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7 July 2021**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 7 July 2021

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The House met at half-past Eleven 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

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Conversion Therapy: Support for Victims

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support victims of conversion therapy. [902445]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): Conversion therapy is an abhorrent practice that this Government will ban. We are launching a consultation in September to ensure the action we take is informed and effective.

Dr Wallis [V]: Will my right hon. Friend outline what she is doing to promote LGBT safety not just in the UK but abroad?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaigning work on this issue. I am proud that we have announced the UK's first ever global LGBT conference, Safe To Be Me. It will take place in June next year, and it will bring the world together to end persecution, violence and discrimination against LGBT people everywhere.

Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds: Geographic Equality of Opportunity

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve geographic equality of opportunity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. [902446]

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve geographic equality of opportunity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. [902452]

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve geographic equality of opportunity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. [902456]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): Every child, no matter what their background, should have access to world-class education that opens up opportunities for their future. Our pupil premium is targeted at schools based on the number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It has helped to close the attainment gap over the past decade, and it is expected to increase to more than £2.5 billion this year.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to the Minister for her reply. Early years education plays a key role in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but there is a concern that the current funding arrangements are skewed against providers operating in deprived areas such as parts of Lowestoft in my constituency. I have corresponded with her on this issue, and we will hopefully meet shortly, but does she agree it is vital that all children, whatever their background, have ready access to high-quality and properly funded early years education? Will the Government take steps to ensure this happens?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. High-quality early years education is important, which is why the Government have invested over £3.5 billion every year for the past three years in supporting education for two, three and four-year-olds. Our recent education recovery announcement included increased investment in early years teaching.

I urge my hon. Friend and, indeed, all hon. Members to encourage families from lower-income backgrounds to take up the Government's generous offer of 15 hours of free childcare for their two-year-olds. Children who take it up do better at school, and it gives them the vital skills that set them up for life.

Dr Mullan: In light of the recent Education Committee report, what is the Department doing to support disadvantaged white boys?

Vicky Ford: We are considering the recommendations of the Select Committee on Education very carefully, and all the evidence shows that high-quality teaching is the single most effective way to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. That is why it is so important that the pupil premium is used to support continuing professional development, as well as academic programmes and pastoral support. It is also why so much of our recovery funding is tilted towards top-quality teaching and tutoring for disadvantaged pupils.

Ruth Edwards: Given the recent Ofsted report, what steps are the Government taking to make sure that all parts of the country have robust safeguarding measures in place so that every girl can fulfil her potential in school without fear of sexual abuse?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—sex abuse is not acceptable. The Government are taking action through the child sex abuse strategy and the violence against women and girls strategy, and we have published strengthened guidance for schools on peer-on-peer abuse and updated relationships, sex and health education. In addition, we have asked every local safeguarding partnership across the country to review how they work to support schools to tackle this issue.

Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): What further steps she plans to take to tackle maternity discrimination. [902447]

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What steps the Government is taking to tackle pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the labour market. [902448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government recognise the importance of tackling pregnancy and maternity discrimination, which is why we will extend the redundancy protection period for six months once a new mother has returned to work and provide similar protections for those parents taking adoption leave and shared parental leave. We will bring these measures forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Gareth Thomas: As a devastating Equality and Human Rights Commission report highlighted some five years ago, and certainly given the experience of too many of my constituents, discrimination against pregnant women and new mothers is still widespread. When will the Government actually get their act together and bring in the legislation they have promised to stop employers making women redundant during pregnancy, and until at least six months after they have returned from maternity leave?

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but legislation can only ever be part of the answer, which is why we have committed to bring together key business and family representative groups to tackle the questions on organisational culture and to ensure that women and employers know their rights. We will introduce legislative measures when parliamentary time allows.

Alison Thewliss [V]: EHRC research in 2016 found disturbingly high levels of pregnancy and maternity discrimination in UK workplaces, and the Select Committee on Women and Equalities report highlighted that discriminatory practices towards pregnant women and those on maternity leave during the pandemic should have been

“better anticipated by the government”

and that “preventative actions” should have been taken. So will Ministers tell me what representations they have made to Cabinet colleagues to urgently legislate to extend redundancy protection and finally put an end to this unacceptable discrimination?

Paul Scully: As I said, when parliamentary time allows we will bring legislation forward. I value the hon. Lady's work and the conversation we had with Pregnant Then Screwed and Maternity Action. We continue to have plans for roundtables to understand the issues better, bringing those two groups together again, along with businesses.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Tragically, maternity discrimination does not just happen in the labour market—it also happens in labour wards. What work is the Minister doing across government to make sure that we drive down the horrific death toll that sees black women four times as likely to die in childbirth than their white counterparts?

Paul Scully: The Minister for Equalities is doing a lot of work in this area, as is our Department of Health and Social Care. We are committed to reducing inequalities in health outcomes, and Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent OBE, the chief midwifery officer, is leading work to understand why mortality rates are high, consider evidence and bring action together, because this is a complex situation. It is not just within maternity; it is far more holistic than that, for instance on whether people are accessing health services in the first place, and with the fact that we had some of the highest rates in the EU of obesity and underweight issues going into maternity and the highest rates of smoking in pregnancy in the EU—indeed, our level is even higher than America's.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Research from the TUC has found that one in four pregnant women and new mums experienced unfair treatment or discrimination at work during the pandemic, including being singled out for redundancy or furlough. The imminent tapering off of furlough prompts serious concern about unequal redundancies. Will the Minister follow Labour's lead and, instead of the Government simply extending their ineffective and complicated laws, make things simpler and more robust for mothers and businesses alike by introducing a German-style ban on making a pregnant woman or new mother redundant from notification of pregnancy to six months after they return to work?

Paul Scully: We believe that extending the MAPLE—Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999—provisions is a better way of doing it that goes with the grain of the tribunal system that we have within this country. That is why, after due consideration, we will be bringing that forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: Maternity Action highlights the fact that pregnant women and new mothers cannot devote their energy and finances to pursuing employment tribunal claims. The Minister says he wants to take steps to understand, but I can tell him that the thousands of women who have lost wages, entitlements or their job because of the pandemic, or the more who will unfortunately follow, need effective access now to justice and more time to enforce their rights. The Minister has also says he is committed to action. So what is the hold-up, and what does it say about this Government's priorities?

Paul Scully: I said earlier that legislation can only ever be part of the answer. There are robust laws at the moment whereby employers have to maintain their duty of care to their workforce, but, as I say, we are taking a different approach rather than bringing in an almost outright ban on making pregnant women and new mothers redundant. We are working with the grain of the existing UK approach, and this will happen soon as parliamentary time allows.

Covid-19: Disabled People on Legacy Benefits

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to ensure the adequacy of support for disabled people on legacy benefits during the covid-19 outbreak. [902449]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government are committed to supporting disabled people affected by the covid-19 outbreak, including those who claim legacy benefits. We have delivered an unprecedented package of support, injecting billions into the welfare system, and we continue to monitor the impact on disabled people while ensuring that they are able to access the support that they need.

Chris Elmore: The Minister claims that legacy payments were not increased because disabled people have not faced additional costs during the pandemic, but the Disability Benefits Consortium found that 82% of disabled people have had to spend more money than they normally would during the pandemic. So will he set out for the House what evidence he is basing his assumptions on, because disabled people really do deserve better from this Government?

Guy Opperman: I will get the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work to write to the hon. Gentleman, but he will be aware that we spend £57 billion on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. At the same time, we have reformed employment and support allowance in the light of covid and brought in supportive changes to statutory sick pay, local housing allowance and the Access to Work programme. We continue to support the disabled into work.

Covid-19 Vaccine: Ethnic Minority Communities

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage covid-19 vaccine take-up among ethnic minority communities. [902450]

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): What recent steps the Government have taken to increase covid-19 vaccine uptake among ethnic minority communities. [902458]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): My third quarterly report to the Prime Minister on covid disparities summarises the unprecedented measures taken to promote vaccine uptake among ethnic minorities. This work includes establishing vaccination centres at around 50 different religious venues, with many more acting as pop-up sites, and, more recently, an NHS partnership with the Caribbean & African Health Network, which co-produced a toolkit to increase vaccine confidence and uptake. Thanks to such initiatives we saw an increase in both positive vaccine sentiment and vaccine uptake across all ethnic groups over the last quarter.

Felicity Buchan: On Friday, I was delighted to visit the Al-Manaar mosque in North Kensington, which has administered more than 750 vaccines in pop-up clinics and done vaccine information sessions in English, Arabic and Somali. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is an excellent model for encouraging vaccination in our diverse communities?

Kemi Badenoch: I do agree. I thank my hon. Friend for her engagement on this issue and for so effectively representing a very diverse constituency and its complex needs. I pay tribute to religious leaders in Kensington and everywhere else who have played such an important role in encouraging their congregations to be vaccinated.

Initiatives such as the one that my hon. Friend mentioned and the NHS's plan for Ramadan, which includes the use of twilight jabbing, all help to build trust, increase vaccine confidence and tackle misinformation.

Duncan Baker: From speaking to care home operators in my constituency, I know that there is concern among ethnic minority groups, and particularly women, about their fertility chances being affected by their taking up the vaccine. What reassurances can my hon. Friend give to those ladies that their fertility will not be affected, and that it is entirely safe to take up the vaccine?

Kemi Badenoch: I should start by reiterating that the covid-19 vaccines are safe and there is no evidence that they affect fertility. I recognise that there is much information about the vaccines, as my hon. Friend describes. We are working with Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, the Chief Midwifery Officer in England, and others such as Media Medics, Dr Hazel Wallace and Dr Philippa Kaye, to encourage women to be vaccinated.

Official Development Assistance: Gender Equality

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of the reduction in official development assistance on gender equality in the developing world. [902451]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton) [V]: Tackling gender inequality is a core part of the Government's mission. The integrated review confirms our commitment to tackling the discrimination, violence and inequality that hold women back. Girls' education is one of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's seven key priorities for ODA spending, and this year we will invest £430 million in girls' education, helping to achieve the global target to get 40 million girls into education.

We continue to demonstrate the UK's leadership in reducing gender-based violence. At the recent Generation Equality Forum, we launched the £67.5 million What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale programme, which is the first global effort systematically to scale up proven violence-prevention approaches worldwide.

Margaret Ferrier [V]: The Gender Equality Advisory Council recently recommended to G7 leaders that they renew their commitment to the 0.7% of GNI target for overseas development assistance and urged them to ring-fence any funding for gender equality projects. Will the Minister assure us that she has assessed the effect on such projects of the recent cut of ODA to 0.5% of GNI, and that she is working with Cabinet colleagues to mitigate that harm?

Wendy Morton: It is important to recognise that the UK will still spend more than £10 billion on ODA in 2021, and we will return to spending 0.7% as soon as the fiscal situation allows. On impacts and equality assessments, I assure the hon. Lady that officials considered any impacts on women and girls, the most marginalised and vulnerable, people with disabilities and people from other protected groups when they developed their advice to Ministers as part of our decision-making process.

Online Abuse and Hate towards Women

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to prevent online abuse and hate towards women by (a) involuntary celibates and (b) others who use hate speech. [902453]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): Online abuse and hate towards women is completely unacceptable, and no one should have to experience threats to their safety or abuse online—and even offline. Under our groundbreaking online safety legislation, companies will need to take swift and effective action not only on illegal content, but on legal but harmful content, including abuse and hate speech.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Involuntary celibate groups—incel groups, as they are known—are increasingly on the rise. This online community understands society to be hierarchised along the lines of sexual attractiveness, and these misogynists blame women for their own lack of status and for forcing them into involuntary celibacy. The harbouring of hate and resentment towards women has manifested itself in a spate of deadly terrorist attacks across the Atlantic, with at least two cases of terrorism here in the UK motivated by incel ideas. Will the Minister commit to having discussions with the Home Secretary to identify, and proscribe where necessary, any forms of this deadly misogynist hate group? Moreover, as most of this hate occurs online, can the Minister tell us what steps the online harms Bill will take to end this online abuse against women, when it will be introduced and when its measures will take effect?

Caroline Dinenage: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work that she is doing to call out online abuse. She is absolutely right: there is no place for this sort of behaviour online. The online harms Bill will make much clearer the links between what online companies say they do and what they actually do, and women will be better supported to report abuse and should expect to receive appropriate, swift action from the platform. In addition, we have sponsored the Law Commission review on harmful online communications, looking at whether the law needs to be tightened around this issue; that will be reporting back shortly.

Employment Gap: Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority People

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reduce the employment gap for Black, Asian and ethnic minority people. [902454]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government are committed to supporting people from all backgrounds to move into work. Clearly, £2 billion has been spent on kickstart. There are 13,000 extra job coaches, and the job entry targeted support scheme is also being rolled out. For black, Asian and minority ethnic claimants specifically, we are taking action in 20 local authority areas with high populations of ethnic minority people.

Dr Huq [V]: With the Office for National Statistics finding that in coronavirus, black and minority ethnic people are less likely to be in management positions,

more likely to be unemployed and more likely to earn less, confirming the Government's own McGregor [*Inaudible.*] report, when will the Government implement its 26 recommendations?

Mr Speaker: Minister, make what you can of that.

Guy Opperman: I am happy to write to the hon. Lady through the Department when she gives me a more detailed version. I can just answer that we have 500 kickstart jobs per day, and from 20 locations—from Bradford to Barnet, Glasgow to Leicester, and Manchester to her own Ealing community—jobcentres are specifically helping BAME people.

BAME Students

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the comparative performance of BAME students in (a) further and higher education and (b) statutory education. [902455]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): Equality of opportunity for talented young people across the country is one of the Government's highest priorities. We are focused on giving people, whatever their background, ethnicity or circumstances, the high-quality education and skills that they deserve to succeed.

Mr Perkins: I am very pleased to hear that, but the reality in terms of the results is that those policies are not working. Most black and ethnic minority groups improve educational attainment relative to white students up to the age of 16, but from the age of 16 there is a drop off in every single group. Whether it be Chinese, who are the highest-performing, or the lowest-performing groups, all of them do less well relative to white students after the age of 16. While I recognise and welcome the Government's rhetoric, what actual policies are there to do something about that alarming decline?

Michelle Donelan: We recognise that raising educational standards is absolutely key to levelling up opportunity, providing £14 billion in over three years, the biggest uplift to school funding in a decade, investing it in early years education and targeting more than £3 billion in recovery funding. That is why, compared with 2009-10, the proportion achieving A-levels and equivalent improved across all ethnic groups, with the largest improvement in the black and black British ethnic group.

Topical Questions

[902485] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): As we look to build back better, we want to make it easier for people to work flexibly. Normalising flexible working will help turbocharge opportunities for women, boost employment outside major cities and support a diverse workforce. We have already reconvened the flexible working taskforce, and I am working with ministerial colleagues to champion flexible working practices.

Tim Loughton: May I ask what research the Government have commissioned into the causes of the inequality of educational attainment that disadvantages children living in coastal communities? If they have not, why not, and will they?

Elizabeth Truss: I can tell my hon. Friend that we have commissioned the equality data programme to look specifically at the issue of geographical inequality. We will be announcing the early results of that programme in July, and the Department for Education has already announced an £80 million extension of the opportunity areas programme, including helping coastal towns.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Disabled people account for two thirds of deaths from covid, and recent research by the BBC showed that 78% of disabled people said that their mental health had got worse during the pandemic and 72% said that their disability had deteriorated. This Government's failure to comply with their public sector equality duty and undertake equality impact assessments has cost disabled lives. Does the Minister acknowledge the extent of those failures? When will her Government finally bring forward the delayed national strategy for disabled people, and will they finally treat disabled people with dignity and respect and tackle those fatal inequalities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I will get the Disability Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), to write to the hon. Lady with a specific answer to her specific questions, but I can assure her that yes, when the consultation is responded to, it will be in full detail and will address the points that she raised.

Marsha De Cordova: A third of people who use social care are working-aged disabled adults, and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission recently recommended that the Government enshrine in law article 19 of the UN convention on the rights of people with disabilities, to support them to live independently. It has now been over 700 days since the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised that he would fix social care, yet there are still no plans, so what steps is the Minister taking with her colleagues to guarantee that the long-overdue plans for social care will adequately support disabled people to live independently, as recommended by the EHRC?

Guy Opperman: As I believe the hon. Lady is aware, that is a work in progress.

[902487] **Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]:** Nine in 10 school-aged girls are being subjected to indecent exposure on their phones, iPads and computers, but they are told that that is not a crime. Often, the picture is of male genitalia. When will the Government make the non-consensual taking, making and sharing of all intimate sexual images a crime for adults and children? Surely, we do not need yet more review before action is taken.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to this issue. As part of its review of harmful online

communications, the Law Commission is considering offences around the sharing of intimate images, including things like cyber-flashing, which she mentioned, and is looking to identify whether there are any gaps in existing legislation. It will publish the results of the review very shortly, and we will consider them all very carefully.

[902490] **Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]:** After I was told by a local school student of her experience of sexual harassment working in a restaurant, and of the power imbalance that made it difficult to raise that harassment with her employer, I have worked with the Sheffield *Star*, the business improvement district, the chamber of commerce, the council, the police and others on a campaign to "Know The Line" for zero tolerance of sexual harassment in the hospitality sector. Will the Secretary of State back our campaign, and will she say when the Government will finally respond to the results of the 2019 consultation on sexual harassment in the workplace?

Elizabeth Truss: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his campaign, and I can assure him that we will be bringing forward our response very shortly.

[902488] **Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con):** During the Batley by-election, Labour circulated a leaflet saying:

"Don't risk a Tory MP who is not on your side",

featuring a picture of the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Modi of India. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning that as divisive, and designed to stoke up anti-India and anti-Hindu sentiment?

Elizabeth Truss: First, I want to welcome the new hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) and commend her for her dignity in standing up to intimidation during the campaign. I do agree with my right hon. Friend about the very divisive nature of the leaflet that she talks about. Politicians should not be stoking division: instead, we should be working together to unite and level up our country.

[902501] **Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** Relative to the average working wage, the UK state pension is the worst in Europe. We have had the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women scandal, where the Government did not do anything, and now they are going to take £1.2 billion from the mineworkers' pension scheme. This Government do not solve inequality; they add inequality, do they not?

Guy Opperman: I wholeheartedly reject the comment by the hon. Gentleman. The state pension has gone up dramatically under the triple lock—by £2,000 since 2010—by the coalition and Conservative Governments. We have a system that is taking forward real change and making a real difference to state pensioners.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[902340] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 July.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Today marks the 16th anniversary of the 7/7 London bombings. We remember the 52 innocent people who lost their lives and those who were injured, and pay tribute to the city's emergency services for their heroic response.

I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in sending condolences to the family and friends of Sislin Fay Allen, who died earlier this week. She was the UK's first black female police officer, and she served in the Metropolitan police.

I am sure colleagues will also want to join me in wishing the England football team the best of luck for tonight's semi-final against Denmark.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

John Mc Nally: Prime Minister, we hear a great deal in this place about the rule of law and injustice. Can the Prime Minister tell me what he is going to do about the injustice that my constituents in Falkirk, and indeed families up and down the UK, are facing every day because of the retrospective loan charge, which is fast turning into the next Post Office scandal? The hounding by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs—clearly out of control, accountable to no one—has managed to hoodwink and mislead his own Treasury Ministers and now, according to the head of HMRC, the retrospective loan charge appears to be without any legal basis or justification. Therefore, will the Prime Minister accept that this matter needs further and immediate investigation?

The Prime Minister: I am acutely aware, as I think all colleagues are around the House, of the pain suffered by those who entered into loan charge schemes. I think, alas, that they were misguided to do so, but I think that the line taken by the Treasury, I am afraid, is right on this.

[902344] **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con) [V]: It is very true of the United Kingdom that there is more that unites us than divides us, but improved connectivity is vital to ensuring we remain united. The Government's recent interim connectivity review has suggested some improvements. If this is really going to happen, then improvements must be made to the A75, the A69 and the extension of the borders railway. Does the Prime Minister support such investment and what is the timescale for such investment?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question. I think he should not have too long to wait for the final recommendations from Sir Peter Hendy about the A75 and other great features of Union connectivity that this Government hope to support, but we have already agreed £5 million from the UK and the Scottish Governments to support the extension of the Edinburgh-Tweedbank borders railway to Carlisle.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in his remarks about the 7/7 anniversary? I remember where I was on that day and will never forget it, and I am sure that is the same for everybody. We will never forget all those affected, especially the family and friends of all those who died.

May I join the Prime Minister in his comments about Fay Allen as well, and also about football, and wish the very best of luck to the England football team this evening? I am sure the whole country, with the possible exception of the Conservative MP the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), will be watching this evening and cheering England on.

May I also extend a special welcome to the new Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater)? I hope Conservative Members will forgive me if I turn around to look at my new hon. Friend, as she sits on these Benches beneath the plaque for Jo Cox, her sister? That is a special and emotional moment for all of us on the Labour Benches and I think for everybody across this House. It takes incredible courage and bravery to stand in that constituency and to sit on these Benches beneath that plaque.

We all want our economy to open and to get back to normal; the question is whether we do it in a controlled way or a chaotic way. The Health Secretary told the House yesterday that under the Government's plan, "infections could go as high as 100,000 a day."—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2021; Vol. 698, c. 755.]

A number of key questions fall from that. First, if infections reach that level of 100,000 per day what does the Prime Minister expect the number of hospitalisations and deaths and the number of people with long covid will be in that eventuality?

The Prime Minister: There are a number of projections, and they are available from the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling graphs. It is certainly true that we are seeing a wave of cases because of the delta variant, but scientists are also absolutely clear that we have severed the link between infection and serious disease and death. Currently there are only one thirtieth of the deaths that we were seeing at an equivalent position in previous waves of this pandemic, which has been made possible thanks to the vaccine roll-out, the fastest of any European country, and I think what people would like to hear from the Labour party, because I was not quite clear from that opening question, is whether or not it will support the progress that this country is intending to make on 19 July. The right hon. and learned Gentleman says it is reckless to go ahead; does that mean he is opposing it?

Keir Starmer: We know that the link between infection rates and deaths has been weakened but it hasn't been broken, and the Prime Minister must, and certainly should, know the answer to the question I asked him. That he will not answer it here in the House hardly inspires confidence in his plan. Let us be clear why infection rates are so high: it is because the Prime Minister let the delta—or we can call it the Johnson—variant into the country. And let us be clear why the number of cases will surge so quickly: it is because he is taking all protections off in one go. That is reckless. The SAGE papers yesterday made it clear that with high infection rates there is a greater chance of new variants emerging, and there will be greater pressure on the

NHS, more people will get long covid and test and trace will be less effective. Knowing all that, is the Prime Minister really comfortable with a plan that means 100,000 people catching this virus every day and everything that that entails?

The Prime Minister: I really think we need to hear from the right hon. and learned Gentleman what he actually supports. We will continue with a balanced and reasonable approach, and I have given the reasons. This country has rolled out the fastest vaccination programme anywhere in Europe; the vaccines—both of them—provide more than 90% protection against hospitalisation and, by 19 July we will have vaccinated every adult, with all having been offered one vaccination and everybody over 40 having been offered two vaccinations. That is an extraordinary achievement, and that is allowing us to go ahead. Last week, or earlier this week, the right hon. and learned Gentleman seemed to support opening up and getting rid of the 1 metre rule—he seemed to support getting back into nightclubs and getting back into pubs without masks—but if he does not support it, perhaps he could clear that up now: is it reckless or not?

Keir Starmer: We should open up in a controlled way, keeping baseline protections such as masks on public transport, improving ventilation, making sure the test and trace system remains effective, and ensuring proper payments for self-isolation. The Prime Minister cannot just wish away the practical problems that 100,000 infections a day are going to cause; he cannot wish them away.

The next obvious one is the huge number of people who will be asked to isolate. If there are 100,000 infections a day, that means hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of people are going to be pinged to isolate. The *Financial Times* estimates this morning that that could be around 2 million people per week. The *Daily Mail* says 3.5 million people a week. Either way, it is a massive number. It means huge disruption to families and businesses just as the summer holidays begin. We know what the *FT* thinks; we know what the *Mail* thinks—we know what their estimates are. Can the Prime Minister tell us: how many people does he expect will be asked to isolate if infection rates continue to rise at this rate?

The Prime Minister: I want to thank everybody who self-isolates. They are doing the right thing. They are a vital part of this country's protection against the disease. We will be moving away from self-isolation towards testing in the course of the next few weeks. That is the prudent approach, because we will have vaccinated even more people.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He says it is reckless to open up, yet he attacks self-isolation, which is one of the key protections that this country has. Let me ask him again. On Monday, he seemed to say he was in favour of opening up on 19 July; now he is saying it is reckless. Which is it, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Maybe I can help a little. Just to remind us, it is Prime Minister's questions. If we want Opposition questions, we will need to change the Standing Orders.

Keir Starmer: The question was simply how many people are going to be asked to self-isolate if there are 100,000 infections a day, and the Prime Minister will not answer it. We know why he will not answer it and

pretends I am asking a different question. He ignored the problems in schools; now there are 700,000 children off per week because he ignored them. Now he is ignoring the next big problem that is heading down the track and is going to affect millions of people who have to self-isolate.

It will not feel like freedom day to those who have to isolate when they have to cancel their holidays and they cannot go to the pub or even to their kids' sports day, and it will not feel like freedom day, Prime Minister, to the businesses that are already warning of carnage because of the loss of staff and customers. It must be obvious, with case rates that high, that the Prime Minister's plan risks undermining the track and trace system on which he has spent billions and billions of pounds.

There are already too many stories of people deleting the NHS app. The Prime Minister must have seen those stories. They are doing it because they can see what is coming down the track. Of course we do not support that, but under his plan it is entirely predictable. What is the Prime Minister going to do to stop people deleting the NHS app because they can see precisely what he cannot see, which is that millions of them are going to be pinged this summer to self-isolate?

The Prime Minister: Of course we are going to continue with the programme of self-isolation for as long as that is necessary. I thank all those who are doing it. But of course we are also moving to a system of testing rather than self-isolation, and we can do that because of the massive roll-out of the vaccine programme. It is still not clear—I think this is about the fourth or fifth time, Mr Speaker—whether the right hon. and learned Gentleman is actually in favour of this country moving forward to step 4 on the basis of the massive roll-out of vaccines. This is unlike the law, where you can attack from lots of different positions at once. To oppose, you must have a credible and clear alternative, and I simply do not hear one. Is he in favour of us moving forward—yes or no? It is completely impossible to tell.

Mr Speaker: Once again, it is Prime Minister's questions and the Prime Minister answers questions.

Keir Starmer: If the Prime Minister stopped mumbling and listened, he would have heard the answer the first time. We want to open in a controlled way and keep baseline protections that can keep down infections, such as mandatory face masks on public transport. We know that that will protect people, reduce the speed of the virus and the spread of the virus, and it will not harm the economy. It is common sense. Why can the Prime Minister not see that?

The Prime Minister: Of course we can see that it is common sense for people in confined spaces to wear a face mask out of respect and courtesy to others, such as on the tube, but what we are doing is cautiously, prudently moving from legal diktat to allowing people to take personal responsibility for their actions. That is the right way forward. I must say that if that is really the only difference between us, if the right hon. and learned Gentleman supports absolutely everything else—opening pubs, opening nightclubs, getting rid of the 1 metre rule, getting people back to work—and it is all about the difference between making face masks mandatory or advisory on the tube, then that is good news, but I would like to hear him clarify that.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister agrees it is common sense because it protects the public, but he will not make it mandatory—it is ridiculous. It is clear what this is all about: he has lost a Health Secretary, he has lost a by-election and he is getting flak from his own MPs, so he is doing what he always does—crashing over to the other side of the aisle, chasing headlines and coming up with a plan that has not been thought through. We all want restrictions lifted. We want our economy open. We want to get back to normal. But we have been here too many times before. Is it not the case that, once again, instead of a careful, controlled approach, we are heading for a summer of chaos and confusion?

The Prime Minister: No, is the answer to that. Of course these are difficult decisions. They need to be taken in a balanced way, and that is what we are doing. Throughout the pandemic, to do all these things, frankly, takes a great deal of drive, and it takes a great deal of leadership to get things done. If we followed the right hon. and learned Gentleman's advice, we would still be in the European Medicines Agency and we would never have rolled out the vaccines as fast. If we followed his advice, we would never have got schools open again, with all the damage to kids' education. Frankly, if we had listened to him, we would not now be proceeding cautiously, pragmatically, sensibly to reopen our society and our economy, and giving people back the chance to enjoy the freedoms they love. We are getting on with taking the tough decisions to take this country forward. We vaccinate, they vacillate. We inoculate, while they are invertebrate.

