of millions of people. We cannot be picked off nation by nation in turning a blind eye to genocide for the sake of trade deals. As we know from history, the true scale and horrific details of genocide rarely become fully known until much later. For all the statistics that we know of, for all the tormenting stories that we have heard of, and for all the secret images that have been smuggled out of China illustrating what is happening, the likelihood is that the situation is much, much worse. Therefore, we must be on the right side of history and take action now. This is not just a moral obligation, but a legal one, too. As a signatory to the UN genocide convention, the UK has an obligation

"to prevent and to punish the crime of genocide."

We in the SNP wholly support this motion today. It is time for the UK Government to uphold that commitment to do everything in their power to prevent further atrocities from taking place and, in alliance with our international partners, ensure that the Chinese Government are held to account for their horrifying crimes.

4.35 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I first want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for securing this vital debate and for her willingness to work across this House to ensure that, today, Parliament will speak with one voice. May I also pay tribute to the courage that she has shown in standing up to the bullying and intimidation of the Chinese Government? The fact that she and other hon. Members, who are also present in this House and elsewhere, have been sanctioned by Beijing for simply doing their jobs is an affront to our democracy and to this House. We on these Benches stand in solidarity with all those who have been targeted. Indeed, as the hon. Lady and others have so rightly put it, an attack on one of us in this House is an attack on us all, and authoritarian regimes the world over should take careful note.

I also want to thank contributors to the debate, including the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan), my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Brentford

[*Stephen Kinlock*]

and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson), each of whom made a powerful speech.

The Labour party stands in solidarity with the Uyghur population and the other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang who have been suffering oppression at the hands of the Chinese Government. The accounts are harrowing and the evidence is clear: the mass surveillance and arbitrary detention of more than 1 million Uyghur and other minority groups; the torture and the brutality; the rape; the abuse; the forced sterilisation of women; the enforced separation of children from their parents; and the denial of the Uyghurs' right to practise their religion or to speak their language. We have seen the first-hand footage of shaven-headed, bound Uyghur men being led into trains at gun point. We have seen the video bravely recorded by Merdan Ghappar from inside the forced labour camps. We have heard the first-hand accounts from Uyghur women of their treatment, and we have read the reports by Adrian Zenz and others, which are based on the Chinese Government's own data and directives.

Ideally, a competent international court would examine this evidence, but there is no prospect that either the ICC or the International Court of Justice will be able to do so, as this would require the consent of China. Beijing will also continue to prevent the United Nations from conducting a proper investigation in Xinjiang. Through amendments to the Trade Bill, we, along with Members from across the House, sought to create a route to genocide determination through the UK's courts, or through a panel of senior law lords, but those cross-party efforts were shamefully defeated by the Government. With the international route to legal determination of genocide blocked by China and the domestic route to legal determination blocked by the Government, it falls to Parliament to take action.

In February this year, an opinion by barristers at Essex Court Chambers led by Alison Macdonald QC provided a detailed legal assessment of all the available evidence. It concluded that there is a very credible case that the Chinese Government's actions constitute genocide. In response, the chambers were sanctioned by China. In March this year, the Newlines Institute of Strategy and Policy in Washington also published a legal analysis that concluded that a genocide is taking place in Xinjiang. Importantly, given that the crime of genocide requires proof of intent, both opinions concluded that the atrocities that are being perpetrated against the Uyghur are not the random acts of rogue individuals, but the result of a conscious and carefully orchestrated campaign of oppression and persecution that is being conducted by the Chinese Government.

As a signatory to the 1948 genocide convention, the United Kingdom is legally bound to take all reasonable steps to both punish and prevent genocide. By passing this motion today, the House would be instructing the British Government to carry out those legal duties in relation to events in Xinjiang. So it is time for us in this House to take a stand and to support this motion. Today, we can speak with one voice. Today, we move forward with our eyes open and our shoulders broad. Today, we send a clear and unambiguous message that

genocide can never be met with indifference or inaction, and that attempts to bully us into silence will only strengthen our resolve. Today, we shall offer the Uyghur people our unequivocal support.

The question, then, is what should be done. Unfortunately, the Government's actions thus far, fall far short not just of the strength of feeling in this House, but also of their own rhetoric about the situation in Xinjiang. They have shamelessly prioritised their ability to enter into trade negotiations with China over a process to assess genocide. They were too slow in bringing forward the Magnitsky sanctions and they continue to skirt around the edges of reforming supply chain legislation and human rights due diligence. This dither and delay must now end, and the Government must take the following steps.

First, the Government should widen the Magnitsky sanctions, so they cover a broader range of senior Chinese Communist party officials and entities responsible for serious human rights violations in Xinjiang, including Chen Quanguo, already sanctioned by our allies in the United States. Secondly, they must support the work of the Uyghur people's tribunal, which is hearing evidence from those affected. Thirdly, they must engage diplomatically to build wider support for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to gain access to Xinjiang, and in particular work to engage countries, many of which are friends and partners of the UK, which to date have regrettably been sheltering China from international scrutiny.

Fourthly, the Government must continue to explore legal routes to justice through international courts and mechanisms. The Foreign Secretary should seek to introduce a General Assembly resolution requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the question of genocide. We should also explore legal avenues via other international treaties and conventions, such as the convention against torture to which China is a signatory. We must do what we can to seek justice and accountability.

Fifthly, there must be consequences for the bilateral economic relationship. Will the Minister make that commitment today by confirming the continued suspension of the joint economic trade commission and the economic and financial dialogue? Sixthly, we all recognise that British businesses should not be supporting slave labour in Xinjiang. When will this House be presented with legislation strengthening the Modern Slavery Act 2015, so that companies have a responsibility to demonstrate that their supply chains are free of forced labour and that there would be meaningful sanctions for non-compliance?

Successive Conservative Governments since 2010 have been profoundly naive and complacent in their dealings with China. The so-called golden era policy was the very definition of a sell-out, with Conservative leaders turning a blind eye to human rights abuses and sacrificing our national security on the altar of narrow commercial interests. A more coherent and clear strategy is urgently required, yet we see, unfortunately, division on the Government Benches, with a caucus of Conservative Members taking a principled stance, while the Foreign Secretary says one thing in public and something entirely different in private, and No. 10 appears to be desperate to do a trade deal with China at literally any price.

We need to lead by example when it comes to international law, not undermine our country's authority and credibility by breaking international law ourselves. And we need to be building bridges with our partners and allies in Europe and elsewhere, who face the same challenges in their relationship with China, rather than constantly losing friends and alienating people. Because the Chinese Communist party respects strength, consistency and unity, and it is contemptuous of weakness and division.

Democracy around the world is in retreat. Authoritarian regimes are in the ascendancy and the rules-based international order is under threat. So it is all the more important that we in this House stand united today. I therefore call on the Minister to support the motion, to implement the actions that I have set out, and to urge the Government to do all they can to prevent, and to punish, those who are committing genocide against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

4.45 pm

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for securing this debate, and I pay tribute to her, and to all hon. and right hon. colleagues who were the recipients of those ill thought-out and ludicrous sanctions announced by China recently, for their continued work on this important issue.

I of course acknowledge the strength of feeling across the House on this critically important issue. We have heard some powerful speeches from all parts of the House today. Parliaments and individual parliamentarians rightly play a pivotal role in drawing global attention to human rights violations, wherever they occur. I am very grateful for all the contributions and I will try to answer the points raised within the context of my speech. I am conscious that I need to leave my hon. Friend some time to wind up the debate.

As we have heard from across the Floor, the situation faced by Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang is truly harrowing. We have repeatedly emphasised our grave concern at the serious and widespread human rights violations occurring in the region. There are credible reports of the extrajudicial detention of over 1 million Uyghur people and other minorities in political re-education camps since 2017, extensive and invasive surveillance targeting minorities, forced separation of children from their parents, forced sterilisation of women, systematic restriction on Uyghur culture, education and the practice of Islam, and the widespread use of forced labour.

The evidence of the scale and severity of the violations in Xinjiang is extensive. That includes, as the whole House knows, satellite imagery, the testimony of survivors, credible open-source reporting by journalists and academic researchers, and visits by British diplomats to the region that have corroborated reports about the targeting of specific ethnic groups. United Nations special rapporteurs and other international experts have also expressed their very serious concerns.

Meanwhile, leaked and publicly available documents from the Chinese Government themselves verify many of the reports that we have seen. Those documents show guidance on how to run internment camps, and lists showing how and why people have been detained. They contain extensive references to coercive social measures and show statistical data on birth control and on security spending and recruitment in Xinjiang.

In the face of that evidence, the United Kingdom has acted decisively. In March, the Government took the significant step of sanctioning four senior individuals responsible for the violations that have taken place, and which persist, against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. We also designated the organisation responsible for enforcing the repressive security policies across many areas of Xinjiang.

The sanctions involve travel bans and asset freezes against the individuals and an asset freeze against the entity that we are designating. These individuals are barred from entering the UK and any assets that they hold in the UK are frozen. By acting alongside our partners, the United States, Canada and the European Union, on an agreed set of designations, we have sent a clear and powerful message to the Chinese Government that the international community will not turn a blind eye to serious and systematic violations of basic human rights. These countries amount to a third of global GDP.

On 12 January, we announced robust domestic measures to help to ensure that UK businesses and the public sector avoid complicity in human rights violations in Xinjiang through their supply chains, including a review of export controls as they apply to Xinjiang, the introduction of financial penalties for organisations that fail to comply with their transparency obligations under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and robust and detailed guidance for UK businesses to target those who profit from forced labour and those who would support it financially, whether deliberately or otherwise.

We have also acted internationally to hold China to account for its policies in Xinjiang. In February, in the first personal address to the UN Human Rights Council by a UK Foreign Secretary in more than a decade, my right hon. Friend underlined his call for China to allow the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, or another independent expert,

“urgent and unfettered access to Xinjiang.”

That point was made powerfully by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and was reinforced by the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) and the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

Working with our partners, we have built an international caucus of countries calling China out for its gross human rights violations and increased the diplomatic pressure for Beijing to change course. On 6 October 2020, alongside Germany, we brought together 39 countries to express grave concern at the situation in Xinjiang in a joint statement at the UN General Assembly Third Committee. That was an increase on the 23 countries that supported the UK-led joint statement a year earlier.

We continue to raise the human rights violations in Xinjiang directly with the Chinese authorities. I had direct conversations recently when I summoned the chargé to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has raised his serious concerns on a number of occasions with his counterpart, Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi.

The motion before the House is that the situation in Xinjiang amounts to genocide and crimes against humanity. The UK of course treats all allegations of genocide and crimes against humanity with the gravity they demand.

[Nigel Adams]

As a nation, we have a strong history of protecting global human rights, but as the House is no doubt aware, the UK's long-standing position, like many countries around the world, is that determining whether a situation amounts to genocide or crimes against humanity is a matter for competent national and international courts, after consideration of all the available evidence.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Nigel Adams: I will on that point, although I am conscious that I need to leave a few minutes at the end.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I will be very brief. Will my hon. Friend now commit the Foreign Office and the Government, given that they do not want to say genocide, to co-operating with and giving full evidence to the Uyghur tribunal led by Sir Geoffrey Nice? Can he now give that commitment that they will co-operate and give evidence? It will define genocide, and then the Government could sign up to it.

Nigel Adams: I have made our position clear. Incidentally, I have met Sir Geoffrey Nice. I met him yesterday, along with Lord Anderson of Ipswich. We had a very constructive dialogue, and we will continue to have dialogue with Sir Geoffrey. Our policy is that a competent court should determine genocide. Sir Geoffrey is an eminent lawyer and he has done fantastic work in this area, but his tribunal is of course not a criminal court. That is our policy.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will you give evidence?

Nigel Adams: What I will say to my right hon. Friend is that competent courts include international courts such as the ICC and the International Court of Justice, and national criminal courts that meet international standards of due process.

Genocide and crimes against humanity are among the most egregious of all international crimes. We believe—my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) concurred with this in his powerful speech—that the question of whether they have been committed is for a competent court of law to decide. Genocide and crimes against humanity are subject to a restrictive legal framework under international law. In particular, a finding of genocide requires proof that relevant acts were carried out with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Proving such intent to the required legal standard can be incredibly difficult to achieve in practice.

For these reasons, we do not believe it is right for the Government to make a determination in this, or in any other case where genocide or crimes against humanity are alleged. Parliaments in Canada and the Netherlands have passed motions saying it is a genocide, but the Dutch Prime Minister's party voted against the motions and Prime Minister Trudeau's Government abstained.

The United Kingdom is committed to seeking an end to serious violations of international human rights law wherever they occur, preventing the escalation of any such violations and alleviating the suffering of those who are affected. Our approach has not prevented us from taking robust action to address serious human rights violations, as we have done and will continue to

do in the case of Xinjiang. We are also committed to ensuring that, where allegations are made, they are investigated thoroughly, including, where appropriate, independent international investigation by relevant bodies and experts. The Foreign Secretary has been clear that we wish to see the UN commissioner for human rights or another independent observer have full and unrestricted access to Xinjiang to investigate the situation on the ground. Today, I again call on China to grant that without further delay.

A number of colleagues mentioned the issue of the winter Olympics. The Prime Minister has made it clear that we are not normally in favour of sporting boycotts, and of course the participation of the national team at the Olympics is a matter for the British Olympic Association, which is required to operate independently of the Government under International Olympic Committee regulations. The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) mentioned the recent announcement of the official development assistance cuts in China. We have cut the budget to China by 95%, but every single penny of the remaining budget for China will be spent solely on open societies work and human rights work.

The Government understand the strength of feeling on this issue and share the grave concerns expressed by Members. I commend the efforts of hon. and right hon. Members to draw attention to the deeply troubling situation in Xinjiang. We have taken robust action. We have introduced sanctions, we are tackling Uyghur forced labour in UK supply chains, and we are ramping up pressure on Beijing through UN human rights bodies. We will continue to work with international partners to hold China to account for its gross violations of human rights against Uyghurs and other minorities in the region.

4.58 pm

Ms Ghani: I thank hon. and right hon. Members across the House for speaking with one voice and the appropriate tone in considering the crime of all crimes, genocide. There is absolute recognition that all five markers of genocide have been met. The House, I hope, will speak with one voice in a few moments and unanimously support my motion. Unfortunately, that puts the Government in a very difficult position because at some point they will have to undertake their UN obligations.

China sanctioned us for opposing its crimes against the Uyghur. Parliament must now prove that it will not be cowed and back my motion unanimously. We will continue to stand up for the Uyghur people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are suffering crimes against humanity and genocide; and calls on the Government to act to fulfil its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and all relevant instruments of international law to bring it to an end.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Could those Members now leaving do so in a covid-friendly way? We are going to move to the next business. My suggestion is that, while Mr Fletcher is speaking, we sanitise the Government Dispatch Box only.

British Wrestling

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David Duguid.*)

5 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate. It is an honour to lead a debate on the future of British wrestling. Much to the disappointment of several of the Doorkeepers and the Whip on duty, but to the relief of the Deputy Serjeant Arms, who is sanitising at the moment, there will be no practical demonstrations during the debate. It follows a report released by the all-party parliamentary group on wrestling less than a month ago. I must say that I am tremendously sad to be doing the debate without my tag-team partner, my friend the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is unfortunately detained with her other duties. I hope that I can do her justice in my remarks.

I think that, with some exceptions, I am the first MP to be addressing professional wrestling in the House—at least in a significant way—for some eight decades. That is slightly surprising, given that wrestling is perhaps the only industry that can rival politics for bravado, faux indignation and partisan crowds. However, wrestling may have the edge on physiques and fake tans, where only an episode of “TOWIE” may rival it.