[902345] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): Last week I visited Penketh South Community Primary School in Warrington to talk to year 6 children about how we can generate cleaner energy in the future. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that, as well as backing electric vehicle production in the north-west, there is a great opportunity to shift towards low-carbon hydrogen by providing support for projects such as HyNet North West, which by 2030 will secure thousands of green jobs in the north-west, as well as cutting emissions to the same level as taking 4 million cars off the roads?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I believe that the north-west, in addition to the rest of the country, will be a world leader in hydrogen technology. The HyNet project is an excellent example. We have already put £45 million into supporting the HyNet project, kickstarting our hydrogen capture and storage, and I thank my hon. Friend for his support.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Can I wish England all the best for the football match tonight against Denmark? I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on the tragedy of the 7/7 bombing, which we all remember so vividly. Also, yesterday was the 33rd anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster, where 167 people cruelly lost their lives. Our thoughts are very much with friends and family who are still grieving over the terrors of that event. Finally, before I move on, this is also Srebrenica Memorial Week. We should remember those who have suffered genocide, whether in Bosnia, the holocaust, Rwanda or in many other places. Perhaps the Prime Minister will meet me to discuss how we can help the Srebrenica charity here in the UK.

This week, the Tory Government introduced their so-called electoral integrity Bill. In reality, the Bill is designed to do anything but increase the integrity of our elections. It is a solution in desperate search of a problem that simply does not exist. What the Bill will do is to impose, for the first time, Trumpian voter ID laws in the UK. The Electoral Reform Society says it could lead to voter

“disenfranchisement on an industrial scale”,

disenfranchising people from working-class communities, black and minority ethnic communities, and others already marginalised in society, creating barriers to vote. Prime Minister, why are the Tory Government trying to rob people of their democratic right to vote?

The Prime Minister: What we are trying to protect is the democratic right of people to have a one person, one vote system. I am afraid that I have personal experience and remember vividly what used to go on in Tower Hamlets, and it is important that we move to some sort of voter ID. Plenty of other countries have it. It is eminently sensible, and I think people will be reassured that their votes matter. That is what this Bill is about.

Ian Blackford: Goodness gracious, Prime Minister, come on! There were 34 allegations of impersonation in 2019. This is a problem that does not exist. It is a British Prime Minister seeking to make it harder to vote because it is easier for the Government to get re-elected if they can choose the voters rather than letting the voters choose their Government. Three and a half million people in the United Kingdom do not have a form of photo ID, and 11 million people do not have a passport or driver's licence. Those millions of people will be directly impacted by seeing their right to vote curtailed. It is not just the Opposition saying that. Members of the Prime Minister's own party have called his plans

“an illogical and illiberal solution to a non-existent problem”.

Will he withdraw these vote-rigging proposals immediately or continue down the path of being a tinpot dictator?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Member is making a bit of a mountain out of a molehill, if I may I respectfully suggest. Councils will be under an obligation to provide free photo ID to anybody who wants it, and I do think it reasonable to protect the public in our elections from the idea of voter fraud. Nobody wants to see it. By the way, I do not think that elections in this country should be in any way clouded or contaminated by the suspicion of voter fraud. That is what we are trying to prevent.

[902346] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): I was pleased to see my right hon. Friend in Cornwall for the very successful G7 summit. While he did not manage to get to South East Cornwall, I assure him that Looe is a very beautiful coastal town. The problem is Looe floods—regularly. Will he speak to Government Departments to get this sorted?

The Prime Minister: Through my hon. Friend, I thank again the people of South East Cornwall and everywhere in Cornwall. The G7 had wonderful hospitality. I assure her that I am aware of the problem of flooding in Looe. I can tell her that my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary has met Cornwall Council to discuss the matter, and we will do everything we can to sort it out.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): On behalf of the Alba party, I add my voice to the comments about 7/7. On the morning of 7/7, I was in a meeting at University College London Hospital A&E as the information started coming through, and I pay tribute to every single one of the frontline staff I worked alongside on that day. It was a long shift and it was a long walk home that evening.

The Prime Minister talks about vaccines. Accurate surveillance is also really important—it is equally important. On 15 March, the Department of Health of Social Care Minister Lord Bethell said on Twitter that Omega Diagnostics and Mologic were in line for an order of 2 million lateral flow devices per week by the end of May, and promised jobs and security. Will the Prime Minister explain why his Government are undermining superior domestic diagnostics tests while propping up discredited Chinese imports to the tune of £3 billion?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that is an entirely fair characterisation of what the Government are doing. On the contrary, we have worked night and day to build up our domestic lateral flow capacity and continue to do so.

[902348] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last week President Xi cheerily threatened that any foreigners attempting to influence China

“will have their heads bashed...against the Great Wall of steel”.

Of course, he is still in denial about human rights violations and the genocides in Xinjiang and Tibet, as recognised by this House, as a result of which five of us remain sanctioned. Will the Prime Minister therefore support our motion, to be debated in the House next Thursday, calling for a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 winter Olympics—incredibly awarded to Beijing—until and unless this dangerous regime abides by basic international standards of decency?

The Prime Minister: This country has led the world in condemning human rights abuses in Xinjiang, in putting sanctions on those responsible and in holding companies to account that import goods made with forced labour in Xinjiang. I will certainly consider the proposals debated, but I must say that I am instinctively, and always have been, against sporting boycotts.

[902341] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister and others on the anniversaries being marked today?

This Sunday, 11 July, marks two years since the Government committed to reforming a cruel aspect of the welfare system that forces terminally ill people to prove that they have six months or less to live before they are granted fast access to benefits. The Motor Neurone Disease Association and Marie Curie estimate that, in that time, 7,000 people have died waiting for a decision on their benefits claim. With the pandemic, and with the NHS managing it and the backlog of diseases, the situation will become only more acute. When will the Government publish their review and finally scrap the six-month rule, as they have committed to do so?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the issue that the hon. Lady has raised. To the best of my knowledge, we are making that change, but I will write to her as soon as I have that information.

[902350] **Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): While the extension of the grace period for the supply of chilled meat from Great Britain to Northern Ireland is welcome, Lord Frost is entirely right to say that it amounts in truth to no more than a temporary “sticking plaster”, so can my right hon. Friend please confirm that, unless the European Union adopts a more proportionate approach to the application of the Northern Ireland protocol, this country will do whatever is necessary, legislative or otherwise, to fix the problem permanently?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is, sadly, completely right in his analysis. There remain very serious problems in what I believe is the misapplication—the excessively legally purist application—of that protocol. What we are hoping for is some progress from the European Commission—some repairs that I think that they should make to the way this is working—but to echo what he has said, we certainly rule nothing out in our approach.

[902342] **Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): One in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage. Does the Prime Minister agree that parents’ grief for this profound loss is not an illness and therefore that parents should receive formal miscarriage leave rather than resorting to sick pay or unpaid leave if their miscarriage occurs before 24 weeks? Will he support my private Member’s Bill and introduce paid miscarriage leave for parents?

The Prime Minister: I sympathise deeply with anybody who has suffered the loss of a baby by miscarriage, of course. What I can tell the hon. Lady is that we did introduce, in 2020, paid parental bereavement leave. That entitles those who lose a child after 24 weeks of pregnancy to some payment, but, of course, nothing I can say, and no payment we could make, would be any consolation to those who experience a miscarriage in that way.

[902354] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Serious Fraud Office achieved a rare success in Southwark Crown court in April with the successful prosecution of GPT Special Project Management Ltd, which resulted in £28 million of penalties for corruption. The key whistleblower in this case was my constituent Ian Foxley, without whom the prosecution would never have happened, yet he has been totally hung out to dry by the Serious Fraud Office, despite 10 years of financial devastation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, unless we properly compensate whistleblowers, they simply will not come forward, and will he consider making a payment out of the £28 million received by Her Majesty’s Treasury to compensate him for his losses?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question. I want to thank Mr Foxley for his whistleblowing, because he has seen justice done. The trouble is that we do not normally compensate whistleblowers in the way that my hon. Friend recommends, but I know that my right hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General has offered to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

[902343] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): On Monday, we celebrated the 73rd birthday of the NHS—one of the very best things about our country. Many Opposition Members, and our constituents, remain committed to protecting the fundamental right to universal healthcare, free at the point of delivery, but this Government remain a constant threat to our public health service, with no staff pay rise, a 25% cut in the number of mental health beds, and the widespread sell-off of GP practices, such as the Edith Cavell Surgery in my constituency to American private insurance giant Centene. There is also the Health and Care Bill, which will only open the doors wider for privatisation. Why is the Prime Minister continuing to eviscerate our most essential public services, and why will he not listen to the thousands of essential workers who demonstrated on Saturday to end NHS privatisation, chronic underfunding and understaffing, and to keep the NHS public?

The Prime Minister: With great respect to the hon. Lady, I do not think that I have ever heard a question that was more inversely related to reality. This is a Government that from the beginning invested the biggest amount in the NHS for a generation. Then, in the last year, we put another £92 billion into frontline care. We have increased nurses' starting pay by 12.8% over the last three years. Above all, not only are we building 48 more hospitals, but there are another 59,000 people working in the NHS this year than there were this time last year. This is a Government who are putting our NHS first.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I am sure that the whole House welcomes the fantastic news of Nissan's investment in an electric battery gigafactory in Sunderland, but does the Prime Minister agree that batteries are only part of the solution in pursuit of net zero by 2050, and that zero-carbon hydrogen combustion engines, such as those recently developed by Midlands-based JCB, have an important role to play in our country's decarbonisation plans?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. The investments that we have seen in just the last week or so—Nissan's investment in a gigafactory in Sunderland and what Stellantis is doing at Ellesmere Port—are tremendously exciting for battery-powered vehicles. It is fantastic, but we must not forget hydrogen. As I said in an earlier answer, we want this country to be a world leader in hydrogen technology as well.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I know that the Prime Minister is aware of the fatal and serious road accidents that have taken place on St Albans Road and Redbourn Road in my constituency. Will he advise the House on what more the Government are doing to improve road safety, not just in the case of fatal accidents but where there are serious accidents or near misses, because this is an issue that is of growing concern to many of my constituents and, I believe, to many across the country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. Although the number of those who have been killed or seriously injured on the roads has been coming down over a long period, it is vital that we invest in this area. We have put another £100 million through the safer roads fund to invest in 50 of the most dangerous

stretches on A roads. I also draw his attention to the THINK! campaign, which can play a huge role in reducing deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

[902349] **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): To their bitter disappointment, and despite the assurances given during the passage of the Fire Safety Act 2021 that it would do so, the Building Safety Bill, published on Monday, does little to help the hundreds of thousands of leaseholders who right now face financial ruin as a result of the building safety crisis. My question to the Prime Minister is a simple one: why are his Government seemingly intent on failing to honour the commitments given to those leaseholders, and to Members of this House, by refusing to legislate to fully protect all the blameless victims of this scandal?

The Prime Minister: That is not accurate. We are continuing to support all those who have to remediate their buildings. I remind Members that the £5 billion that we have provided is five times what Labour offered for support in their last manifesto. We will ensure that all the leaseholders—the people who have suffered from the consequences of the Grenfell conflagration—get the advice and support that they need.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recognise the huge service done by independent hospices to those at the end of their lives, to their families and to the NHS, because those people would be likely to otherwise be in hospital. He will also understand the huge impact that the covid pandemic has had on the fundraising capacity of those hospice charities, so may I ask him to consider carefully and personally the case that is being made by independent hospices for greater Government support for their clinical costs—costs which, if they were no longer there, would undoubtedly be borne by the taxpayer and by the hard-pressed NHS?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is totally right to draw attention to the incredible selfless work of hospices up and down the country. Charitable hospices receive £350 million of Government funding annually, but he is also right to draw attention to the difficulties they have had in fundraising this year and over the pandemic. That is why they have received an additional £257 million in national grant funding arrangements.

[902351] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab) [V]: In January, the Prime Minister promised me that he would listen to the calls of those that the Government had excluded from vital support to protect their jobs, businesses and incomes during the coronavirus pandemic, yet over the last six months many of my constituents have still been coming to tell me that they have been shut off and ignored, and millions across the country continue to be excluded. I have to ask the Prime Minister: why did he give those who have been excluded false hope instead of the support they desperately needed?

The Prime Minister: Of course I know how tough it has been for millions of people up and down the country and for business. That is why this Government put in an extraordinary £407 billion to support jobs and livelihoods across the country throughout the pandemic. The single most important thing we can do now for the individuals and families that the hon. Gentleman represents and is

rightly talking about today is to help our country to get back on its feet by cautiously opening up in the way that we are on 19 July, if we can take that step, which I very much hope we will. I hope that it may command the support, if not of the Leader of the Opposition, then at least of the hon. Gentleman.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): The River Test is one of the finest chalk streams in the world, but since May, diesel has been spilling into the river. What matters most is that the flow is stopped and that there is an effective clean-up, but there are many agencies involved, which has made a co-ordinated response challenging. Please will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Environment Agency, Natural England, Southern Water, local authorities and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are all involved in solving this environmental catastrophe together?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is completely right. All those bodies are involved, but the lead agency is the Environment Agency, and I know that it is in touch with her. I must say that I have a very high regard for the agency and for its work.

[902352] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am not sure that the Prime Minister actually welcomed my hon. Friend the new Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), but perhaps he will want to correct the record after this.

They say that where there's a will there's a way, and the public will clearly welcome the Government's move to introduce emergency legislation tomorrow for pubs and bars to be able to stay open later on Sundays. However, the public will wonder why the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) will be allowed to return to this House tomorrow and not be subject to a recall, despite there being a serious case of sexual harassment. The public do not understand why there should be one rule for Conservative MPs and another for the rest of us. Will the Prime Minister therefore allow time tomorrow for a motion to close this loophole and make the hon. Member for Delyn the subject of a recall?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the gentleman in question's sanction has come to an end. Secondly, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) is in error: the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) is not a Conservative MP.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): This year thousands of children will die because of the Government's dramatic cuts in international aid. Top lawyers in the country advise us that this policy is unlawful, and it has never been presented to this House for approval. When the Prime Minister was previously asked about this by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), he suggested that the estimates vote would be the appropriate vote, but that does not allow us to increase the amount of spending

on this aid. I ask the Prime Minister again: when are we going to get a binding vote on the Government's aid policy?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, but I am assured by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that the House was given a chance to vote on this matter in the estimates votes, but it mysteriously chose not to.

[902353] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): When my grandmother, whom I loved dearly, was lying on her hospital deathbed, none of us was allowed to be there to comfort her in her final moments. I could not even carry her coffin on my shoulders. I also had to endure the agony of watching alone, online, the funeral of my fun-loving uncle, and we were not there to comfort my brother-in-law's father, who had somehow contracted covid in a Slough care home during his final moments—all this because we followed Government guidance.

After we had experienced such painful personal sacrifices, like many others, imagine our collective disgust when, to curry favour with a Prime Minister's chief adviser, we saw sycophantic, spineless, hypocritical Government Ministers lining up to defend the indefensible, saying, "It's time to move on." Some even had the gall to tell us that they, too, go for a long drive when they need to get their eyesight tested. What an absolute disgrace! They should all be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

When is the Prime Minister finally going to apologise to the nation for not mustering the courage and integrity to do the honourable thing and sack his chief adviser, who so shamelessly flouted his own Government guidance? He could have regained that lost public trust and confidence, and demonstrated that it was not one rule for him and his elite chums and another for the rest of us plebs.

Mr Speaker: This is a very emotional issue.

The Prime Minister: Perhaps the best thing I can say is how deeply I, the Government and everybody sympathise with those who have gone through the suffering described by the hon. Gentleman. No one who has not been through something like that can imagine what it must feel like to be deprived of the ability to mourn properly and to hold the hands of a loved one in their last moments in the way that the hon. Gentleman describes. I know how much sympathy there will be with him.

I take the hon. Gentleman's criticisms of the Government and everything we have done most sincerely, but all I can say is that we have tried throughout this pandemic to minimise human suffering and to minimise loss of life. He asks me to apologise and, as I have said before, I do: I apologise for the suffering that the people of this country have endured. All I can say is that nothing that I can say or do can take back the lost lives and the lost time spent with loved ones that he describes. I am deeply, deeply sorry for that.

Points of Order

12.42 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 23 June, my colleague my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) asked the Prime Minister whether article 6 of the Act of Union (Ireland) 1800 had been impliedly repealed when the Northern Ireland protocol was approved by the House of Commons. The Prime Minister answered emphatically no.

Last Thursday, the High Court, responding to a case made by the Government's lawyers, said that the Northern Ireland protocol was not in conflict with the 1800 Act because article 6, which guaranteed equal trade across the United Kingdom, had been impliedly repealed when the withdrawal Act was passed through the House of Commons. Mr Justice Colton agreed that indeed article 6 had been overridden by the passing of the withdrawal Acts here in the House of Commons.

Here is the point, Mr Speaker: the Government's case was approved, presented and argued before the Prime Minister gave the answer to my right hon. Friend in the House of Commons. That answer therefore must have been misleading to the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. I suggest "inadvertently".

Sammy Wilson: Inadvertently misleading to the House. I would like to know whether the Prime Minister can be called to apologise for inadvertently misleading the House. What steps does he intend to take to undo the damage that the change to the Act of Union has caused constitutionally and economically to Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving me notice of this point of order. He raises the issue of legal interpretation, which is not a matter for the Chair. He will know, too, that the Speaker is not responsible for Ministers' answers. The Prime Minister and the Minister will have heard the right hon. Gentleman's comments. If the Prime Minister believes his answer requires a correction, there are processes by which one can make that happen, although he may take a different

view from the right hon. Member about the facts of the case. In any event, the right hon. Member has put his point on the record, and I am sure he will find other ways of pursuing it. I do not think this is the end of the matter for now, but it is just for this moment.

I am now suspending the House for three minutes in order for the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

12.45 pm

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

12.49 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have received a number of representations from those seeking to find work on sites such as LinkedIn about not being able to see even a minimum salary that would be available to them were they to secure the position. The Employment Bill is obviously the right piece of legislation to raise these issues with Ministers, but as yet there appears to be no sign of it appearing. I wonder whether you have heard any evidence as to when it might emerge.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman can probably guess, I have not been made aware of that. It is on the record, and I am sure the Government have picked up on that point. Hopefully they will be in touch.

BILL PRESENTED

ISRAEL ARMS TRADE (PROHIBITION)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Richard Burgon, supported by Caroline Lucas, Liz Saville Roberts and Tommy Sheppard, presented a Bill to prohibit the sale of arms to Israel and the purchase of arms from Israel; to make associated provision about an inquiry in relation to Israel into the end use of arms sold from the UK or authorised for sale by the UK Government; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 September, and to be printed (Bill 144).

Dogs (DNA Databases)

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

12.50 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require dog keepers to register a dog's DNA on a database; to make provision about such databases and about the information held on them; and for connected purposes.

There are not many days when we in this House can bring joy to so many families and individuals, fight crime, improve biosecurity, help the UK's leadership in animal genomics and repay the loyalty of the nation's faithful four-legged friends. This is one such day, and I believe we can do so united on both sides of the House.

One in three households across the UK is home to a furry four-legged canine friend. This Bill seeks to create a national register of doggy DNA as a more secure, more humane and better long-term alternative to microchipping. I am grateful for the feedback from the many parties I consulted in developing this Bill, including dog shelters, police forces, vets, academics, members of the public and genomic industry professionals. I am also grateful for the support of the RSPCA, the largest and oldest animal welfare organisation in the world.

Under the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015, all dogs must already be microchipped. If there is a canine libertarian movement, that pass has already been sold. Although microchips have been a big step forward and have produced many successes in reuniting dogs with their loving owners, they are not infallible. Some dogs have health conditions making them unable to be microchipped. Microchips can be inserted incorrectly, causing suffering, or sometimes migrate to other parts of the body. Increasingly, they can be found and cut out by unscrupulous thieves.

Registration itself is fragmented, with many databases offered by competing suppliers, each of which hold data in a variety of formats. Unlike microchipping, a simple DNA swab inside a dog's mouth is non-invasive. It is a modern solution whose time has come.

There is a particular problem right now of dog theft, which reportedly increased by 250% in 2020, but a database, once set up, will have a number of additional benefits and solutions for policy questions related to dog welfare and ownership. In March, my colleague Katy Bourne, police and crime commissioner for Sussex, ran a survey that received almost 125,000 responses, revealing fear of dog theft was a "serious problem".

Earlier this year Gloucestershire constabulary gave us a proof of concept, having set up its own opt-in DNA register. I am grateful to Gloucestershire's adviser, Kim Mowday, who examined everything from nose prints to paw prints before concluding that DNA was the most robust and reliable identifier. I know from farmers in my constituency, that a register would protect not just dogs but other animals, too. SheepWatch UK estimates that, in 2016 alone, over 15,000 farm animals were killed by out-of-control dogs.

A register would also improve our city parks and public spaces by tackling dog fouling, which has been linked to toxocariasis, a parasite that is a particular risk

to the youngest children. Trials by Barking and Dagenham Council showed that DNA testing drove down fouling by over 60% once owners realised that they could or would be traced. A DNA database would also have immense research value, putting Britain at the cutting edge, and allowing for canine genetic diseases to be tracked and traced. In 2018, whole genome sequencing allowed researchers in Helsinki to identify a gene that causes congenital eye disease in dogs, and such a wide and deep data pool would only generate more advances in veterinary science.

I come to the second major function of the Bill: it seeks to unify the existing microchip registers and merge them into a nationally standardised format. Several organisations I consulted when developing this Bill already advocate for that, including Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, the Dogs Trust and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. I draw the House's attention to the 13 June 2013 debate on compulsory microchipping, in which the then Minister said:

"We are working with database operators and the microchip manufacturers and implanters to address standards and ensure quality and consistency".—[*Official Report*, 13 June 2013; Vol. 564, c. 156WH.]

He was thereby acknowledging the problem that, eight years on, has still sadly not been solved. The Bill would simplify that by providing a single, consistent point of contact for updates, in much the same way as drivers know they must inform the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency when they change vehicle. The RSPCA has welcomed the Bill, which it says will

"streamline the process of registering dogs, making this easier for owners and authorities and vets to get the information they need."

Nor is the cost of DNA tests a meaningful objection. The Bill does not seek to bring this in overnight, and would instead see a phased introduction over a decade. That would allow for the expanding provision of DNA testing to drive down cost. The cost of genome sequencing has fallen so rapidly that it has outpaced Moore's law. Today, a whole human genome can be sequenced for less than \$300, and this is expected to fall further. A dog DNA test today can cost as little as £40, depending on the purpose. Given that pet testing is a completely new market and is growing rapidly, we can be sure the price will drop much further over the next decade. The original debates about microchipping featured concerns about the cost burden to owners of making microchipping compulsory. Despite the legal requirement having been in place for five years, there has been no collapse in demand for pet dogs—quite the opposite. Dog ownership has soared from 7.8 million in the year of that debate to more than 10 million last year. The 10-year phasing in would also allow the existing microchip databases to regularise their formatting ahead of unification and to avoid existing owners being penalised.

This will be an effective solution for a number of dog-related problems. Although the list I have given today, including pet theft, puppy farms, dog fouling, wildlife protection, livestock worrying and veterinary research, is not exhaustive—although it sounds it—once the basic framework is set up, any number of other applications can follow. It is clear that a DNA-based approach will become the standard sooner or later. It is surely easier to start now, sorting the scaling problems earlier, so that we make this a long-term fix.

[Andrew Griffith]

Let me conclude by addressing my final remarks to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). This is a change that is coming. The only question is when and how. We can be sure that the departmental brief written for her will raise no end of objections as to why this is the wrong change at the wrong time. Although our civil service is a fine machine in many respects, the status quo has no better or more skilled advocate for inertia and inactivity. This is that rare thing, a Bill for which there is political consensus and that requires no Treasury funding. So I urge her, for the sake of pet owners, and for the much-loved dogs that will be stolen today, tomorrow and the next day, let us fast forward to the point where the Government agree to pick up this Bill and legislate. Please go back to the Department, challenge the advice and seek action this day on this very important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Andrew Griffith, Virginia Crosbie, Siobhan Baillie, James Sunderland, Sir David Amess, Sir Roger Gale, Mr Robert Goodwill, Robert Halfon, Jane Hunt, Dr Julian Lewis, Andrew Selous and Suzanne Webb present the Bill.

Andrew Griffith accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March 2022, and to be printed (Bill 145).

Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Covid-19: Contracts and Public Inquiry

12.59 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House believes the Government has failed to give full details of the process behind the issuing of emergency covid-19 contracts; and therefore calls on the Government immediately to commence the covid-19 public inquiry, announced by the Prime Minister on 12 May 2021.

There have been many instances during this covid-19 pandemic when we have seen the very best in our society, from our frontline workers keeping food on supermarket shelves, to our extraordinary scientific community who have produced life-saving vaccines, to, of course, our NHS heroes who have been so deserving of the George Cross. The pandemic has also led to opportunism, greed, and covid profits being put above accountability. This Tory Government are guilty of funnelling covid cash from the frontline into the pockets of their rich friends. We are talking about endemic cronyism during a global pandemic, the misuse of funds, and covid profiteers raking in billions of pounds for services that have often been too substandard or irrelevant in the fight against the virus. Yes, Mr Speaker, it is billions of pounds that we are talking about—billions of pounds while millions in our society have been excluded from any help from the Government.

Today, the SNP is saying enough, no more dodgy dealings, no more undeclared meetings, and no more billion-pound contracts to friends. The Prime Minister promised an inquiry into the UK Government's handling of the pandemic; it must start right now.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I have the greatest respect for the right hon. Gentleman and I understand why he is bringing this debate forward, but he must realise that we have just had a week where his own country's newspapers are full of headlines saying that Scotland is becoming the covid capital of Europe. Who is responsible for that?

Ian Blackford: We really should not be playing political football—[*Laughter.*] I have to say, Mr Speaker, that says it all. [*Laughter.*] They should just keep going, because, friends, we are talking about people who are getting a serious illness, we are talking about people who are getting long covid, we are talking about people who are going on ventilators, we are talking about people who are losing their lives, and that is the behaviour that we get from the Conservatives. They ought to be utterly, utterly ashamed of themselves.

When it comes to the covid numbers in Scotland, let me give those Members a reality check. The reason that covid numbers are rising so dramatically right across the United Kingdom—and we have seen the projections this morning of what is going to happen here over the coming weeks—is largely down to what has happened with the delta variant. My Government in Edinburgh told the Government in London that we had to lock the door on the delta variant. It is the UK Government

who have been asleep at the wheel, so we take no lectures about our responsibilities when there is a Prime Minister who talks about letting the bodies pile high. We know where the blame lies and the blame lies at the door of No.10 Downing Street.

James Cartlidge *rose*—

Ian Blackford: Last week, I raised an urgent question in this House on the misuse of covid funds—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us just calm down. Two of you cannot be standing at the same time. If the hon. Gentleman wants the Member to give way, he will give way. If the hon. Gentleman really felt that it was so bad, he could have made a point of order. The fact is that we need to calm it down. We need to get on with this debate, as it is important for all. People are watching it and we need to be able to hear all sides, and I am struggling at times. With so few Members here, it is amazing how much noise is being generated; I see Mr Shelbrooke is back in town. Carry on, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. These are important matters and we need to be able to deal with them respectfully.

Last week, I asked an urgent question in this House regarding the misuse of covid funds for political campaigning. The Secretary of State ordered the use of a £560,000 emergency covid contract to conduct constitutional campaigning on the Union. That was taxpayers' funds, which were earmarked for the NHS to protect supplies of personal protective equipment but were instead used to order political polling. [*Interruption.*] I can hear an hon. Friend asking whether they can do that; no, it is not permissible to engage in such behaviour. We are talking about taxpayers' funds that were earmarked for the NHS to order PPE but were instead used to order political polling.

At Prime Minister's questions on the Wednesday prior to my urgent question, the Prime Minister told me that he was unaware of the contracts. The accusation of misusing covid contracts was not media speculation; nor was it a political accusation: it was a plain fact. It came directly from the official evidence published in the High Court judgment on the Good Law Project v. the Minister for the Cabinet Office, which revealed that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster instructed—officials to commission research on “attitudes to the UK Union”

using the emergency contract given to Public First for pandemic research. As I have stated, that is a fact admitted in a court of law, but in this very Chamber last week the Government sought to deny that any such spending took place and said that the Minister had no part to play in it. These are serious matters and we need honesty and transparency from the Government. Perhaps today the Minister on the Front Bench—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—could put the record straight on the fact that it was admitted in court that that had happened.

We are dealing with a Government acting in a sleekit manner and in a covert way, using covid funds for research on attitudes to the Union without authority. For the UK Government to funnel funds earmarked for emergency covid spending into party political research

is jaw-dropping and morally reprehensible. Can we imagine the reaction if the Scottish Government had used emergency covid funds to conduct polling on independence? There would have been justifiable outrage from Government Members.

In another court case, the failure to publish details of contracts within the required 30 days led the judge to rule that the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), had acted unlawfully. It took the Government until last month to publish the details of 40 PPE contracts worth £4.2 billion, despite the contracts having been awarded a year before and despite the Government claiming months earlier that all PPE contracts had already been published. In documents seen by the BBC, Government lawyers admitted in February that 100 contracts for suppliers and services relating to covid-19, signed before October last year, had yet to be published. Yet three days earlier, the Prime Minister told MPs that the contracts were “on the record for everybody to see.”—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 638.]

Was this yet another example of the Prime Minister being unaware of the situation that his Government had found themselves in? The alternative is—and can only be—that the Prime Minister willingly misled the House and the public. There is no other conclusion that can be drawn—

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

Mr Speaker: Order. I went through this earlier with other Members. “Inadvertently”—we do not use the direct accusation that somebody misled the House, but “inadvertently” I will accept. We have to use the right language, which is the language that we expect, and I am sure that the leader of the SNP would not want to break with the good manners of this House.

Ian Blackford: Of course I would not wish to do so, Mr Speaker, but I am simply laying out the facts of the matter.

Mr Speaker: So we can use “inadvertently”.

Ian Blackford: I will be generous to colleagues and the Prime Minister and for the purposes of this place I will respectfully do so.

The court cases highlighted that the covid contracts were not published on time, and poor records left big unknowns, such as why some companies won multi-million-pound contracts and others did not. Clarity on the latter has been provided through the revelation that civil servants were requested to triage contract proposals into high-priority lanes. That means that proposals from a supplier recommended by Ministers, Government officials, or MPs and Members of the House of Lords were given preferential treatment. That was crucial to the success of those seeking procurement deals: a National Audit Office report found that up to July 2020, one in 10 suppliers that had been put in the high-priority lane were awarded a contract, while the figure was less than one in 100 for those outside that lane. It is not what you know, or what you can provide: it is who you know in Government. These priority lanes created a tale of friends and family fortunes.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, and for outlining his case forensically.

[Jonathan Edwards]

What does this so-called VIP lane indicate about the priorities of the British Government, when we compare it with the fact that when the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and the Northern Irish Government together asked for extra borrowing capacity to deal with the covid crisis, they were turned down? What does that say about the priorities of the British Government, and—more to the point, perhaps—what does it say about the nature of the relationships among Governments within the British state?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is quite correct. There have been a number of occasions on which all the devolved Administrations have sought support from the UK Government for borrowing, and have been frustrated in that, but for friends of the UK Government, it is a case of “Come in, there are contracts to be had.”

Let me give a few examples. There was the neighbour and local pub landlord of the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who supplied tens of millions of vials for covid-19 tests despite not having had any previous experience of providing medical supplies: off the street, no experience whatsoever, but he was a friend of the Government. There was the small Stroud-based company which, despite making a loss in 2019, was awarded a £156 million contract for PPE. Wait for it: the company was run by a Tory councillor, and no evidence—none whatsoever—was ever found of its supplying PPE previously.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) *rose*—

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) *rose*—

Ian Blackford: If the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine would like to stand up and defend what his Government have been doing, and Tory cronyism, he can be my guest.

Andrew Bowie: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I respectfully suggest that before he starts throwing stones at the UK Government, he looks at his own Government's record in Edinburgh. Over 160 contracts awarded by the Scottish Government, worth £539 million from NHS Scotland, the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities, were awarded during the pandemic to suppliers with no competitive process. It is quite clear that every Government on these islands and around the world were dealing with an unprecedented situation and rushing to save lives. Exactly the same was going on in Edinburgh as was happening in London, and for him to stand up and claim it is “Tory cronyism” does not dignify him or this place.

Ian Blackford: I am afraid to say that the lack of dignity in the Conservative Government is what is at stake here. The Scottish Government's processes on procurement were open and transparent—that is the difference with what has taken place in this place.

Let me give a couple of other examples. A company run by a former business associate of the Tory peer Baroness Mone was awarded a £122 million contract seven weeks after the company was formed—my goodness, who has ever heard of such a thing? Another company,

owned by a Tory donor, that supplied beauty products to high street stores was awarded a £65 million contract to produce face masks. Public First, which was awarded a £560,000 contract by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to conduct polling on the Union, was run by a former employee of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Colleagues, right hon. and hon. Members, there is a thread that runs right through this. Incidentally, we have yet to see any of the research into support for Scottish independence: perhaps the Government did not like what they found.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making a valid point. Is he aware of the recent report from openDemocracy that another person who helped to run Public First was Rachel Wolf, who was also a non-executive director at the Department for Work and Pensions at the time? Not only are Tory cronies getting contracts, but they have placemen who are supposed to challenge the Government but are actually helping to get contracts.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is quite correct. I am delighted that we have an opportunity today to shine a light on all this, but it demonstrates that we need to get on with the public inquiry. The public deserve to know what has been happening with this Government as we have come through the pandemic.

We have heard excuses from the Prime Minister and the former Health Secretary that some of these contracts were fast-tracked because there was no time to be wasted in such urgent circumstances. Well, some basic due diligence might have been useful. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the lack of expertise of some of those securing the covid procurement contracts, there have been numerous issues with the orders.

As reported by the BBC, 50 million face masks bought in April 2020 could not be used by the NHS because they did not meet its specifications. The use of 10 million surgical gowns for frontline NHS staff was suspended because of how the items were packaged. Millions of medical gowns were never used, having been bought for the NHS at the end of the first lockdown for £122 million. A million high-grade masks used in the NHS did not meet the right safety standards and have been withdrawn. What a waste of taxpayers' money. What a shambles. At the same time, 3 million of our constituents have been left with no financial support. Those are the warped priorities of the Government.

Alec Shelbrooke: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: There are, of course, numerous further examples of Tory sleaze in the Government's response to the pandemic, of which we are all too aware. There was David Cameron's lobbying of Cabinet Ministers to benefit Greensill Capital, of which he was a shareholder. We had Dido Harding, wife of a Tory MP, put in charge of the disastrous and costly Test and Trace despite a lack of experience in public health. And of course there is the issue of the £37 billion that has been spent on it. Where is the value for money? Money wasted. [Interruption.] I suggest to the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) that this is a debate where he is permitted to put in to speak, but—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us calm down. I think the right hon. Gentleman has been trying to catch your eye for quite a while, Mr Blackford. It is up to you who you wish to give way to, but if you did, it might save us all more pain in the future.

Ian Blackford: If the right hon. Gentleman tries, he might catch your eye later on in the debate, Mr Speaker. I think we have heard enough of him from a sedentary position. *[Interruption.]* Government Members can carry on—there might not be that many of them, but my goodness they make a hullabaloo as they try to shut down and shout down the representatives of Scotland who are here to stand up for our constituents. *[Interruption.]* Yeah, carry on, carry on.

Andrew Bowie: You're not “the” representatives.

Ian Blackford: Well, well, well. We are not the representatives of the people of Scotland? Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that we have just won an election to the Scottish Parliament. Thank goodness that we have a Parliament that has a majority that can take Scotland out of this Union, into the future of an independent Scotland back in the European Union and away from the Tory sleaze and corruption that I am outlining this afternoon.

It was just last week that I asked my urgent question from this spot on the misuse of public funds in covid contracts, but since then the revelations of cronyism have continued. As revealed by *The Sunday Times*, Lord Bethell has something in common with his close friend the former Health Secretary: he failed to declare meetings—27 meetings that we know of, with companies that went on to receive £1 billion-worth of covid contracts. Puzzlingly, despite having had—wait for it—no relevant experience, Lord Bethell took ministerial responsibility for Test and Trace. His only qualification seemed to be that he was a long-time close friend of the then Health Secretary who happened to chair and donate thousands of pounds to his failed Tory leadership campaign. Lord Bethell also provided Ms Coladangelo with a parliamentary pass to the Houses of Parliament despite her not undertaking any work for the peer. This has rightly been referred to the House of Lords Commissioners for Standards. It prompts the question: why is Lord Bethell still in post?

Such examples of Tory cronyism and multimillion-pound deals in the pockets of Tory friends are difficult to digest. It is hard, looking at this covid contracts scandal, to conclude anything other than that Westminster is rotten to the core. As well as unlawful covid contracts, we have seen dodgy donations to refurbish the Downing Street flat, peerages handed to billionaire Tory donors, and offers of tax breaks by text. The Scottish Government have committed to a public inquiry on the covid pandemic to start this year. The UK Government must do the same.

Those of us on these Benches know Scotland can do better. We are doing better and we could go further still with the powers of independence. While NHS heroes received a measly and insulting 1% pay rise from the UK Government, the Scottish Government pledged 4% with a £500 one-off thank you. While 3 million people are excluded from UK Government support, the SNP will continue to argue for them and stand up for them. While Tory aid cuts mean that the global fight

against the virus is hindered, we will continue to make the case that none of us will be free from the threat of covid-19 until it is eradicated from all around the world.

Support in Scotland for the First Minister remains steadfast, while the Prime Minister continues to be incredibly unpopular. A recent Ashcroft poll of Scottish voters found support for Nicola Sturgeon to be the highest of all party leaders, and common descriptions used for the First Minister were “determined” and “competent”. By comparison, the Prime Minister was commonly referred to as being dishonest, arrogant, out of touch and out of his depth. When it comes to our recovery from the pandemic, the question for Scots will be: who do you trust to lead us? For many Scots, the answer is becoming clearer and clearer with every passing day.

1.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this Opposition day debate on covid-19 contracts and the public inquiry into the handling of the outbreak.

Possibly the only two sentences that I could agree with in what, unfortunately, was largely just smear—*[Interruption.]* Mr Blackford—*[Interruption.]* I am frightfully sorry. I would just gently say this to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford): I sat quietly, with respect, listening to what you had to say. I would be really grateful for that same courtesy.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me just say that we do not call Members by their names; we use their constituency. We need to take the tension out and take the heat out. Everybody should quite rightly be listened to. The same that I expected for the leader of the SNP I certainly expect for the Minister.

Jo Churchill: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

I agree that we have seen, totally, the best of people—our frontline workers and our NHS workers. They have really stepped up. They need to know that we did everything we could in exceptional circumstances. I remember the weekend I went to Liverpool to meet the plane that flew back from Wuhan with those very first individuals who were carrying the virus. We knew nothing of it at the time, so how far have we come?

The other point on which I would agree with the right hon. Member is that very pithy sentence, “Those of us on these Benches know Scotland can do better.” As he will appreciate, covid-19 has presented this country with one of the most unprecedented challenges we have ever faced. It has been imperative for us to work together closely throughout this pandemic. In particular, the Government recognise the key role devolved Administrations have played in this, and I have been incredibly grateful for the meetings I have had with my counterparts not only on issues relating to the pandemic but on other issues—there was a meeting last week in which we spoke about how we might address the challenge of those going through the journey of cancer. We are very grateful for that.

It is thanks to that close collaboration and co-ordination that we have been able as a United Kingdom to achieve success in our vaccine roll-out programme. Over three quarters of adults in the UK have received at least one

[Jo Churchill]

dose and well over half have received both doses. Our job was to protect the weakest and most vulnerable, and that goes for all of us.

Had we remained in the EU scheme, which has not performed as well as ours, we would not be here at this point, and I am proud of the work of the vaccines taskforce and proud of the leadership that Kate Bingham showed. I seem to remember these debates revolving around that at one time; I do not see anybody now denying and saying, “No, don’t give me a vaccine.” That work was led and driven by Kate Bingham and her team, who worked ceaselessly—longer days for longer weeks for longer months—to find our pathway out of this.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and totally share in the point she just made about the vaccine. As she will have seen, when I intervened on the SNP spokesperson earlier I raised the point that Scotland has been described recently as the covid capital of Europe, and the SNP is refusing to take responsibility, and indeed is blaming the UK Government because of the delta variant. But is it not the case that since it became identified as a variant of concern, England played Scotland and the Scottish Government could have stopped thousands of Scots travelling south of the border? There was nothing to stop them doing that; they must take some responsibility for the fact that there are so many covid cases in Scotland.

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber referred to his leader, who early on in the pandemic spoke about elimination, yet now the World Health Organisation says six out of 10 of the highest rates across Europe are currently in Scotland. That is why I think that if selective lines are picked out, and people are used as battering rams against each other rather than us looking sensibly at the facts, that means that we do not get the perspective we need to make sure that we come through this and that we stand shoulder to shoulder with the population and deliver the vaccine programme.

As I said, I am proud of the work that the UK Government have done in driving the vaccine. At the beginning of the pandemic we were told this would be a 10-year process; we got there in a year. That is utterly phenomenal, and there were great academics from Scotland who joined in; there were academics from across the world. We can deliver this, and the NHS is getting on with the job of vaccinating and allowing us that road to freedom.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree that, because of the investment the UK Government made in the AstraZeneca vaccine and the Government’s worldwide collaborations and investment, not only have we been able to produce the vaccine in 10% of the predicted time but we unlocked technology that will serve the health service and people of this country for many years to come?

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more. The vibrancy and quality of the life sciences industry, the pharmaceutical industry and the academic ecosystem in Scotland, in Wales, in Northern Ireland and in the UK really does unleash a bright future for us. It is thanks to that joint

working that we have been able to procure at speed vital goods and services, such as ventilators and PPE, which have been so critical to our response in the pandemic. To date, every patient who has needed a ventilator has had access to one. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber will celebrate the jobs that have been created—I think it is 450 of them—at the Honeywell factory in Motherwell, producing PPE for the frontline. We now have a home-grown industry that provides 70% of all PPE, apart from gloves, and we are working hard to find the right materials so that we can have a glove industry as well. That is what I call a success story, from a standing start back in April.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) *rose—*

Alan Brown *rose—*

Jo Churchill: I will give way in a minute. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber is well aware of the public contract regulations, which existed before the pandemic and which allow the Government to procure at speed in times of emergency. There was no need to suspend or relax the procurement rules in order to use those regulations. I gently say that these were the same systems as in Scotland and Wales. We had an unprecedented global crisis and, quite rightly, people had to use existing regulation that allows them to flex in order to deliver for their populations.

The use of the emergency contracting procedures has reduced since the early days of the pandemic. That contingency procedure is, however, still available to Departments provided the key tests are met. The Government have always understood the scale of the challenges that we have faced as a nation, and that is why, from the start of the pandemic, we were clear with public authorities that they would need to act extremely quickly to meet the challenge of covid-19. We have also been clear about the continued need to use good commercial judgment and to publish the details of awards made, in line with Government transparency guidance.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way. The emergency tender procedure that she highlights is the one that was previously used to award a ferry contract to a company with no ferries, so we know how bad the governance is from this Government. On governance, openDemocracy recently confirmed that 16 non-executive directors appointed to various Departments are Vote Leave compadres, Tory chums and Tory donors. They are the ones who are supposed to hold the Government to account. Can she explain the selection process for these non-executive director roles?

Jo Churchill: No, I will not. Those non-executive directors are selected through a selection procedure because they hold skills—commercial skills, legal skills and so on—from the outside world. If the hon. Gentleman is telling me that the way someone votes in an election makes them unable to scrutinise, that makes a mockery of the way that we set up Select Committees and so on. It is important that people are enabled to come in with their skills from the outside world to scrutinise.

That being said, we are committed to looking for opportunities to improve the way that we work. The first independent Boardman review of procurement processes, looking at a small number of contracts in the Government Communication Service, has reported to Government. Twenty-four of the 28 recommendations

have already been implemented, and the remainder will be met by the end of the calendar year. A second review by Nigel Boardman into pandemic planning and procurement across Government identified further recommended improvements to the procurement process. Work is under way to progress them, and an update will be given to the Public Accounts Committee this month—a double layer of making sure that we are doing the right thing. The Cabinet Office Green Paper “Transforming public procurement” also sets out proposals to update the rules on procuring in times of extreme urgency or crisis to include lessons learned from the pandemic.

Procurement has been and is being extensively reviewed, including by the independent National Audit Office report published last year on Government procurement during the covid-19 pandemic, but the Government know that there is so much more to learn from the experience of the pandemic. That is why the Prime Minister confirmed a public inquiry into covid-19, which will begin its work next spring. I hear the calls for that inquiry to be brought forward, but I believe it would be irresponsible. A premature inquiry risks distracting Ministers, officials and Departments from the ongoing pandemic response, slowing down action and diverting the very people we need to be focused on each delicate stage of our ongoing response. I would also gently say that with six out of 10 of the highest-rate areas in Scotland and the pandemic still very visible in the north-west, north-east, Yorkshire and Humber, it is incumbent on us to deal with the pandemic as our first priority.

This was a global pandemic. It impacted all of us: individuals, friends, businesses and our own families across the UK and across the world. We have to recover as one team, team UK, or else we are weakened. It is right that we learn these lessons together. We will continue to work with the devolved Administrations as we develop the inquiry. I know that they, too, will welcome the scrutiny and the diligence that an inquiry will bring not only to England, but also to Scotland.

1.36 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, for missing the first couple of minutes of the debate. I did, however, hear the excellent contribution by the leader of the SNP, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). It is no reflection on my feeling about the importance of this debate not just for us as Opposition parties, but for the people of the whole of Britain who are listening to these questions and who want more answers than those we have just heard. Maybe we will have them at the end of this debate.

On the Opposition Benches, we share the conclusion that the right hon. Gentleman came to in his remarks, which is that Government procurement over the past 16 months has been marred by huge waste to the taxpayer and brazen cronyism. That is not to say that the vaccine roll-out has not been an enormous success, but if that is all we going to hear from Conservative Members we will not get to the heart of the debate. At the same time as we were rolling out the vaccine, these crony covid contracts were being made and there are questions that must be answered for contracts being given now and for the future, as well as those given last year.

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Lady will have heard the Minister suggest that the same processes have been followed in Scotland and Wales as were followed by the British Government; but does she agree with me that it is only the British Government who have been found, twice, to have acted unlawfully?

Fleur Anderson: I agree with the hon. and learned Lady. This is not about the processes and whether they have been followed, but about what undue weight was given to the resulting contracts that came out of those processes. Some of them have been taken up in court, so there are questions to be answered.

For over 12 months now, my colleagues and I in the shadow Cabinet Office team have been asking some very simple questions again and again of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and his team over their procurement policy during the pandemic. Every time, we have been met with deflection and non-answers. Those questions have not been getting an answer, so I will try again today. That is not very impressive for the Department responsible for increasing transparency across Whitehall, and it is transparency that we are talking about today. But it is not only about transparency. Were those contracts given to the right companies to save lives at the right time? Without question, we needed speed. Without question, we needed the best companies to be chosen. The question is, when it comes to another emergency, pandemic or crisis, do the Government throw due transparency out of the window and just start talking to their friends?

Alec Shelbrooke: The hon. Lady said that shadow Cabinet Office Ministers have been asking the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster questions about the things going on. However, I warn the hon. Lady—I say this to draw us back to where we were 12 or 15 months ago—that the then shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), wrote to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster saying that he was not awarding PPE contracts quickly enough, and that he should be bypassing the system to get them out there. She then gave a list of companies in my city of Leeds that had offered support, and they included a football agent, an historical clothing company, an events company in Surrey and a private legal practice in Birmingham. All I say to the hon. Lady is that there are lessons to be learned, but in terms of what she is trying to say, please do not think that Opposition Members were all innocent and that the Government were guilty and need to follow some lesson, because the reality is that the then shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster put it in writing.

Fleur Anderson: Of course there are questions to be asked, and that is what we are doing—we are asking these questions. I hope that there is a real-time review going on right now, and I hope that all the questions we are asking will be in the public inquiry to come. All these questions need to be looked into.

I have 15 questions for the Minister today, which I hope she will be able to answer. Question 1: what assessment has she made of the accuracy of the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson’s statement on 28 June 2021 on the conduct of ministerial Government business

[Fleur Anderson]

through departmental email addresses? The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), said, only two hours after the statement that day, that

“a huge volume of correspondence was coming to Ministers via their personal email addresses”.—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2021; Vol. 698, c. 33.]

The Minister will have seen the leaked minutes from the Department of Health and Social Care meeting on 9 December, confirming that. So was the Prime Minister’s spokesperson not telling the truth, or just wrong, and will the Prime Minister be correcting the record? The use of private email addresses, how it all came to be and the murky times around that time need to be opened up to transparency.

It is hugely welcome news that the Information Commissioner’s Office will be investigating that point. The Government must co-operate fully. It is not just about freedom of information law and data protection law, important as that is; it is about taxpayers’ money being dished out secretly on private emails. Labour expects the Government to ensure that they come clean on private email use in other Departments, and that anyone found to have acted unlawfully or inappropriately in ministerial office faces the consequences.

Question 2: in her response to last week’s urgent question, the Parliamentary Secretary said that 47 offers of PPE supplies were processed through the Government’s priority mailbox. The Government have said that the details of all contracts will be published, but have refused to name the 47 companies. Who are those 47 companies, why are they not being named, and will those names be published now?

Question 3: can the Minister tell us which Ministers formally approved contracts awarded under the emergency procurement process during the covid pandemic? The Minister will have no doubt read the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s recent report on decision making during the pandemic, and it has a whole slew of other questions. It concluded:

“Ministers have passed responsibility between the Cabinet Office and Department of Health and Social Care”.

So who was responsible for actually signing off those contracts?

That leads me to question 4: which Minister made the decision to award a contract to Public First for contact focus group testing in March 2020? The Cabinet Office has stated that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster did not personally sign off the decision, so if he did not, who did?

Question 5, which was raised earlier in this debate: what role do the army of non-executive directors currently employed across Whitehall have in influencing the award of contracts? Did they have a say in the process or the decisions behind the award of those contracts? For instance, how can the Minister explain the fact that Kate Lampard, the lead non-executive director on the Department of Health and Social Care board, is also a senior associate at the consultancy firm Verita, which in May was awarded a contract by the same Department, worth £35,000, to assist Public Health England? It is not just about how people vote when they are awarded these positions. It is not about their voting tendency. It is their closeness to Ministers and others, and their closeness to some of the contracts being given out, that the public need to know more about.

This brings me nicely on to question 6. What steps were taken by the Department to identify and address conflicts of interest in relation to the contracts awarded through the VIP lane? Is the Minister confident that all meetings between Ministers and companies that were awarded contracts have been fully disclosed and added to the transparency data? Can we be assured of that today?

Question 7: I mentioned the leaked minutes of the December meeting of the Department of Health and Social Care. In that meeting the second permanent secretary used the term “sub-approval”. Can the Minister enlighten us on the sub-approval process? What does it mean in relation to Government covid contracts? The public have so many questions about what was going on in the contracting last year.

Question 8: the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster, spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on Monday 21 June, which I attended, about the market conditions facing suppliers in China. There have been questions about links with China. In that same debate, I referenced evidence uncovered by the Good Law Project that showed officials in the Department of Health and Social Care were aware that an agent working for PestFix, the pest company that got a covid contract, may have been bribing officials in China. The point was not addressed by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, in that debate, so I ask the Minister to comment on it today. Is she aware of this allegation? Does she agree that, no matter how difficult market conditions were at the time, it warrants urgent investigation?

Question 9: I also asked in that debate whether the Cabinet Office would commit to auditing in detail all the contracts identified by Transparency International as raising red flags for possible corruption, and to commit to publishing the outcome of that audit. This would go a long way to restoring public trust. If it cannot be done, why not? What do the Government have to hide? I am afraid this is a question to which I did not receive an answer in that debate, so I hope to receive an answer this afternoon.

Question 10: the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, said she believes there are cases where clawback is taking place, and other Ministers have mentioned it, too, but we do not know when it has happened and what was in the contracts for those that failed, by millions of pounds in some cases. Is the Minister in a position to provide more detail?

In the past 12 months, the Government have awarded £280 million of contracts for masks that did not meet the required standards, at a time when we were crying out for PPE that would save lives. I presume those masks had to be mothballed. I do not know where they are.

The Government spent £100 million on gowns without carrying out technical checks, so they could not be used. It is incredibly important that as much of this taxpayers’ money as possible is retrieved as soon as possible. Perhaps the Minister can explain to the nurses facing a pay cut, and to the 3 million who have been excluded from any help, that the money has gone to boost the profits of the firms that received these contracts, rather than coming back to the public purse.

Similarly, my eleventh question is about how much money the Government have spent defending themselves in court against the unlawful decisions that have been made.

James Cartlidge: How much does the hon. Lady think the investigation into the former Mayor of Liverpool will cost?

Fleur Anderson: I do not know how much further investigations will cost, but that does not preclude from needing to investigate this point. We cannot deflect by looking at other investigations; we need to have an investigation into this point.

Hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on masks that have been mothballed and on gowns that could not be used because the contracts were not good enough. At a time of public emergency, we need the Government to be excellent in their competence in contracting, and not to throw the rules out of the window and end up with these failed contracts.

Question 12: why, despite all the evidence uncovered this year, will the Government still not commit to ensuring these contracts are in the public inquiry? I hope to hear confirmation that this will happen.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Lady is asking a series of highly pertinent questions, and I wonder whether we will receive the answers with any haste. Does she agree that we also need an urgent inquiry in Wales, where it has become apparent that almost 2,000 deaths occurred from infections that probably, or definitely, took place in hospitals and were therefore the responsibility of the Welsh Government, and that we need that inquiry urgently?

Fleur Anderson: Inquiries need to happen in real time, as we are learning, because we are making decisions all the time that affect our lives. There also need to be major Government inquiries, and I hope that all of this will be included in the Government inquiry to come.

The Minister made much of the Boardman review, saying, “There has been an inquiry. Don’t worry. The Boardman review has done it,” but this is my thirteenth question. It is, again, a question that I have asked before and received no answer to: does she seriously believe that the Boardman review is an independent and unbiased review, and good enough? How can she think that when Mr Boardman’s law firm has been the recipient of Government contracts in the past year, and given that Mr Boardman once ran to be a Conservative councillor—far more than just voting for one party or another? It looks more and more as if the Conservatives are set on glossing over the cronyism in their ranks, so that they can carry on as if nothing has happened.

I have two more questions, and then I will close. Question 14: when will we see a return of all public sector procurement to open competitive contracting as a default? The Minister said that emergency procurement procedures are still continuing, but they do not need to anymore. We need a way of having a contract in good time but with all the open competitiveness that the public need to see. There is no justification for the continuation of emergency procedures. They should be wound down immediately, and ways found to make contracting work without being secretive.

Finally, my fifteenth question: where is the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to answer these questions? The Cabinet Office is responsible for overseeing transparency across Government, and these are the fundamental questions that we have today. Why has he once again dodged an opportunity to explain the decisions

made by his Department? Will he ever take responsibility and stop getting other Ministers to do his explaining for him, as has happened in many previous debates on this issue? The public will not stop asking these questions. We on the Opposition Benches will not stop asking these questions. We need some answers.

I have a lot of sympathy for the Minister, who will have to field some incredibly difficult questions about serious allegations. When such debates come up I can imagine that the conversation that Ministers have about who will reply is not a pleasant one. There are some very serious allegations, and I hope to hear the answers this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I hope that we can manage the debate without a time limit. We will do so if everyone takes around six minutes. That will mean plenty of time for interventions and real debate.

1.52 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this Opposition day debate on the awarding of covid contracts. It is probably worth starting with where we were 16 or 17 months ago. At the time, we were just hearing about the covid-19 pandemic and what it meant for our lives. With the benefit of hindsight, things may have been done slightly differently, but we should not use our experience over the past 16 or 17 months to prejudice the decisions that we had to make very quickly as a nation back in February and March last year.

I had the honour of sitting on the Public Accounts Committee earlier in my parliamentary term. Under the stewardship of Gareth Davies, the Committee works hand in glove with the National Audit Office. I know that the Committee, ably chaired by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), has done various investigations into the response to the pandemic, with a particular focus on procurement and money. Scottish National party Members will be grateful to know that their colleague the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) is a vocal member of the Committee and, I am sure, will give wise counsel in future debates.

When I saw the topic of the debate, I was a bit surprised that the SNP had decided to call for it. I refer to its manifesto earlier this year in the local government elections that we had up in Scotland.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Parliamentary elections.

Mr Mohindra: Sorry—the national Holyrood elections. The manifesto, on page 9, committed to a Scotland covid review. Unfortunately, the leadership up there has now done a U-turn and has not committed to that, so on behalf of the Royal College of Nurses and the GMB union, I urge them to have a rethink and hopefully commit to delivering what was promised in the manifesto.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) referred to the disappointing news that Edinburgh is regarded as the covid capital of Europe. I will not be political on this one; I just think that it is a disappointment and that all colleagues across the House will hope that, with our heated debate and constructive criticism, we

[Mr Mohindra]

will get a better result quickly. With that sentiment in mind, I urge colleagues: where Government Members can help, please do not be shy about asking.

Let me go back 16 or 17 months, with the benefit of hindsight—unfortunately the Leader of the official Opposition is not in his place; he uses hindsight a lot. There was a real fear that, as a country, we were potentially running out of PPE. It was this Conservative Government who gave a call to arms and said, “Actually, the United Kingdom needs a national effort”. We did that to ensure that we had the right PPE and other things in place for those on our frontline. Reference has been made to not using the normal procurement process and I urge colleagues to look at the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, which allow the accelerated procurement that has been used during this global pandemic—an event that fortunately happens only once every 100 years, approximately.

Colleagues on both sides of the House refer to the quantum of PPE and I think we need to put that in context. We have an additional 22,000 ventilators, 11 billion pieces of PPE and 507 million doses of vaccine. Those are phenomenal figures. Did each procurement absolutely hit the spot? No, but the figures quoted earlier in this House, I suggest, were a very small percentage of poor delivery, and I am sure that the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and various other bodies in this House and in the Palace will look into that further.