This is an opportunity for me to marry my duty as a Member of Parliament and my joy as a wrestling fan. My love of professional wrestling started when, as a very young man, I got a DVD, and it had the Undertaker on it. He captured my imagination. Then I got a VHS of the 1992 Royal Rumble, with the amazing commentary of Bobby “The Brain” Heenan and Ric Flair’s historic victory. In that same year, some 80,000 people went to Wembley stadium for that year’s SummerSlam in which the British Bulldog won the Intercontinental championship. Around that time, my dad and my step-mum took me to a wrestling show at Adwick leisure centre in Doncaster, which was an amazing occasion for me, I was hooked.

A few years ago, I spent the day after my birthday—it was a birthday present—at Wembley arena for a progress show among 5,000 wrestling fans, seeing some of the very best wrestlers in the world in our capital. Many of them were British. Nowadays, to switch off from the day job, I often go home and watch a New Japan show or an All Elite Wrestling show. Wrestling is booming. The work of the all-party parliamentary group on wrestling has unleashed several closet wrestling fans. Among MPs, many of the staff of the House and indeed many journalists we find many closeted wrestling fans.

As Jim Smallman wrote in his book about British wrestling, modern wrestling has its origins in the carnival. In the 1800s, travelling carnivals went around attracting the public, often using wrestling. Indeed, to give some political crossover, I am told that Abraham Lincoln was renowned for his wrestling prowess. Although it was originally a sport, it became predetermined in its outcome largely because—some Members could learn from this—actual fighting is quite dull. The crowds preferred a prolonged and entertaining contest.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I always knew that Jim Shannon harboured a secret passion for wrestling. We are going to hear about it now.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who I spoke to beforehand. My three boys were all keen on wrestling and used to try to imitate the wrestling shows that he referred to. I am afraid that their dad was not quite as keen. Does the hon. Gentleman share my disappointment that World Wrestling Entertainment, the one major wrestling body in the UK, did not engage in the tremendous piece of work carried out by the APPG and him in particular? I commend that work. Does he agree that it is not too late for engagement and that the aim of the report to provide a safe, enjoyable and successful sport is more than worthy of their time, as it was for my young boys when they were small?

Mark Fletcher: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. This is my second Adjournment debate and I am delighted that on both occasions I have been intervened on by him. I absolutely share his sentiments, because the WWE is the most well-known name in global wrestling. It has a UK base, which I was just about to talk about, a UK performance centre and a UK brand. The WWE shares many of the requirements we have identified in our report and it is an important stakeholder in the future of the industry. There are some issues to address relating to WWE working practices, but that is part of the wider engagement we need to have as an industry.

Let me return to where I was. I was about to say, and I am sure this will pique your interest, Mr Speaker, that for many people in this country wrestling is synonymous with “World of Sport” and the likes of Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks on a Saturday afternoon—I have been amazed at how many people have made reference to that. But those fans may have missed some of the developments, to which I have just alluded, in recent years, including a thriving British independent wrestling scene that has developed some of the best talents in the world. Indeed, in the month the all-party group released its report, a British wrestler became the New Japan IWGP champion, a British wrestler was in the opening match at Wrestlemania for the WWE title, a show headlined by two brilliant female wrestlers, which is an incredibly important part of the report and what we examined, and the British Bulldog was honoured, following his death, by being inducted into the WWE hall of fame.

Wrestling is a wonderful bubble. We can escape the real world and see the contest of people in front of us as purely good or bad, a luxury we are rarely afforded in real life. It is escapism, and a brilliant art form. Unfortunately, that bubble that the industry operates in has been burst somewhat, and that is the focus of my following remarks. Last year, two separate forces happened to British wrestling that will have a profound and long-lasting impact. The first was, of course, covid-19 and the inability to put on shows. The second was the SpeakingOut movement, whereby many in the industry spoke of allegations of abuses of power, including sexual abuse. We started the all-party group inquiry in September 2020, and I do not think any of us involved realised what an undertaking it would be. We struggled to pull together simple facts and statistics. We discovered a largely unregulated industry operating outside the rules that most businesses operate in. In our numerous evidence sessions and written evidence, we found an industry in which leadership, unity and collaboration were sorely lacking. We put to many of these individuals and organisations incredibly difficult allegations, and in

[Mark Fletcher]

turn we heard of some extremely harrowing experiences. But we also heard of the brilliant things that British wrestling does, from fundraising for charities to turning people's lives around. I am thinking, in particular, of Aspire Wrestling in Derby, which is working with young kids and giving them transformational skills. As well as entertaining hundreds of thousands of people, wrestling does an awful lot of good.

The report that we produced was a labour of love, an unprecedented pulling together of the background of the industry, alongside the modern challenges that it faces. I wish to place on record, on behalf of the hon. Member for Pontypridd and myself, our thanks to the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), and my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow). In addition, I wish to mention the brilliant Danny Stone, the wonderful Robert Rams and Freddie Cook, who is a staffer in the office of the hon. Member for Pontypridd and who somehow managed to keep us all on track. I thank all those who submitted evidence and came to the oral evidence sessions.

We found, on the whole, two major issues. One is a culture within British wrestling that has become toxic and requires tremendous improvement, and the second is a total lack of governance. In my remaining time, I would like to cover some of our key conclusions and ask the Minister—who has been incredibly helpful in his engagement over the last few months, along with his officials—to give the Government's response on some of these issues.

Wrestling falls between two different worlds. Is it an art, or is it a sport? We think we have answered that question, and we have separated it out in the report. Our idea is that those who are training to be wrestlers and are in wrestling schools are undertaking a sporting exercise—those foundations are largely physical and require teaching, so that is the sporting aspect. When someone attends a wrestling show, they are watching a performance. We think that that is a helpful distinction, because it gives a clear pathway for the different aspects of the industry to move forward. Has the Minister considered our recommendation that schools be considered sporting and shows be considered theatrical? Does he agree that this is the first step to unlocking the industry's potential? Will he write, as we recommended, to Sport England and Arts Council England and work with devolved counterparts to do the same, so that we can get things moving?

With regard to wrestling schools, there is a particularly serious issue, because we are often talking about children and minors. Those who go to wrestling schools are often not of an age at which they are fully aware of their surroundings, and they are not in adulthood yet. As I outlined, we have recommended that we separate them out from promotions. There are issues around whether those who teach wrestling are in positions of trust—an issue that we have discussed when considering legislation in the House. They are certainly in positions of power, but we need to know whether they are in positions of trust legally, for the purposes of child sexual offences.

With regard to health and safety, we found an industry that is sorely lacking. We found everything from unfit rings in which people operate to basic first aid requirements

lacking. Some of our wrestlers are being let down, and in turn, our fans are being let down. I would like to thank Dr David Bevan for his expert input into the report and praise www.wrestlingsafely.co.uk, which outlines an excellent way forward. Will the Minister raise with ministerial colleagues the recommendation that rings produced in the UK and used here be required to have a designated standard adopted by the British Standards Institution?

The report also references the online safety Bill. Can the Minister outline the Government's plans for pre-legislative scrutiny? In the absence of any standard, will he encourage promoters to read and follow the recommendations on health and safety, specifically with regard to concussion protocols, in the APPG's report? Unfortunately, wrestling is a long way behind other sports in which people suffer from concussions—particularly rugby—and there is a serious need to make progress, so that some wrestlers are not left in a terrible state in later life. Will the Minister raise with Home Office colleagues the recommendation on strengthened licensing requirements for the temporary event notice scheme and work with the devolved Administrations on equal standards across the regions?

We spoke to many wrestling promoters during our inquiry. Unfortunately we did not speak to all of them, but it was not for lack of trying. We encourage any wrestling promoters who feel that they did not get to have their say to come forward and have a discussion, because they will be central to the future of the wrestling industry. There is a clear requirement to make sure that they are brought on board and understand the rationale behind what we set out in the report.

Specific problems arise from the current situation in regard to Brexit and the ability of talents to come into this country for wrestling shows, so will the Minister raise with colleagues at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department for International Trade the points in the report about ensuring a point of contact for UK talent overseas? Will he raise the point about visiting talent with the Home Office?

I alluded to the SpeakingOut movement earlier, and I thank everybody who gave testimony in regard to that. It was the inspiration for the passion of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) to get involved in the APPG. Undoubtedly it was a low mark in British wrestling's history. We have tried to give a voice to those who may have felt that they have not had one in this House before. We hope that we did justice to those victims in a meaningful way. The toxic culture around wrestling will have to end if it is to rise again. In our report, we highlighted a pledge that we hope promotions will abide by. Does the Minister have any comments on that pledge?

Finally, in regard to governance, one of the strange things about writing this report was the discovery that we knew so little about British wrestling's history or the modern context. The Minister will almost certainly say that one of the difficulties he has in engaging with British wrestling is that there is no governing body. There is nobody to put forward the industry's arguments at a Government level. Indeed, there is nobody to disseminate advice back down through the pyramid. There was a clear consensus that a governing body is needed to help bring about some of the things and to help professionalise the industry and put it on a sustainable footing.

The APPG is not well placed to bring in a governing body. We can be part of that conversation, but all that we can do is make recommendations. I very much hope that the industry saw the arguments that we set out in our report, because there are so many ways in which wrestling organisations are treated poorly because they are not properly represented, whether that is to do with venue hiring rules, Arts Council grants, obtaining visas or getting insurance.

The economies of scale from co-operation through a governing body would pay back tenfold what it would cost to these groups and promotions, but it would also give legitimacy to the industry and help raise the standards that performers and fans need to see. Does the Minister agree with the argument that industries with governing bodies have been better placed to weather the covid storm that we have seen over the past few months? Does he have any additional comments about our recommendations on a governing body?

In conclusion, in our report, we said that we wanted to begin a conversation. That conversation has to take in many stakeholders, from fans and those in the industry through to those in government, but it has to be industry-led. As two Back Benchers, the hon. Member for Pontypridd and I are not in a position to take that forward, but we hope that this report has started the conversation, and this Adjournment debate is part of that. I fear that British wrestling will bury its head in the sand again. Unfortunately, wrestling usually makes the front page on two occasions: one is when we have a nostalgic moment when somebody who used to be famous has passed away, and the second is when there is a tragedy, and I think of something like Chris Benoit and the actions he took—and that is not something I want to happen. I am desperate to try to help British wrestling overcome those barriers and become better.

It does not have to be this way. It is an industry with hundreds of thousands of fans. It has some of the most creative minds around. It can be better, but British wrestling needs to respect itself if others are to respect it, too. The industry needs to rise together, to work together and to be better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am thrilled that the hon. Member mentioned Robert Rams. As the hon. Gentleman may or may not know, Robert was my chief of staff for several years. If I let him, he would turn the conversation to wrestling, and there were no limits to what he would not do to go and see a wrestling match. I know he will be thrilled by that reference today.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) on securing this debate and for raising both the issues and opportunities of wrestling. He and his colleague, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), the co-chairs of the all-party group on wrestling, have done a fantastic job of raising the profile of wrestling in this place and outside. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his comments as well. Perhaps, Mr Deputy Speaker, with your leave, we could make an exception and allow a physical demonstration in the Chamber today between the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover. I think that

could be quite an entertaining end to the day, but perhaps we have to wait for another day for that. However, now that we know your personal interest, Mr Deputy Speaker, maybe we can find some way to do so.

Professional wrestling brings incredible joy, as my hon. Friend said, to people right across the country. It has a proud and rich history in this country. If we ask anybody who grew up in the UK between the 1960s and 1980s, as a few of us did, what they think of when somebody mentions wrestling, they will probably talk about Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks and watching “World of Sport” on ITV—those fantastic Saturday afternoons watching wrestling. “World of Sport” finished in the 1980s and the WWF, now WWE, took over. We saw an Americanisation of wrestling for quite a long period, but despite the American dominance, British wrestlers did manage to infiltrate the very top echelons of wrestling, including Davey Boy Smith, better known as The British Bulldog. He was there, as my hon. Friend mentioned, at Wembley Stadium in 1992 when 80,000 people attended the SummerSlam.

In the last few years, British wrestling has seen a resurgence, with high-calibre talent and impressive promotions. This has allowed the UK scene to rival the larger promotions across the world. Not only has there been an increase in the number of shows booked, but over the last few years we have seen a steady rise in attendances, with many shows now selling to record numbers. We have seen British promotions such as PROGRESS, Insane Championship Wrestling and Revolution Pro Wrestling hosting major shows attracting international audiences and adding to our international tourism offer. Recently, there has also been the creation of the UK’s own specific WWE brand in NXT UK.

Across the country, training facilities have also become more important for the British pro wrestling scene. They are being run by some of the biggest names in the industry. This includes the creation of the first WWE performance centre outside the United States, in London, in 2019. We have seen some of this British-trained talent cross the Atlantic and become successful in major established promotions, such as WWE and All Elite Wrestling. Drew McIntyre became the first ever British WWE world champion in 2020, and Scottish-born Kay Lee Ray is currently the NXT UK women’s champion.

With the current pandemic impacting on the sport and entertainment industries so severely over the last year, I really do appreciate the efforts of the APPG on wrestling to ensure that the last few years of hard work raising the profile of UK pro wrestling does not go to waste. I particularly applaud my hon. Friend because, as he said, without a governing body, the sector faces some challenges. I warmly welcome the work of the APPG and its recent inquiry into the future of professional wrestling in Britain, which we heard about this afternoon. The inquiry’s report makes many recommendations across a broad range of issues relating to the sector. I am not in a position to answer every single one of his questions at the moment, but I will carefully consider the report and happily engage with him and the APPG as we consider it more thoroughly.

My hon. Friend covered a very wide range of areas, including health and safety standards, safeguarding, the promotion of wrestling and addressing the gender pay gap, which are all important issues. A lot of these areas are in the gift of the wrestling industry itself to address,

[Nigel Huddleston]

and I urge those in the sector, as he did, to consider the APPG's report very carefully and what actions the sector can take, including coming together more clearly.

I agree with the need for wrestling to place safety and wellbeing at the forefront of its priorities. There is no need for the industry to start with a blank sheet of paper here; as the report sets out, there is a wealth of information from other sectors that can be used as a starting point. That includes safeguarding standards in sport and in the arts. In sport, the Child Protection in Sport Unit provides a clear framework of standards that organisations working with children and young people should meet, along with supporting resources. In the arts and entertainment sector the NSPCC has produced guidance, including advice on creating clear safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures. The Department for Education has provided advice for local authorities and individuals working with children in all types of professional or amateur performances, paid sport and paid modelling. All those resources are available for wrestling right now, and I urge those in the industry to make use of them.

The report also addresses how wrestling should be categorised. We have spoken about that on several occasions; it is a challenge. The report recommends that training should be considered a sport and the performance element an entertainment. Personally I can see the logic in that distinction, but that is a matter for Sport England. I understand that there is engagement with Sport England, and I suggest that that continues.

Mark Fletcher: My hon. Friend is doing a brilliant job. I asked whether he would write to Sport England in support of our recommendation; would he be willing to do so?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend. I will definitely write to Sport England and ask it to seriously consider it. He will understand that, because the matter is at the discretion of Sport England, if I were to get involved and strongly suggest that it should decide one way or the other it might be considered inappropriate, but what I will do is consider the application very seriously and get back to him. Look, personally I understand it, but this is not for me to decide, and I need to respect the appropriate decision-making bodies.