There have been various accusations about relationships that Conservative Members of Parliament may have with business owners or others involved in procurement. I gently urge Members to be mindful that there have been multiple independent investigations, including some in this House and from the National Audit Office, that have all shown that there was no conflict of interest with Members of Parliament, and that if there were, they were properly declared at the time.

Reference has been made to the Boardman review, which reported at the back end of last year and the 28 recommendations that the Government have already committed to implementing. I know that Opposition Members were urging a quicker review and investigation on the pandemic, but the deputy chief medical officer has argued that this would be regarded as “an extra burden” and a “distraction” from the successful vaccine roll-out.

Reference has been made to the SNP Scottish Government’s procurement processes and the fact that £539 million of grants and contracts were awarded without a competitive process or proper scrutiny. I urge colleagues to have a look at the Audit Scotland review, which has investigated the three separate pandemic preparedness exercises that were undertaken, with some of the lessons that should and need to be learned from that. I will leave it there; I look forward to other contributions.

1.59 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): If you type the words “covid contract” into Google, the first suggested return is “corruption”, so this Government are fooling nobody. There is no denying that the pandemic was unprecedented. There is no denying that every single Government across the globe have made mistakes, even in countries regarded

as having a high degree of covid success, ahead of that of the UK—and there are many countries ahead of the UK in that respect. But the havoc wreaked on the UK by this Government is unforgivable. Efforts to secure contracts for friends and jobs for associates were their priority. That is the epitome of sleaze, and makes the cash-for-questions scandal that engulfed the same Tory party in the 1990s seem like a teardrop in the ocean. Many tears have been shed over the past 14 months, and I would like to pay my respects to the devastated families across these islands whose loved ones have succumbed long before their time as a result of this pandemic.

The UK is currently at the wrong end of the European table, with 1,952 deaths per million, compared with Ireland at 1,011, and Japan—the benchmark—at 127. That is an unforgivable outcome for an island nation with a developed economy and a developed, highly functioning health service. British exceptionalism lies at the heart of this Tory Government’s failed response, combined with delay, dithering and distraction by financial considerations and commercial opportunity. That saw an inevitable UK covid death toll expand to the actual UK covid death toll, and we need to see the gap between those two figures quantified in a public inquiry.

We must also inquire why it was only recently that such an inept Health Secretary was replaced. He presided over a litany of judgments as arrogant as they were poor and over decisions that, when taken together, allowed the covid death toll to reach more than 128,000 people during the pandemic in the UK. He was a Health Secretary whom the Prime Minister himself described as useless. We need the public inquiry to commence immediately.

The Prime Minister’s watery defence that we are fighting the pandemic and must wait till next spring was weak when he announced it and it has collapsed completely now. If he thinks it is time to remove face coverings—and it is not—then it is time for a public inquiry. No more time must be afforded to this dodgy, delinquent Administration of clientelism to tidy up their loose ends and administer away their inconvenient paper trails—where paper trails exist at all.

These Ministers are quite prepared to break domestic and international law if it suits their objectives—“Why let the law get in the way of Tory ideology?” is what I take to be their mantra. Let me provide three examples: the preparedness to breach the Northern Ireland protocol, the unlawful prorogation of Parliament in 2019 and Ministers now unlawfully refusing to publish a full list of covid contracts. What we do know is that billions have gone to politically connected companies, to former Ministers and Government advisers, and to others who donated to the Tory party; billions have gone to companies that had no prior experience in supplying PPE, from fashion designers, to pest controllers and jewellers; and billions have gone to companies with a controversial history, from tax evasion to fraud, corruption and human rights abuses.

In November, the National Audit Office revealed that this Tory Government had awarded £10.5 billion-worth of pandemic-related contracts, without a competitive tender process, in a VIP lane—how very Tory—and that companies with the right political connections were 10 times more likely to win than those outwith. The attitude at the heart of this UK Government was so demonstrably rotten, so bold and so unashamedly

opportunistic that the Chancellor of the Duchy of the Lancaster felt that he could simply spend vital covid moneys on political polling on the state of the Union in Scotland. He could have asked me, because I would have told him for nothing: the Union is a busted flush in Scotland. He even made sure that his pals, the private fund Public First, got the contract into the bargain.

On track and trace, quite how this Government have budgeted £37 billion—a cost described as “unimaginable” by the Public Accounts Committee—to a system that has singularly failed to do its solitary job of helping to avoid a second lockdown, when we have now just emerged from a third, is simply incomprehensible. The UK Government have committed to wasting more than the entire budget of the Scottish Government in 1920 on a project that has failed miserably. For context, let me say that £37 billion would buy 148 Type 31 frigates from Babcock in Rosyth. That is the colossal scale of what we are talking about, but that is the Tory way, and they have no opposition in this place, as we can see from a depressingly empty set of Labour Benches—we might have thought that Her Majesty’s Opposition would front up to talk in detail about some of these important issues. That is the Tory way, where patronage and cronyism are rife and are upheld by privilege that starts at Eton and Harrow, and gets refined at Oxford and Cambridge, before reaping its entitlement off a weary population of taxpayers.

But that is not Scotland’s way. When the public inquiry reports, if it does, Scotland will take a different way. We take one look at the posh old pals’ network masquerading as a Government—for the next 30 years, unopposed—and Scotland says no. We have already rejected their so-called Union, we will have our referendum and we will be independent, forever turning our back on unending Tory sleaze.

2.5 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): As a comprehensive schoolboy, I have that privilege running right through me! However, let us be serious. First, let me say that we are dealing with a subject that has cost hundreds of thousands of people their lives. Millions of people around the world have died from a disease that nobody had even heard of, because it probably did not exist, two years ago. In that short time, we have had to do things, in the developed world and across all of the world, including in this country, that nobody would ever have dreamed of. We had to react very quickly to those things.

It is worth taking a step back to where we were, because short memories do not serve us well for the future. As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), at that time several people were coming to MPs, from all over, with suggestions, and not to make a quick buck; a lot of them answered the call to help out in the crisis the country and the world were in—one that not only affected this country, but created a worldwide shortage of the very equipment and supplies that the world needed. Of course, what has come out of this pandemic is a look at the global supply chains and how they have to change, and that is tearing up the convention that has existed for many decades across many parts of the world. It took the crisis to say, “When we stretch out your supply chains like that in a world

crisis, they are not going to work in the best way possible.” The pressure for personal protective equipment was enormous.

Again, I make the point about the letter that the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster sent to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, which covered two aspects. First, it said, “All these people are offering you PPE. Why haven’t you bought it? Why are you taking so long to buy it?” That is there in black and white, in an official letter sent to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The letter then listed other companies that had come to the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and said that they could supply things; as I said before, there were football agents, historical clothing companies, events companies and private legal practices in Birmingham. I am not saying that in a sense of mockery; I am saying that to make the point that Members of Parliament from all parties—from across the House—received several emails and representations from those trying to supply PPE to deal with the crisis. It was the responsibility of Members of Parliament to pass those emails and those contacts into the system to see what would happen.

I equally understand that the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster had a frustration about the length of time it was taking for those contracts to be awarded, because we were all desperately trying to solve a problem that the world was facing to get PPE to where it needed to be. Of course we can name contracts that went wrong. We can do that in any walk of life and for any contract. It does not mean there was an endemic failure. Things were happening in a very short space of time and certain procurements did not meet the standards, but the last figure I heard showed they amounted to less than 1% of all the PPE that was procured. That is not a bad hit rate when there was not time to fill in the paperwork.

It is important that we bring these issues out in these debates, but why we do that is being lost in this one. There are, quite rightly, calls for an inquiry, but do we want it so that the country can learn, move forward and understand how to tackle things in the future, or is it for cheap political points? What I have heard so far is, pretty much, “If we had independence, we wouldn’t have any problems.” From almost the first sentence that came out of the mouth of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) there was the argument for independence, and it has gone on and on. We have heard, “If Scotland was independent, it would be different.” Well, it would not be that different, because Scotland would not be in the EU and it would not have had a chance to take part in the UK-wide procurement that supplied the vaccine programme. Let us not forget that the British armed forces have also contributed a huge amount to the fight against the pandemic. There has been a UK-wide force—the strength of this Union—delivering for every adult in the country. It does no service at all to try to make what has happened in the last 18 months into an argument about independence. It should stop this afternoon.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Since the right hon. Member has taken us on to the Union, why did the Government seek to poll Scottish attitudes to it if its benefits were so self-evident throughout? Why were public funds that were intended for covid procurement misdirected to pay for that polling?

Alec Shelbrooke: I despair. I literally just said that we are supposed to be examining the procurement of PPE and when the inquiry comes, and yet we go back to those allegations. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General will once again give the answers that were given previously. Stop it! Grow up! The reality is that we are dealing with an issue that has caused the deaths of millions of people across the world, including tens of thousands of people in this country. Today we need to explore where things went wrong—that is important—why the inquiry should wait and how it should take place.

By profession I am a mechanical engineer and, as somebody who flies around the world, I have an interest—a morbid interest, I suppose—in the programme “Air Crash Investigation”, which my wife will not watch under any circumstances, given her fear of flying. Aircraft safety has improved immensely in the past decades, and that is because there is a no-blame culture. That ties straight in with the report published this week by the Health and Social Care Committee on deaths in natal care and having a no-blame culture. We may want to get to the analysis of what went wrong and why it went wrong, but we cannot do that from a position of wondering, “Am I covering my political back? Am I covering my professional back? Can I have an honest conversation?”

We have to understand what went wrong. Things did go wrong. There cannot be a single person in the Chamber or indeed across the country who felt that everything went really well and was fine. Nobody says that. Nobody believes that. It is self-evidently not true that everything went fine. We do have to learn lessons, and it is important that we learn them through the matrix of what went wrong. As we have said, plenty of preparation was done for a flu pandemic, but that turned out not to be able to handle this pandemic. It is therefore important that we analyse the pressures caused by different diseases that can come forward. *[Interruption.]* I heard things from a sedentary position, but I did not notice what was said.

Ultimately, we have not had any sense of the SNP taking responsibility where they have responsibility—indeed, it was noticeable that the leader of the SNP just dismissed the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), mocked it and tried to put the blame back on the UK Government. Quite simply, if people are really taking notice of this debate this afternoon, they will think that it needs to be a lot more mature and serious than it has been so far.

2.15 pm

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I begin by remembering those who have lost their lives over the last year and a half. Like many Members in the House, I have lost loved ones. I am sure that many people who have lost loved ones will be watching this and will be interested to note the manner in which parliamentarians are conducting themselves.

“Gesture politics”—if the Home Secretary claims that taking the knee in a football match is gesture politics, I have news for this Government: clapping hands for the NHS rather than giving them an adequate pay rise is a gesture. Rather than providing financial assistance to those, such as NHS staff, who risk their lives, the Government are lining the pockets of their rich friends.

As a relatively new Member of this place, I was informed of the seven standards of public life—the Nolan principles. As an elected Member, I must hold

myself to these standards, as must all Members, including those on the Government Benches. Let us take a moment to examine these seven principles and see just how this Tory Government fit in. “Selflessness”: Members must “act solely in terms of the public interest.”

Instead, the Minister for the Cabinet Office used taxpayers’ money intended for covid recovery on examining attitudes towards the Union. “Integrity”: Members

“should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.”

Well, where do I start? “Objectivity”: Members

“must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit”.

But we know that judges ruled that the UK Government had acted unlawfully in awarding a contract worth over half a million pounds to a firm known to associates of Government Ministers. “Accountability”: Members

“are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions”.

Yet the Department of Health and Social Care failed to declare 27 meetings of a Minister in the other place at the outset of the pandemic. The companies involved in those meetings went on to acquire public service contracts worth over £1 billion. “Openness”:

“Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.”

In May 2020, the former Health Secretary was found guilty of a minor technical breach of the ministerial code after initially failing to declare his stake in an NHS supplier—a company run by his sister and his brother-in-law. Members must also “be truthful”. The former Health Secretary used private email accounts to communicate and award substantial covid-related contracts to his friends.

Finally, there is “Leadership”: Members

“should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour.”

I am not sure whether we are seeing that.

When we consider the record of this Tory Government, we see that they have failed to uphold a single one of the seven principles of public life to which we are bound. They have failed to act selflessly, placing the financial prosperity of their friends and colleagues above the needs of our NHS. They have lacked integrity, indebting themselves to private companies and exchanging contracts for donations and favours. They have lacked objectivity, handing out contract to their friends while some of the most vulnerable in society suffer under their policies. And now they are delaying this public inquiry, denying the country the openness, honesty and accountability that the electorate deserve.

However, we in Scotland have a choice to escape this Tory sleaze and build a fairer and more democratic future as an independent nation. Scotland taking the reins and becoming an independent nation is not just for the sake of independence: I truly believe that with independence, we can build a fairer Scotland, a Scotland that is reflective of all those who choose to make it their home. We can build a society that invests in our people; we can build a stronger, more diverse economy; and we can finally ensure that power resides in Scotland, with a Government that the people of Scotland have elected.

2.20 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this Opposition day debate, and I will address the motion—which I am not sure has anything

to do with Scottish independence, which is what we heard about in the last speech. It calls on the Government to immediately commence the covid-19 public inquiry.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The hon. Member says that the motion has nothing to do with Scottish independence, so why did the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Cabinet Office put forward a contract that specifically looked for Scottish views on independence? What was the purpose of that, if not to understand independence?

Angela Richardson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but as I said, I am going to speak to the motion that his party has tabled today for discussion.

The Prime Minister has already confirmed that an independent inquiry into the handling of the pandemic is expected to begin in the spring of 2022. This inquiry will be on a statutory basis, with full powers under the Inquiries Act 2005, including the ability to compel the production of all relevant materials and take oral evidence under public oath. Every part of the state pulled together to tackle this virus, and as we recover as one United Kingdom, we must learn the lessons together in the same spirit. That is why the Government will consult the devolved Administrations before finalising the scope and details of the arrangements of this inquiry.

Given the scale of the inquiry and the resources required to carry it out, from identifying and disclosing all relevant information to giving that oral evidence, launching an inquiry would place a significant burden on our NHS and scientific advisers at a time when focus must still be on the fight against the virus. We are still rolling out the vaccine project; we have booster jabs to get into arms in the autumn; we will have winter pressures on the NHS; and, as we have discussed in recent days, we are rightly focused on addressing all of those missed appointments for other health concerns. Our deputy chief medical officer has said that an inquiry now would be an unnecessary extra burden that would distract the NHS from the vaccine roll-out:

“Personally, would an inquiry be an unwelcome distraction for me personally, at the moment, when I’m very focussed on the vaccine programme and the vaccine programme we might need in the autumn? Who knows, I think it would be an extra burden that wasn’t necessary.”

Alec Shelbrooke: Does that really not just make the point that what the inquiry needs to do is learn lessons so that we can move forward and be better prepared next time, rather than just scoring cheap political points?

Angela Richardson: I agree with my right hon. Friend: as always, he makes an excellent point.

We have acted at pace to protect our NHS and save lives, by delivering more than 11 billion items of personal protective equipment to our key workers and helping to protect all those working on the frontline in our fight against the virus. From the onset of the pandemic, we have acted at pace to secure the PPE that we all need. We purchased over 32 billion items for the whole of the UK, three quarters of which will now be provided by British manufacturers—that is massive upscaling at speed—and we have distributed over 11.7 billion items of PPE across England since February 2020.

We have talked about the success of the vaccine roll-out, but what was amazing was securing those 507 million doses of the eight most promising vaccines through our vaccine taskforce for every corner of our Union. We can be incredibly proud not only of that but of the investment in the COVAX project.

Dave Doogan: Let me share with the hon. Lady my appreciation that the vaccine roll-out has been a tremendous success. I am not certain that any of my colleagues said that it was not a tremendous success. Does she agree, however, that it is the one thing that this Government got right in the whole pandemic, and that a vaccine never brought anybody back from the dead?

Angela Richardson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I think he is being a little bit too narrow in his focus by saying that we only got one thing right. The way we invested in that scheme was replicated across many areas. We rightly hold that up as the absolute beacon of success, but there are many other areas where we used similar sorts of processes and where we had successes. We need to keep that in mind. Our diagnostic capacity has been excellent at identifying new strains, and we have to discuss that as well.

James Cartlidge: Is it not true that our brilliant scientists also developed groundbreaking treatments such as dexamethasone that, in the long run, will be the most crucial to ensuring that those who are seriously ill recover?

Angela Richardson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those therapeutics have made a huge difference to people who are unfortunately hospitalised. In my local hospital, the Royal Surrey, the doctor who led the covid ward was seconded from treating cancer, and he has learned many things by being involved in running that ward that will be beneficial not only for the pandemic but for anything coming down the line.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is no longer in his place, but in his speech he gave several examples of companies that had no previous experience in the production of something but had turned their hand to helping us to source things that we needed for the pandemic. I would ask the right hon. Member, if he were in his place, what he would say to all the whisky distilleries in Scotland that turned their hand to making hand sanitiser. What message is he giving to them today? I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the gin distilleries in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies that got in touch with me. They had made hand sanitiser and wanted a contact to speak to at my local hospital so that they could gift that hand sanitiser to it.

The Opposition would like us to take a trip down memory lane. Well, I am quite happy to do that. I was newly elected in December 2019, and I still have my training wheels on. I think a lot of us still feel like that. I had barely given my maiden speech before we were locked down and put into this situation. When you start as a new MP, you build your team from scratch. It is not there already waiting for you. At the most difficult time, I had about 1,500 emails a day coming into my inbox, and there were three of us dealing with them. We were trying to triage them and help as many people as we could. At the same time, I was receiving emails from

[Angela Richardson]

people I had never met. I am an immigrant, and I went to a state school, so I am not connected in the way that the Opposition like to suggest about Conservative Members. It is a complete farce to talk like that, especially about a lot of those who have come in in the new intake—

Alec Shelbrooke: Discrimination!

Angela Richardson: It is. But I was receiving those emails and I knew it was my duty and responsibility, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) has said, to pass on every single one of them, because I did not know which one would make a difference. That was not up to me; my job was to pass them on. I did not know most of those people from Adam, but I knew I had a responsibility to do that. I did not know about the eight-step process that civil servants were looking at for awarding contracts. I did not know whether any of them would be successful, but I hoped they would be. I hoped that many of the companies and individuals who put forward good ideas would have some success, because that is what we needed to tackle the pandemic.

We are at risk today of politicising this and going back into the Westminster bubble. We are at risk of not acknowledging the true heroes of the pandemic. Not us politicians, as we were just doing our job, but the businesses, schools and individuals in my constituency that suddenly came up with an idea or turned their hands to something. They were so proud of creating PPE for our local hospital, and they did an amazing job. We must remember, as we look back over the pandemic and as we consider our lessons learned, the trust spirit of communities coming together. I would wager that not just in constituencies in England, but in all four corners of the nation—in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—there were people in the community who were making a difference. We have so much more in common than that which divides us, and that is how I would like to finish my speech.

2.30 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) [V]: Any private company or public organisation worth its salt will have procurement policies in place that ensure it purchases materials that provide value for money and are fit to do the job. Those working in procurement teams will be expected to maintain high standards of propriety and ethics. Contracts to supply will be based on a mature purchasing system that has been developed over years, to ensure that both the purchaser and the supplier are satisfied with the deal, which means paying a fair price for suitable goods. That is a basic, standard guideline. Any junior procurement officer would understand that from day one.

Yet the procurement process that is within the full control of the UK Government, controller of all UK citizens' tax, appears to have embarked on a poorly orchestrated spending spree, with many contracts being handed out in what can only be described as dubious fashion.

Recently, the Government quietly published the details of 40 PPE contracts awarded a year ago during the first wave of the pandemic. The value of those contracts was an eye-watering £4.2 billion. I accept the figures will be large when the Government hand out contracts, so what

is required is transparency and the utmost integrity. I am sure we all remember our maths teacher setting problems for us and saying, "I don't just want the answer. I want to see your workings." The same principle applies.

It is interesting that 365 Healthcare, a trading division of Bunzl, was handed a £151 million PPE deal on 1 April 2020 without explaining why it won the contract or what was better about its bid compared with the competition. That is not good enough, especially when, as the Good Law Project revealed, a Conservative peer had lobbied for PPE contracts on behalf of Bunzl while still acting as an adviser to DHSC. Globus Shetland landed a £14 million deal in April 2020 to provide eye protection and respirators. The firm had previously donated £375,000 to the Conservative party.

The UK Government should be held up to the highest scrutiny, and they should govern in such a way that they have nothing to fear. Who created the VIP list? What were the criteria, and what was the motive behind creating such a list? Emails revealed in a hearing during the legal challenge by the Good Law Project to the direct award of PPE contracts show civil servants raising the alarm that they were drowning in VIP requests from political connections that did not have the correct certification or could not pass due diligence. One email showed a civil servant warning that, when VIPs jump to the front of the queue, there is a knock-on effect on the remaining offers of help. Why were these civil servants ignored? Who within the UK Government thought they knew better? This is not scaremongering; the facts exist if we are prepared to look for them.

In February, the Prime Minister falsely claimed that details of all PPE contracts awarded by the Government had been published and were on the record. A few weeks later, a Cabinet Office Minister doubled down on the Prime Minister's statement, claiming that he spoke accurately. Well, they were both wrong. This leads to a lack of confidence in the Government over the pandemic. It undermines the sacrifice that millions have made and it mocks the financial hardship that so many citizens throughout the UK are facing during the pandemic. A deadly pandemic should not be an opportunity for the UK Government to line the pockets of their cronies and business acquaintances, and yet the more we scrutinise the PPE contracts awarded by the UK Government, the more the questions arise. Enormous amounts of public money have been handled without any advertising or competitive tendering process.

This simply is not good enough, and we have to understand why these mistakes have been made. To protect taxpayers' money and prevent further PPE procurement failures, we need answers. We need a public inquiry that is free from UK Government interference. Only with good procurement practice, which means learning from mistakes, can we safeguard the lives of the public and our highly valued healthcare workers, and that comes from scrutiny of and transparency from the UK Government.

2.36 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is kind of a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). His tieless, sedentary, relaxed demeanour contrasted somewhat with the demeanour of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who I admire and respect, because when I intervened on him and raised the issue of the very widespread levels of

covid currently pertaining in Scotland, it is fair to say that he did not react with what I would describe as calm statesmanship.

Only two days ago, *The Scotsman*, no less, had as one of its headlines the question, “Why does Scotland have the highest covid rates in Europe?” That is a fundamental question.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP) *indicated dissent.*

James Cartlidge: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene and defend that, he is more than welcome to the chance. He will not defend it; well, there is a surprise. *[Interruption.]* Come on then, why does Scotland have the highest rates in Europe?

Owen Thompson: Of course, *The Scotsman* is well known to be a great supporter of the Scottish National party; the hon. Gentleman might want to have a look at that. The Scottish Government do not have control of our borders. The delta variant has come in and has created so many of these cases. That is outwith the control of the Scottish Government, who are doing everything they possibly can to bring them down.

James Cartlidge: That is unbelievable. Scotland has the highest covid rates in Europe. The SNP is governing in Scotland and it will take not a shred of responsibility for this situation.

Owen Thompson *rose—*

James Cartlidge: I might give the hon. Gentleman another turn, but let us just put some facts on the table.

In June, 2,000 people in Scotland who tested positive for covid had attended a Euro 2021 event. I am no killjoy. I am quite happy that they attended. I will be attending a Euro 2021 event tonight to watch England vs Denmark. I am quite happy that many thousands of Scots made the journey to London to watch that game, in which their team performed admirably—far better than we did. The idea that the Scottish Government had no power in this matter is ludicrous. If they really thought that this variant was such a concern and that we should have closed the borders, they should not have allowed people to come down in their thousands. The evidence shows that those people are now super-spreaders of covid in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman should not pretend that the Scottish Government had no power in this matter.

Having said all that, I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, who has now returned to the Chamber, for introducing this debate about covid contracts, because it gives me the opportunity to talk about two covid contracts that are far more important than all the other guff we have heard today. Those contracts are, first, the contract that this Government—indeed, my right hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock)—signed with AstraZeneca to procure a vaccine, along with all the other ones that we took a risk on procuring before the rest of the EU. That has brought liberty to millions and saved the lives of thousands, for which we should all be grateful.

The second contract is one that we will not find a copy of, and there was no procurement for it, but again it is of fundamental importance: it is the social contract that exists between the Government and the governed

on the basis of when we are expected to give up our precious rights because an emergency exists and when—the key question for me—those rights should be returned because the emergency has passed: a fundamental point given the Prime Minister’s statement on Monday.

The first contract was the generic process through which the UK Department of Health and Social Care negotiated contracts for those vaccines and delivered them in a way exceeding almost all other major nations, delivering millions and millions of doses. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) for saying in his intervention that that was the one thing the Government got right, but, boy, that one thing is more important than anything else: it is the way out of the mess; it is the way we get out of lockdown; it is the ways we save millions of lives. And it is not just lives in the United Kingdom that are being saved; it is not just lives in every corner of this precious Union. The AstraZeneca vaccine contract was negotiated so it would be produced at cost. The significance of that enormous contractual point is that the vaccine has been spread around the developing world. We have seen 400 million Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines go into the arms of the poorest in the world. We should be incredibly proud of that. This Government have an incredibly honourable record in what has passed.

Covid was one of the greatest crises the world has faced; it was completely unprecedented, and every time we have had to make a choice we have been between a rock and a hard place, but the only way out of it, as we all knew, was through vaccines, and we made the right call at the right time, which no other Government in Europe made at that point, and we should be proud of that contract, and it is far more important than all the other stuff mentioned today.

On the second point, the social contract, this is my first opportunity to respond to the enormous announcement we heard on Monday—one I am so grateful for—that we will be returning to normal, restoring our precious freedoms. I believe in the social contract; it is implicit—we all have our own interpretation of it—but at its heart must be the idea that Government have certain powers but they can only use them in exceptional circumstances, if those circumstances are truly an emergency.

Tonight, as I said, thousands—millions—of people around part of the Union will be going to watch a football match. They will be crowded in pubs. The idea that we are still in an emergency is for the birds, and that is because of medical science, and I am profoundly grateful; it is because of the first part of the contract that I spoke about, but because of that we must start taking decisions that restore freedom and return this country back to normal.

I understand that some people are nervous, because I have had emails from constituents who voted in all ways for all parties—and in all ways in the referendum, in case anyone tries to make that link. Some people are still nervous; they worry and think we should still have to wear masks after 19 July and that the Government should still keep measures on. I have no idea where the Labour party stands on this; as far as I can see, they want us to remain in lockdown, but, as the Prime Minister said, if not now, when? Let me answer that: if not now, it is never, because the whole point of the social contract is that if we allow the state to keep that power for too long, it will not come back. The default

[James Cartlidge]

disposition of the state must be that its citizens are free and that they are only not free in exceptional circumstances, and I believe those circumstances have now passed, and that is because of the vaccine; there are still high numbers of cases, but they are generally not resulting in significant ill health, and because of that we can unlock this lockdown.

Mr Carmichael: For the record, I agree with a lot of what the hon. Gentleman says with regard to the social contract, but if his analysis is that we are genuinely out of the end of the emergency period, then surely the same question—if not now, when?—should be applied in respect of the start of the inquiry?

James Cartlidge: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman and that is a fair question. My own view is that to most of my constituents the question of how soon the time comes when, for instance, they can sing in a choir in a church or go to a nightclub or gather inside with family and friends and loved ones without fearing that they are breaking the law, is more important than how soon the Westminster bubble can get excited about something that will take months and months and months and be pored over by legal people and many others.

Alec Shelbrooke *rose*—

James Cartlidge: I was going to conclude, but I cannot resist my right hon. Friend; he spoke so well earlier, so as a prize I will let him intervene on me.

Alec Shelbrooke: Well there you go—everybody is a winner. Just to expand on the point that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has just made, I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that now is the time that we should come out of the restrictions, and things are moving to a close, but they are not over yet, because we have to get the autumn booster programme right. I would rather that that was properly in place before we move on to inquiries.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I hope he will be writing to our brilliant new Health Secretary to make that point to him.

Let me conclude by saying this. We ask ourselves when those freedoms will return and when the Government will do their part of the social contract and say, “The worst has passed, so it’s fair that you should now be able to do those things you used to do in normal life.” The answer is when those first contracts have delivered—the ones we signed with those companies, such as AstraZeneca and Pfizer, that have delivered this amazing vaccine programme that has benefited every part of the UK and every part of the world.

Every country in the UK has played a role in that. It has been a true feat of the Union, and we should be proud of it, because we are stronger together as a Union. Instead of falling back on narrow nationalism and bitterness, we stand together with a positive agenda. We have done the right thing. We have delivered an amazing vaccine programme. We have brought freedom, we have brought hope, and we look forward to better times ahead.

2.45 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If I may, I am going to return to the subject of the motion, which is about methods of scrutiny of the United Kingdom Government.