As the report made out, this is a complex area; it is not clear, but it is a perfectly valid point to raise. The report highlighted the fact that support from the two most relevant Government arm's length bodies, Sport England and Arts Council England, has been provided to many projects in the past, where the projects have met the relevant funding criteria. Where that is clearly sport or clearly entertainment, that has been straightforward.

Where that is not the case, there are obviously challenges, but the door is open for discussions about what support can be provided to wrestling, and I would urge the industry, as well as the APPG—but it is the industry that would benefit here—to be very clear about the exact nature of the support they are looking for and therefore pursue that help. It is for wrestling itself to make the case for support and how it fits with those organisations' strategic aims, just as it is for any other organisation looking for publicly funded support. We all want to see wrestling prosper, but the industry needs to be clear about what it wants to achieve.

The report and this afternoon's debate have highlighted the effect that the current pandemic has had on the industry. I appreciate that the sector has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic. We have been working with sectors throughout the economy to make it possible for entertainment such as pro wrestling to restart in a safe manner, and rightly our focus remains on public safety. With falling infection rates and the vaccination of more than 33 million people, we have cause for optimism. As my hon. Friend knows, in February the Prime Minister set out a road map out of the current lockdown for England. We also announced the events research programme, an integral part of the road map, which will help to explore how larger events across the cultural and entertainment sectors can reopen safely. Currently, participants have been able to resume training.

Again, I would like to thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. As I have promised, we will happily continue with the conversations, and I will endeavour to give him answers to the many other questions he raised today. I would like to reiterate my thanks to the APPG for wrestling for its work on looking at the future of wrestling in this country. We will carefully consider the report and what factors are relevant to the Government and, potentially, to Departments other than the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I urge the wrestling community itself to look at the recommendations that it should take forward. We all want to see a successful wrestling industry, both for participants and for the many fans right across the country. I hope that the report will help it to grow and continue to prosper.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): What a wonderful way to finish the parliamentary week, debating British wrestling. Well done! I would also like to thank all the technicians and the backroom people in broadcasting who have allowed those Members participating remotely to be able to do so. We are incredibly grateful for everything that you have done.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 April 2021

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Religious Minorities: Land Rights

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

1.30 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (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 amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be a short suspension between this debate and the next one that starts at 3.15 pm. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall and are expected to stay for the entire duration of the debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times to each other and to us here in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address—they will have had an email this morning with the address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they leave the room after using them. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

1.31 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered land rights for religious minorities including Baha'is in Iran.

First, I place on the record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate. I also thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for co-sponsoring this debate in his capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Baha'i faith. He had hoped to be here, but unfortunately he has other things to do, so he is unable to be here. Others who wanted to participate have not been able to attend, either. None the less, the issue is of great importance. When I and others have made our contributions, hon. Members and the Minister in particular will understand how important it is.

I am pleased to see my good friend, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), in his place. He is always very faithful and attends not only in his role as a spokesperson for the Scottish National party, but because he has a deep interest in these issues, as has the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David). I very much look forward to the Minister's response. It is good to see him in his place as well.

I am also a member of the all-party group on the Baha'i faith, but I speak today primarily in my role as chairperson of the all-party group for international

freedom of religion or belief, a group that we have had in Parliament for some time. My interest in that particular APPG is significant. We have more than 130 members and peers from the House of Commons and House of Lords, so it is a deep interest for many people. The issue of the Baha'is has come to our attention for some time and we very much want to put the issue on the record. As I and others will explain, there is gross persecution of the Baha'is in Iran.

In March this year, the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief published its third annual "Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief". It includes reports on the state of freedom of religion or belief in 25 countries and territories, including Iran, and offers recommendations for UK foreign policy, which is why it is so important to have the Minister here to see what the Government can do to respond in a positive and helpful way.

In the foreword to the report, three leading experts in the field, Professor Sir Malcolm Evans, Dr Nazila Ghanea and Dr Ahmed Shaheed observed the following trend—this is their opinion in relation to Iran and the Baha'is in particular:

"It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for many, the pandemic has provided a backdrop to a further deepening of the repression and suppression which they have been facing – as some states have taken the opportunities presented by the 'eyes of the international community being elsewhere'" –

as they obviously were during the covid-19 lockdown—

"to return to their oppressive practices."

Today, I will illustrate clearly that those oppressive practices are alive and, unfortunately, exceeding the boundaries of what is legally and morally acceptable in Iran.

I have met the Baha'is on many occasions. I can honestly say that they are some of the nicest, most generous and genuine people anyone could ever meet. They have a pleasant way with them, as well as a smile and a handshake that matches that pleasantness. Today, I wish to highlight one facet of why the Baha'i community in Iran are facing increasingly oppressive practices, and the particular injustice of the denial of land rights to the rural community of farmers in the small village of Ivel in Mazandaran province.

We all know the problems in Iran, its position in the world and how the world looks on it, but there is specific, physical targeting of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is. From the information available to the APPG and to my office, it is clear that the expropriation of land in the village of Ivel was the first indicator of a deepening pattern of escalating repression of the Baha'is in the province of Mazandaran at the hands of Iranian authorities. When we hear what has happened, we will know clearly where we are in relation to this.

Beyond Iran, the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief has, in recent weeks, heard evidence and testimony, which I will touch on, about how religious minority communities face denial of land rights in other states, ranging from the restriction of public goods necessary for agriculture to attacks on cultural heritage, even burial sites. Baha'i graves have been desecrated, which I will explain properly later on. I bring these issues to the attention of the Minister—my Minister—and to the Government—my Government.

[*Jim Shannon*]

There has been a Baha'i community in the village of Ivel in northern Iran for around 160 years. Many generations ago, shortly after the foundation of the Baha'i faith in 1844, the majority of the community were farmers, working for their subsistence through the hard discipline of an agricultural life, a way of life recognised by rural people in every culture and land across the world. The same families have tended the land for generations.

Some members of the Baha'i faith live in my constituency and a neighbouring constituency, and I have had the opportunity to meet them at home. They are so proud of their heritage, culture and where they are, and I know they wish me to speak on their behalf. The Baha'i community was committed to their farms, to their families and, very much, to their faith. They were also committed to service to their neighbours and to their nation. Anyone who meets the Baha'is will see that they are not just about themselves, but about others. I have been impressed by that.

From the earliest stages of the Baha'i presence in Ivel, they contributed resources and time to the social, economic and cultural development of their community, a commitment that is shared by so many people of all faiths and none. At the very beginning, the Baha'is reached out to those of other religious faiths and groups to ensure they created relationships that benefited from the pluralistic society, which unfortunately no longer exists.

They built schools and bathhouses that were open to all the people of the village—the Baha'is, the Muslims and those of other faiths. They contributed towards the care of victims of conflict and earthquakes. Despite their industry and service to others, these Baha'i farmers have been singled out for unusually persistent levels of persecution. From 1983 onwards, the post-revolutionary Government made repeated efforts to expel them from the village and displace them from their lands. What has been happening has been specific and it becomes much more worrying, as you will hear from my comments as we go on.

In June 2010, those efforts extended to the authorities sending bulldozers to demolish some 50 Baha'i homes in the village. Since 1983, the Baha'is have used, and exhausted, every possible legal channel to defend their legal rights to their properties and lands. Their frustration is that something is happening that is truly wrong, evil and vindictive, and which specifically targets them, and they do not have the protection that they should have from the legal system in Iran.

Reports from the Baha'i international community reveal that on 1 August 2020 branch 54 of the special court for article 49 of the constitution of Iran ruled that the ownership of farmland by a number of Baha'is in the rural village of Ivel in Mazandaran province is illegal. Imagine if someone came along to you, Dr Huq, and said, "We're going to take your house and you have no way of stopping it," or said to the Minister, "We're taking your property away as well, and legally it's impossible to do very much about it."

A further ruling from the court of appeal on 13 October 2020 ruled against the legitimacy of the ownership of land of 27 Baha'is. Members will see who are the targets. It appears to be the final step in the actions of

the Iranian authorities to dispossess those Baha'is of their homes and lands in Ivel. There has been a movement across the free democratic world for those in authority to stand up for the Baha'is, and to do their best to try to raise awareness.

The judgment of branch 54 of the special court for article 49 of the constitution, issued on 1 August 2020, and a further extraordinary session of the court of appeal on 13 October 2020 appear to have closed off any final opportunities for the Baha'is of Ivel to defend their right of ownership to their land—land that they have cultivated and lived off, and that others have lived off as well. That land is their source of economic sustenance. Their lives, and their efforts and energies, have been poured into that land over the years.

It is also of note that on 13 October the appeal court order endorsed the decision in favour of the execution of Imam Khomeini's order, known as EIKO, in the city of Sari to sell the farmlands owned by the Baha'is. Again it seems to me, and I suspect to everyone else, that it was specifically directed at them, and it was done, as I will illustrate, because of a certain religious belief. The Baha'is now look to the voice of the international community, including Members of Parliament and our Minister, as the only recourse to defend the rights of this community of innocent rural farmers.

We have the privilege in this House of being able to speak up for those who have no one to speak up for them. I know that you, Dr Huq, the Minister and others have done so regularly, because we see wrong in the world and we want to speak up for other people. We do it because it is right and because we have the opportunity to do so in this House. I assure the Baha'is that today's debate is for them. It is a debate for those people we may never meet in this world. It is a debate on behalf of the Baha'is, whom I have a passion for and believe I should speak up for.

I record my appreciation of the tweet issued by the Minister of State, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, on 12 February, expressing deep concern at the expropriation of land from the Baha'is in Ivel. I am very encouraged by Lord Ahmad, a voice so often for those who have no voice to speak up for them. In his tweet, he said:

"The UK is deeply concerned by reports of expropriation & repossession of land owned by Baha'i communities in Ivel. This follows a worrying escalation in long-standing persecution against religious minorities in Iran. We will always stand up for people of all faiths & beliefs."

Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, an imam from Leicester and the chair of the Virtue Ethics Foundation also released a statement, in which he said:

"I am greatly alarmed to learn about the prejudicial ruling of two courts in the Islamic Republic of Iran confiscating land belonging to the Baha'is in the rural village of Ivel."

Importantly—if it is being done because of religion, which it clearly is—he also said:

"Islam does not permit a government to confiscate land from citizens just because they follow a different religion or ideology."

He went on to say that

"the verdicts must be confronted and overturned."

Clearly, world opinion and religious opinion is very concerned.

The Baha'is' lawyers were given no opportunity to see the court documents, to prepare a defence, or to present any arguments back in October 2020. This case could

set an alarming precedent in nullifying Baha'is' right to ownership of land. This is the latest in a pattern of persecution for the Baha'is in Ivel. The community has experienced taxes on their properties, arson, imprisonment, and expulsion as direct consequences against them. Numerous official documents reveal religious prejudice as the motive behind land confiscations, and some records show that the Baha'is have been told their properties will be returned to them if they convert to Islam. If they convert—do away with their own religion and take another—they are told that it will be okay, so this is very clearly direct action against them that is politically and religiously motivated.

Others across the world have supported the Baha'is in Ivel. The former Canadian Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, is among a group of more than 50 high-ranking legal professionals who have written an open letter to Iran's chief justice, Ebrahim Raisi. The letter condemns the court ruling to confiscate the Baha'is' property and violations against the Baha'i community. It states that

“Under the current Iranian government, Bahá'ís have experienced home raids, attacks on properties, confiscation of possessions, dismissals from employment, denial of access to higher education, imprisonment, and execution”—

it can be as final as that. The letter also states that

“Bahá'ís have sought legal remedies, but to little avail”,

and that:

“The 2020 rulings now establish a dangerous constitutional precedent of judicially sanctioned confiscation that nullifies legitimate property interests based only on the owners' religious affiliation, thus departing not only from international human rights standards but also from the text and intent of the Iranian constitution itself.”

Germany's federal Government commissioner for global freedom of religion issued a press release as well, calling on the Iranian Government to

“recognise the Baha'i as a religious community and to respect the rights of all religious and faith minorities.”

Officials, including politicians from Brazil, Sweden and Canada, have also expressed their support for the Baha'is, so this has taken on an international flavour now, which I think is very important.

In the Iranian province of Mazandaran, persecution has escalated. The APPG warns in its report that the crisis of the covid pandemic could provide a backdrop for a ratcheting up of repression of religious minorities, and that appears to be taking a more ominous shape within that province, in which the village of Ivel is located. I have expressed concern about this in the Chamber to other Ministers before: I have always felt that countries that are indiscriminate in how they target ethnic groups or religious minorities can do so under the cover of the covid pandemic. On 9 March 2021, the Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme—that is a good Ulster-Scots go at French—an international NGO, issued a press release that gave notice of a directive that reveals plans by authorities in the Iranian province of Mazandaran to intensify their suppression of Baha'is and other religious minorities. It is not just the Baha'is: if someone is of a different religion from Islam, the state religion, then they are targeted, but today we want to speak specifically about the Baha'is.

The text of a directive from the Commission on Ethnicities, Sects and Religions in the town of Sari in Mazandaran, dated 21 September 2020, which has the authority of the highest levels of the Iranian Government,

calls for the rigorous control of the Baha'i community in virtually all aspects of life. They can no longer practise their religion; they can no longer have individual thought. According to the Iranian Government, they have to rigorously adhere to what that Government want them to do. It worries me when I read and observe what is going on. This directive mandates the identification of Baha'i students in order to bring them to Islam—in other words, they cannot be a Baha'i and cannot have a different faith, but have to have the faith that the Iranian Government want them to have. The economic strangulation of the Baha'is is another way of making that happen.

These sinister instructions are similar in nature to documents that Members who follow the plight of the Baha'is in Iran will recognise. The language draws directly from the Iranian Government policies to suppress Baha'is found in an infamous 1991 memorandum on “the Baha'i question”, and in the 2005 letter issued to the highest levels of the security forces for monitoring and identifying all Baha'is. This came from the top: the order to take on the Baha'is came from the highest level. Both documents were confidential communications that were uncovered and brought to light by the former UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the former UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief: the late Maurice Copithorne of Canada, and the late Asma Jahangir of Pakistan. I pay tribute to their memory and their service to human rights.

In recent years, the Baha'is in Iran have faced increasingly harsh treatment. Attacks on homes, businesses and personal and community property are reportedly increasing. Baha'i cemeteries have been desecrated, seized and bulldozed. Family connections with former generations, and with the land that they love, are being bulldozed as well. In January 2021, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javid Rehman—in conjunction with the APPG on Pakistan minorities, which I chair—published a report outlining human rights concerns in the country. Among other issues, the special rapporteur noted deep concerns that discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities persists, including forced evictions and land confiscation in minority areas. It is probably easier to do it in minority areas, because there are not many people there. In 2020, hundreds of people were reportedly arrested for resisting land confiscation and house demolitions—as anyone would if someone was taking their house—despite presenting evidence of ownership. Even when someone owns a house and shows their ownership, they still do their worst.

The report notes that in November 2020, over 100 Iranian security agents undertook raids, without cause, against the Baha'is, reportedly demanding deeds and confiscating items. Their protection from the security forces and authorities is zero, which has led to longer-term fears about the widespread and unlawful seizure of Baha'i-owned property. In a statement to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2021, Javid Rehman said:

“I am disturbed at the harassment, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments of religious minorities, particularly members of the Baha'i faith who have experienced a new wave of house raids and land confiscations in recent months.”

A global campaign calling for an end to the persecution of the Baha'is, and the return of ancestral lands that were confiscated by an Iranian constitutional court in

[*Jim Shannon*]

August 2020, has also been gaining international support in the last few months. Today's debate enables us to highlight these issues and then ask the Minister to respond on the Government's behalf.

The September 2020 directive calls on the Mazandaran authorities to review the latest status of the “perverse Baha’i sect”—their words, not ours, obviously—and states that the Baha’is are to be rigorously controlled. My goodness—it scares me to think what that means. The directive proposes a detailed plan at the highest level for cultural and educational institutions. These are ominous and alarming developments, representing a sharp acceleration in a range of pressures on the Baha’is in Mazandaran. If the collective voice of the international community does not deter the Iranian authorities from the unjust repression of innocent citizens from a minority community, there must be concerns that the invidious rise in persecution could widen to other regions of Iran, or indeed to other religious minority groups in other parts of the world. It is clear to me and my colleagues in the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief that the plight of the 27 Baha’is in a village in northern Iran echoes the experiences and travails of many people of various faiths and communities across the world, and we have seen that escalating throughout the pandemic.

In March of this year, I chaired a webinar with the Baha’is to explore this subject, and I wish to share two further case studies of the pressures on the land rights of religious minority communities. The webinar was helpful but reinforced our fears about cases that reached beyond Iran. At a webinar on 4 March, Pablo Vargas of Impolso 18, a human rights organisation, gave testimony about concerns in Mexico. Mexico is an inherently pluralistic country with a large Catholic population and a small Protestant population. Despite that, there have been cases of human rights infringements against religious minorities, especially people who are members of indigenous communities and also from religious minorities.

Article 24 of the Mexican constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, yet Christian Solidarity Worldwide, one of those excellent organisations that speak up for Christians and other religious groups across the world, has expressed concern about a culture of impunity and a reluctance to prosecute those responsible for criminal acts such as violations of the freedom of religion or belief. Mr Vargas reported expulsions of indigenous Protestant Christians from ejidos, areas of communal land used for agriculture, which families are granted the right to cultivate. There are also reports of seizures of land in Mexico.

Again, for the benefit of this debate Christian Solidarity Worldwide kindly supplied my office with a case study of the phenomenon that Mr Vargas describes. It states the following:

“In Cuamontax in the state of Hidalgo, a family was expelled from the community on 20 July 2019 for belonging to a minority religion. Their home was looted and destroyed, and their ejido—their property rights—

“were taken away. In August 2020, the community leaders harvested the crops that this family had been cultivating on their land. This was a demonstration to that family that the family is no longer recognised as part of the community and almost two years later the family is not even allowed to enter the community.”

Imagine that happening—every one of us will feel angst in our souls, our hearts and our minds for those people.

Another powerful testimony was offered at the webinar by Max Joseph, a researcher on Iraq for minority rights groups. He spoke in depth about the plight of the Assyrian Christians and noted that land ownership is one reflection of shifting demographics, whereby Assyrians, Yazidis and other ancient Christian communities have suffered repeated land seizures as a process of ethno-nationalism, particularly across the 20th century, which has manifested itself in crimes as severe as genocide. We are extremely concerned about that.

One example was a case in 2018 where Christian MPs submitted legislation to the Iraqi Parliament calling for the return of over 60,000 properties in Baghdad alone, but to no avail. One comment by Mr Joseph captures the injustice of the theft of land rights for many minority communities. He observed:

“Land theft is something that the vulnerable suffer from the dominant.”

That sums up the situation really well, and it is happening in Iran, Iraq and Mexico.

The final speaker that day, Stephen Powles, QC, of Doughty Street Chambers, expressed the hope that what is lost may one day be retrieved. Certainly, the purpose of this debate is to try to make that happen. But how much better it would be if the lands, farms and rights of the Baha’is, the Christians, the Muslims and all communities of faith and belief facing persecution in our world today were not lost in the first place. It would be great if that was the case, but unfortunately it is not.

In conclusion, I have some requests to make of the Minister. Bleak as this situation is, I wish to record the hopeful signs of global solidarity. I am encouraged when I realise that those of standing in 50 countries across the world are prepared to sign a letter and voice their opinion and express global solidarity for the right of freedom of religion or belief, which these cases have elicited. The Baha’i community has received an extraordinary wave of support in response to these injustices. The global outcry has included the voices of Government officials, parliamentarians, civil society organisations and faith leaders of all faiths, which is really important. It underlines that this situation is wrong, morally and legally, and we need to speak up.

It is notable that prominent among these voices are prominent Muslim organisations and learned Islamic scholars who are speaking out. That is really important, because it shows the solidarity of the world among those of different religious persuasions who see the danger and are speaking out.

There have also been statements of support from the American Islamic Congress, the Canadian Council of Imams and a respected faith leader known to many in this House, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, a visiting Imam to De Montfort University. He has called upon the Iranian Chief Justice to address this injustice, adding:

“Islam does not permit a government to confiscate land from citizens just because they follow a different religion or ideology”—and, I want to make clear, nor should it.

Those of us who labour in the sphere of freedom of religion and belief understand full well that there are bonds of friendship and solidarity between Baha’is, Muslims, Christians, Jews and people of all faiths and those of secular and humanist beliefs. This is not a clash of religions. This is a struggle for all people of faith and

belief to enjoy the rights enshrined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, against the abuses and the persecution carried out by those in authority who deny them the right to believe and live by their beliefs. Parliamentarians of all parties here and in the other place share the view that informed and calibrated accountability for abuses of religious minorities has a place in bilateral and multilateral efforts to dissuade authorities in Iran, Iraq, Mexico and elsewhere from acts of persecution or from granting impunity to forces that commit such acts.

I welcome a commitment from the Minister—I am in no doubt at all that it is forthcoming, but it is good to have it on the record—and any public statement that Ministers and ambassadors of the UK Government might make on these issues, to continue the process of accountability. I also thank the Foreign Secretary and Ministers and civil servants of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I know they are very aware of these matters.

It is time for us in this House, collectively, from all political parties and from all religious views, to stand up and show the Baha'is that we are standing by them. The fact that other Governments and parliamentarians from across the world have done the same should encourage us. It should encourage the Baha'is. I know whenever the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief first started, we recognised that it was our job—I believe it is my job, as a Christian—to speak up not only for those of Christian beliefs, but for those of other beliefs and, indeed, of no belief. Today, I am standing up for the Baha'is. I hope that our Minister and our Government will do the same and show solidarity for the Baha'is, who need our help at this time.

2.2 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this afternoon's debate, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate on land rights for religious minorities, including the Baha'i community in Iran. I thank him for his typically detailed and passionate speech on behalf of yet another voiceless minority group around the world. We have relied so much in this Parliament on his good work.

We heard about the issue of minority communities and the access that they have to their traditional homelands. As he pointed out, it is a real, live and relevant issue, nowhere more so than in the middle east, particularly in Iran and Iraq. I will address the Christian and Yazidi minorities there, too, a little later.

I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman made specific mention of the Baha'i community in Iran. There is overwhelming evidence that the 350,000-strong Baha'i community, which constitutes the largest non-Muslim community in the country, continues to suffer systematic persecution simply because of their religious beliefs and their decision to exercise their fundamental right to practice their faith.

Like the hon. Gentleman, many of us will have Baha'i communities in our constituencies—I know I do. I have met them many times in Helensburgh. I know the people they are, I can see the good work that they do and I am proud to call them my friends.

For more than 30 years the Iranian authorities have been absolutely determined to marginalise and remove the social and economic rights of the Baha'i community, with instructions from the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council explicitly stating that official dealings with the Baha'i community should be conducted in such a way “that their progress and development are blocked”.

It is a remarkable and appalling indictment of the Government in Tehran that they behave in such a manner.

As a result, the Baha'i community is regularly demonised in the official state media and by clerics from the pulpits in the mosques. The authorities have actively and officially encouraged blatant discrimination—discrimination that, as we have heard, all too often has led to violence, murder and the confiscation of property and land. Just last year, in a further escalation of the official Iranian repression of the Baha'is, the Government in Tehran officially barred Iranian Baha'i citizens from holding national identity cards. In effect, that stripped them of their basic rights and access to the most fundamental services as citizens of their own country.

There is little argument that Iran's Baha'i community is among the most persecuted religious minorities in the world. As the 2019 report of the United Nations rapporteur to Iran says, in the eyes of the Iranian Government the Baha'is are considered to be “unprotected infidels”, leaving them very much at the mercy of the state and of the Government. As a result of this state-sanctioned repression, in recent months the Baha'i community experienced a whole new wave of house raids and land confiscation. The hon. Gentleman highlighted that, like so many other regimes, the Iranian Government used covid as a smokescreen to cover their actions. In November last year, without warning the Iranian security forces raided the village of Ivel where the Baha'i community make up about half the population and have been settled for more than 150 years. Among their other crimes, the Iranian security forces unlawfully seized Baha'i property, with hundreds reportedly arrested for resisting house demolitions and land confiscation even though they presented proof that they were the legal owners.

The Baha'i community in Iran is not rich. It is not powerful. The Baha'is do not have deep pockets and they do not have influential friends. The Baha'is are often hard-working, low-income agricultural workers with no other assets or means of earning a living aside from their homes or their farmlands. This means that state-sponsored, court-sanctioned land theft takes away everything they have.

What happened in Ivel was not just the judicially sanctioned confiscation of property and land based solely on the owner's religious affiliation; it was a flagrant breach of international human rights that also flies in the face of the Iranian constitution. Article 13 of the constitution provides protection of named minorities such as the Zoroastrians and Christian and Jewish communities, but it specifically excludes the Baha'i. Article 19, however, says explicitly that

“regardless of the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong” everyone in Iran has equal rights. That is reinforced by article 20, which says:

“All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights”.

[*Brendan O'Hara*]

Yet we know that the reality is very different. The Baha'i community, despite the protections afforded by the constitution, is afforded absolutely no protection in Iran.

What is happening to the Baha'i community in Iran is deeply concerning, and we in the SNP strongly believe that freedom of religion and belief is a fundamental right that cannot be taken away from an individual by any Government. Iran has to know that the world is watching. While we have known for several years that Iran seems to care very little about its international reputation or how it is perceived globally, that does not mean that we can stop applying pressure where we can and when we can. We will continue to support in any way possible any initiative that will bring pressure to bear on the Iranian Government to cease this awful persecution of a peaceful religious minority. We hope that as well as the Minister highlighting to his Iranian counterpart the things that have been said this afternoon, the hon. Member for Congleton (*Fiona Bruce*), the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, will take the matter directly to the Prime Minister, and seek for urgent diplomatic pressure to be exerted by the UK Government on the Iranian Government to fulfil the human rights obligations that they have signed up to. Perhaps we could ask the Minister to consider following the example of the German federal Government commissioner for global freedom of religion, who has called for Iran to recognise the Baha'i religion under article 13 of the Iranian constitution.

As the hon. Member for Strangford has said, land rights for religious minorities is not solely an issue for the Baha'is or Iran. The atrocities perpetrated by Daesh in Syria and Iraq in the last few years, and the chaos in the aftermath of its military defeat, had a devastating long-term impact on minority religious communities across the region. In Iraq, Christian, Yazidi and even Jewish communities that once flourished alongside their Muslim neighbours are decimated and dispersed—unable or, in many cases unwilling, to return, because of security fears. Persecution and bloody sectarian violence have reduced the number of Christians living in the Nineveh plain and the Erbil region from 1.5 million at the start of this century to a mere fraction of that number today.

The Yazidi community, likewise, have for centuries lived and worked on the land around the Sinjar and, after the most awful genocide at the hands of Daesh, when their people were murdered and forced to flee, their population, which was about 700,000 a decade ago, is less than half that today. Given that the security situation is so fragile and that almost none of the Islamic State perpetrators of that Yazidi genocide have been brought to justice—and still, today, 3,000 Yazidi women and children are missing—how could they, and why would they, go back to their homes? Also, tragically, the Jewish community has of course all but disappeared, having been forced out of Iraq over many years.

On Tuesday night I was privileged to be asked to chair the launch of the Aid to the Church in Need 2021 report on religious freedom in the world. It is an extremely important and detailed piece of work running to several hundred pages, and I commend it to all colleagues with an interest in freedom of religion or belief around the world, and in the basic human right to exercise the

freedom to worship and freedom of expression. One of the speakers at Tuesday's launch was Archbishop Nathanael Semaan who joined us from the diocese of Erbil. He gave a first-hand account of how minority faith groups have been systematically cleared from Iraq in recent years, and made the point that although Daesh may have been beaten militarily, the mentality and mindset that allowed it to flourish in the first place has not gone away. He also pointed to the Iraqi constitution, which despite recognising the right of non-Muslim faith communities to exist, relegates them to the status of second-class citizens, because it gives constitutional recognition to the supremacy of Islam.

The archbishop made the very relevant point that the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all have long and deep roots back to the land that we now know as Iraq. Abraham himself was reportedly born in the town of Ur Kasdim in the south of the country. As the archbishop said, Iraq has a rich history of religious diversity, and an Iraq without that rich diversity is simply not Iraq. Although he was speaking specifically about Iraq, his words could easily be applied to many other countries in the region and indeed across the world, where many faith groups and communities have lived side by side in mutual respect and tolerance for many years. In too many cases, that is something that has gone completely, and in other areas we can see its final disintegration. It is incumbent on us to speak out, just as it is on Governments to do what they can to defend the human rights of minority communities who face oppression and discrimination for nothing more than holding fast to a faith or belief.

In conclusion, I thank my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford, for securing this debate, for once again shining a light where it needed to be shone, and generally for the tireless work that he does day in, day out on behalf of religious communities around the world as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. The world is a better place for the work that he does and for having him in it. I am grateful to him.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): From Scotland, we now go to Wales and shadow Minister Wayne David.

2.15 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dr Huq. I want to echo the comments of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (*Brendan O'Hara*) and give my warmest congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (*Jim Shannon*) for securing this debate and for his detailed and passionate exposé of the situation faced by the Baha'i community in Iran. It is important that we have these kinds of debates because the voice of the British Parliament is strongest when parliamentarians, irrespective of parties, speak as one. It is significant that I agreed totally with what has been said by the hon. Members for Strangford and for Argyll and Bute. No doubt I will agree also with what the Minister says. It is important that we put aside our political differences on a raft of issues and speak with one voice in defence of religious freedom and give maximum support to the Baha'i community in Iran.

A lot of people do not realise that the Baha'i religion was founded in Iran in the last century but one. Iran has the largest non-Muslim religious minority: some 350,000 people adhering to that faith. Yet that religion is not

mentioned in the Iranian constitution, even though other religions are. It is not a question of simply ignoring that religion. A green light is being given for a host of different persecutions.

As has been referred to already, in 2019 the annual report of the United Nations special rapporteur for Iran said that Iran regarded the Baha'i faith as something that was beyond the pale, and it referred to Baha'is in particular as "unprotected infidels". That has meant we have seen the most appalling persecution of Baha'is for the past 40 years and more. We have seen persecution, intimidation, and hundreds of Baha'is imprisoned and even executed. They have been excluded in large numbers from higher education and have been prevented from finding work in many parts of the country. We have even seen Baha'i cemeteries being desecrated. That is totally and unequivocally unacceptable and needs to be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

Significantly, the situation was referred to in a statement made to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2021 when Javaid Rehman stated:

"I am disturbed at the harassment, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments of religious minorities, particularly members of the Baha'i faith who have experienced a new wave of house raids and land confiscations in recent months."

Those land confiscations are something that the hon. Member for Strangford rightly focused on.