It has been clear from the outset of the current Prime Minister’s term of office that this is a Tory Government who abhor scrutiny. Shortly after he took office, the Prime Minister tried to shut down Parliament completely. He did so because he was finding its scrutiny of his Government’s hapless progress towards Brexit tiresome. But it is Parliament’s job to scrutinise, and no matter how tiresome hon. Members on the Government Benches may find the subject of the debate, it is actually rather important.

I say to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) that I suspect that his constituents, like mine, also care about how their hard-earned money is spent by his Government. They are rightly concerned because two court cases so far—there are others in the pipeline—have revealed that there are major question marks over whether this Government have abused their privilege to line the pockets of their mates.

This Parliament, when it was unlawfully prorogued, sat again only because of the intervention of the courts. That is an indication of how important the rule of law is, and one of the many reasons why the UK Government want to reduce both the scope and the availability of judicial review.

An unlawfully prorogued Parliament is dangerous for democracy, but so is a supine Parliament, and this Parliament is, frankly, a shadow of its former self. Regulations impinging on our basic civil liberties during the covid crisis have been rushed through with the minimum of parliamentary debate. It is not just urgent business regarding covid that this Government treat in a cursory fashion in this Parliament. Earlier this week, we saw a Bill with major implications for civil liberties—including the civil liberties of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, who are protesting outside Parliament this afternoon—go through without proper debate or scrutiny because of the ridiculously short time that the Government allocated to hundreds of new clauses and amendments.

The brutal fact is that this Government do not like evidence-based policy making. In fact, they do not like evidence full stop. They like to run the country and the four nations of this Union free from scrutiny or accountability. They like to do so based on their little Britain, me first ideology and the personal ambition of Ministers—Ministers who have not dared to show their face in the House this afternoon—who look only to their mates for assistance, in return for handsome remuneration and keeping records minimal.

The way in which the Government have handled the emergency covid-19 contracts typifies that approach. The sad thing for British parliamentary democracy is that it is only through judicial processes instigated by concerned citizens acting through the Good Law Project that the full scale of this Government’s chicanery has come to light. So far, the Good Law Project has brought two successful legal challenges against the Government’s handling of pandemic-related procurement, but there are quite a few more in the pipeline, and I suspect there will be more than two successes to come. The two successes so far have established that both the former

Health Secretary and the current—for now—Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster acted unlawfully. That is a really serious matter, and we would be failing in our duty as an Opposition if we did not bring it to the Floor of the House.

Over and over again, we have heard representatives of the Government try to argue that in the case of the *Good Law Project v. Minister for the Cabinet Office*, the Court did not find the Government guilty of any actual bias. That is a total red herring, however. The *Good Law Project* did not seek a finding of actual bias; it sought a finding of apparent bias, which is a well-understood legal term. The test for apparent bias in the law of England, and indeed that of Scotland, is whether the

“circumstances would lead a fair minded and informed observer to conclude that there was a real possibility, or a real danger,” that the decision maker was biased. That is the test that the Court applied.

Looking at the contract awarded by the Cabinet Office, the Court found that a fair-minded and informed observer would conclude that there was a real possibility that the Government had awarded a significant contract to a company on the basis of bias. In layman’s terms, that means that the Court found that the Cabinet Office awarded a lucrative contract on the basis of favouritism. Even in the middle of a crisis, that is illegal. It is illegal because that money is not the Government’s, but the taxpayer’s. It is my constituents’ money; it is the money of the constituents of the hon. Member for South Suffolk; and it is the money of all our constituents.

These court processes have brought to light emails that would never otherwise have got into the public domain. These emails show that the much-maligned newspaper *The Guardian* newspaper and openDemocracy were right last year when they alleged that there was institutional cronyism at the heart of the British Government.

Mr Carmichael: I very much share the hon. and learned Lady’s analysis of the work of openDemocracy and the *Good Law Project*. On the subject of emails that are only now coming into the public domain, does she agree that intervening to delay the publication of data relating to care home deaths in Scotland, as a story in *The Scotsman* indicates that Fiona Hyslop did, was, at the very least, ill advised?

Joanna Cherry: I am not aware of the detail of that allegation, but, like the right hon. Gentleman, I was elected by my constituents—for my sins—to come to Westminster to scrutinise the actions of the British Government. Just earlier this year, a whole bunch of MSPs were elected to scrutinise the actions of the Scottish Government, and that is for them to do. Today, I am focusing on this Government.

The point I want to make—I am coming to a close, because I know others want to speak—is that the sunlight that these two judicial reviews have shone on the Government’s back-door dealings shows why a judge-led inquiry is so important. Even when this Government lose in court, they cannot tell the truth about the reasons why they lost. That is why the power of a judge-led inquiry to compel witnesses and the production of documents will be so important. Not telling the truth, or indeed not telling the whole truth when on oath is a very serious matter. In a judge-led inquiry, doing so would have the sorts of repercussions that

ought to make most people—even in this Government—think twice. Witnesses are far less likely to get away with prevarication and obfuscation under questioning from lawyers, supervised by a judge. An approach to government that involves saying, “The cat ate the paper trail” or, “My redaction pen is my trusty shield” will not cut it in a judge-led inquiry. Obstructing judicial orders for documents constitutes contempt of court, and experience shows that that threat in a judge-led inquiry often brings to light records that would otherwise have found their way to the virtual shredder.

There is something wrong with British democracy, in that a Government elected by only 43.6% of the UK-wide vote can rule like a dictatorship, treating this Parliament as an inconvenience. Seen from Scotland, the situation is even worse: this Government have no mandate in Scotland, and the party that does have a mandate—the Scottish National party—is frequently treated with contempt in this House. In the past few days, we found out what most of us already suspected: the Prime Minister has so little respect for democracy in Scotland that he wants to close Scotland’s Parliament down. He does not need to worry too much about this Westminster Parliament, because he has already emasculated it.

The rule of law is our only hope. That is what the *Good Law Project*’s successful cases show: the only way that we can get to the truth of what this lot have been up to is by litigation and a judge-led inquiry. No wonder they are so desperate to limit the scope and availability of judicial review, and no wonder they fear a judge-led inquiry.

2.55 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

I start by saying something with which I hope most Members can agree: I welcome the announcement of a public inquiry and I am glad that the Government are committed to learning the lessons from one. After the most unprecedented time of our lives, when there was no prior institutional memory of what was likely to happen and the risk calculation suggested that a pandemic based on coronavirus was extremely unlikely, we none the less need to learn lessons from what we have gone through and work out how, if there is ever a future pandemic, which I hope there never will be, we ensure that we approach it differently. We must also try to learn lessons from a wider community, society and government perspective.

If we all agree with the concept of a public inquiry, that there are lessons to be learned and reviews that need to happen, and that we need to understand how to work better in future, what do we disagree on? Why are we here, other than for another debate to push forward the suggestion of Scottish independence, in all but another name? The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who is no longer in his place, said clearly that he wishes to see a public inquiry this year; the first obvious thing on which we disagree, then, is the question of when. I acknowledge that there are arguments for both—I understand and accept that there is a logic to a quick inquiry and a logic to a longer one—but to me the basic premise is that an inquiry should have the opportunity to review what has happened calmly, and not while in the middle of or even near the challenges, or while we run the risk of those challenges coming back. That does not seem to be an inappropriate approach to take.

[Lee Rowley]

We have obviously made a huge amount of progress in recent months in terms of resuming normal life and hopefully being able to move back to what we did previously when we get to 19 July, but it remains the case—I presume that, when we pull back all the hyperbole and political machinations, everyone in the Chamber would accept this—that we are not necessarily absolutely and completely out of the woods yet, and throughout the winter a huge amount of work is going to have to be undertaken to make sure that we hold the line and do not go back to lockdowns and the like, to which we do not want to go back. With that in mind, I simply do not understand how we could conclude, on the balance of risk and the weight of evidence, that the inquiry should start immediately, or nearly immediately, when that would almost be guaranteed to take capacity out of our ability to prevent or reduce the chances of any problems over the coming winter. I think most average men and women on the street would accept that.

The second thing on which I fundamentally disagree—or on which those on the Government and Opposition Benches seem to disagree—is how cautious and careful we want to be about the conclusions we draw. I want to learn lessons from this pandemic; it is clear that there are lessons to be learned. I want the Government to improve and to be as effective and as efficient as they can be in terms of their procurement and processes—I say that as somebody who served on the Public Accounts Committee for 18 months in the previous Parliament and saw lots of examples of where we need to improve—but we forget the context of last year, simply to score political points, at our peril.

On procurement, the hon. Member for Inverclyde said that any junior procurement officer would understand from day one exactly how they should approach this. Well, any junior procurement officer would understand from day one that the circumstances of last March and April were entirely extraordinary and are unlikely to be repeated. The concept of procurement is to ensure a process that takes time to get a satisfactory outcome, but if we do not have that time then we have to accept that we are undertaking a prioritisation exercise that pits time against outcome.

If there are people on these Benches, including the hon. Member for Inverclyde, who genuinely think we should have gone through the process of tender, submissions, reviews, notices of publications, cool-off periods, mobilisations and all the things that so many of us who have operated either in local government or in this place for many years know about and understand—we understand the amount of time it takes to get through them—then they should come to this Chamber right now and argue that in March and April last year we should have put out a series of call to tenders for things we needed in our hospitals, our care homes and across our society. That was simply not proportionate or reasonable.

Joanna Cherry: I do not think anyone is suggesting that there should not have been an emergency contract tendering process. What people are suggesting is that there should not have been bias in who the contracts were awarded to. That is what the courts said.

Lee Rowley: I am so grateful for the hon. and learned Lady's intervention. She just spent about two minutes talking to this Chamber about the difference between bias and apparent bias, and she has just conflated the two points to make a political point.

On the need to be cautious and careful in the conclusions we have drawn, I just say calmly and gently to Members that there were opportunities for two approaches last year, and we should be very careful about drawing a conclusion on one that would not have put us in the best place to deal with the problems we were seeing last spring in an already very difficult circumstance.

Finally, what we clearly and obviously disagree with is the utility of the inquiry. All those who are calling for the inquiry to be brought forward and asking for additional scrutiny, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) rightly went on about, do not actually seem to want to scrutinise things or to be that interested in the evidence, because they have made their decisions already. The level of hyperbole, smear, rumour, gossip and assertion in this debate, from the moment it was started in that unseemly way by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, shows that they are not interested in having a cool, calm and collected discussion about how we learn lessons, make things better and ensure the inquiry puts us in a better place if we are ever to suffer this or something similar again. They have decided what their answer is. They know what the outcome is. They know what the conclusion will be, and I certainly disagree with them on that basic premise.

Should lessons be learned? Yes, absolutely. Should an inquiry happen? Definitely. Should we do the exact opposite of what the SNP and to a lesser extent Labour have done and not seek to predetermine the outcome before we draw conclusions? I would certainly think that that was relatively sensible. Do I expect problems to be found and that things will need to be done better next time? Of course I do. That is the point of an inquiry. Will we, in a mature political democracy, acknowledge the difficulties of last spring in simply trying to ensure we had the things we needed at a time that we were never expecting and that it was never reasonable to assume would happen? Well, I certainly would, and I hope, in a cool, calm and collected way, that some of those who have engaged in hyperbole in this debate will acknowledge that too when things are not quite as political as this debate has been. Should we play political games with this? No, we should not. The one thing I agree about with the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber is that these are serious matters. They deserve to be treated with seriousness as a result.

3.3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am pleased that the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) took us back to the position pertaining to March last year, because that is a very important piece of context for this whole debate. It informs the decisions we took then: what we knew about the likely course of the pandemic and how much, in fact, we now know was probably guesswork. I will return to that, because I think it is an important piece of context for the decisions that this House took then

and the accountability we are now entitled to demand of Government for the exercise of the powers that this House gave them at that time. Effectively, we gave them the powers on trust.

My right hon. and hon. Friends will support the motion in a Division; however, by way of clarification, we will do so because of the words that SNP Members have put in it, not necessarily because of many of the arguments that they have advanced in support of it. The inquiry requires to be early. There is no real justification for a delay until the spring of next year. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) spoke about the social contract. As I said to him at the time, I very much share his analysis. In fact, it is because of that social contract, which essentially comes down to the relationship between the citizen and the state, that an early and thorough, but not overly lengthy, inquiry is absolutely necessary.

To go back to the spirit of March 2020, there was a genuine sense of national endeavour. It was a rare moment in public life, because there was a sense that—in that much misused and overused phrase—we were “all in this together”. It pains me to say that many of the things that we have seen and heard, and that we have discussed today, have done so much to damage and diminish that sense of national endeavour. The earliest possible clarity and resolution of these things—to pick up the words of the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire, the earliest opportunity to decide what is hyperbole and what is hard fact—matters for our politics as a whole.

I was here when the House voted to go to war in Iraq. I believed then, and have believed since, that that was a major strategic error in the United Kingdom’s foreign policy. That was in 2003. It took until 2016 for us to get the Chilcot inquiry report—all 12 volumes and executive summary of it. I do not think that it is hyperbole to say that by the time the report came the moment had somewhat passed. Personally, I still use that report—six volumes act as a laptop stand, and the other six ensure that the door will not blow shut if I open the window. That, I am afraid, is the danger that faces us, and it is why we have to have an early start to the inquiry. If the need for restrictions has passed, as the Prime Minister and so many of his Back Benchers have told us, surely the time has come for us to start that work.

I am sympathetic to the views of those who act as scientific and medical advisers, but the inquiry, when it comes, will have to deal with so much more than just the public health aspects. We need a bit of sympathetic and strategic planning of the time to be taken. The matter that we are talking about today—covid contracts—is exactly the sort of thing that could be dealt with in the early stages of the inquiry, which is why we should be able to start it.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): On the comments that the right hon. Gentleman makes about some of the aspects that could be considered now, yes, we are coming towards the end of the pandemic, but we are still in it. Considering that some fiscal measures will go on until at least September, does he not agree that we should wait until we can review the pandemic as a whole and then make meaningful conclusions, as opposed to trying to make quick ones now? Surely we do it right or we do it quickly.

Mr Carmichael: Actually no: it is not an either/or. I think it is eminently possible to have a quick and dirty analysis. In fact, given that we may be looking at further waves, vaccine resistance and the rest of it, I think it is very important that we do have an early analysis of some of the public health aspects. However, that should not be a barrier to a fuller and more thorough analysis of things when we have the full facts available to us. As I say, other public inquiries have proceeded in that way, and I see no reason why this one should not.

The reason why I think it is particularly important that we have an early start is that, as we read in many of the newspapers, the Government’s intention is possibly to go to the country in a general election as early as 2023. An inquiry that starts now might have a fighting chance of bringing at least preliminary decisions to this House and to the public before that point. One that starts in the spring of next year—we know that spring is a moveable feast in Government calendars—will almost certainly still be doing its work when it comes to a general election in 2023, if that is when we get it.

The point is that, in March last year, this House gave a lot of power to the Executive—unprecedented amounts of power. Those powers for the most part, actually, have been unused, but still the Government insist on holding on to them, because that is in the nature of Governments. Once Parliament gives power to the Executive, the Executive are always very reluctant to give it back. We can go back as far as the granting of the power to force people to carry identity cards in 1939. We might have thought that that would finish in 1945, but in fact it was the early 1950s before a court ruled that the emergency had passed and the carrying of identity cards was no longer necessary.

I also want this inquiry to look at what the decision-making process was to ensure that we continued with these emergency powers, because I would suggest that the moment had probably passed in September of last year and had almost certainly passed by March of this year when we renewed them for the second time. So there are questions that can be answered now. They must be answered now, and it is in the interests of politics and the standing of this place that they should be answered now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I hope that Members will now keep their speeches to under five minutes, because then everybody will get a chance to speak.

3.12 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)[V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be as quick as I can. I am just sorry I am not with you in person today.

Opposition day debates are a precious opportunity to direct the subject of debate and focus national attention on areas of utmost concern to the country, yet today the SNP has used one of these few debates to repeat last week’s attempt by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) to smear mud on the Government’s handling of PPE contracts back in 2020, hoping that some of it will stick. When we are still facing momentous decisions on how to handle covid, and with Scotland right now, as we have heard, being the covid capital of Europe, that tells us a lot about the SNP. With speech after speech starting with unsubstantiated accusations of sleaze and ending with the goal of separation,

[Jerome Mayhew]

it feels as though it is more important for the SNP to build up the UK Government as some kind of bogeyman figure to boost support for separation than to try to make Scotland better, so here we go once again.

The motion asserts that

“the Government has failed to give full details of the process”

for granting

“emergency covid-19 contracts”,

which is just not correct. SNP Members should look at regulation 32(2)(c) of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, which sets out the power used by the Government. Early on, the Cabinet Office published guidance on how procurement should take place in this framework, referring to the need to keep proper records of decisions; transparency and publication requirements; and the need to achieve value for money and to use good commercial judgement during any direct award. This guidance was published, and it is still on the gov.uk website. It is there for SNP Members to see, but they must know that because, after all, it was exactly the same approach that they used themselves in Scotland. There was one difference: in Scotland, the SNP Government tried to remove the ability of the public to question their procurement decisions by excluding freedom of information requests. They were foiled only by a parliamentary revolt. When it comes to their own record in government, this debate tells us a lot about the SNP.

As for the Government not giving details of the procurement process, SNP Members well know that the PPE offer was put through the same process by civil servants, working round the clock to save lives, no matter where the offer came from. The NAO made it clear that

“we found that the ministers had properly declared their interests, and we found no evidence of their involvement in procurement decisions or contract management.”

I hold my hands up, like so many others today. At the height of the emergency, I was personally inundated with offers to help from random businesses in my constituency. I have no idea whether they were Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Labour supporters, but I am pretty confident that they were not Scottish National party supporters. I passed them all on to the VIP inbox in the same way as other MPs, including Ministers, and thank goodness we did. One was from those at the Black Shuck distillery in Fakenham. They looked up the recipe for hand sanitiser on the World Health Organisation website. They made it themselves and donated it to local medical facilities—at least they wanted to. Was I wrong to help them to get around regulatory difficulties and pass that offer on?

Mistakes were definitely made—probably lots of them. After all, a lot of decisions had to be made very quickly and there was no precedent to follow. However, as we have heard, the Boardman review reported on that back in December 2020 and it made 28 recommendations on how the system should be improved. The Government welcomed those recommendations and agreed to implement them in full. SNP Members already know that. It feels as though they are less interested in the facts than in creating this image of a UK bogeyman in Westminster. They are less interested in improving government in Scotland than in their obsession with separation. This debate teaches us that.

3.16 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is nearly 50 years ago, long before I was born, incidentally—[*Interruption.*] It was a good decade before, I say to colleagues shouting to the contrary. It is nearly 50 years since the Poulson scandal began. It was a tawdry affair with politicians, civil servants, local government and industry all enmeshed in a network of bribery and corruption that rocked the establishment through the early '70s, yet the amounts involved, even allowing for inflation, are miniscule when compared with the moneys that have flowed through the UK Government and been disbursed to the chosen ones.

Poulson went to prison for three years for paying around £500,000 in bribes to secure building contracts. Last November's National Audit Office reports alone looked into £17.3 billion-worth of covid-related contracts, while the most recent total is over £31 billion. Those reports painted a picture of procurement policies that were simply ignored and skirted, where managing risk went out the window. They also lay bare the golden trough that was laid on for those fortunate enough to enjoy VIP status and the ear of Ministers or Government officials. Those able to use that high-priority lane were 10 times more likely to be successful in securing a contract than those unlucky enough to have to do things by the book.

Giving favoured companies and individuals VIP status and allowing them to jump over procedures put in place for mere mortals was a happy event for one pub landlord, who counted the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), as one of his regulars—so regular that he appears to have had the former Minister's mobile number and sent him a message selflessly offering his firm's services. A few weeks later, those services were indeed taken up by a medical products distributor involved in supplying the NHS. At least that particular individual appears to have done nicely over recent months, because not everyone these days can afford a £1.3 million country house.

The National Audit Office report on Government procurement in the first months of the pandemic makes for damning reading. The word “inadequate” appears too often for comfort. At various points, the NAO mentioned that there was

“insufficient documentation on key decisions”,

and that

“contracts...have not been published in a timely manner”,

as well as

“diminished public transparency...the lack of adequate documentation”,

and so on, and so on.

No one doubts the exceptional—perhaps unique—situation that the Government found themselves in last year. It is clear that emergency procedures are justified in a public health emergency. Indeed, we support them and have used them in Edinburgh, but that does not give Ministers and the Government the right to excuse themselves from basic norms of transparency and accountability and throw billions of pounds of taxpayers' money—or rather, future taxpayers' money, given the levels of borrowing needed—at companies who, in many cases, turned out to make Del Boy or even Arthur Daley look legitimate.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: With apologies, I will not, just because of time.

Some £108 million was given to a company with net assets of £18,000, another £108 million was given to a company small enough to be exempt from publishing full accounts, and £252 million was given to a company advised by an individual who was also an adviser to the UK Board of Trade. There is no allegation that those companies have done anything wrong themselves. Many would say that their job is to make money—and that they certainly did. But the Government's job was not to enrich obscure micro-companies with nine-figure sums, but to equip our public services with the equipment to do their job safely and to ensure value for money in the process.

In each of the cases, the Government have fought tooth and nail to hide behind secrecy and use the pandemic as an excuse for ignoring the norms of transparency and accountability that are there for a very good reason. That abandonment of transparency was then used by the Minister for the Cabinet Office to commission polling into attitudes to the UK Union at a cost of more than half a million pounds.

Like most people dealing with the effects of the pandemic, I struggle to see why polling aimed entirely at promoting the Government's political agenda can in any way be classed as emergency procurement. It is shabby, disreputable and a complete misuse of what should be a carefully used and monitored short-circuiting of normal procurement rules.

It is also just a little ironic that the Conservative party, which almost hourly accuses the SNP and others of being obsessed with the constitution, demonstrates its own myopic obsession with the Union by using the cover of a national and international health emergency to do so.

No one is suggesting that routes should not be available for the Government in times of real crisis to act swiftly and decisively outside what the norms are during relative periods of calm. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures, and we were and are still living in extraordinary times. But the evidence that has emerged—forced, bit by bit, out of the Government, against their will at every step of the way—shows how the measures have been abused by a cabal who appear no longer to care about probity and transparency, but instead to have been caught in the act of shifting millions out of the back door when no one was looking.

The Prime Minister has promised a “full, proper public inquiry” into the covid pandemic, which of course I welcome. But as others have said, there is no need to wait. That inquiry must also include a full and open examination of the Government's procurement policies, with every one of these deals open to public scrutiny. Those who have attempted throughout the past 16 months to hide their dealings from Parliament and from the public must be called to account for their actions and asked to explain why.

There is a way for Scots to be rid of these spivs, speculators—

Andrew Bowie *indicated dissent.*

Gavin Newlands: If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, he is more than welcome—if he is very brief.

Andrew Bowie: I might finish the hon. Gentleman's speech for him because I am quite sure that I know what his next line will be. I will let him continue to finish his speech.

Gavin Newlands: I am very grateful for that intervention; that was very useful. But the hon. Gentleman's groans were indeed correct: I am going to talk about our way out of this, which is through independence. No number of attempts from the hon. Gentleman or the Front Benchers in front of him to muddy the waters by briefing on changing the voting franchise will stop it from coming. At the end of the day, the UK Government's actions such as those we are debating today, when combined with Brexit, make Scottish independence absolutely inevitable. In their dying days, and as we witness what counts as a Government in this place, the time cannot come quickly enough.

3.23 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to be called to speak in today's debate about the steps that the Government have been taking in the last 16 months to procure lifesaving equipment and PPE for our incredible frontline staff across the country. This debate is nothing more than another attempt by the SNP to trot out its same old line seeking to smear the Government, pursue its separatist agenda and obscure attention from being focused on its own failures.

In Scotland, the SNP-led Government have been using the same procurement process for protective equipment but have failed to launch their own inquiry into the Scottish Government's handling of the pandemic. Measures that this Government have taken have undoubtedly sped up Whitehall bureaucracy while operating without the need to break, suspend or change pre-existing legislation on contract awards and procurement.

It is testament to the speed at which the Government acted and delivered PPE that even while the virus was raging and there was a global PPE shortage, every single recommendation for the procurement of PPE went through an independent eight-stage process verified by independent civil servants. That approach has meant that the UK Government have been able to procure more than 22,000 extra ventilators, 11 billion items of personal protective equipment in England and 32 billion items for the whole of the Union, protecting those workers on the frontlines of both the NHS and social care. It is therefore no wonder that the approach taken to procurement by the UK Government has been used across the world. Japan, New Zealand and Finland have used similar approaches, while the devolved Administrations in Holyrood, Cardiff and Belfast use the same techniques and purposes.

I welcome the fact that the Government have been open and transparent with their procurement process, with the independent National Audit Office acknowledging the Government's exceptional work while ensuring that Ministers were not involved in procurement processes and had “properly declared their interests”. Meanwhile, the Scottish audit found that the SNP had failed to prepare for the pandemic and was paying tens of millions more than normal for its PPE supplies.

Today's debate is nothing less than a poorly thought out move by the SNP to create more soundbites by failing to address its poor handling of the pandemic.

[Peter Gibson]

Far from intending to help save lives and protect the most vulnerable, the SNP is seeking to distract attention from a disproportionate rise in cases and deaths in Scotland and its opposition to a Scottish inquiry into the handling of the pandemic.

This Conservative Government, thank goodness, are getting on with the fastest roll-out of the vaccine that has been seen across Europe while laying the groundwork for their own in-depth, independent inquiry in spring 2022, delivering for our whole United Kingdom.

3.26 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me earlier than expected.

First, I pay special tribute to frontline workers who have worked tirelessly at the forefront of fighting this deadly virus. Our nation is indebted to all those doctors, nurses and other health workers who rose above the limits of their duty, saved lives and ensured the availability of essential services. However, I want to put on the record my thanks to one particular nurse who has never been mentioned in this place—my identical twin brother. He has been on a covid ward for the duration of this pandemic and has been unable to have a vaccine because he is allergic to them. He really has been at the forefront of this pandemic; I am proud of everything that he has done, and I cannot say so enough. People have said to me a number of times, “You have an identical twin. Who is the good one and who is the evil one?” I am a Conservative MP and he is a nurse, so I will let everyone else do the math of that one.

The public have gone above and beyond during this pandemic—whether it be brewers and distilleries making vital hand sanitisers, chemical works such as ITAC, which I visited last year, fundamentally changing its own production methods to make hand sanitisers, or firms such as Vitafoam in Heywood and Middleton, which has gone from making beds to making face masks. Everyone has fundamentally changed the way that they work, live and, in some cases, even eat, but we are all getting to the point where we are sick of Zoom and Teams. Thankfully, the way that we socialise is coming back to the forefront and we are now able to have a cautious hug, a cautious handshake and, heaven forbid, a pint over the football tonight—and it is coming home.

At the onset of the crisis, against a backdrop of unprecedented global demand, there was a real fear that we would run out of vital equipment. That is why we acted quickly to secure the medical equipment and the PPE needed for our frontline workers, securing more than 22,000 additional ventilators and delivering over 11.7 billion items of PPE to frontline workers. We have moved heaven and earth, as any responsible Government would do, to keep people safe, and we make no apology for acting at pace in securing the lifesaving equipment needed to save lives.

In addition, this Government have secured a portfolio of 507 million doses of the eight most promising vaccines. We are not only vaccinating this country but making sure that we donate 100 million vaccines to the most needy across the globe, and I am immensely proud of that. The UK has stormed ahead with its vaccination

programme, which is why we are able to unlock and why, hopefully, we are able to go back to freedom. Despite that, the SNP wanted the UK to join the EU's vaccines scheme, with the SNP's Mental Wellbeing and Social Care Minister, Kevin Stewart, slamming our decision to opt out of it, calling it “lunacy” and “irresponsible”. We need only look to our neighbours on the continent to see that we were right. By contrast, the latest figures show that, as a result of our independent vaccine programme, 86% of people in the UK have received their first dose of a vaccine and 64% are fully vaccinated, having received their second dose.

We have one of the best testing regimes in the world, with the capacity to deliver over 1 million tests a day. Instead of the Opposition attacking our efforts, our achievements should be celebrated as an example of what we can do as a truly United Kingdom.

The Opposition's claims about conflicts of interest in PPE contracts have been thrown out by multiple independent investigations, which have failed to find any conflicts of interest whatsoever in PPE procurement by Ministers. Indeed, the deputy chief medical officer said that an inquiry would be an unnecessary “extra burden” that would distract from the vaccine roll-out.

The SNP Government themselves decided to award over £500 million of contracts without competition, so perhaps the SNP should be keeping their own house in order rather than attacking our Government.

Transparency is fundamental to trust, and I will say that we have not got everything right. If I were to say otherwise, I would be lying—not just inadvertently misleading the House—which is why a fully independent public inquiry, starting next spring, will ensure the pandemic response is robustly examined. It will show where we got things right and where, unfortunately, we got things wrong, and we have got some things wrong during this pandemic because we are human. Hindsight is 20/20 and, in an unprecedented pandemic, people make the decisions they think are right at the time, and they can only be judged afterwards.