In the village of Ivel in the province of Mazandaran in northern Iran, a Baha'i community has flourished for the past 150 years, but in June 2010 the Iranian authorities sanctioned the demolition of 50 Baha'i homes, and we have seen evictions and people cast out as a consequence. The international community, and the United Nations in particular, is extremely concerned about the situation. Mr Brian Mulroney, a former Canadian Prime Minister, to whom Members have referred, recently signed a high-profile open letter signed by more than 50 judges, lawyers and former Attorneys General addressed specifically to Iran's Chief Justice, Ebrahim Raisi, stating that the court ruling that apparently has given sanction to the demolitions was a departure

"not only from international human rights standards but also from the text and intent of the Iranian constitution itself."

That was a telling statement from someone held in enormous international esteem. Strong statements have followed from Canadian politicians, in particular, Swedish politicians and German politicians. We have even seen a powerful seminar held in the European Parliament, where the unanimity of concerns was noticeable. I hope that Britain will add to the huge groundswell of opinion that is in evidence, and articulately and forcefully place our condemnation on record.

I look forward to the Minister's response to the debate and I am sure that, given Britain's consistency on human rights and our adherence to international law, he will make a strong statement, sending the message from the British Parliament that all politicians, irrespective of our political differences, are strongly in favour of religious freedom and are firmly behind the Baha'i religious minority in Iran.

2.22 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dr Huq.

I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. I pay tribute to his considerable efforts and his tirelessness,

not just as a member of the APPG on the Baha'i faith but as chair of the APPG on freedom of religion and belief.

I echo the words of the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who was right to say that the world, including Iran, should take note of the fact that from every corner of the United Kingdom and every political corner of the House there is unanimity of voice on the importance of the issue. I am glad that he made that point at the conclusion of his speech, enabling me to echo it at the start of mine.

The issue of inequality in land rights affects millions of people around the world, and it is of particular concern, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, to the most vulnerable and minority groups, including religious minorities.

The UK Government support good land governance as a key pillar of inclusive and sustainable economic development around the world. Securing land and property rights is necessary to release other human rights: the right to food, the right to water and the right to housing, to name just a few. The UK Government fund development efforts to support effective protections against forcible evictions and to facilitate responsible investment in land, which we believe are integral to economic growth, rural livelihoods, conflict prevention, environmental sustainability and fundamental human rights.

The House is well aware that we monitor human rights in Iran very closely. The recent deterioration in the land rights of religious minorities in Iran is deeply troubling. Our bleak assessment is that Iran continues to violate human rights across the board, including, sadly, the right to freedom of religion or belief. While some faiths in Iran, most notably Christianity and Judaism, benefit from constitutional protection, in truth, there is widespread discrimination against all religious minorities, but it is markedly worse for unrecognised faiths, including the Baha'i.

The Baha'i community in Iran faces systematic discrimination, as the hon. Member for Strangford outlined. They face harassment and targeting. Baha'i-owned shops and businesses have been forced to close across the country by the Iranian authorities, and the state's efforts to identify, monitor and arbitrarily detain Baha'i people show little sign of abating. Those patterns of repression extend beyond property rights. We have seen Baha'i students, as the hon. Gentleman said, pressured to convert to Islam or be denied an education altogether.

The Government share the view of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran. Discrimination against the Baha'i community is legally sanctioned by a lack of constitutional recognition in Iranian law and by the absence of other meaningful legal protections. Alarming, our assessment suggests that there has been a rapid and severe decline in the rights to freedom of religion or belief in Iran over the last year, particularly for the Baha'i community. Arrests of Baha'i followers have increased. The sentences handed out have been arbitrary and disproportionately lengthy. Meanwhile, the Iranian authorities at local and national level have appeared to intensify plans to suppress religious minorities.

In late 2020, we understand several court judgments in Iran ordered the seizure of farmland from Baha'i communities in the village of Ivel in Mazandaran province.

[James Cleverly]

These lands have been farmed by Baha'i families for more than 150 years. While the Iranian Government have reportedly been attempting to expel the farmers since the 1980s, the recent court ruling against the legitimacy of Baha'i ownership of land has had a profoundly negative impact. It presents serious wider implications for the property rights of other unrecognised religious minorities.

Members will be aware that the UK is committed to defend the freedoms of religion or belief for all and to promote respect between different religions and non-religious communities. We have concerns, and when we have such concerns we raise them directly with Governments, including at ministerial level. We do not shy away from challenging those who we believe are not meeting their obligations, whether publicly or in private. We remain deeply concerned about the violations of the freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world, including in Iran. Where this right is under attack, other human rights are almost always under threat as well.

In response to the reports of persecution of the Baha'i, the Government have taken the following steps in recent months. At the Human Rights Council, the UK called on Iran to end the discrimination and persecution of religious minorities, which continue to persist, particularly towards the Baha'i and Christian converts. On 12 February, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon issued a statement expressing deep concern about reports of expropriation and repossession of land owned by Baha'i communities in Ivel. The UK continues to co-sponsor the UN Third Committee resolution on the situation of human rights in Iraq. The resolution expressed serious concerns about Iran's violations committed against unrecognised religious minorities, including the Baha'is. Our efforts ensure there remains widespread global support to highlight and call out these issues.

In October 2020, we made a national statement at the UN Third Committee, focusing particularly on our concerns about the lack of freedom of religion or belief in Iran, and the treatment of religious minorities. The Government have consistently made clear to the Iranians our concerns at persistent violations of freedom of religion or belief, and many other human rights. Iran must comply with its treaty obligations to uphold human rights of believers of formally protected religions and of unrecognised ones.

We will continue to hold Iran to account on a wide range of human rights issues, including land rights, both through bilateral contacts directly with the Iranian Government and on the international stage, including using our membership of the Human Rights Council and at the United Nations, alongside like-minded partners.

On our broader action to support freedom of religion or belief, on 20 December 2020, the Prime Minister reaffirmed his commitment by appointing my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) as his special envoy. Mrs Bruce works with Ministers, officials and other parties to deliver the Government's aim of seeing everyone, everywhere able to have and practice a faith or belief, or to have no religious belief at all, in accordance with their own conscience. In fact, her first joint external meeting, alongside Lord Ahmad, was with representatives of the Baha'is.

The Government have excellent links with the Baha'i community in London and more widely, and we continue to work with faith leaders to advocate for the rights of their communities in Iran and elsewhere. In November 2020, the Minister responsible for human rights, my noble friend Lord Ahmad, further underlined the UK's commitment to freedom of religion or belief for all at a number of international meetings. These included speaking at the ministerial meeting to advance freedom of religion or belief and at the Ministers' forum of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. I hope the House is reassured that we will continue to call out such violations for as long as Iran continues to commit them.

While we rightly discuss Iran's violations towards religious minorities and its citizens, in response to a number of points raised by hon. Members I would like to take this opportunity to set out our wider engagement with Iran. The Government have been consistently clear that we want to put the relationship between the UK and Iran on a better footing, as we continue to hold Iran to account for its human rights record, including on the freedom of religion or belief.

We strongly believe that maintaining diplomatic relations will help to achieve our vision for a non-nuclear Iran—an Iran that acts as a responsible regional power and an Iran that does not pose a threat to UK and the UK's interests. We maintain that that diplomacy is also the best way to secure the release of all arbitrarily detained dual British nationals. The Government will work with all international partners to deliver those shared goals and to keep our diplomatic door open for discussion on a wide range of UK interests.

Let me end by reassuring the House that our commitment to defend freedom of religion or belief for all and to promote respect between religious and non-religious communities endures. Let me also assure hon. Members that we will continue to monitor and assess the threats to the Baha'is and other minorities, including through violations of their land rights. We believe that one of the most effective ways to tackle injustices is to encourage states to uphold their human rights obligations. I assure the House that the Government remain committed to encouraging Iran to respect human rights, and calling it out on the international stage when it fails to do so. We will continue to make representations on those issues at every level, at every opportunity.

2.35 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and for Caerphilly (Wayne David), and the Minister, for supporting the Baha'is very clearly in word and, I believe, in person. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute referred to how Iran needs to know that the world is listening. The hon. Member for Caerphilly said that there must be a strong message from Parliament, and I think that the Minister gave exactly that. He outlined the Government's position and strategy, and Baha'is across the world should take some solace from the fact that this House has rallied to their cause, heard their pleas and responded in a positive fashion. I appreciate that.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute referred to the land grab as real and relevant, and to the fact that we all have Baha'is in our constituencies. It is not just that. We recognise that, but the people of the Baha'i faith in our

constituencies tell us what they want us to do, and bring it to our attention. Today, we have brought it to the attention of all other countries. I think he referred to shining a light where it needs to be shone, which he did. The hon. Member for Caerphilly referred to the importance of Parliament in what it does here, and to the prominent legal authorities that have made a statement. If people of legal standing in all countries across the world do that, legally it speaks volumes.

I am particularly heartened by the Minister's response. I never doubted that it would be good, but he did exactly what I think we all wanted, and it is on the record. It is not just words, by the way; it is actions, which our Government and our Minister are doing with passion and belief. I take encouragement from his comments about bringing up human rights at the UN, and highlighting FORB issues wherever they can.

It is also important—it is very good to have it on the record—that the Government want to have a wider engagement with Iran, and a better relationship to maintain diplomacy. The Minister spoke about the grabbing of the land rights, but it is not just that; it is the Baha'is' right to water, education, food, health and jobs. All those things interact. There are fundamental human rights issues, and a pattern of oppression.

Clearly, the UK is committed to freedom of religion and belief, as has been said. We hope that the Baha'is in Iran, and those who are colleagues and constituents, will be encouraged. Land theft is something that the vulnerable suffer at the hands of the dominant. We want to change that, and today this House has made it happen. Thank you, Dr Huq, for chairing the debate. It is not often said, but I thank all the staff as well for what they do. They make it happen. I have no idea how the technology works, by the way, but I know that they do—and thank goodness they are doing it and not me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered land rights for religious minorities including Baha'is in Iran.

2.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Social Care

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

Derek Twigg (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 amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There are also suspensions between each debate.

I remind Members attending physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of the Westminster Hall debates. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also 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 before they leave the room. I remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

3.16 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social care and the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and to speak in this debate in person—for me, for the first time in the Boothroyd Room. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate, and to my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), for co-sponsoring it.

The APPG on adult social care has a working group of representatives from the social care sector, including not-for-profit care home providers, sector-wide bodies such as the National Care Forum and Skills for Care, and people with lived experience of managing their own care at home. From the start of the covid-19 pandemic, the working group met weekly to discuss the experience on the ground of each of the membership organisations and the individuals represented on it. I am also grateful to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), and to the Minister herself for meeting the working group during that time.

Week by week, those meetings gave a vital live insight into the multiple devastating impacts of the covid-19 pandemic on the care sector. They often provided a reality check against what the Government were announcing. The right hon. Member for Ashford and I felt strongly that it was important to bring the weight of this collective experience before the House so that it may inform urgent discussions about the future of social care.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of the social care sector, as there is always a tendency to focus mainly on care homes for older adults when we talk about social care. It also encompasses care homes for working-age adults and people who receive all types of care in their own homes and in supported housing.

[Helen Hayes]

The covid-19 pandemic took a dreadful toll across the whole sector. Perhaps the most shocking figure, well reported, is that between March and June 2020, 40% of all deaths from covid-19 were care home residents. The deaths have continued, with a further 12,000 deaths of care home residents since January 2021 alone. More than 34,000 people with dementia have died from covid-19, and tens of thousands more have seen their condition deteriorate at an increased pace due to limited support and contact with loved ones. Those figures mask a human story: the tens of thousands of families grieving the loss of a precious loved one, remembering the full richness of the lives they lived, and the thousands more families grieving the loss of precious time that they cannot get back with loved ones whose dementia has deteriorated.

At least 850 social care workers have died due to covid-19. That figure is likely to be higher given the lack of availability of testing to confirm diagnosis in the early weeks of the pandemic. The vast majority of the care workers are women, many are black, Asian and from other ethnic minorities, and many had dedicated their lives to looking after other people. Each one leaves a grieving family, and we must acknowledge their service and sacrifice.

The figures also belie the diversity of the social care sector, because they do not include the impact on people receiving care in their homes, who were often vulnerable to coronavirus infection from carers visiting multiple homes. Sometimes, they felt unable to receive care at all, due to the risk of infection, resulting in untold hardship and difficulty. The figures also do not include the impact on unpaid carers, often left isolated and unsupported, or the impact on people living in unregulated supported housing.

Each week, the APPG working group heard of the problems accessing personal protective equipment and covid-19 testing. Providers were operating in the dark, with their hands tied behind their back, unable to know who was carrying covid-19 in their care homes and without access to full infection control measures.

Covid-19 ripped through many care homes, as the access to testing and urgent need to free up hospital beds for covid patients meant that undiagnosed covid-positive patients continued to be discharged from hospitals into care homes. The completely unacceptable blanket use of “do not resuscitate” orders for care home residents further speaks to the disregard for the most vulnerable members of our communities at the start of the pandemic.

I pay tribute to social care workers who stepped up to do extraordinary things in these horrendous circumstances—staff who moved into care homes, leaving their families in order to avoid the risk that they were a source of infection; staff who, again and again, held the hands of the residents in their care as they lay dying, when their loved ones were unable to be there; and staff who went out of their way to facilitate FaceTime calls to maintain contact with relatives who could not visit. Social care staff must be recognised for their immense contribution during the pandemic.

I will dwell for a moment on the mental health impacts of the pandemic, in the light of the situation that I have described. It is easy to forget that care homes are communities. Staff look after the same residents

week after week, and relationships become like family. Many staff who watched residents and colleagues dying from coronavirus have experienced the trauma of bereavement many times over during the past year. I recall listening to one social care worker describing the first time in many weeks that residents with dementia in her home were able to come together for a music therapy session. One resident, looking around the room, said, “Where is everyone?” not understanding that so many residents had passed away. It is heartbreaking.

Contrary to the words of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, there was no protective ring around care homes or other vulnerable residents receiving social care at the start of the pandemic. The need for urgent reform of social care has been known for a long time. We have had more than a decade of detailed cross-party work on social care. The funding gaps are quantified. The international best practice is well understood. The range of options available for reform are known. What has been lacking is the political will at the very top of Government to deliver it.

Despite the Prime Minister promising in July 2019 that a plan was ready and that he would begin cross-party talks, there has been no progress nearly two years on. The Government have published the NHS White Paper, which barely mentions social care. We are told that there will be a 10-year plan for social care, but for all those working in social care, and relying on social care day by day, reform is long overdue. They are struggling to understand why the Government have dragged their feet so much for so long, for a sector that has such a profound impact on quality of life for so many people every single day.

From the perspective of the APPG working group, what are the priorities for the Government as we reflect on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on social care? First, the promised public inquiry on the covid-19 pandemic must include a separate strand on social care, so that the lessons can be learned for future pandemic planning and social care can be better protected the next time we face such a terrible challenge.

Secondly, the Government must start the long-promised cross-party talks. Social care needs long-term reform, based on cross-party agreement. That will not be achieved by the Government announcing plans at short notice and simply expecting everyone to vote for them. It needs a process, properly resourced and entered into in good faith, to secure that agreement.

Thirdly, it is vital that co-production is at the heart of social care reform. Social care reform must be delivered in partnership with those who live and breathe social care every single day as residents in care homes, people who manage their own care at home, older people and working-age adults, social care workers, unpaid carers and local authorities. The Government must set out a process for co-producing reform with those who have the most knowledge and experience to contribute.

Fourthly, reform must address pay and terms and conditions for social care workers. Social care work is highly skilled and demanding and can be very rewarding, but there is not a route to social care reform that avoids the issue of pay. As well as making a huge difference to the lives of millions of people every day, social care contributes £46.2 billion to the UK economy each year.

However, in many parts of the country it is still possible to earn more at the local supermarket than in social care. That cannot continue.

I pay tribute to Unison for its work in establishing the ethical care charter, which guarantees domiciliary care workers the real living wage, and an end to zero-hours contracts and 15-minute visits. It has been adopted by many councils, including Southwark, which covers part of my constituency. It not only benefits care workers, but helps build resilience in the social care system. This should not be left to the discretion of individual councils. There is a chronic shortage of social care workers, and the trauma that many have experienced during the pandemic is likely to make the situation worse. Social care must be seen as a rewarding career in which everyone is paid a decent wage. There has been no commitment from the Government to increase pay for social care workers, and I call on the Minister to change that urgently.

On long-term reform, the Government's proposals must be comprehensive. In the discussion of social care, all too often there is a failure to acknowledge the diversity of the sector and a dominant focus on care for older people, which ignores the needs of working-age adults, who account for almost half of all spending on adult social care. It also ignores the unregulated provision in which much care and support is delivered, and the needs of unpaid carers, who save the economy a colossal £132 billion each year.

We need a social care system that makes high-quality care and support available to everyone who needs it across a wide range of different settings. Although I hope the Minister will respond on the urgent need for long-term reform, there are also some very pressing short-term concerns that are important for the social care sector right now. The first is the question of additional funding for infection control. Social care providers have faced huge additional costs as a consequence of the need to use personal protective equipment and employ additional staff to cover for sickness absence, or to avoid agency staff travelling between care homes. Despite the anticipated release of covid restrictions in June, it is highly likely that the need for enhanced infection control in care homes, and for domiciliary care workers, will continue. However, the current funding allocation runs out in June. Can the Minister confirm whether ongoing funding will be provided for infection control in care homes beyond June?

Secondly, many care providers have raised with me the very restrictive nature of the 14-day quarantine requirement for residents who leave care homes, which means that if a resident leaves a care home, even for only a few hours, they have to quarantine for 14 days. Having entirely failed to protect care homes from coronavirus infections at the start of the pandemic, the Government are now applying a much more restrictive standard to care homes as restrictions are lifted elsewhere. Can the Minister please explain under what legislation the guidance could be enforced? What are the implications for the deprivation of liberty?

Importantly, what will be the implications for care home residents who wish to vote in local elections on 6 May? Requiring residents to isolate for 14 days after attending a polling station will surely deter many from exercising their democratic right to vote. In anticipation

of the guidance, there has been no dedicated effort to encourage residents to vote by post, or to make them aware of the implications of it, and it is now too late to sign up for postal votes. Will the Minister consider moving to an approach based on testing, vaccination, social distancing and PPE in order to enable care home residents to leave their care homes for voting and other essential purposes?

In conclusion, I thank each and every social care worker for their immense contribution during the past year of the coronavirus pandemic, and I remember each worker, care home resident or vulnerable adult whose life has been lost. I pay tribute to the scientists and NHS workers who have delivered the vaccine roll-out with such rapid speed, so that we can now see the beginning of the end of this terrible pandemic. However, acknowledging the immense contribution of the social care sector at the frontline of the coronavirus pandemic can be done properly only by making a firm commitment on the funding and reform that social care so desperately needs, and I hope the Minister will take the opportunity to do that today.

3.29 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing it and on the way she opened it. It is the first time I have spoken in a Westminster Hall debate in the Boothroyd Room as well.

The covid-19 pandemic has exposed the failings of our social care system. With more than 30,000 deaths of care home residents, the care sector has been hit very hard over the past year. Of course, it is not just care home residents who have died from the virus. We know that people with learning disabilities were around six times more likely to die from covid-19 than the general population. Every single one of those deaths was a tragedy that we must never forget.

Beyond that appalling death toll, there are staff who worked far beyond what would normally be expected of them, many of whom have also been hit hard by the deaths of people they have known for years. There are also care home residents who have been cut off from friends and family for months on end and other care users who have gone without vital support in order to avoid contracting covid.

The Government made the fundamentally flawed decision at the start of the pandemic to allow local authorities to overlook their obligations under the Care Act 2014. While these social care easements were used by only a handful of local authorities, and have now been withdrawn, the reality is that many people using social care saw their services cut back.

Over two thirds of people with learning disabilities reported that they had their care packages cut in the first wave of the pandemic. The vast majority of these will not have lived in areas that implemented Care Act easements, meaning they should not have seen changes to their care packages. As a result, four out of five family carers have been forced to take on more unpaid care for the person with a learning disability. Nearly nine out of 10 people with a learning disability have not had all their social care reinstated, so their family members and carers are still having to increase the care they give.

[Barbara Keeley]

Where services were still provided, restrictions on visiting often failed to consider the damage that isolation does to people's wellbeing. I accept that there were times when visiting had to be paused, but the use of blanket bans and maintaining restrictions beyond those imposed on the rest of society left residents isolated and seriously impacted their wellbeing. The issue is exemplified by the current guidance on visits out of care homes, as referred to by my hon. Friend.

The Government have finally relented on allowing the over 65s to go on visits out of their care homes, but they are expected to isolate for two weeks on their return. As I raised with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care this week, a traveller from Brazil or India must isolate for only 10 days when they arrive in this country. Are we seriously saying that an older person on a visit, who sits outside for an hour or two with a family member who has tested negative, is more of a threat than someone coming from a country that is seeing a hundred times more covid cases than the UK? In addition, as my hon. Friend rightly raised, the issue of residents having to isolate after voting must be sorted out before election day.

Earlier in the pandemic, there was a blanket ban on visiting for people with learning disabilities living in care homes or those living in supported living settings. Many of the people covered by these bans lived alone in their own homes, with carers coming in to support them but, because of the lack of clear guidance, they were told they could not form a support bubble and they could not have visitors. This was disproportionate and it risked creating closed cultures in some services, because neither family members nor Care Quality Commission inspectors were able to visit to monitor the development of any inappropriate practices. At its worst, I heard from the mother of a young person with learning disabilities that the social worker had to ask care staff to bring the young person to the window to prove he was still alive.

I am glad that we have now moved away from the position of blanket bans, but people living in care homes and in supported living settings need a concrete reassurance that they will never again be denied fundamental rights, such as contact with family members. If this means implementing robust testing procedures for some time yet, that is what should happen.

I want to turn to care staff, whose work and commitment have gone above and beyond over the last year, because they deserve better support. As my hon. Friend said in her opening speech, at the start of the pandemic we heard about care home staff leaving their families to move into care homes full time, so they could ensure they did not unwittingly bring in the virus. Care staff also took on additional roles, because NHS staff switched to online consultations or were unable to visit due to ongoing covid outbreaks. Much of what care staff did was involved with end-of-life care.

The Select Committee on Health and Social Care heard from one member of care staff who told us this:

"We have done things that are on a par with other medical professions...we have a duty to care, and we do the job for a reason."

If the crisis of the pandemic showed us anything, it was that without the hard work and commitment of care staff our care system simply would not work. We must

remember the 470 social care staff who died from covid, including Jane Rowbotham, a care home manager in my constituency. Despite all that, care staff remain chronically underpaid and undervalued, with poor recruitment and retention rates. There is, rightly, outrage at the idea that NHS staff will get a real-terms pay cut this year, but most care staff will not get any rise either. The reality is that most of them will be asked to accept a pay freeze, at best, despite rising workloads and all the additional responsibilities.

There are 112,000 care job vacancies, and the turnover rate is 30%: those workforce issues cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. Without extra funding, care providers are not in a place to provide extra support to their staff. Since the start of the pandemic they have taken on extra costs, from extra PPE to deep cleaning, while there has been a drastic decline in the number of care home residents. They were struggling to make ends meet before, and the additional funding provided by the Government simply has not been sufficient to meet their needs.

The Local Government Association estimates that adult social care services have faced additional costs of £6.6 billion in tackling the pandemic, with PPE alone costing more than £4 billion. The National Audit Office has reported that many local authorities will have to rely on reserves to balance their budgets this year, and there is little confidence about the setting of budgets beyond that, to meet needs that have increased during the pandemic.

It is clear that since the emergence of the virus last year, the social care sector has often been overlooked by the Government. Ministers claim to have put a protective ring around care homes at the same time as hospitals were actively discharging covid patients into care homes, without testing them. Care homes, in turn, were not resourced for the measures that they needed to control an outbreak. Residents have gone without contact with their friends and families because of limits on visits, which still involve a longer quarantine period for a care home resident who spends an hour sitting outside with a family member than there is for an international traveller coming back from a red-list country. Staff who have done so much to keep the care system going are rewarded only with the offer of a CARE badge. There is no pay rise or bonus as offered to care staff by the Welsh Labour Government.

All that is not good enough. When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope that we shall get more than warm words for social care. We need solid commitments. The pandemic has to be a turning point in the way we treat care staff. In the past year we have all seen that the work done by care staff—whether in a care home, providing domiciliary care, or in supported living—is every bit as important as the work done by NHS staff. It is time for social care staff to have parity of esteem with NHS staff, and for a workforce strategy for social care that has better pay, conditions and training for the staff who have given so much. It is way past time for the Government to take action to fix social care funding as they have promised to do repeatedly in the past 10 years.

3.37 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. As others have said, this is my first speech in the Boothroyd Room, although I reflect, as I look at the wall and see those

steely but friendly eyes staring at me, that I have been around long enough to remember that happening live in my first Parliament, with Madam Speaker, as she then was, in the Chair. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care, for obtaining the debate. I should declare that I am chairing an investigation of social care by Public Policy Projects.

There are two halves to the debate. Obviously there is the covid-19 aspect, but there is also the question of the future of social care more generally, and they clearly come together in important ways. But I shall start with the specific covid-19 aspects. I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said. In particular, urgent action is required to facilitate voting by people in residential care homes, on 6 May. That obviously needs to be done in the next few days, and I hope that the Minister can take that message away from the debate.

We have seen the most terrible year ever in care homes—the figures have been put out already, so there is no point in my repeating them. It has been terrible not just for covid victims but for other residents and relatives who have seen the terrible toll of what has happened inside care homes. Happily, we have now moved on from the worst days of this time last year, and the current covid-related issues in care homes tend to relate to access for visitors and the opportunities for residents to make visits outside. Both are hugely important issues for the wider mental health of those living in care homes.

I have a lot of sympathy for my hon. Friend the Minister, for other Ministers and, indeed, for care home managers. The paramount concern must be safety at all times and I can see that there is an extremely difficult balancing act. The solution surely lies in vaccination—not just of residents, but of staff. Through discussions at the APPG working group that we have heard so much about already, I am aware that there is a great disparity of view about how best to encourage vaccination take-up among care home staff.

People argue strongly that threatening to make vaccination compulsory might not be the most constructive approach, and the Government are consulting on that. I await the results of the consultation but, whatever the best system, it is imperative that the percentage of those who work in care homes and who have daily contact with the most vulnerable people in the country should be higher than the national average and not lower, as it is in too many places. That is an urgent aspect of the current situation.

I have fallen into talking about care homes, but domiciliary care is equally important. People move from house to house where there are vulnerable people so the same thoughts apply to that sphere. Those who look after a loved one—“unpaid carers” in the sector jargon—are equally important, and they should be vaccinated as well. I urge my hon. Friend to move fast and get our care workers vaccinated as quickly as possible for the sake of those who need care as well for the comfort of loved ones who will then be able to visit. That will also help to create a sense of normality for those who will then be able to leave the care home that they may have felt trapped in over the past year. That is clearly an important mental health issue.

The crisis over the past 12 months has shone a fierce light on residential social care and has drawn public attention to it in a way that has never happened before. It could scarcely have happened in more tragic circumstances, and the only sliver of consolation from the awful death toll has been the developing consensus that we simply cannot go on putting sticking plasters on to an increasingly fragile system.

It is getting on for a quarter of a century since the first in a list of Prime Ministers said that social care was an urgent issue that needed addressing. I have done some research and I think Tony Blair said that at a Labour party conference in 1997. All his successors have agreed with him, but the problem is that none of them has yet met words with action. That is not for the want of trying.

Under Gordon Brown, Labour produced proposals for a national care service that foundered when it was dubbed a “death tax”. David Cameron put through the Care Act 2014 and a version of the Dilnot proposals. Shaky Government finances meant that was never implemented. In 2017, a new version was proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). It was dubbed a “dementia tax” with not great political results. Here we are in 2021 without a solution on the table and the problem is still with us. Later this year, we are promised a sustainable solution in the comprehensive spending review. Let us hope that we see it.

There are many problems to be solved, and some have been mentioned by previous speakers. At the root of them all is funding. The Health and Social Care Select Committee estimates that £7 billion extra is needed to put the system on a sustainable footing. The most intractable problem, as it has been over the past quarter of a century, is how it is raised. If it is all raised from taxation or national insurance, working-age people will, by and large, end up paying for their own care, perhaps later in life, and that of their parents’ generation. That will rightly seem unfair to them.

More promising models offer a mixture of extra public spending and more contributions from individuals—through an insurance system, through a Dilnot-style system or through variations of those models. I argued in a paper for the Centre for Policy Studies that we should look to the pension system for an example of universal state provision being successfully supplemented with private savings. As we have seen with pensions, we have established cross-party consensus under Governments of different parties.

Even when the Government come to a conclusion on how to find the extra money needed—let us hope that it is not from council tax, which is not suitable for funding care—there will be other intractable problems, including workforce planning. The demographics will dictate that we need more workers, so we must make it a more attractive sector to work in. Pay levels have already been mentioned, but the development of a proper career structure for care workers—it can be seen in the NHS, but it is much less easy to see in the care sector—is hugely important.

So much technology of all kinds is available that would improve the daily lives of those receiving care, but I fear that there is no discernible strategy for introducing and experimenting with it.

[Damian Green]

Housing is a key issue. If we built differently we could keep far more people in their own homes longer, which would make them happier in themselves, most importantly, and be less expensive for the system. I agree very much with Anchor, one of the providers, which says that there should be changes in the planning system that include older people's housing in local plans and the creation of a new planning classification for retirement communities. That and other ideas are very worth considering.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the whole issue of what integration we want of the care system and the NHS. I am delighted that the Government produced their recent paper on integrated care systems. It will not be easy to make a reality of that, but it will be absolutely vital.

I make a plea for two things, the first of which is that the voice of the care sector is heard not just in debates on ICSs but inside ICSs when they are introduced. At present it is not clear from the White Paper that that would happen. As a subset of that, simply having local authorities, vital though they are, around those ICS tables is not enough. There are many independent, third sector and profit-making providers whose voices need to be heard.

Secondly, I completely welcome the long-term plan for the NHS—the 10-year plan—but equally it is important to have a 10-year plan for social care that fits with it so that it is seen as a system on its own. It clearly has to mesh very closely with the NHS: it has as many and as complex needs as the NHS and ought to be treated as just as importantly.

I am aware that that is a formidable set of challenges, but 25 years is too long for reaching a decision about how to tackle them. I hope and profoundly expect that this is the year when we will finally see determined and sustainable action on this front.

3.49 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con) [V]: It is a delight to be able to participate in this important and timely debate, and to do so under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing the debate. As a vice-chair of the all-party group on adult social care, I must pay tribute to both Members for their commitment in this area and their leadership of the APPG.