Furthermore, we have strengthened transparency around the awarding of Government contracts by bringing in new rules on Government procurement, so we can make sure that Government contracts are fully transparent and offer true value for money. We will also be publishing more information about Government contracts, so all details on the procurement process are in the public domain.

The Opposition have used every opportunity throughout the pandemic to play politics, from accusing Kate Bingham of cronyism to describing test and trace as money wasted. Labour and the SNP are more interested in sniping from the sidelines, but this Conservative Government have delivered for the people of this country. That is why we are able to reopen the economy and the country, and it is why we are hopefully moving forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There are five more Back Benchers wanting to contribute, as two have dropped out. The wind-ups will start at precisely 3.59 pm, with two contributions of eight minutes. The vote is then expected at 4.15 pm. Could Members please be mindful of the length of their contributions?

3.32 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I associate myself with some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), particularly in relation to the work being done by his twin brother and all those working on the frontline, for which we all share a great deal of respect.

I am delighted that my party has made time available today to discuss the scandal of the way in which covid-19 emergency contracts have been dished out by this Government. We have seen the Prime Minister make an artform of stripping away the processes that protect fairness and transparency, all under the cover of the pandemic. The justification has tended to be the same across the board—it has to be done in a hurry—but how far can that stretch?

I have no doubt that procuring goods at speed and scale was a challenge, and there are clearly things that had to be done to make sure it could be undertaken, but justifying the bypassing of due process in the early days is not a catch-all or an excuse for the growing list of questionable contract decisions that were not open to a competitive tender process.

The sense of right and wrong did not go out of the window when the covid virus came in. There must always be time for proper scrutiny of money spent from the public purse, and the Government must always be available to answer for their decisions. Perhaps the Government will tell us today whether the VIP channels that were so roundly criticised earlier in the pandemic are still operating today, who knew about them, who was on them or where we can find out more about them. It is only through the National Audit Office that we know the fast-track channels existed and that they vastly increased the chances of successfully landing a contract. Of over 15,000 suppliers, just 400 went through the VIP lane and one in 10 of them received a contract, compared with 0.7% of those that went through normal channels. I have plenty of talented and deserving constituents in Midlothian who would have been delighted to have that opportunity to have a leg up through a VIP channel and get a comfy Government contract, but that door was not open to them: it stayed firmly shut, unless a person happened to rub shoulders with the right people in the corridors of power. Details of those channels were certainly not advertised in the Government's guidance, and many people—including medical professionals with invaluable experience of the NHS—were not even aware that they existed.

There is room for a fast track; I do not deny that. If it is an emergency, we need to look at new ways of doing things, but it is absolutely absurd that having connections to a party of Government is the criterion that is required to be on that fast-track list. This should slow things down, not get a person to the front of the queue. There are too many serious allegations of cronyism coming out now for this to be simply brushed aside or written off as a mere coincidence. Transparency International UK has so far found contracts worth over £3.7 billion—one in five—between February and November 2020 that raised red flags. According to its report, the Government displayed

“apparent systemic biases in the award of PPE contracts that favoured those with political connections to the party of government in Westminster”.

There is an ever-growing roll call of examples of apparent cronyism coming from the excellent investigative journalism of organisations such as Byline Times, openDemocracy and others, and we have already seen successful litigation from the Good Law Project over delays in publishing contract award notices. The more we dig, the dirtier it looks, and the emergency excuse for bypassing due process begins to wear a little thin when it is used for contracts with little to do with frontline emergency, such as the £500,000 awarded illegally to Public First—old colleagues and pals of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Dominic Cummings, of course.

Nor does the speed argument explain those early contracts being given to companies with such little experience in the field, when a wealth of other suppliers had put offers in. Can the Government tell us now why crucial contracts for life-saving protection went to a Florida-based jewellery company, or to a wholesaler of sweets with no obvious experience of supplying PPE? What made the tiny vermin control operation PestFix, valued at just £19,000, the best-placed company to provide a vital £32 million order for isolation suits, and why did the former Health Secretary's neighbour and pub landlord get a £30 million contract for producing plastic vials following a few chats on WhatsApp? The Greensill scandal and the Dyson scandal demonstrate that this is a Government that are overseeing a culture of taxpayers' money being dished out through informal back channels removed from public scrutiny. If the Government have nothing to hide, I would again ask why they did not back my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill in the last term of this Parliament. We accept the need for speed, but that does not mean we cannot ask questions after the event.

Week after week at business questions, I have requested Government time to debate many of these serious concerns about the openness and transparency of the Government, but those concerns are dismissed. In one response, the Leader of the House put on his best poker face and assured me that

“We have in this country one of the most honest public sectors of any country in the world.”—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 1096.]

It is unfortunate that that does not always appear to extend to all within Government. If that is the case, the public sector is badly being let down by the Government and their culture of secrecy. This Government claim that they cannot find support for the 3 million excluded, nor can they afford to pay a decent pay rise to the NHS, yet they found a staggering, jaw-dropping £37 billion for private companies with connections to power to run a test and protect system that does not yet work properly, with consultants earning £1,000 a day. This is a system in which we now know—thanks, again, to the efforts of the Good Law Project—that yet another VIP lane existed. It is an absolute scandal.

The Government may claim that people do not care about these contracts issues because they do not affect them, but they do: people see what is going on, and they will be scunnered by it all. When faith and trust in democracy is lost, we are all lost. If the Government are innocent on all charges—except, of course, the ones on which they have already been found guilty—they need the public inquiry into covid contracts to press ahead now, not next year after the heat has gone from the

[Owen Thompson]

issue. We need to have clear channels through which to scrutinise Government actions and hold the Executive to account. Standards in public life are the foundation on which democratic institutions are built, and we need systems with which to root out anyone in public office who puts profit for themselves, their partners or their pals before the public good. If corruption is ignored, it will fester: the small cracks will become fissures, and the very foundations of our democracy will crumble.

The Government remain far too blasé in response to allegations of cronyism and this cannot go unchecked. Like the ancient Romans, perhaps they still believe themselves to be untouchable and answering to no one, especially not those outwith their VIP circles, but if they let the rot set in, the public will soon lose trust in their leadership. If they do not stand up for decency, democracy and high standards in public life, we may be watching our current modern-day Nero see the end.

3.39 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in the debate this afternoon. I shall start by wishing all my English constituents, my English staff and even my English colleagues the best of luck in this evening's semi-final. I do hope that England are successful in bringing football home to the island on which the modern game of football was created. Of course, like all the best things in the modern world, the modern game of football was invented in Scotland. Maybe next time, in Qatar in 2022, we will see the World cup going home to its real home at Hampden Park in Glasgow.

Since my election in 2017, I have become well used to the SNP's tactic in Opposition day debates of mixing rank opportunism with righteous indignation and manufactured grievance. But today, we have seen the gall and the sheer brass neck of the Scottish National party. It takes some beating for the party in government in Scotland, the party responsible for public health north of the border, to come here to this place and put forward a motion on, of all things, covid-19 in the week when Scotland was declared by the World Health Organisation to have six of the top 10 covid hotspots in Europe.

I was now going to launch into a few well-constructed jokes about the Cabinet Secretary for Health disappearing, grabbing his invisibility cloak and using the Floo Network to get to the Harry Potter Studios in Watford. However—I mean this sincerely—everybody at all levels of all the Governments in the United Kingdom has been under immense pressure over the past year and a half, and who can begrudge any Minister in any position of responsibility taking some time to spend with their family, who have borne the brunt of the pressure they have been under? So I will refrain from attacking the Cabinet Secretary for Health, and I hope he enjoys the precious time he gets to spend with his children over the next few days.

This is not a laughing matter. Scotland is already leading the continent in terms of drugs deaths, but we are now leading it in terms of covid cases contracted, and this is putting at real risk Scotland's own freedom day on 9 August. This is under a party whose leader claimed that the strategy north of the border was to

eradicate covid. That would be incredible; we would be the first country in the world to do it. The SNP seems to be having about as much success in achieving that aim as it does in improving educational standards in schools, meeting the R100 broadband roll-out deadline, establishing Welfare Scotland or developing a new farm payments system. No wonder it scrapped the Scottish Qualifications Authority, for if there was an examination in good government, the Scottish National party would get a “must try harder” and a big F.

The reverse Midas touch of the SNP is quite incredible to behold, but this is incredibly serious. We have heard Scottish National party Members talking this afternoon about test and trace. They call it the failing test and trace, but I think it is a world-leading test and trace system. Let us compare it to how test and protect is operating north of the border. Test and protect is operating at its slowest-ever rate, and in the week ending 27 June, only 29% of positive individuals were interviewed within 24 hours of appearing on the case management system. If we are to escape from these awful restrictions that everybody on these islands is living under, we must have a functioning test and trace system. Again, the SNP must try harder.

It is true that vaccination in Scotland for covid-19 continues apace, even if the roll-out has slowed in recent weeks, and we are of course forever grateful to our amazing NHS workers—in my case, in NHS Grampian—and to the volunteers and the armed forces for their tireless efforts and the speed at which they are building the wall of protection that will get us back to normal. But there is a certain irony that the one part of the covid response that is working well in Scotland at the minute is the part that is solely as a result of Scotland being part of our United Kingdom. It is because this UK Government took the decisions they did, moved at the pace they did and invested what and when they did that we are leading the world in terms of vaccination, allowing us to dream of a day when masks are something we save for guising at Halloween and when we need never again use that awful term “social distancing”. Not that we would know any of that from a party that is reluctant even to use the full name of our world-leading Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, should it in some way indicate that the people of Scotland are benefiting from our working together as one United Kingdom.

I could accept all that. After more than 10 years of being in Scottish politics at some level or another, I would expect all of that from a party for whom taking responsibility is anathema—indeed, I have concluded that the Scottish National party wants to take Scotland back into the EU only because, without Westminster, it needs somebody else to point the finger of blame at for its mistakes—but this motion really takes the biscuit. It takes the hypocrisy that we are so used to from the Government in Edinburgh to whole new levels—and, for me, whole new levels of incredulity.

For a party that refuses to deliver on a manifesto commitment to hold a public inquiry into covid in Scotland to come down here and call for a covid inquiry in this place, and for a party that wants to see an end to the UK, and that uses every single opportunity afforded to it to emphasise the differences between our two nations to seek to break up this country, suddenly to suggest that it would be untoward or improper for the

Scottish Government to hold their own inquiry before the UK Government did the same, is quite a change of tack, particularly when that party usually grabs any chance to show that it is leading the United Kingdom or moving faster in some way.

That party has also come here today to complain about the process for issuing emergency covid-19 contracts. As has been said, this country, along with every country and every Government in the world, was dealing with an unprecedented situation a year and a half ago. We were moving heaven and earth to protect the British people the length and breadth of our country. We know that Governments moved faster to try to protect people, because the Scottish Government did exactly the same thing. They awarded over a billion pounds in covid contracts without tender and with no competitive process, including, but not exclusively, for call centres, PPE, housing and care contracts, IT support, hand sanitiser and consultancy work.

It is astounding to hear SNP Members complain that MPs came to this place and represented to the Government companies, organisations and individuals in their constituencies who had ideas, mechanisms or inventions that could ease the pressure on the NHS and save lives. Surely Members of Parliament are supposed to represent businesses and individuals in our constituencies who could help in a crisis. That is certainly what I did when an individual caught me at a rather inopportune moment. I happened to be giving blood at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in Foresterhill when a constituent recognised me from across the room and started telling me all about his great idea for a new ventilation system. He had me tied to the spot, I am afraid, and I was all ears. I went on to represent his company and his ideas to Ministers. I have no idea whether his idea or invention was successful, but I know that I did what I should have done and took that idea to the people who could make a difference, so that it could save lives in this United Kingdom.

Goodness me, was I quite amazed to hear SNP Members raising the use of private emails to conduct Government business? That from the Scottish National party, whose leader's office last year advised people that the First Minister would use only her party email address and that urgent matters should be sent only to her private SNP account, not her Government account. That from the Scottish National party, whose Ministers now seem to communicate exclusively by Signal and whose use of public money to further their own political ends is blatant and routine.

The time for inquiries will come. There will undoubtedly be questions for senior members of both Governments, who were thrust into an impossible and unprecedented situation and urged to act quickly and urgently for the public good. However, this House, and indeed this country, should have no truck with, and should take no lectures in good government from, a party that is failing Scotland and failing the Scottish people and whose arrogance in power grows by the day. There is less than five years until the next Scottish election. For the sake of my country, it cannot come a day too soon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There is less than 10 minutes left and there are three people to contribute, so—

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): That's shocking.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I did try to indicate, but please be mindful of that if we want to get everybody in.

3.49 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): For someone who does not believe that this debate should be taking place, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) trundled on for 10 minutes, although it felt like much longer. He criticises the Scottish Government—a Scottish Government, of course, overwhelmingly endorsed a mere eight weeks ago—when his own party cannot even win a by-election. Good luck to it with trying to hold its position in Scotland. The people of Scotland see through it.

We have undergone the most serious health pandemic of our times. Of course, the worst is not over, but we still hope that the future continues to improve, even as so many of us continue to mourn our lost loved ones. However, during dark times—the darkest times—democratic accountability and scrutiny of Government must continue. That is perhaps even more important in dark times than in normal times, given that when the populace is distracted by seismic events that touch their lives in such personal ways, a Government who realise that may be tempted to abandon the standards so essential in public office, in the belief that the usual corners may be cut, even when the public purse is involved. During dark times, as in all times, the Government must be seen to act with the utmost probity, disinterested in their dealings and with a laser-like focus on protecting their civilians. That is exactly why the bad smell permeating deals done and contracts signed on PPE and covid is so very unfortunate.

The list of potential wrongdoing when it comes to this Government would be far too long for me to outline in a very long speech, much less such a short one. There is simply not time to go through the catalogue of serious concerns. Suffice it to say that, with NHS contract tendering; the £23 billion spent on Test and Trace; the former Prime Minister's lobbying for Greensill Capital, which *The Guardian* indicated today was given access to covid loans without detailed scrutiny, with Ministers asked to “nudge” the deals “over the line”; contracts for pals; and a Government shrouded in chumocracy while 3 million people across the UK have been left with no support at all, the bad smell is overwhelming. Let us not even start again on the money spent on testing the strength of the Union, which should have been spent on fighting the pandemic. All that gives this Government's dealings a very bad smell.

In view of all that, I can well understand the desire to delay and dither over a public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic and the subsequent desire to ensure that any of the inquiry's findings are buried until after the next general election, but that is simply not good enough. Let us have the public inquiry now, without delay, so that people across the UK can decide for themselves whether this Government have served them well during the darkest of our times, and so that the people of Scotland can decide for themselves whether the Government on offer from Westminster are the best they deserve. We in the SNP believe that the people of Scotland deserve better and must have better, and they will when they choose their own future.

3.52 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): This pandemic has been a time of extreme hardship and suffering for millions of people. In my constituency in east Leeds, many have lost loved ones, and others, who were struggling to make ends meet even before this crisis, have fallen into deeper poverty. But it has been a very good crisis for some—for British billionaires, who increased their wealth by £100 billion in the last year; for outsourcing giants such as Serco, pocketing money that should have gone to our public services; and for those with friends in high places in the Conservative party who have got their hands on huge covid contracts.

The one sure-fire way to make money over the past 18 months has been to be a mate of a Tory Minister. Access to the so-called VIP lane made someone 10 times more likely to win public contracts. Ministers have been found to have broken the law with contracts. A world-leading anti-corruption body says that one in five Government covid contracts has corruption red flags. Over £800 million in covid contracts went to donors who had given the Tories £8 million in total—a very good return for those in the know, with the inside track. Those super-rich donors hand over huge funds and expect public contracts and favours to come their way in return. The Conservative party, I am afraid, is up to its neck in it.

Because the Tory party is using the system to help super-rich donors with covid contracts, it thinks that that is what other people are up to, too. We have seen a Tory MP this week implying that the British Medical Association's medical advice to wear masks is because of lobbying from mask manufacturers, and Ministers have admitted that they are refusing proper sick pay because they think that people out there would abuse the system. Is that not telling? It is a telling insight into Ministers' thinking: the assumption that everyone else is as dodgy and corrupt as they are—that is why Ministers think that.

Polls show that huge swathes of the population believe that the Conservative party is corrupt, and the stench of corruption has grown ever stronger through this crisis. They have been using a crisis where tens of thousands have died needlessly as a money-making scheme for their mates and their super-rich donors. The link between big money and our politics has been exposed more than ever during this crisis. Of course, many will hope to get their reward with directorships and comfortable jobs when they leave this place, but this is rotten to the core. It is undermining confidence in our democratic system and we need to put an end to it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume his seat no later than 3.59 pm, I call Neale Hanvey.

3.55 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), but it is distasteful to listen to the braggadocious glee from the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) when he celebrates the increased rate of covid cases in Scotland—

Andrew Bowie: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could you advise me on how we can correct the record, because the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and

Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) has distorted what I said only a few minutes ago? Never once did I express any glee at the record number of cases on the SNP's hands in Scotland. I expressed my concern at what was happening in Scotland. He should withdraw that comment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has put it on the record.

Neale Hanvey: The Prime Minister demonstrated today a complete lack of comprehension of the fundamental principles of infection management. Kate Bingham's achievement in bringing vaccines to market I have rightly celebrated in this place and Westminster Hall, but it is not the only game in town. The Prime Minister has bet the farm on vaccines, but the control and suppression of this virus relies on robust surveillance, treatment and control measures. All of that is at risk of being undone, with £3 billion wasted on tests that are absolutely unreliable. The Innova lateral flow device scandal presents a significant concern across three specific domains: public health, the impact on the domestic diagnostic sector, and a lack of contracting transparency and mounting concerns about chicanery.

On Monday 21 June, at the Dispatch Box, the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), boasted that the Government were “unleashing the potential” of the constituent countries of the UK “by backing British industry”. During that contribution, he derided China for “trade-distorting practices”. The experience of the domestic diagnostic industry differs significantly from that rhetoric. During a covid briefing on 29 June hosted by the Minister for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care, it was asserted that the Government's position on the United States Food and Drug Administration's class 1 recall of dangerous and deadly Innova tests was attributed to the FDA's over-reliance on the manufacturer's data. Furthermore, it was asserted that the UK Government are utilising public resources at Porton Down in efforts to disprove the Chinese manufacturer's own data, which suggests that these tests are unsuitable for asymptomatic screening and have been ever thus, and are not endorsed as sensitive to the prevailing delta variant. On 15 March, in a tweet to UK firms Omega Diagnostics and Mologic, Lord Bethell, the Minister for innovation and public health, promised 2 million daily lateral flow—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now come to the wind-ups. I call Stephen Flynn.

3.59 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I was sitting on the Back Benches earlier listening to a lot of the debate and deciding on how I would open my remarks on this most important of topics, and then my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed) got to her feet and rightly highlighted the Nolan principles—the seven principles of public life—with which we should all be familiar. I am sure some Conservative Members are not overly familiar with them, given their record. It made me think about what the public expect from their politicians, and the key to that is of course trust. In Scotland, in my lifetime, trust has changed in politics and politicians. The Labour party was once the panacea of politics in Scotland; it was where we all

wanted to be, but of course it then took us into an illegal war in Iraq and that trust was eroded. The Liberal Democrats had much support in Scotland and had the trust of a lot of younger people, but that trust was eroded when the coalition Government U-turned on tuition fees, something they gleefully supported.

The question of trust in the Conservatives in Scotland in my lifetime is a difficult one, because they have not won an election in Scotland since 1955. There is a particular reason for that, and it goes to the heart of the debate here today: the people of Scotland simply do not trust them, and the situation in relation to covid contracts is a perfect example of why the people of Scotland do not trust them.

We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) about the endless list of contracts awarded by the Government that have gone to their friends, family, donors and pub landlords, who have all managed to make a quick buck out of this pandemic—incidentally, I should add that that is taxpayers' money, before Conservative Members forget. We must not break the trust that people should have in us, but Conservatives simply do not care.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said earlier when she eviscerated the Government in relation to their record on covid contracts, it is not just that these contracts have been handed out from a dodgy perspective—it is not just that they have gone to people with no expertise or to companies made up on the hoof—but that two of them have now been found to have been awarded unlawfully, and one of them in particular.

There was a particular moment in this debate when we were told that none of this was to do with Scottish independence and we should not be talking about that, but one of those contracts was awarded on the basis of polling the views of the people of Scotland and their attitudes to the constitution. Shame on Conservative Members, because that is not how public money should have been used during this pandemic. Imagine the indignation, the anger, the rightful fury of the people of Scotland if it had been the Scottish Government who had done just that. It is an appalling use of public money, and Conservative Members should be ashamed of having done that.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, but it is even worse than he has outlined. We know this spending took place—it was admitted in court by an official from the Cabinet Office—yet last week in this House the Government sought to continue to deny that it happened, and we have not had one word of contrition or an acceptance that this happened; now is the opportunity for the Government to do so.

Stephen Flynn: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, because there have been opportunities, not just last week but throughout our debate today, for Conservative Members to stand up and clarify exactly why it happened, but they have failed to do so. It is incumbent upon the Minister to do so when she follows me in this debate.

But if the Conservatives are unwilling to do that, they should be willing to do one other thing: finally agree that a public inquiry must take place. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) says that it is. When is it happening? Is it happening now? It should happen now. Some Conservative Members

argue that it is not happening now because we are still in the middle of the pandemic, but one of them said today that the emergency is over. So if not now, then when? The hon. Member for Macclesfield is wearing his mask; in two weeks, he will not have to. We will be told that the pandemic is almost over at that point. Yet the Government will not start a public inquiry because they are afraid of accountability, transparency and the consequences for them in the polls.

Ultimately, the people are watching—in particular, the people of Scotland. We will be at a crossroads once again in the not-too-distant future in relation to the constitutional settlement on these islands. The people of Scotland will have the opportunity to decide their future once again. Is this incompetent, sleazy and corrupt Government the limit of their ambitions? Absolutely not, and when they have the opportunity to decide, they will choose to take a different path. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) shakes his head. If he is not in agreement, he can get his Prime Minister to go to the polls any day, any time, and the people of Scotland will show him an alternative way.

It is not just about the cronyism; it is also about the handling of the pandemic. I have been appalled by some of the remarks from Government Members in relation to the situation in Scotland at the moment. We even had a Member at the back blaming it on Scotland fans going to the football. Of course, the only people who were not allowed to travel in the UK were football fans. I find the remarks that we have heard appalling.

James Cartlidge *rose—*

Stephen Flynn: The hon. Member had the opportunity to say what he said earlier, and he can reflect upon it. The truth of the matter is that the situation in Scotland is as it is because Government Members let the Johnson variant in. They brought the delta variant to our shores. They could have closed the door, and they chose not to.

James Cartlidge: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could you advise me, as you did my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), how I correct the record? I did not at all blame Scottish fans. I said that personally I was happy for them to travel and to celebrate. The point I made, sir, was that SNP Members were saying that it was our fault that Scotland now has the highest rate of covid in Europe, but had they wanted to do something they could have stopped fans travelling.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That is not a point of order for the Chair, and I hope that this device will not be abused.

Stephen Flynn: The record is clear, and the hon. Member should reflect on his remarks. When the Scottish people look at it in totality—the cronyism, the corruption, the mishandling of the pandemic, and the bringing of the Johnson variant to our shores—they will say that they have had enough. The people of Scotland will vote for independence.

4.8 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate and I associate myself with the remarks and the tributes that have been paid to all those who have lost their lives, and the

[Penny Mordaunt]

incredible work that so many have done to help in the pandemic. I was particularly moved by the story of the twin brother of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford). My twin brother started the pandemic as cabin crew for Virgin Atlantic, and in fact still works for it, but he volunteered at the Nightingale Hospital London and then retrained as a phlebotomist to help with the blood plasma work and antibody work for the NHS. I am incredibly proud of him, of all my constituents and of everyone across the country who has done such an amazing job in the pandemic.

At the heart of all the speeches have been core questions of those in public life—that we should take responsibility, fulfil our duty and act in the public interest. This debate is the latest in a long line of debates and urgent questions on this topic. The Minister for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), set out yet again the facts and figures, but I remind the House that we are talking about goods and services that included 32 billion items of personal protective equipment and 15,000 ventilators with enormous numbers of component parts. It was a massive and highly complex procurement at a time when the rest of the world was doing the same. Against that backdrop, less than 1% of that PPE was not fit for purpose. I pay tribute to all those who made that happen.

We were focused on getting the right spec in the right volumes to the right people in the right timeframe. We followed up thousands of offers of help and the same processes were applied to all expressions of interest. Although SNP Members have collective amnesia, they were on the daily calls and fully know the nature of the hotlines that we set up. All this information is in the public domain and subject to scrutiny. Procurement rules were not suspended. The efforts made and the motivation behind them were recognised by many public bodies that hold us to account. They were recognised by the National Audit Office in its November report and even in the judgment in respect of Public First. Are there lessons that could be learned? Yes. Could we have been better prepared? Yes. Were we late with our paperwork? Yes—but as a procurement officer at the Cabinet Office said, “I’d rather be late with my paperwork than a nurse go without PPE.”

We have been subject to an enormous amount of scrutiny: two PACAC reports; 15 Public Accounts Committee reports; one Treasury report; one report from the independent auditor; three Boardman reports; one review from the Committee on Standards in Public Life; one review from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards; one review from the House of Lords Commissioner for Standards; two reports from the Information Commissioner’s Office; and one joint inquiry from the Health and Social Care Committee and the Science and Technology Committee. All those, as well as the inquiry that the Prime Minister has announced. We are also accountable before the law; it is ironic that I cannot talk about many of the contracts people would be interested in because they are subject to legal proceedings.

I always take pleasure in taking part in SNP debates; I have done a few and am beginning to notice a pattern. I have been called here previously to defend the UK’s position on jobs, while the SNP has dismissed the

545,000 Scottish jobs that are reliant on Scotland’s being part of the UK; I have been called here to discuss the importance of hypothetical EU funding mechanisms, while the SNP dismisses the very real United Kingdom dividend to the taxpayers of Scotland of £2,000 per person; and in another debate the SNP sought to be the champions of democracy while they ignored the result of two referendums. Although it might be a surprise to some that, in a week when we have had more revelations about the Scottish Government’s own lack of financial propriety and literacy, the SNP has called a debate on such schemes, it is not a surprise to me: I think it shows admirable consistency, as well as a complete lack of self-awareness with a large helping of assumed piety.

In addition to the many things we have done in government to improve transparency and procurement, let me tell the SNP and the House what we have not done. We did not hire to run our testing service, at the cost of £10 million, a firm that promptly furloughed its staff; the SNP did. We did not ignore firms that offered PPE to NHS Scotland; the SNP did. We did not provide guarantees to a company to the tune of £5 million per job to be secured—yes, £5 million per job—and then fail to secure those jobs; the SNP did. We did not secure loans without due diligence; the SNP did. Our National Audit Office did not say that we had no framework for working with private companies and, indeed, needed urgently to establish one; Audit Scotland did say that of the Scottish Government. We are not having to face replacing lost public funds from capital budgets—money earmarked to build schools and hospitals; the SNP is.

We did not ignore recommendations made by our auditing body, unlike the SNP, which has been criticised for ignoring Audit Scotland’s reports for the past three years; and we did not ignore inward investors who wanted to put their own money into Scotland and instead give preference to another firm that could do so only with public funds, as the media report this week.

If SNP Members want to start to gain some credibility on these matters, I suggest two things. First, they should implement the recommendations of their own scrutiny bodies and place information on deals, guarantees and dealings with private companies—including in respect of the Gupta Family Group—in the public domain.

Secondly, I want SNP Members to think about the context in which we are having this debate. This week, we learned that Scotland contains six of the 10 places with the highest infection rates in Europe. On average, Scotland’s schoolchildren have missed 119 days of schooling in this pandemic, and those from deprived backgrounds even more so. A massive 216,000 operations have not taken place in NHS Scotland. We have a huge catch-up job to do, and we must ensure that we can keep a vaccine programme on track.

We all face these issues and challenges, and we will meet them better if we meet them together. For our part, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will continue to engage with Scottish colleagues. Our four-nation NHS will continue to work together, as will our chief medical officers. My fellow Ministers and I—all comprehensive school educated, by the way—will come to this House to be held to account, and we will continue to reject the distracting, delusional and divisive debate from the SNP. We will do the responsible thing. We know our duty to the Scottish people, and we will always be guided by what is in their interest. I hope that, one day, the SNP will do the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Please observe covid regulations when voting.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 263, Noes 365.

Division No. 46]

[4.15 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn

De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Ferrier, Margaret
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan

Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah

Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qaisar-Javed, Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeter, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
Richard Thomson

NOES

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

Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evensnett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James

Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian

Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherylyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John

Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert

Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wigin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Maggie Throup and
David Rutley

Question accordingly negatived.

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

EU Settlement Scheme

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are now seamlessly moving on to the next debate, the second Opposition day motion on the EU settlement scheme. I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected amendment (a) in the name of Wendy Chamberlain. I call Stuart C. McDonald to move the motion.