Care workers have made an extraordinary contribution, particularly through the hugely difficult circumstances of the past year, doing all they can to help people to live comfortably, safely and with dignity up and down the country. Here in Somerset, at the onset of the pandemic, I had the privilege of working with Gracewell of Frome care home, and I have to say that the dedication and professionalism of Jemma Griffiths and her staff have been tremendous.

Care workers such as those at Gracewell and in similar settings across the country could reasonably be called the unsung heroes of this crisis. They have worked throughout to keep the most vulnerable among us shielded from the virus, and to provide their residents with comfort

when their families and friends have been unable to visit them. I hope that today's debate is also the beginning of our showing appreciation for the vast number of people who work across social care settings: the caterers, the cleaners, the drivers, the porters, the assistants who have supported people in their own homes, and of course the unpaid carers, supporting their own loved ones.

However, sadly, the pandemic has shone a spotlight on the fragility of our social care system, which is all too harshly demonstrated by the shocking loss of life in our care homes that we have been hearing about since last March. Although covid has perhaps made social care reform unavoidable, it is clear that many of the issues it has exposed have existed for years, if not decades. We see this through staffing shortages, with Skills for Care research highlighting over 100,000 vacancies across the social care sector at any one time, and we see it through the impacts on the NHS, with lack of capacity in the social care sector causing too many people to remain in hospital unnecessarily. Surely, this is the opportunity to learn the difficult lessons from this period and create a sustainable future for social care.

Let us be clear: that sustainable future for social care is dependent on sustainable funding. The LGA estimates that adult social care services face additional costs of over £6.6 billion in tackling the pandemic. Increased staff, personal protective equipment, cleaning and overheads have been the areas of most pressure, and while the social care grant has been extremely valuable, I am concerned that it is not enough to address the situation, or indeed the future. I am sure that the Minister will comment further, but Mencap's figures suggest that at least an additional £3.2 billion of funding is needed to stabilise the social care sector before a longer-term settlement can be achieved.

Over the past year, as we have been hearing, we have all been concerned about the situation around visitation and the confusing policy advice there. Obviously, since 12 April, there have been welcome changes to the guidance, but safe access for social care workers to visit people in care and health settings continues to be difficult, even with the successful rolling out of testing and the vaccine.

Should—perish the thought—new restrictions be required in the future, I very much hope that social care settings will get quick and clear guidance from the very start; as with so many sectors affected by the pandemic, this is really about certainty. One thing I hear again and again from people in the social care sector is the perceived lack of appreciation for what they do. We have all rightly praised the NHS throughout the pandemic, but parity of esteem for the social care sector is vital. If we are to see social care improve and provide better outcomes and better health, it must not be the forgotten frontline.

As such, I very much support a comprehensive social care workforce strategy, much as we have a people's plan for the NHS, to drive forward skills training, professionalism and better pay and conditions for our social care workers. Such a strategy should be anchored in the vision of improving the quality of life for the people who access care and support. With the introduction of integrated care systems in England, this is more important than ever. Truly integrated care means that we need a truly integrated approach.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on such a scheme and a funding boost for social care,

along with, of course, a long-term and sustainable funding solution that is equitable and fair for all.

3.55 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) for securing this debate, and I particularly commend my right hon. Friend for his work to develop long-term policy solutions for many of the challenges that we see, which are not new but which have been brought into sharp focus by the experience of covid and its impact across the social care sector. We have all seen large numbers of constituents, for example, who have been enormously distressed by the restrictions on care home visits, which has had a hugely significant impact, and it is welcome that we are able to see a lifting of restrictions, so that families can get together at long last.

However, when we look across the whole of the UK, we recognise that even in places where there is a relatively high level of demand being placed on the care sector, less than one in five of the population will make use of it during their lifetimes, including children's social care, adult social care and social care for older people. It is a sector that is often not well understood. In fact, because most people do not engage with it during their lifetime, unlike the NHS, the police and other emergency services, people often do not appreciate how it works or indeed recognise that for most top-tier local authorities—those with social care responsibilities—social care will consume around 70% of their budget. It is far and away the biggest area of local authority expenditure in England.

I would like to draw the Minister's attention to the work of Sir Paul Carter, formerly the chairman of the County Councils Network and the leader of Kent County Council, who has been looking internationally at models of care, particularly for older people, and ways of funding care that represent a move towards sustainable and long-term funding. This is a topic that I will come back to my closing remarks, but when 70% of the typical local authority budget is being spent on care, there is clearly a serious risk that unless we find a long-term solution, it will consume the rest of the budget.

Many of those other services, such as libraries, parks and leisure services, which support the wellbeing of the wider community and in many cases represent the infrastructure that our communities need, will genuinely be in financial peril unless we find a long-term financial solution. Indeed, the only area of local authority expenditure to have increased in the last decade is expenditure on children's social care, which has been achieved largely at the expense of other areas of local authority expenditure, rather than through tax rises.

A number of ideas have been put forward. I know that many in the local government sector—I speak as a vice-president of the Local Government Association—have welcomed the opportunity to raise a council tax precept specifically for social care. However, even when I consider my own two local authorities, which are London boroughs, there is enormous variation within the same type of council and within the same type of city in what that

precept can contribute to boosting social care budgets. It ranges from the maximum precept being implemented—in the City of London, an additional 0.02% on the budget—to the other end of the scale, in the London Borough of Richmond, where much more expenditure is raised directly through council tax and where there is an additional 1.8% net. When we take into account the variations across the country, it is clear that precepts are not a long-term solution to social care funding. We need to find a different way of looking at this issue.

The second issue, which seems to me absolutely critical, is that we need to consider the success or otherwise of the joint working arrangements put in place under schemes such as the better care fund, whereby the NHS and local authorities come together to manage local services. When we look at those ventures, it is very clear that it is the local authority-led elements of them that have consistently delivered against the targets that they have been set and the outcomes that we are all seeking to achieve. The NHS has found it considerably more challenging.

That demonstrates that we need to look at a local authority-led model for social care, because it is already clear and established that it is more efficient, more focused on delivery for our residents, and more likely to achieve the outcomes that we want to see. Because the vast majority of social care for children and adults of working age is well outside both the remit and the capacity of the NHS—indeed, it is not something that would normally be a priority for the NHS—it is clear that that bigger picture needs to remain firmly in view as we look at a long-term solution. A key element of likely success in social care reform will be in ensuring that it is managed and controlled by local authorities, who are in the best position to deliver against that.

Moving to conclusions, it is clear that in order to be effective and to address the issue around the discharge of patients from hospital, which causes such concern, a new model of care needs to have a very direct form of input, particularly from acute NHS services when it comes to the discharge of patients from hospital and rehabilitation services, which are a big part of this. We also need to ensure that general practitioners are able to work closely with the system so that the needs that they see emerging among patients in their surgeries can be taken into account. What we need most is a stable and consistent funding model, and there have been different attempts at developing that.

In his recent work, Sir Paul Carter looked at how the German operation is funded and structured through a form of social insurance. To an extent, what matters is not that we try to find a perfect solution. We need a solution that providers of social care and local authorities can rely on to ensure stability in the system and to avoid either the large-scale collapse of parts of the social care system, as we have seen with some providers, or a continued shortfall between what people need and expect, and what local authorities and their partners in the NHS can provide.

It seems clear from everyone who has spoken today—I am sure the Minister has grasped this message—that stability and consistency of funding are critical to provide a long-term solution for social care in England and the wider United Kingdom.

4.2 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to take part in today's debate, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing it. May I start by paying tribute to all the care staff who have worked so hard during the covid crisis, tackling issues on the frontline and coping with the loss of residents to the virus? I extend my deepest sympathy to all who have lost loved ones.

Members will be aware that social care is a devolved matter, and in Scotland we do things a little differently, which means I often feel like a foreign observer during such debates. However, there is no doubt that we have faced many of the same challenges over the past year. The challenges of covid have been quite unprecedented in the sector. I have commented in a few debates that there are often lessons that we can learn from each nation and good practices that can be shared. I hope that on this issue that proves to be the case.

There are lessons that we must learn for the future from our covid experiences. We know from the Office for National Statistics data for England and Wales and the National Records of Scotland data that our nations pretty much experienced the same rates of care home deaths per head of population. Such deaths account for approximately a third of all covid-19 deaths, and that represents a national tragedy. Undoubtedly, hindsight tells us that there are things we would have done differently if we had known then what we know now, but real-time decisions are made without that luxury. Instead, we have to be content that the decisions taken were thought to be the best at the time, and we must learn from the experience. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to hold a public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic by the end of this year.

On a positive note, Scotland has achieved almost complete vaccine uptake among care home staff without making the vaccine compulsory, which I think we can all welcome. It can be done. Like the NHS, social care has faced huge pressures during the covid pandemic. In Scotland, the SNP Scottish Government have taken action during the covid outbreak to support the social care sector and its workforce. Going forward, we are committed to creating a national care service, increasing social care investment and scrapping non-residential care charges to ensure a rights-based approach to care.

Throughout the pandemic, the Scottish Government continued to prioritise the health, safety and wellbeing of their health and social care workers. That included working with partners to ensure a range of wellbeing and psychological support, with measures such as the national wellbeing hub, a national 24-hour phone line for NHS and social care staff, and committing £5 million to establish a health and social care mental health network to enhance existing support and provide more funding for local support.

Social care providers in Scotland can currently claim back PPE costs over and above their usual amounts due to the pandemic, and can access local PPE hubs for emergency PPE supply if their existing supply routes fail. That support is available to social care providers across the sector, including unpaid carers and personal assistants. Those arrangements, introduced in March 2020, were due to expire in March this year but have been extended until June.

The most significant changes going forward, though, will come from the findings of the independent Feeley review of adult social care in Scotland, which contains 53 recommendations for the future of social care provision. The SNP is committed to implementing the recommendations of the Feeley review, including scrapping non-residential social care charges. The report, which was published on 3 February this year, provides a foundation to enhance adult social care provision across Scotland.

This independent review has found many aspects of Scotland's adult social care system that are worthy of celebration, such as the introduction of self-directed support, the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, and our commitment in legislation to integrate health and social care. Scotland is proud to be the only country in the UK with free personal care, which was extended in April 2019 to all those under 65 who need it.

I believe that social care services, just like healthcare services, should be provided on a truly universal basis, free at the point of use. An SNP Government will abolish all non-residential social care charges for those who need support. Health and care integration has been progressing in Scotland since 2014, and the SNP Scottish Government's commitment to develop a national care service will ensure equity across the country.

On 16 February, the Scottish Parliament voted in favour of a motion that commits to establishing a national care service in law, on an equal footing with NHS Scotland, to provide national accountability, reduce variability, and facilitate improved outcomes for social care users across the nation. The creation of a national care service will also involve reviewing the number, structure and regulation of health boards and other related delivery services to remove unwarranted duplication of functions and make the best use of the public purse.

Social care staff in Scotland are already paid better than those in England and Wales, and the SNP has pledged to introduce a new fair national wage for care staff and national pay bargaining for the sector. For their extraordinary service in the battle against covid, social care workers were included by the Scottish Government in the £500 bonus thank-you payment.

The £500 thank-you payment is for Scotland's NHS and social care workers employed between 17 March last year and 30 November, including staff who have had to shield or who have since retired. It includes final year nursing students who worked on temporary contracts during the pandemic—like all staff, it will be paid pro rata—as well as community pharmacists in Scotland, NHS bank and NHS locum staff, who work on NHS contracts at NHS rates of pay, and staff employed on a seasonal basis for GPs, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists.

That investment of around £190 million will see nearly 400,000 staff gain some benefit from the payment. The SNP has repeatedly called for the UK Government to allow the payment to be exempt from income tax. Sadly, the ability to exempt the bonus in that way is not within the current powers of the Scottish Government; it is a power that we shall soon have with independence. The UK Government should follow Scotland's lead and make a commitment to a national care service for England.

4.9 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and very nice to see so many people present in person. One of the things that we have all missed during this pandemic is human interaction, possibly even in Parliament.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate and on her brilliant speech, every word of which I agree with. I thank her and the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) for their work on the APPG. Every week, I have read the readout of their discussion, even if I have not been able to attend, and that real-time information has been hugely important. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who was the shadow Minister for Social Care before me and from whom I have learnt a great deal over many years.

I will say something about the impact of the pandemic on the users of services, staff, families and the wider community, who have not been touched on so far. I will also talk about the underlying reasons why we have failed to prioritise and secure longer-term reforms to social care. We cannot deal with a problem unless we understand why it is there; that is how we get progress.

As other hon. Members have said, the emerging tragedy in social care over the course of this pandemic will be etched on all our brains for the rest of our lives. To see 41,500 care home residents dying from covid-19, including those residents who ended up dying in hospital, has been brutal for every single one of those people, their families and all the staff who have gone through unimaginable horror caring for people at this difficult time.

The sad reality is that the proportion of care home residents who have died in England is higher than in almost any other country that we have data for, especially in Europe, where it is surpassed only by the proportion who died in care homes in Slovenia, Belgium and, unfortunately, Scotland—despite what the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) said. Scotland has had one of the highest rates of care home resident deaths. That is a serious problem. I will come on to why, whatever Ministers said, I think that a protective ring of steel was not put around care homes. That is related to the deep-seated problems and our fundamental challenges. We must ensure that it never happens again.

People living with dementia have been particularly badly hit by the pandemic. A third of all covid-19 deaths have been of people living with dementia. Also, the deaths of people with dementia even where covid-19 has not been present have been significantly higher. I will say something about this later, but I think the fact that so many people in care homes have been prevented from seeing their loved ones means that those with dementia have gone downhill fast. When people lose their memory, which is what dementia is, their family is their memory. No matter how hard care home staff try, family are the ones who know what films people liked or what music they liked to play, and without their absolute involvement and interaction, we have seen many care home residents with dementia go downhill fast.

I also want to touch on a point made continually by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South: the impact of covid-19 on people with learning

disabilities. They are six times more likely to die than the general population and, horrifically, for those aged 18 to 34, they are 30 times more likely to die. To be honest, however, that should come as no surprise to us, because we know that people with learning disabilities have far worse health outcomes and are more likely to die early because of their lack of proper access to care.

Everybody has rightly paid tribute to the amazing work of care staff, who have given more than almost anybody during this pandemic. Tragically, they were twice as likely as the general population to die from covid-19 during the first wave. That presents two really big issues.

There was an appalling lack of access to PPE, especially in the first wave. I met frontline care workers who told terrible stories of having only one mask to last the whole day, from client to client, when seeing clients with dementia, who cannot help but spit on to the mask when they are talking, so the care worker thinks, “I haven’t got another mask to see my next client.” A survey by GMB found that 85% of frontline care workers said that they were worried about the risks to their own health and that of their families, and that one in five thought about quitting cause of the lack of PPE.

That has been compounded by the low pay and poor terms and conditions of frontline care workers. We have heard time and again that many workers who needed to self-isolate or shield were forced to take unpaid leave or rely on statutory sick pay, leaving them desperately out of pocket, unable to pay their bills and facing an awful choice between going to work or being unable to put food on the table. A Unison survey found that those are absolutely essential issues that must be addressed. One care worker said:

“I was Covid-positive after contracting it at work and was off for three weeks. I have a mortgage to pay and bills, and I don’t know how I’m expected to survive. I put my life on the line, survived and was repaid with SSP.”

Three quarters of frontline care workers do not make the real living wage. Many do not even make the minimum wage at the end of the week because they are not paid for travel time between clients. We cannot deliver a better system of social care without transforming the pay, terms, training and conditions of the care workforce.

On families, there are two issues. One is unpaid family carers, who have done so much more to care for their elderly or disabled loved ones during this pandemic. There were 9 million of them in the UK, but since the pandemic struck, there have been an extra 4.5 million—it is astonishing that we have not heard more about that during the debate. They are providing even more care than usual, without breaks, and their own physical and mental health has suffered as a result. Families are as important as the paid workforce in delivering care in this country. We need a new deal—a partnership between families and the Government—to support those carers in doing their best to look after their loved ones.

We then have the families who have been banned from seeing their loved ones in care homes, and who are now also unable even to take their loved ones out for a walk or a cup of tea, because they would have to self-isolate for 14 days. We have to completely rethink that. Since June, we have been arguing that families should be treated as key workers and have access to all the testing, PPE, vaccinations and so on, so that they can safely visit their loved ones. That is not just a term

[Liz Kendall]

or a gimmick, however; they actually are key workers. We cannot have good-quality care for older or disabled people without families' involvement.

I urge the Minister, as I have done many times when discussing this topic, to have a rethink about this. The guidance still is not working—it is wrong on the 14-day self-isolation—and we may have to look at legislation to enshrine the rights of care home residents. They are not prisoners. Quite frankly, if we all think that, when we end up in a care home, we will be banned from seeing our family and will not be allowed out, what kind of future is that? It will be a future that we fear, rather than a future for which we look forward to getting older, and that must change.

On the wider community, one of the positive things from the pandemic—I am very proud of what has happened in Leicester, the city that I represent—is how many voluntary groups and mutual aid groups have sprung up to try to do things such as helping older people with shopping, delivering it quicker than either the local authority or the private sector ever could. That support for the wider community—ringing older people to help them if they are isolated—has got to be part of our future social care system, too.

Let me move on to why we have seen the problems that we are all relating here. The immediate and glaring issue, as the Alzheimer's Society has said, of why we have seen such problems in the care sector, is that the pandemic struck at a time when social care was already overstretched and undervalued. Local authority care budgets have been cut by £8 billion in real terms since 2010 and that has pushed many to absolute breaking point. It is not morally right, but it does not make economic sense either, because if staff are not paid properly and there is high turnover and vacancy rates and family carers are not supported and their health suffers and they end up in hospital, that costs us all far more.

It is also the failure to put in place long-term reforms, as the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) said. Why is that the case? It is a big challenge, but it is not rocket science, to ask for older and disabled people to live as normal a life and as full and fulfilling a life as possible, with help to get up, washed, dressed and fed, maybe go to the shops, with help for a disabled person to live independently and maybe have a job. It is not that complicated, yet we have ended up in this crisis. Why?

First, when the NHS and the wider welfare state was created, average life expectancy was 63. Now, it is 80. We did not live in a world where people lived for so many years, and so we have been scrabbling to catch up ever since, with a fragmented and piecemeal system. Secondly, in many ways we have left it to families—“This is a family issue; families should look after elderly or disabled relatives.” Yes, and they want to. They want to do all they can, but they need help and support, especially in a world where women work; they want to work and balance their family lives. Thirdly, it is about caring and caring is women's work—undervalued, underpaid and yet some of the most important work in our society.

What that all adds up to is a failure to understand that a third of our lives will now be lived aged over 65. We have got to transform society—not just the care

sector, but housing, transport and planning—because getting older should be something that we look forward to with hope and optimism, not fear. It is my lovely mum's birthday today. She is so worried about the pandemic, but I am afraid, when I was discussing this debate, she said, “You know what, Liz? You know what we feel? At best, ignorable; at worst, expendable.” That is not a country that any of us want to live in.

The legacy of this pandemic must be to transform services and support so that every older and disabled person can live the life they choose. It is politically controversial and my strong advice to the Government would be to bring forward proposals early on, because the closer we get to an election, the worse it will be. The Labour party was accused of a death tax; the Conservatives have been accused of a dementia tax. In the end, it is not us who suffer. It is the people who use services and their families.

We need a long-term settlement for older and disabled people that pools our resources and shares our risks and has a fair balance of funding across the generations. That is surely within our grasp. I know Opposition Members will continue to do everything they can to secure a better future for all.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I remind the Minister to leave a few minutes at the end for Helen Hayes to wind up.

4.23 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I will do so. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I wish the shadow Minister's mother a happy birthday today.

I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) for securing this debate on social care and covid and for the work they do as co-chairs of the APPG on adult social care, bringing the sector together and being a voice for it in Parliament and beyond.

As the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend said—as, in fact, all speakers today have said, and as we all know—the pandemic has been cruel to those who receive social care, especially those living in care homes around the world, here in the UK, and indeed in England. Sadly, both residents and care staff have lost their lives, and each one will be missed by friends, family, and those who love them. I thank those working in social care—staff in care homes, home care workers, those supporting people in extra care and supported living, personal assistants, social workers, and millions of unpaid carers as well—for all they have done during the pandemic, and are continuing to do now, to care for those who rely on their care and could not live without it.

Members have spoken about the many challenges the sector has faced during the pandemic. I want to outline some of the things that the Government have done to support social care, with a level of intervention—a level of support—that is unprecedented for social care, and rightly so in the circumstances of the pandemic. First, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood spoke about the extra costs that social care has faced during the pandemic. We have put in £1.8 billion of specific, ring-fenced covid funding for social care during

the pandemic, including £1.3 billion for infection control measures, and providers have told me what a huge difference this support has made to them and how essential it has been all the way through the pandemic.

Secondly, the Government have stepped in to provide PPE to the social care sector, and PPE has been available free for many months via a portal to meet the covid needs of social care providers on demand. Over 2 billion items of PPE have been supplied to the social care sector, and the Government have committed to continue PPE supply through to March 2022.

Thirdly, social care has been prioritised as our testing volumes have increased. Last summer, we introduced weekly polymerase chain reaction testing for care home staff, and since December, that has been supplemented by twice-weekly lateral flow device tests. That has made a difference, because we can not only quickly identify when a staff member may be covid positive but, through the introduction of the LFD tests, we are able to identify whether a member of staff is covid positive before they set foot in the care home. During this time, we have sent out over 28 million PCR tests and 47 million LFD tests to the social care sector across care homes, home care, supported living, and other parts of the sector. We have also made rapid tests available to visitors, supported by £288 million of funding for the staff costs involved in that testing, to help people see loved ones. I will say more about visiting in a moment.

Fourthly, many hon. Members have spoken about the impact of the pandemic on the social care workforce. Again, we cannot thank care workers enough for what they have done, and how they have gone the extra mile time and again. Through the virtual visits I have made to care homes and the conversations I have had, I have seen what staff have done, particularly to step in and support residents at a time when visiting has been restricted.

I also know the difficult experiences that some care workers have been through. We have specifically advised care providers to use some of the funding for paid sick leave for social care staff who have had to isolate due to covid. We have also put in place mental health support for the social care workforce, seeking as far as we can to mirror the mental health support offer to NHS staff, and we will continue to see how we can support staff through the mental health impacts of the pandemic.

As hon. Members have said, we know that there are workforce shortages within social care, and at times covid has made that harder, with staff rightly taking time to isolate. Recognising that, we provided £120 million of funding for the workforce capacity fund, which was passed to local authorities to boost staffing for the sector during the second wave.

To increase the voice of the social care sector and to give further leadership—particularly clinical leadership—to the social care workforce, we appointed the fantastic Deborah Sturdy as the chief nurse for social care. She is already doing brilliant work with the sector and the workforce, and contributing to plans for the workforce of the future.

To increase our understanding of the social care situation on the ground, we created a social care data dashboard as a single point of information for the system. We came into the pandemic with relatively small amounts of timely data about social care; as hon.

Members know, it is a highly fragmented system, with over 25,000 different providers. We have built a way of having up-to-date information and self-reported data from providers, which has given us truly valuable information to which local authorities also have access. It gives a good sense of what has been happening on the ground.

We have also established a regional assurance team for social care, as this is now the Department of Health and Social Care. They are a group of people with great experience in the sector who have been able to reach out during the pandemic, working with local authorities, directors of public health, providers and others, to understand some of the challenges being faced and provide more localised support.

On visiting, on many occasions we have developed an iterated visiting guidance, responding to requests from the sector for a steer on how to manage the challenge of wanting people in care homes to be visited while acknowledging the risks to residents of more people coming through the door. We have drawn a huge amount of clinical guidance from the deputy chief medical officer of Public Health England on how we can enable safe visiting. Clearly, we have substantial caution because we know the great risks to care home residents when covid gets in and how difficult it is to stop an outbreak from spreading through a care home, even with the PPE, the testing and the other things I have outlined. One reason why we introduced visitor testing was to reduce that risk.

Since 12 April, care homes have been able to open up to two visitors, and the essential care giver scheme addresses particular need. I look forward to care homes being able to continue to open up, step by step, through the combination of lower infection rates and vaccination, to enable people to once again spend much more time with their loved ones.

Several hon. Members spoke about visits out. I recognise the importance of both having visitors at care homes and being able to leave—to go out and about. This applies to older people, but particularly to families who have relatives of working age in residential settings, who I have spoken to. Often, somebody of working age might come out every weekend to spend time with their mum and dad, and their family. Clearly, they have not been able to do that during the pandemic.

I ask other hon. Members with an interest in this subject to listen to the Joint Committee on Human Rights sitting held yesterday, when I was asked about this. With me was Dr Éamonn O'Moore from Public Health England, who explained in some detail, which we do not have time for today, the reason for the caution around visiting out and the clinical reasons for the requirement to isolate for 14 days on return. To respond to the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, I should say that that is not the same as somebody coming from overseas to the UK and quarantining, because of the particular circumstances within care homes. There may be people who are very vulnerable. In the event that someone brings covid into the care home, that can lead to an outbreak, which can lead, sadly, to people dying. Therefore, rightly, the issue is taken seriously.

I assure colleagues that, as Dr O'Moore said to the Health and Social Care Committee yesterday, I have asked Public Health England to provide advice on how to make more visits possible—particularly those with

[Helen Whately]

lower risk, such as those outdoors—and on what could be done to reduce quarantine requirements afterwards. I am mindful of the May elections and of those who might want to vote in person.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford rightly said that vaccines are the answer to allowing more visiting and for much of life to come back to normal, for those who receive social care. We prioritised the social care sector for vaccinations—and particularly care homes, who were top of the list. The vaccine was offered to all care homes by the end of January, on time. Soon, all residents who can be vaccinated will have been offered their second dose.

The impact of vaccination is already being seen, with the rates of covid coming right down in care homes. There are still some outbreaks and I would caution those listening to the debate that the vaccine is not 100% effective. Many residents have had their second dose but others are still only on their first, and it is important in that situation that the precautions continue. For instance, we are continuing to urge care homes to make sure that staff use PPE and infection control measures, even when everyone has been vaccinated. However, there are far fewer outbreaks and the consequences are much less serious. I want to use this opportunity to thank the NHS vaccination teams, and the social care workforce, who have been involved in the tremendous and lifesaving effort to vaccinate so many thousands of people in social care.

Many hon. Members spoke about the importance of reform, and how the pandemic has shone a light on the social care sector and the need for reform. I truly welcome the support for reform among hon. Members who have taken part in the debate in this room and virtually. Some steps have begun, and I urge the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood to look again at some of the social care content in the health and social care White Paper, including the voice of social care in integrated care systems—and I agree with the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford that it is not just about a local authority voice, but the wider sector.

The White Paper also proposes the introduction of a new oversight and assurance system for social care, which I see as an important part of building on the experiences of the pandemic, to give us more oversight and the ability to drive quality and outcomes more strongly for those who receive social care. It also includes steps to support better use of data and data sharing for social care.

Those things are, however, just the beginning and we need to go further. We have committed to go further and to publishing a long-term plan for social care this year.

Barbara Keeley: As the Minister is talking about the White Paper, I wanted to point out that we have talked quite a lot about unpaid carers in the debate, but they are not mentioned once in the White Paper. Carers' organisations took that in a bad way and felt that all the efforts that unpaid carers put in during the pandemic were not recognised at all. The Minister and the Health Secretary need to address that.

Helen Whately: The hon. Member makes a really important point, and I really appreciate how she has

spoken about unpaid carers during this debate. I absolutely recognise the crucial role of unpaid carers, the things that unpaid carers do and the demands on and challenges for unpaid carers during the pandemic. I absolutely see unpaid carers as part of the breadth of the social care system that we must consider for the reforms as we go forward.

I very much welcomed the expertise, in the room and virtually, on social care reform. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford reminded us that the reform debate has been going on for nearly 25 years. He has extremely valuable experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) has great experience from local government and flagged the work of Sir Paul Carter, whom I know because he is the former leader of Kent County Council and I am a Kent MP. I will indeed be looking at the work that my hon. Friend mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) called for a social care workforce strategy. Yes, absolutely, as part of the reform work, we need and plan to bring forward a strategy for the social care workforce.

I am conscious of the time and so that is probably as far as I can go today, but broadly, I truly welcome the support for social care reform expressed during this debate. I assure those in the room and all those listening to the debate that we are determined to seize this moment. We have supported social care at an unprecedented level during the pandemic; on the back of that, we are determined to bring forward the reform that we know social care needs.

4.41 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate today. It has been a reflective debate and one full of immense experience and knowledge of the social care sector, and that is very welcome.

In the couple of minutes that I have, I will push back slightly on some of the Minister's comments. It was disappointing that she mentioned additional funding, PPE and testing and talked only about the things that the Government did later on in the pandemic—the very deep trauma experienced by the social care sector with regard to a shortage of PPE and lack of access to testing was in the early months. I feel that, by failing to mention it, she does a disservice to those workers and residents in the social care sector who really suffered the impact of the Government's failure to plan ahead of time for a pandemic and their failure to deliver and get swiftly off the blocks when the pandemic hit.

The point that I would like to make about the health and social care White Paper is that it talks about integration, but without talking about social care reform, and that cannot happen. We have an NHS, which is a well organised national system, founded on a statutory basis; and we have social care, which is not a system but a fragmented and diverse set of organisations and individual families all struggling and all brought to breaking point by the lack of funding, the lack of organisation and the lack of overall structure and accountability.

If there is to be integration, it has to be integration on the basis of parity of esteem, and that involves the Government getting to grips with the question of reform. I urge the Minister just to take seriously the voice of the

APPG and the sector, to continue to engage and, most importantly, to start a structured process for cross-party talks, so that together we can deliver the change that the social care sector so desperately needs.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered social care and the covid-19 outbreak.

4.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 22 April 2021

GOVERNMENT EQUALITIES

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

The following are extracts from the oral statement on the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report.

Kemi Badenoch: 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.

[Official Report, 20 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 876.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt).

The correct response should have been:

Kemi Badenoch: This is a good time to remind the House that the current **director** 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.

Kemi Badenoch: 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.

[Official Report, 20 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 880.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler).

The correct response should have been:

Kemi Badenoch: 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 **director** of the Runnymede Trust—to find out what we can do to improve disparities in this country.

Kemi Badenoch: 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.

[Official Report, 20 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 883.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi).

The correct response should have been:

Kemi Badenoch: 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 **director** and some staff members.

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.

[Official Report, 20 April 2021, Vol. 692, c. 885.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson).

The correct response should have been:

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 **director** of the Runnymede Trust why she made that statement.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 22 April 2021

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