4.25 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the end of Freedom of Movement following the UK's exit from the European Union; notes the enormous contribution EU nationals make to the UK economy and society, including in response to the ongoing covid-19 pandemic; regrets that the Government did not grant automatic right to remain to EU nationals despite assurances made during the EU referendum campaign; welcomes the fact there have been over six million successful applications to the EU Settlement Scheme; but further notes with concern that inevitably, many thousands of EU nationals have not applied; regrets that provision in relation to late applications will not prevent injustices and the loss of rights of many thousands of EU citizens; calls on the Government to recognise that the ongoing health emergency has also impacted on outreach work and the ability of EU nationals to apply, and to respond to this either by automatically granting Settled Status or by scrapping or extending the 30 June deadline; and further calls on the Government to introduce physical proof of Settled and Pre-Settled Status and to work with the Scottish Government on agreeing a transfer of immigration powers to allow the Scottish Government to create a Scottish visa or Scottish migration system.

I am grateful for opportunity to introduce this debate on the EU settlement scheme and I am very grateful to hon. Members across the House for taking part, especially as some minds may be starting to drift towards Euros of a different sort just a few miles away in north-west London.

The starting point, and I hope a matter of unanimity across the House, is what our motion says in relation to the enormous contribution that our EU nationals have made to every part of the UK: to our economy, our public services and culturally. I hope we also all agree that we want these EU citizens to stay. That is why we selected this topic for debate: to allow us to press the Government on whether their settlement scheme really reflects those goals as well as it could, and what we feel are the obstacles making it harder for some to stay than it should be. It gives us the opportunity to ask what happens now that the EU settlement scheme deadline has passed and what can be done to protect those who, as things stand, have lost their rights.

In a moment, I will get into the nuts and bolts of the rather messy situation we find ourselves in, but it is important to start by making clear what happened last week and why. Last Thursday morning, at the stroke of midnight, thanks to policy choices made by successive Conservative Governments, tens and almost certainly hundreds of thousands of people to all intents and purposes lost their rights to live, work, study and enjoy family life here in this country. It does not matter how long they have been here or whether they really have any home elsewhere, the clock struck midnight and these people became subject to the full force of the hostile environment. The first question for the Minister is whether he will tell the House what estimate the Home Office has made of the number of those who have failed

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

to apply prior to the deadline. If we are to have a proper discussion about the scheme, surely that is the least of the information the Government must provide?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The difficulty for the SNP in this sort of debate is that while they are quite right to talk about some teething problems relating to our leaving the EU, will those problems not be compounded a thousand times more if the United Kingdom was broken up? For centuries Scots have settled here. Would it not be absurd if, Scotland having left the United Kingdom and joined the EU, Scots had to apply for settled status here or we had to apply for settled status in Scotland? What is the answer?

Stuart C. McDonald: The answer, quite simply, is that there is a country that the right hon. Gentleman may be aware of called Ireland, which is part of the common travel area and enjoys full blown free movement of people from the rest of the EU. There is absolutely no question of people having to apply for visas to get across borders and so on. It is perfectly possible and there would be absolutely no need for any such thing.

Sir Edward Leigh: I thought the hon. Gentleman would make that answer. That settlement was made in 1921. The difficulty for the SNP is that it would have to reapply as a new state to join the EU. It is very unlikely that the EU would bend all its rules, as happened in 1921 in Ireland, so it would be in grave difficulty. I am afraid the SNP has to answer that point. If breaking up the EU is so bad, breaking up the UK is even more difficult.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am not going to go down the rabbit hole the right hon. Gentleman is trying to take me down. All the indications we have had from people involved in the European Union and from other member states is that they would be perfectly happy to welcome an independent Scotland into the EU and I very much look forward to the day that that happens, but I want to get back to the subject of this debate, which is the status of EU citizens who are here today.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I know the SNP wants to present this image of a hostile environment and how the settled status scheme is not working. However, the experience of actual people is completely the opposite. Only this morning I had an email from a constituent who missed the deadline for a technical reason, and my office helped get her application in. This morning she received an email from the Home Office confirming that all her rights are protected while her application is processed. The scheme is working well, and the picture the hon. Gentleman paints just is not true.

Stuart C. McDonald: I will come back to that, and I acknowledge there has been significant success with more than 6 million people applying for the scheme, but yesterday I met the 3 million which, of all organisations, is the one that knows exactly what is happening on the ground and its implications. I will come to all sorts of problems that still exist in the scheme, and the whole purpose of this debate is to try to iron out those problems and to see what we can do to fix them.

The point I was making is that tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people are in a pretty difficult situation because of the fundamental design of this system. Whether it is tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands, it is an extraordinary, painful and awful moment.

On Thursday morning, in contrast to the hon. Gentleman, I received my first email on this subject from somebody who applied late: “My mother is quite distressed, as she needed to apply for settled status by 30 June but did not think it applied to her, maybe in denial. She needed someone to help fill out the online forms and upload the documents. The OTP”—one-time PIN—“code did not arrive on her very old phone and, as well as tech issues, she has recently applied to renew her Italian passport. My dad thinks her Italian ID card will be sufficient. I just cannot believe that someone who has been here for 50 years and is married to a UK citizen has to go through this process. Also she is very worried that her cancer drug will be withdrawn.”

I am hopeful that the situation will be resolved, in exactly the way the hon. Gentleman was able to resolve it for his constituent, but what cannot be undone is the stress, anxiety and hurt that this whole process is causing people. That is just one of hundreds of such cases that we can all expect to see in the weeks, months and even years ahead. The vast majority of people will find it appalling, because it is unnecessary.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): An Italian constituent has written to me and is very concerned about the lack of physical evidence, which they think will be problematic for future mortgage applications, banking, work and the rest of it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to look at this and make sure that people have physical evidence of their settled status?

Stuart C. McDonald: That is a good point, and it is not something I will speak too much about today, although I have spoken about it previously. I know other hon. Members will make that case, and they have my full support.

The scheme did not need to operate like this. There were different options available to the Government that would have prevented this disastrous cliff edge, or at least alleviated its worst impacts, and for which hon. Members on both sides of the House have advocated. My party passionately supported continued free movement. Alternatively, along with many Members on both sides of the House, we advocated a declaratory system in which an Act of Parliament would simply have declared that EU citizens resident at the required date retained the same rights as before, which would have provided far greater security and peace of mind. That, of course, is essentially what was promised during the EU referendum.

The now Prime Minister, Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster all signed a pledge:

“There will be no change for EU citizens already lawfully resident in the UK. These EU citizens will automatically be granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK and will be treated no less favourably than they are at present.”

Tell that to my constituent and the many others currently without their rights. That promise was simply reneged upon, despite its three authors occupying all the roles in

Government required to deliver it. One of them should be at the Dispatch Box to explain exactly why the promise was not kept.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): May I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on his point about causing stress to constituents across the United Kingdom, which he made rather than welcoming the 6 million people who have applied and the 5 million who have settled status, which is the proportionate response? Will he inform my constituents and his that they are very likely to get settled status, rather than scaremongering as he currently is?

Stuart C. McDonald: I am absolutely not scaremongering. I spoke for about two hours yesterday to the 3 million, which I have repeatedly asked the Minister to meet, and I do not think he has yet. The organisation receives reports from EU nationals across the country who are encountering difficulties, some of which I will set out. I have already welcomed the fact that more than 6 million people have applied, and I will say a little more about that in a moment. I am not scaremongering; I am passing on what EU nationals are telling the 3 million and me.

On the other hand, the Government are saying that we should shout about and celebrate the success of the EU settlement scheme. As I have said, I praise the civil servants who have worked hard to ensure that more than 6 million applications have been processed and granted. The reason why tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people have fallen through the gap is not down to the civil servants, albeit that there have inevitably been rough edges and problems because of the fundamental flaws in the decisions made by the Home Secretary and her predecessors. In essence, they opened a horrible big trapdoor and they now want us to thank them for the fact that only tens or hundreds of thousands of people have fallen through it—potentially into the hostile environment.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am particularly concerned about the status of children, many of whom have grown up in the UK: their status is unclear and it is even unclear whether they are British citizens. There is also a big loophole when it comes to pregnant EU citizens who have applied to the scheme. The status of their yet-to-be-born children is really unclear. The situation is full of loopholes and flaws.

Stuart C. McDonald: Lots of questions and loopholes have been identified. The fact that the Home Office had to issue hundreds of pages of guidance, even in the two or three weeks prior to the end of the transition period, shows that the issue has been difficult for it to address.

I come to what this debate should be about, which is looking forward to what can be done. We absolutely maintain that even now a declaratory scheme would be far preferable—people would still apply to the settlement scheme to prove their status, but at the very least the huge uncertainty would be removed and security would be delivered for them. Short of that, surely to goodness the transition period should be extended. There are a million reasons why that would be sensible—not least covid. Outreach work has been curtailed and embassies and scanning centres have been closed. People are not ready.

It is important to remember that this is not just a question of EU nationals being ready, but of employers, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, Department for Work and Pensions staff, landlords, local authority staff and bank staff having to be ready and NHS staff having to understand. As I said, the Home Office itself was still pumping out hundreds of pages of guidance in June and making tweaks to the system. I do not think the Home Office was ready for the end of the transition, and I do not think it can expect all those other organisations to be ready either. As I will mention, there is also an enormous backlog of cases.

Alternatively, the Government could at least remove the requirement for a reasonable excuse and keep the scheme open for the duration. It has to be open anyway, both for late applications and for people with pre-settled status who then go on to try to secure settled status. Why not simply allow people to come forward as it becomes necessary to secure their rights?

To be absolutely fair, the guidance on the reasonable excuse provision is reasonably generous, and more generous than it could have been, so I thank the Minister for that. But the very existence of that test plants huge seeds of doubt in people's minds—if I have any doubt about whether my excuse will be accepted, am I putting myself at risk of enforcement action? I say that we should continue to encourage people to come forward, not discourage them.

That last proposal would be better than nothing, but it would not protect people from the impacts of the hostile environment in the meantime. That hostile environment is supposed to be undergoing an end-to-end review in the light of Wendy Williams's Windrush report. The fact that the review has not yet been completed should be another ground for extending the grace period. More fundamentally, the hostile environment should be entirely suspended until the review takes place and its findings are implemented. All these are real, sensible, constructive options, open to the Government, that would ease the pain of the process. I hope the Government listen.

I turn now to a tiny number of examples of how difficult, technical and confusing the process has become. I am highlighting what groups such as the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and the 3 million are telling me. I do that to press the Minister for a response and to underline the case that there has at least to be an extension to the transition period.

First, I turn to the question of those who applied before the deadline but are still waiting for a decision. How on earth is it that, as I understand it, the backlog has risen to 570,000 cases? Back in October 2019, the resolution centre was able to conclude just over 400,000 cases, but in each of the three months up to the deadline, as I understand it, fewer than half that number were concluded each month, despite additional staff having been drawn in from the Post Office and elsewhere. Is that backlog not enough in itself to justify an extension?

Can the Minister tell us how many applications received in June were dealt with in the five-day target? According to EU settlement scheme statistics, applications from children comprise 15% of the total, with decisions on 25% of applications still pending; they also comprise around a quarter of applications pending for over three months. Why is that?

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

In theory, the full rights of people with outstanding in-time applications are protected while they wait—and that, of course, is welcome. But what is the reality on the ground? Already, all sorts of reports are coming in to representative groups about employers and landlords—and also the Home Office's own Border Force staff—getting the checks wrong. That does not surprise me, because the situation is messy.

Some people with outstanding in-time applications will provide their prospective employer or landlord with a certificate of application to show that they have made the application. Some will provide a physical certificate, printed off, that leads to the employer contacting the employer checking service or the landlord checking with the landlord checking service. Others still will not have a certificate of approval but just an acknowledgement email; that, too, should lead to the checking service being consulted.

But in the last few days, the Home Office has started sending digital certificates of application to avoid the need for anyone to use the checking services, which can take a couple of days. The applicant will provide a code to the prospective employer or landlord, and when that is input into the system it should confirm that an application is outstanding. I hope hon. Members followed that, because all of us in this House are employers, but given that the guidance was issued only a couple of weeks before the deadline, I suspect that there are huge swathes of employers and landlords out there who do not have the first clue what somebody means when they approach them for a new tenancy or a new job and say, "Here's my digital code. This should tell you that I have an application outstanding."

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am absolutely delighted to hear this speech, because the hon. Gentleman is explaining the complexities of leaving a Union that we were part of for about 40 years, yet somehow he seems to assume that leaving this Union is really hard but that leaving one that includes the military, finance, pensions, homes and everything else is going to be incredibly easy. I am not quite sure whether he will explain that disconnect.

Stuart C. McDonald: The point, as I have said, is that the Government could have made this process a hell of a lot easier. Government decisions have made this difficult, not anything else.

We know from research that discrimination is widespread when private actors have to undertake even basic checks, such as passport and visa checks, and it is blindingly obvious that the half a million people who are in the queue are going to face discrimination on stilts if they have to explain these processes. Other than telling employers and landlords to follow guidance, what more is being done to clamp down on and prevent this discrimination? What monitoring, even, is being done?

In theory, public bodies should find this easier, yet we hear of cases of universities not being prepared to confirm that students are eligible for home fee status, or the Student Loans Company not confirming eligibility for student finance until their status is decided. Just an hour ago, I learned of a universal credit case being turned down because, even though the national insurance

number and date of birth all matched up, the Department for Work and Pensions could not verify the digital share code. What is the Home Office doing to identify and accelerate these cases to ensure that no one is denied the educational opportunities that they are entitled to? How will people be compensated when they have been wrongly refused entry to the UK, work or housing, or been charged for NHS treatment or incorrectly denied home fees or student finance because of a failure to apply the law correctly?

Another huge problem is that use of the checking service provides a landlord or employer with only a six-month guarantee of protection from prosecution, but why would an employer or landlord take on someone when they can have a guarantee of only six months' rent or six months' work? That is why it was wrong to end the transition while over 500,000 people were in this perilous position. A freedom of information request in May showed that 100,000 people had been waiting for over three months for a decision. That is a hell of a long time to be in this semi-legal limbo.

Finally on this particular topic, I understand that there are also significant numbers of cases where people have completed parts of the application process online but not the whole process—for example, even just the final "submit" stage. Is the Home Office taking steps to identify and reach out to those people as well?

Turning to people who apply late, or have applied late and are waiting for a decision, it is welcome that they can continue to access healthcare and that, if I understand it correctly, they can continue to exercise rights that they are currently exercising, such as keeping an existing job or social security benefit if they apply with 28 days' notice. However, the huge gap here is that there is no right to take on a new job or new accommodation in England, or to claim a new social security benefit or use other services, so an important first question is why the Home Office thinks this is consistent with the withdrawal agreement, which states that pending a decision on any application, all rights will be deemed to apply to the applicant.

It is easy for the Government to say, "Well the process is quick and therefore these issues should not be widespread. Get the application in and then get on with your job hunt or social security application", but, in practice, it is not that simple. We know that over 100,000 people had been waiting for more than three months in May, and remember, too, that, as we know from Windrush, it is precisely when people are making new job applications or applying for social security or a tenancy that they suddenly realise that they have not applied and should have done. Waiting for three months at these moments of crisis could destroy lives, with employment, accommodation and financial support all missed out on.

The Home Office has mentioned a process for accelerating certain cases, which is welcome, but how does that work? How can we ask on behalf of our constituents that their case is accelerated for these very good reasons? What will the criteria be for accelerating cases, what will the timescales be, and what does that mean for other cases and how long they will take?

Finally, on late applications, I previously asked the Minister what would happen if someone incurred health charges because they had failed to apply for the settlement scheme, but, having realised their error, they then went on to apply late and successfully showed that they had a

reasonable excuse. If I recall correctly, the Minister suggested at the Home Affairs Committee that it would be ridiculous to then insist on those charges being paid. After all, they had had a reasonable excuse for a late application, but, as I understand it—I would love to be corrected—that is exactly what will now happen in England. How can that be justified? Why is it that someone who is considered to have reasonable grounds to apply late can still be held liable for healthcare charges incurred before submission of their justifiably late application? It seems an incredibly strange situation.

What about those who have not applied at all? I want everyone to apply, though late—I am sure we all do—so what is the Government's strategy here? Is there not a danger that the reasonable excuse test is going to put people off, especially if, as suggested in the guidance, it has to be more strictly interpreted the more time goes on? Why is that advice there? Those who encounter border enforcement, whether the Home Office version or delegated private actors such as employers, are going to have 28 days' notice to apply, but what has been done to make sure that some of the people most likely to have missed a deadline—vulnerable and marginalised groups, and maybe those with health issues or with poor English—understand what that notice means and what exactly is required of them? For example, is it going to be available in different languages, will they be signposted for advice and what happens if that 28-day deadline is missed?

It is much more likely that people who have not applied will become aware of the problem only through an encounter not with Border Force, but with an employer, the DWP, a landlord or somebody else, so what work has been done to ensure that, rather than just saying no, they signpost and, in the case of Government Departments, assist them in ensuring that an application can be submitted. The Government are committed to funding grant-funded organisations supporting EU citizens with late applications until September. Why is it only to September? Can we have funding for beyond that as well?

Finally, I turn to the issue for those who actually get settled or pre-settled status. Even if somebody is successful, that is not the end of their problems, and others, as I have said, will speak about the lack of a physical proof of status. There are more than 2 million people with pre-settled status, and many of them will struggle to prove the five-year residence required for settled status. What support will be available to help them with equally vital applications, and what happens to those who fail to apply at the time when their pre-settled status expires?

The settlement scheme may have been designed to be straightforward, but its interplay with our complicated immigration system means that it just cannot be. I struggle to follow its implications, and I suspect many hon. Members will have struggled to follow them as well, yet guidance for employers and landlords was issued just a couple of weeks back. This has, I am afraid, at the end of the day, ended up being a rush job. Even if all our other ideas are rejected, at the very least we need a longer transition period, and for the umpteenth time, I do ask that the Minister meets the 3 million campaign group.

In closing, during the referendum the now Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also promised that, after Brexit, Scotland would have immigration powers. That seems to have gone the same way as his promise to EU

nationals. We have debated the devolution of immigration or at least some immigration powers before, and it is on these occasions that the normally very measured Minister tends to start engaging in tub-thumping rhetoric rather than the arguments in the discussion. I am not going to repeat all those arguments today, but report after report from the Scottish Government, academics, thinktanks and immigration lawyers offer myriad reasons why this should be done, and templates for how this could be done.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I have been lobbied quite strongly by businesses in my constituency, where there is a big shortage of HGV drivers, for instance. Analysis indicates that there are up to 76,000 vacancies in the sector, which hits logistics and construction. Would not one reform that would help with the economic problems we face in Wales and Scotland be for the British Government to allow the Welsh and Scottish Governments to put sectors of the economy where there are skills shortages on the shortage occupations list?

Stuart C. McDonald: I think the hon. Gentleman makes an absolutely fair point, but as I say, there are many different ways we could do this, and all I ask is that people engage with these ideas, rather than just dismiss them out of hand. At the very least, the Government should think again about the remote areas pilot scheme recommended by the Migration Advisory Committee, which the Government just promptly ditched without any sort of explanation at all, otherwise it will be clear that there is no prospect of Scotland having any real influence over these vital powers while it is part of the UK.

In the meantime, I believe we all want to protect EU citizens. We have offered our proposals. We believe that the status quo is fraught with a million problems. There needs to be action and significant changes if protection of EU citizens is to be a reality.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): While there will not be a time limit to begin with, that is clearly open to review if people go wildly over five or six minutes in their contributions, depending on how long we take on the opening speeches.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): As the first Home Office Minister to come to the Dispatch Box since this afternoon's news, I would like to pay tribute to my colleague and right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), and say that we will miss him as a Minister in the Home Office. We obviously still look forward to continuing to work with him as a Member of this House, and wish him the very best for the future.

I am very grateful to the SNP for the opportunity to use the time allocated for today's debate to highlight the great success of the EU settlement scheme, our approach to late applications, and how welcome it is that so many of our friends and neighbours who arrived during the time of free movement want to make our United Kingdom their home on a permanent basis. I appreciate the generally constructive tone of my debates with the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch

[Kevin Foster]

East (Stuart C. McDonald): even though we disagree on some fundamental points, he has given some very constructive input, both during his time as my direct shadow and now in his slightly different role as the SNP's lead spokesperson on home affairs.

As this House is aware, the deadline for applying to the scheme for those resident in the UK by the end of the transition period was last Wednesday, 30 June. As of that date, in excess of 6 million applications have been received by the scheme. More than 5.4 million of those have already concluded and more than 5.1 million grants of status have been issued, with literally thousands being decided every day.

Tom Tugendhat: I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend making these statements. Is he aware that if he had applied for settled status in France, he would probably be queuing up even now, and that if he had done the same in Belgium, he would even now be waiting for documents to be approved? The Home Office has secured a remarkable achievement: even when we were members of the European Union, the paperwork needed to be legally resident in France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and in many other countries around the EU was significantly more complicated than the procedure that my hon. Friend has set up.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments: obviously, he has a unique perspective on these issues, given his chairmanship of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. It is always worth reflecting that on the day the French system opened for applications for UK nationals living in France, the EUSS had already received over 4 million applications. That just shows the scale of the scheme, and most people had the ability to apply from home, using an app on their smartphone to verify their identity in conjunction with their national passport. We are very pleased, and we hope that others will learn lessons from our success at getting so many applications in and so many settled and concluded already when it comes to how they approach the position of UK citizens living in their own nations.

To be clear, any application posted on 30 June is also considered to be in time. In recognition of the time it can take for post from all parts of our Union, especially the highlands and islands, to be delivered, we will assume any application received in the post until midnight tonight was posted in time. This is to ensure there is no prospect of an in-time application being ruled out purely on the basis of when it was delivered to the Home Office. Overall, these numbers are significant just in themselves: despite all the warnings about our potential willingness and ability to deliver, literally millions of EU citizens in the UK and their family members now have their status protected and their rights secured under UK law.

Stuart C. McDonald: The first question I asked was how many applications the Home Office estimates have fallen through the net. Is it tens or hundreds of thousands? The Home Office must surely have an estimate.

Kevin Foster: Our determination has always been to get as many as possible to apply, first by the deadline and now that it has passed. I repeat the message I gave

at the end of last week: if people have not met the deadline, do get in touch. We will look to help and to resolve the situation, rather than taking a particularly hard view on what constitutes a reasonable ground.

Of course, there was never a scheme to register as a European economic area national—we have never had the concept of identity cards in this country, certainly not since the end of world war two—and some who remain eligible to apply for the EUSS, such as joining family members, inherently live abroad even though they are eligible. We do believe that given the sheer scale of applications, the vast and overwhelming majority of those who live here in the UK have applied. However, it would be impossible to put a final figure on it, not least because of those abroad who could still apply; because of the issue, which I will come on to in a few minutes, of children who are yet to be born who may also be able to get status; and also because some of those people are non-EEA nationals. Some people think that eligibility for the EUSS equates to the EU population here in the UK, but it does not. There are many non-EEA nationals, as the hon. Member will know, who qualified for status under the EUSS, through routes such as the Surinder Singh rights that existed under free movement.

A comment that I have been keen to make quite regularly is that the EUSS is the lesson learned from the Windrush era. What happened to members of the Windrush generation was an outrage, and we must apply every lesson that we have learned from the scandal to ensure that our immigration system functions fairly and effectively, and the EU settlement scheme is no exception. It provides clear status and secure evidence of that status, which people will need for years to come, and they can be confident that their rights will be protected under it. By contrast, a declaratory system with status granted automatically but, crucially, with no individual evidence of that would risk repeating the difficulties faced by the Windrush generation, and that is not something that we can allow to happen again.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister knows full well that that is not what we are advocating. We are advocating a declaratory system with a system that provides proof, which would be the settlement scheme. The only difference is that we have the settlement scheme, but we also have the automaticity in law, which provides so much reassurance. It takes away so much of the stress and anxiety that this is causing to tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of EU nationals.

Kevin Foster: This is where we disagree. It will not give EU nationals great comfort if, in years to come, there is a status that they will have to try to prove backwards, having realised that there was something that they should have applied for. We believe that the approach of having a clear deadline, but with reasonable grounds for late applications, gives that certainty of when they need to make an application, and an ability to ensure that those who are not entitled to the benefits of EUSS—those who did not move here before 31 December 2020—are not able to take advantage of these generous provisions. The figures are a testament not only to the work that has gone into this scheme, which ensured that it was simple to use, but to the efforts of more than 1,500 dedicated staff working on the EUSS, and I was pleased to hear the comments of the hon. Member about them.

Let me turn now to the issue of the work in progress. As of 30 June, there were around 570,000 pending applications, which were classed as “in time”. As we have made clear, a person’s existing rights continue to be protected in law pending the outcome of an application made by 30 June. This is achieved by the Citizens’ Rights (Application Deadline and Temporary Protection) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020. It is not just a guarantee from me here at the Dispatch Box, but is written into law. In the meantime, they will be able to rely on their certificate of application, which they can use if they need to prove their immigration status for any reason, such as taking up a new job or renting a new property in England. We have also published updated guidance for employers and landlords that makes that clear.

Stuart C. McDonald: This is a fundamental point. The legal guarantees are absolutely very welcome, but, given that the guidance was published only a couple of weeks before the deadline, realistically how many employers, landlords and even public servants does the Minister think are remotely aware of what they need to do to check somebody who presents them with a certificate of application and a bit of digital code? What are the Government doing to monitor that and to take action to make sure that there is greater awareness?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Member for the overall tone of his question. First, we have made it very clear that landlords and employers do not need to make retrospective checks. We have been saying that for a long time. If they accepted a passport or an ID card from an EEA national for right to work or right to rent checks in England, they do not need, as of today, to start going back through the process to see who has EUSS status and who does not.

None the less, we have been looking at our systems and seeing how people use them. For example, the view and prove service allows users to view their immigration status online. These are not particularly new systems that we are bringing in. Between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the first quarter of 2021, the service had seen more than 3.9 million views by individuals and more than 330,000 views by organisations checking immigration status. We have also seen banks checking identities. It should not come as a huge surprise that, in the middle of the current situation, some people have found it quite helpful to be able to prove their status in a digital way online rather than presenting physical documents face to face. We will, of course, monitor this. We are certainly clear that there should not be discrimination on this ground. Many of those with status under the British National (Overseas) visa, which we created as a settlement route for those in Hong Kong, also rely on purely digital status. Again, we are keen to ensure that employers are well aware of what is there. We have published guidance that makes it clear what an employer should do if they discover that one of their staff does not have EU settled status—to be clear, the employer does not need to terminate the staff member’s employment immediately, but can give them 28 days and secure a statutory excuse in the way that has been set out—and what signposting can be done.

We have had quite a bit of conversation about applications that are outstanding. Given the millions of applications that had already been received a year ago, it is worth noting only about 6,000 have been left

outstanding for more than 12 months. More than 5,000 of them are being held at what we refer to as the suitability stage. In virtually all cases, it is because the applicant either has pending prosecutions, which means that a decision cannot be made until that criminal justice matter is resolved, or has been referred for consideration of deportation action in relation to criminal justice matters and criminal records.

When it comes to communicating, we have so far invested nearly £8 million in public communications about the EUSS to encourage EU citizens who are eligible for the scheme, and their family members, to apply. Our communications and engagement work will continue with a focus on groups who may not yet have applied, and on the marginalised. It is probably worth my saying from the Dispatch Box that we appreciate the support we have had from the devolved Administrations in that area, particularly the Scottish Government’s “Stay in Scotland” campaign, to reach out and communicate with people.

Plenty of support is still available for applicants who need it. Seventy-two organisations across the UK have been provided with up to £22 million in Home Office funding to help vulnerable people apply to the scheme. Eleven of those organisations are in Scotland, including Airdrie citizens advice bureau, Edinburgh CAB, Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey CAB, Perth CAB, Community Renewal, Feniks, Fife Migrants Forum, Perth and Kinross Association of Voluntary Service, Positive Action in Housing, the International Organisation for Migration and the Simon Community. We very much appreciate their work.

Those 72 organisations have among them helped more than 310,000 vulnerable people to apply to the scheme. That includes victims of human trafficking or domestic abuse, those with severe mental health conditions, those without a permanent address and those who are elderly or isolated. As I have touched on, the organisations are funded up to 30 September, and we will review the demand over the summer to see what the position should be beyond 30 September. I note the comments of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East about that.

The EU settlement resolution centre is open seven days a week to provide applicants with assistance over the telephone and by email, and the assisted digital service provides help over the phone with completing the online application process. We continue to support local authorities to ensure that all eligible looked-after children secure their status under the scheme, and we are providing practical help in several ways in addition to the extra funding that has been made available for this work following a new burdens assessment. I confirm to the House that as of 23 April, which was two months before the deadline, applications for the EUSS had been received for 2,440—estimated to be 67%—of the 3,660 looked-after children and care leavers that our survey identified as eligible for the scheme. We have since been working with local authorities on the remaining cases across our Union. For example, we have had confirmation that all looked-after children identified as eligible in Northern Ireland have had applications made for them well before the deadline. We have also made it clear that we will take a pragmatic and flexible approach to applications made after the 30 June deadline.

Stuart C. McDonald: All the work to encourage looked-after children to have applications made on their behalf is absolutely welcome, but an issue that I did not have time to touch on was that some of these kids might actually be entitled to register as British citizens. Can we make sure that people are not missing out on their entitlement to British citizenship and going for settled status instead?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. To be clear, if someone is a British citizen and entitled to go through that process, they cannot be granted status under the EUSS. Certainly, we would look to work with local authorities to see whether the person was eligible to be a British citizen or to be granted EU settled status. That is not something that local authorities are unused to working with, because there may well be non-EEA nationals in a similar position, but the point is well made.

As was touched on during the hon. Gentleman's speech, we have published quite extensive but non-exhaustive guidance on what may constitute reasonable grounds for making a late application. For example, someone who is under 18 or does not have mental capacity to apply themselves—in essence, someone who relies on someone else to apply for them—is an obvious example of where we will see a late application as inherently based on reasonable grounds. I would also emphasise that there is no specific time period for reasonable grounds or a deadline for them. As I have often said in this House, we would consider it reasonable grounds for a child who is aged five today to apply in 13 years' time on reaching 18 if, when going for their first job, they realised that an application had not been made for them. Each case will be considered according to its particular circumstances, so that we arrive at the appropriate and proportionate outcome in each case.

As has been touched on, a process is also in place to prioritise late applications where the person may be at risk of destitution or where other compelling grounds exist. We are building on our work with local authorities, grant-funded organisations and others to identify and expedite such cases. Also, Members should be familiar with the process through which they bring cases to me that they believe should be expedited in the wider visa system, and we will also ensure that when Members of Parliament make representations, that will be done on a similar basis.

Stuart C. McDonald: I think we have come to the crux of the argument here, in that the guidance about late applications is pretty generous—it is much more generous than it could have been, and that is welcome—but if the Government will go that far, why not just remove the reasonable grounds from the application altogether? Who exactly do they want to be able to refuse on the ground of being unreasonably late? Why not just scrap that test altogether?

Kevin Foster: It is a part of the EUSS, and it would be odd if we said that we would accept unreasonable grounds. It would seem a bit weird to put that in the immigration status. As I have said, we did not want to take a tick-box approach. Neither did we want, for the sake of argument, to say that an application from someone who was aged 17 and 364 days was definitely late, and instantly to say no to someone who was 18. We have taken the view that such an approach would be proportionate.

Yes, the guidelines on reasonable grounds are generous, as is the approach we have taken to postal applications, in assuming that any that are received in the post up to today will be considered to be in time, rather than asking for posting certificates or looking at when the envelope was franked by the Post Office. We recognise that not every area or community has a postal collection beyond 9 am, and it would produce some quite harsh outcomes if we required people to take a selfie of themselves posting something at 5 o'clock in the evening.

Touching on the point around pregnancy, we have already changed nationality law to provide for a grant of British citizenship when a child is born to someone who subsequently secures settled status based on a late application. That is based on the notion that they had reasonable grounds for missing the 30 June deadline but met the requirements for status at that time and before their child's birth here in the UK. This provision also applies to anyone whose child is born between 1 July and their in-time application being decided and resulting in a grant of settled status.

Our focus will remain on encouraging those eligible for the EU settlement scheme to apply for and obtain their status, and we will continue to look for reasons to grant people status rather than to refuse it. Those currently receiving benefits who have not yet applied will not see their payments stop immediately. The Home Office is working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to reach out to people who may be eligible to apply. It is important that anyone who has not applied to the scheme does so, to ensure that their payments do not stop, but we would reassure them that help in applying remains available, including through our grant funded network.

Finally, in this area, if somebody who may be eligible for the scheme but has not made an application is encountered by immigration enforcement, they will be given another opportunity to apply. They will be issued with a notice giving them a further period, generally 28 days, in which to apply, and the notice will signpost them to the port available to do so. These safeguards have been built in to protect those who have not yet applied but who may still be eligible, and we believe that it will mean that everybody will be able to get the status they deserve.

As always in a debate on my brief inspired by the SNP, we see its ultimate desire tucked away at the end of the motion. While a debate on the EUSS, and this time for Members to reflect on the millions of applications it has received and statuses granted, is very welcome, the final line of the motion points to the ultimate goal of those who sit on the separatist Benches: a border for people between England and Scotland.

We always see that presented as just a chance to give Scotland's employers an opportunity to recruit at the minimum wage on a European or perhaps even global basis, rather than offering the rewarding packages that many of Scotland's key workers deserve—or perhaps as a way to avoid dealing with the underlying issues that drive people to abandon the world-famous natural beauty of the Scottish highlands and islands to find opportunities for work elsewhere. It does not take much to work out that, as the furlough scheme winds down, many of our fellow neighbours may face the need to find new employment, hence the support packages that the UK

Government are putting in place to help those who may need to retrain. Should immigration policy really be the go-to option for roles where the work-based training requirements can be completed in a shorter time?

Similarly, it is a depressing vision for the future of Scotland—or some of its most beautiful parts—to suggest creating a system that makes the main attraction or selling point of a future Scotland not better prospects, higher skills and being at the cutting edge of scientific research, but the fact that it is a place where someone will need to spend a few years before qualifying for indefinite leave to remain, which will then allow them to move elsewhere.

As we know, for every problem, the SNP believes a border with England is the answer. Our approach is clear: to create a migration system that is not focused on the politics of division and separatism, or where someone's passport is from, but judges people by their skills and what they have to offer, and has at its core a vision of a higher-wage, higher-skill, higher-prosperity Scotland, delivered by being part of our United Kingdom—a Union greater than the sum of its parts.

That means that our focus is to deliver an immigration system that works for Scotland's workers, universities, businesses, events and future economic growth. It can never be a magic bullet for issues and problems that are the responsibility of Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish Government, much as we wish it could be, but Scotland's interests have been at the heart of each stage of recent changes.

Those changes include setting the general salary threshold for our key economic migration route within £20 of the Scottish median salary; harmonising the rules for settlement with the requirements for the skilled worker visa to encourage those who have come to work here to stay here for good; reform of the permit-free festival system to move towards a more proportionate approach; allowing short-term study via the visitor route; simplifying processes and expanding opportunity; changes to the student route in support of the ambitions of Scotland's universities; removing the need to apply for ATAS—academic technology approval scheme—permission for our closest allies when studying relevant courses; broadening the skills threshold to reflect not just academically focused careers; allowing permitted paid engagement leave via entry through Ireland, removing the need for a Dublin band to fly via Paris to do a gig in Glasgow; and, over the coming year, introducing biometric reuse on more routes to reduce the need to travel to a service centre when applying for further leave to remain.

All those things have been driven by direct engagement with Scotland and its businesses, universities and community groups. While the SNP attacks the points-based system, it is worth noting that its own plans for separation back in 2014 included such a system—one it presumably would have enforced, despite its regular comments about such things.

The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in June 2016. We opened the EU settlement scheme in March 2019, on a basis rightly much more generous than the withdrawal agreement requires, to ensure that resident EU citizens—our friends and neighbours—were able to secure their rights under UK law. Our message to EU citizens in the UK, and something that I think none of us would disagree on, is that we want them to stay. The fact that so many of

those eligible for the EU settlement scheme have chosen to apply and secure their rights is something to be proud of and something that will support our nation and our Union for years to come.

5.13 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I start by echoing the words of the Minister about his colleague the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire)? We wish him well and hope he has a speedy recovery back to his position in the Home Office. I also thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for the way in which he presented the case for the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be amazed, as I am, that for the first time since the election in 2019, the SNP are holding an Opposition day debate that is not about independence. When I heard that would be the case, I thought, “Great—we’re going to have a big debate on covid recovery in Scotland,” but that did not come forward either. I wonder why, given the events of the last week. The SNP has, however, still managed to make the debate about a border of some kind, so there is more to do yet; but maybe next time we have one it will have nothing to do with the constitution. This is nevertheless an incredibly important topic and I am delighted to be able to speak on behalf of the official Opposition.

May I first pay tribute to all the organisations who have been assisting in providing information to EU nationals on the settlement scheme, including the 3 million—mentioned by the Member who moved the motion, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East—and the Citizens’ Rights Project, which has helped so many of my constituents in Edinburgh? It is important to say at the outset that we should not conduct this debate on the narrative set by the Government’s hostile environment on immigration; that would be the wrong context for it, but it is worth putting in context why EU nationals are so anxious about this entire process.

We should be conducting these debates from the foundation that EU immigration has been good for this country and that the contribution that EU nationals make will continue to be of benefit to this country irrespective of their position with regard to Brexit. We do not have to look too far to see that. For example, just last week alone in the sporting world we have seen the incredible talents of Emma Raducanu, the new 18-year-old star of British tennis who reached the last 16 at Wimbledon. Born to a Romanian father and a Chinese mother, she was raised in the United Kingdom and has left every one of us in awe at her sporting talent, success and potential. Likewise, all the home nations football teams have been built with the benefits of immigration. An interesting graphic was circulated on social media by the Migration Museum, which showed that eight of the starting 11 in the England team that defeated Germany last week were the children or grandchildren of immigrants to this country; it was a very powerful graphic indeed.

Of course, tonight we will hear thousands of England fans singing “football’s coming home”—I would argue that the home of football is in Scotland, but nevertheless they will be singing that—but what is the definition of “home” for the Government? EU nationals, many of whom have been here for the majority of their lives, see Britain as their home, but the EU settlement scheme has made them feel, in their words, “unwelcome” and

[Ian Murray]

“unappreciated”. This is their home, and we cannot emphasise enough that they are welcome. [Interruption.] I hear some chuntering from the Conservative Benches, but those are their words—EU nationals have told us that they feel unwelcome and unappreciated.

Steve Double: Will the hon. Gentleman at least acknowledge that, while I take it that a few may feel that, the vast majority of EU citizens—certainly those I have spoken to in my constituency—actually feel at home and feel that the EU settled status scheme has made it incredibly easy and simple for them to gain their status? They love this country and I am glad that we have made it easy for them to stay.

Ian Murray: I do not think it is in doubt at all that EU nationals love this country, or they would not choose to be here and contribute to being here. This debate is about making sure that the EU settlement scheme can work for everyone and that the deadline that has just passed does not leave anybody, including the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, in limbo legally or otherwise, and the point of holding debates in this House is to iron out some of those problems.

I was not just talking about sports stars, of course. It is a simple, inescapable fact that our society and our precious national health service could not function, and certainly would not have functioned when we needed it most over the past 18 months, without the hard work of the people who have migrated to this country. They make Britain great, and we will never apologise for standing up for the rights of those who choose to call this country their home.

The immigration system that this Government have created over the past 11 years is broken, and surely the Minister could see, when he reeled off the list of things that the Home Office has been doing with regard to immigration, that the fact that the SNP has tabled a motion to devolve immigration and create that border is the result of some of the things that the Home Office has done over the past 11 years. The Government should reflect on some of those problems and try to resolve them. Demonising people who have contributed, or want to contribute, so much to our country has provided a level of distrust in the system that has meant that EU nationals feel uncertain about their future.

It is also very counterproductive, as we have already seen in the impact of the Government’s immigration policies, especially in key sectors at the forefront of the fight against coronavirus. There are workforce shortages now in our public services, particularly in the NHS and social care. Construction companies say that projects will have to be delayed due to lack of EU workers. Traditional industries in agriculture and food are struggling for the numbers that they require to function as normal. Hospitality businesses are struggling to find enough staff; even the famous Tim Martin, founder of JD Wetherspoon, broke the irony meter last week when he called on the Government to introduce a new EU migrant visa for the hospitality sector.

And, of course, migration works both ways, with more than 1 million UK citizens choosing to make another European country their home. We cannot speak for other Governments in EU countries, of course, but

I know that in France the Government have extended the deadline for UK citizens to register until September, to ensure that they catch everyone who wishes to stay in France post Brexit. The Home Office has failed to do that despite repeated calls for it. Last week, in the days leading up to the settlement scheme deadline, I raised that very issue with the EU deputy ambassador to the UK, who told me of the extreme lengths to which EU countries and embassies are going to ensure that their citizens register for the scheme and have their status preserved. She also talked of the massive volumes of correspondence that the mission was getting from EU nationals as the deadline approached.

The Home Office has a great many questions to answer on the EU settlement scheme. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East was right to pay tribute to all the staff working through the applications. How many EU citizens living in the UK does the Home Office think had not managed to apply by the 30 June deadline? That is an incredibly difficult question to answer, I appreciate, because the Home Office talked about 3.2 million and may have had upwards of 6 million applications—many of which, of course, will be from people not currently living in the United Kingdom. What is the Department doing to reach out to those whom it knows about but who have not applied? Statistics released on 30 June showed that only 5.4 million of the nearly 6 million applications had been processed. How long can applicants expect to wait before finding out their status?

What efforts has the Department made to get to those hardest-to-reach individuals, such as those without internet access? We find that difficult as MPs. Has it taken additional measures, so that people in such circumstances will not fall foul of the law through no fault of their own?

The Minister has said repeatedly, including in the Chamber today, that the Government will not extend the deadline. Indeed, they have not extended the deadline. He said that was not the solution. What is the solution for the estimated 70,000 whom the Government know about who have not applied for settled status but are in receipt of some Government support? What is the solution for those left in legal limbo by missing the deadline? We have heard about some processes put in place, such as the reasonable excuse test, but I hope that we will not see convoys of immigration control vans heading down our streets to deport EU nationals. Will the Minister rule out that option for people who are legally allowed to be here but have not applied for settled status? The Home Office says it is looking to be flexible, but what does flexibility mean in all those cases? What will happen to someone who has not yet applied but will do so at some point in the future when they realise that they must?

Of course, many EU nationals have been in this country for decades and may not think that the scheme applies to them. I hope that maximum flexibility will be allowable for those cases. Surely the easiest way to try to catch all the people whom the Home Office thinks have not applied would have been to extend the deadline, contact them, make sure that they apply and make sure that they are in the scheme as quickly as possible. We all want the scheme to work, because it has to work.

As representatives in this House, we will all have had many constituency cases. We have heard of EU nationals who have been refused on spurious grounds, those who

have found the process difficult to navigate and those who have not applied at all. Hopefully, most of them have now been caught. The scheme has caused a great deal of uncertainty, stress and anxiety for millions of our fellow citizens with whom we share our communities and lives. I hope that, at the end of the debate, the Minister will give assurances on the many questions that Members will pose to him.

It is with great regret that Labour cannot support this motion on such an important issue. It is disappointing that the SNP has decided to use the motion as a clarion call for a border at Berwick, rather than for a debate to stand up for and help our EU friends and family with regard to the settlement scheme. It is a real missed opportunity.

The motion makes reference to the SNP's desire for a separate Scottish immigration system. I would observe that, given that it will take the Scottish Government up to nine years to build the infrastructure required for the devolution of some social security powers that came in the Scotland Act 2016—powers that my colleagues and I fought hard for—I am unsure how long it will take them to create a system to handle migration. What such a system will indisputably need is a border at Berwick. Any system of differing migration ultimately requires a border between the two countries with different systems, and we know that is the SNP's desire. When we are debating the consequences for individuals of putting up a border between the UK and the EU, the SNP's solution is to put up a border between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom—or, as some SNP MSPs famously called it, a border job creation scheme.

Stuart C. McDonald: For goodness' sake. We do not have a hard border with the Republic of Ireland, and we see that system all across the planet—in Canada, Spain, Switzerland and various other countries. The Isle of Man has immigration powers. It is perfectly reasonable to ask for some immigration powers to be handed down and to take part in that discussion, rather than this nonsense about a hard border at Berwick.

Ian Murray: Some years ago I did a little research into the differential of immigration policies. There is great stress in the Canadian system because, as the Minister said, many people land in Quebec, stay for the required period and then move to other parts of Canada. The other provinces in Canada find that incredibly difficult to cope with, and that is exactly what would happen in the context we are talking about—

Stuart C. McDonald: That is not true.

Ian Murray: It is true of what happens in Canada.

Kevin Foster: I am sure the shadow Secretary of State is also aware that at many of the crossing points from the United States into Canada there is full passport control. Presumably, that is what the SNP envisages at Berwick.

Ian Murray: Well, we do not know what the SNP envisages, because we do not know the proposals; it is just a list of words. Unfortunately, this debate will turn to this issue—the Minister spent some time on it and I am having to spend some time on it—because it was put into the motion. If it was not in the motion, we could have debated the EU settlement scheme and voted

accordingly. That is what is so frustrating about these debates: they always boil down to the constitution. None of these things are answers to the question. I want the Minister to tell us how he will sort the scheme and resolve things for the EU nationals who are not in the system, rather than our having to debate whether the solution is another border at Berwick.

To tackle the shared challenges of our time, of which this is a massive one, we need greater co-operation, which is why we see the trade and co-operation agreement between the UK and the EU as the floor of our ambition for our future relationship, unlike this Government, who see it as the ceiling. These issues must be resolved and they can be clearly resolved. Ideas can come forward from the Scottish Government about how to resolve the immigration system, when the two Governments are willing to work together. For example, the former Scottish Labour First Minister Jack McConnell, who is now in the other place, introduced the Fresh Talent scheme in Scotland, which allowed overseas graduates to stay on after university. The scheme was then implemented throughout the United Kingdom.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is another perfect example of a devolved system that did not require any sort of border at all. It could work perfectly well.

Ian Murray: No, it was not devolved; the UK Government implemented that policy at the insistence of the Scottish First Minister who brought it forward.

In 2019, the Prime Minister famously promised to get Brexit done, yet here we are, 18 months after his Government's election with a majority, still debating the details of these schemes more than five years after the referendum, with many EU nationals still living in limbo. The Government have not got it done, and will never get it done as they promised the public they would. We need to be getting Brexit to work properly. The EU settlement scheme is another example of where many people are falling through the gaps, with the Government unable to contact them and get them into the scheme.

I say again, regretfully, that we will not be able to back the motion. I hope that the Government will listen to charities or to the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), and even now extend the deadline for the thousands of EU citizens who have failed to submit their applications on time through no fault of their own. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us how many EU citizens living in the UK the Home Office believes have not managed to apply on time, and what the Department is doing about finding and contacting them and getting them to apply on time. It is particularly important for the Home Office to contact proactively those citizens who are either vulnerable or hard to reach as a result of issues such as a lack of internet access, or who do not think the scheme applies to them because they have been here for so long. I hope the Minister can reassure us that the applications of the nearly half a million people who submitted them before 30 June will be concluded as quickly as possible.

What is missing from these debates is the fact that those affected are our neighbours, our friends, our partners, our colleagues and our fellow citizens. They are human beings, not numbers on a Home Office

[Ian Murray]

screen. Those are the people who have chosen to make this country—our home—their home. Together, we make this country our home. As we chart the next phase of our country's history, we would do well to remember that we are talking about human beings and we need to make sure that the scheme works for them all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind the House that if colleagues' speeches are between four and five minutes, we should be able to get everybody in.

5.29 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I shall take that guidance to heart, Madam Deputy Speaker. With your leave, before I wade in, I wish to pay tribute to my parliamentary team, because it is with great sadness that I report to the House that my constituency office was attacked this morning. I pay tribute to the police for dealing with it incredibly quickly. Luckily, those involved did not gain entry, but they did break 16 panes of glass and, of course, scared the parliamentary team. Across the House, our teams work day in, day out without, necessarily, the protection that this House affords us now. I put on the record my thanks to my team and the police for dealing with the situation so quickly. However, life goes on, and I will now contribute to this important debate.

Although I very much welcome the tone of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and many of the observations that he made in opening, we need to be incredibly careful about getting our language and tone right to remind all EU citizens who have been living, contributing, working and loving in this country that they are very welcome to stay. We need to reflect on the scale of the achievement of getting 6 million-plus applications. When the Minister sums up, I look forward to him giving us the stats to date, which he will have to hand easier than I. At my last check, 5.4 million had been settled. That is a huge achievement, and it is against the background of the last five years, with huge constitutional arguments and with political parties in this place telling people that they could stop Brexit and causing confusion on a huge scale about what the relationship would look like next.

As a result of what the Government have put in place, and what I ensure in my constituency, people in Wales and the whole of the United Kingdom feel welcome and understand the importance of applying. I very much welcome the tone from the Minister in responding to the debate, and the proportionality that he is now applying to anyone who gets their application in late. It seemed to me that what he outlined in opening was pretty much what the SNP is calling for: proportionality. Clearly, we needed a date to work to, and we needed to get the message out to apply, but I very much welcome the proportional response to those who may have got their application in late.

I want it to go on the record that in a previous life I worked very much on the detail of the withdrawal agreement and the generous package that the UK Government put in place. This is the most generous settlement scheme in the whole of the EU—hon. Members should look at the withdrawal agreement. I am happy to

be intervened on by anyone on the Opposition Benches if they can tell me of a country in the European Union that has a more generous settlement scheme package for UK citizens than we have for EU citizens. We have gone above and beyond to ensure that people feel welcome, and we need to ensure that the language and tone are right in this Chamber to reinforce that message.

I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I do not want to make you impose a limit, but I will comment on the proposed introduction of a border. It disappoints me. I join the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), in looking forward to the day when a motion from the SNP does not try to cause a border for our Celtic cousins. Never mind England and Scotland; you are trying to put a border between Wales and Scotland. We do not want that. We do not want you to leave the Union. You have made some fair points, but adding that last sentence with a demand for a border between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom shows your hand, I am afraid. It shows that this debate is more about political point scoring than creating the welcome that you are trying to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a reminder to speak through the Chair, rather than directly to other Members. There is a very good reason why that is how we do things here.

5.33 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: This is a debate that I wish we did not need to have, not just because I find it abhorrent that people who made their home here are now faced with proving their right to stay, but because the UK Government have, true to form, made an absolute moger of the process—removing the safety barriers so that people now risk falling off the cliff edge into the shark-infested waters of the hostile environment.

I have had constituents getting in touch about the scheme for some time now, anxious about what it might mean for them. Delays in the scheme, which have been highlighted recently, are nothing new in the experience of my constituents in Glasgow Central. In October 2019, a constituent made his application to the EU settlement scheme and found out that he had been granted pre-settled status only in June 2020. Another applied in June 2019 and although his wife was granted status almost immediately, he was waiting until February 2021, having been moved into the “complicated” pile. A further constituent applied in December 2020 and was granted status only in June this year. All these delays cause considerable stress to individuals. I appreciate that there are checks, processes and wheels turning slowly in the background, but the UK Government knew this was coming. They were warned on multiple occasions by a whewen of organisations and experts that layering this on top of an already struggling immigration system would cause problems, yet it feels from the experience of my constituents that nothing was done.

There are also uncertainties and grey areas. People who have never had to question their right to live here are now having to do so. A constituent and friend of mine, Toni Guigliano, has lived most of his life in Scotland. He considers himself a dual national—an Italian Scot—but his ID for work purposes was an

Italian passport, so he has had to apply for settled status to ensure he is able to continue to live his life here. He is certain there will be many others like him who do not believe they need to apply. To make matters worse, the EU settlement scheme helpline told him he did not absolutely need to apply, but that was contradicted by an email I received from UK Visas and Immigration today, which would suggest that he does, as his Italian passport is not proof of a right to work. What an absolute shambles!

The lack of a physical document has been raised by many constituents as a deficiency in the scheme. Relying on having a mobile phone with battery sufficiently charged to allow someone to get through the border as they come back from their holidays is far from ideal for most people. For the digitally excluded, this is also a real problem. For those required to prove eligibility to their employer or a whole host of Government agencies, the digital systems appear not yet to be in place or working properly, as constituents have already found and as my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) highlighted. In a response to me from the Minister for Future Borders and Immigration, it was evident that the “view and prove” service is not yet working on a cross-Government basis. In the letter, he stated that, for individuals accessing services provided by Departments and other public authorities,

“e.g. benefits and healthcare, the Home Office will increasingly make the relevant information about an individual’s status available automatically through system to system checks, at the point at which they seek to access the public services.”

Although I understand this may be working to an extent in the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and NHS England, that is not by any matter or means the full spectrum of services that people interact with. A system should be in place right now, not at some vague time in the future. It is yet another reason to remove or extend the deadline if the UK Government have not even finished their own homework on this issue.

There are further consequences for EU nationals as a result of the Tories’ Brexit shambles. Another constituent who has lived in Scotland since May 2016 has been allocated pre-settled status and has applied for settled status. He has always worked, but he lost his job in hospitality in early 2020 and went to stay with family in Italy, unfortunately getting stuck there during the lockdown. His universal credit claim was refused as he was not in the UK, and he could not apply for jobs, not knowing when he would be able to return to his home in Glasgow. As a result, he is now struggling to get by, destitute until he gets an answer, because he has been unable to claim his benefits with pre-settled status. He told me:

“For me this situation is really distressing. I feel really discriminated and humiliated from this government. They are killing my hopes and my dreams.”

I have encountered other cases where the DWP has raised questions over EU nationals’ eligibility and unfairly denied benefits on the basis of the habitual residency test. This should not be the future EU nationals face; the vast majority work and contribute but, as we all know, anyone can require to access support because of the loss of a job or illness. They should not face barriers in their path, in the way that no recourse to public funds already causes destitution and serious harm to so many.

Another compelling reason to extend the deadline is the bureaucratic backlog caused by coronavirus. A constituent who came to the UK in July 2020 has been completely stuck due to agencies being closed—understandably—because of covid-19. She was not able to get a national insurance number, as the jobcentres were closed, or a job, because so many places were not hiring. She was also not able to register with a GP, set up a bank account or obtain a UK driving licence. Now she faces having her claim refused because she cannot absolutely prove she was in the UK before December 2020. So I ask how the Minister expects people to prove their rights when the very agencies we would all expect to assist have not been available to people.

Similarly, another constituent seeking to register his children under the EU settlement scheme found it more difficult, as their passports had expired and renewals were more difficult due to covid. Although I appreciate that passports were not always required to register, I am sure that many others would have found themselves in similar circumstances, panicking as the deadline approached. I hope that this will be taken into account as a “reasonable excuse”, but if there had not been a deadline, that would have removed a great deal of anxiety from the situation.

The future of work for EU nationals is undoubtedly now more complex. The situation has made it more difficult to travel and work, and many may now choose to move elsewhere as a result. We have all benefited from the talent and expertise of EU nationals and the all-round contribution they have made to our communities, but what the UK Government have sought to do through Brexit and through these rules is to make life harder for our friends and neighbours. As the MP with the highest immigration case load in Scotland, I can tell Members that life is already pretty hard for many people and that the UK Government’s utterly despicable Nationality and Borders Bill seeks to make the situation even worse.

Scotland did not vote for this. We voted to remain in the EU. We see the benefits of migration, as a nation who have sent our own out around the world, and we stand by those who have done us the honour of choosing Scotland as their home. I look forward to the day soon when we are able not only to show people our Scottish hospitality, but to have the legislation to back that up.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just another reminder that if we think of each other, everyone can get in, but I did say between four and five minutes.

5.40 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): I will try to speed through my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am delighted to speak on the subject of the EU settlement scheme, as it provides us with a great opportunity to reflect on the invaluable contributions that our friends and neighbours from the EU bring to our country and to our local communities. We have colleagues on both sides of the House who were born in, or grew up in, an EU country. We in this House also rely on the support of our staff, many of whom came to this country from Europe. And who can forget the tireless work of those EU nationals who work for the various parliamentary services that keep us safe, ensuring that the work of our

[Angela Richardson]

Parliament keeps going and making our days brighter in this place. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in thanking them for all their hard work and dedication.

In my own constituency, I see EU nationals on the frontline of our fight against covid-19 as doctors, nurses, paramedics and carers and in many other capacities. Many of the children in Guildford, Cranleigh and our villages are taught at school by teachers from the EU. Our communities are made stronger thanks to the contribution of EU nationals, who are our neighbours, our friends and our partners in building the fairer, greener and healthier country we want. Working together is the best way we can build back better after the pandemic. That is why I was happy whenever my office was able to assist constituents with their applications to the EU settlement scheme or by taking their feedback to Ministers. It is also why I am happy to help constituents outside the EU, too, and I have had many successes on immigration matters in the short 18 months since I was elected.

The Government settlement scheme, which was set up in 2019, sent out a very clear message: we want our friends to stay and enjoy all the rights they have been enjoying for years. I was therefore heartened to hear that the scheme has seen 6 million applications, of which 5.4 million have been met with a positive outcome. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) for the recent update on those numbers. I am also pleased that those applicants who have not received their decision will have their rights protected and will receive a certificate of application that they can use if they need to prove their immigration status until a decision is made on their case.

I was pleased to hear that we will continue to take a pragmatic and flexible approach in considering late applicants and their rights, that we will as a priority continue to encourage those eligible to secure their status to apply, and that each case will be based on its unique circumstances. The comments made by my hon. Friend the Minister at the Dispatch Box today about reasonable grounds for late applicants are extremely welcome and will be very reassuring for my constituents. That, alongside the Government's £8 million investment in advertising and £22 million investment in ensuring that vulnerable applicants are given all the support they require, clearly illustrates our commitment not to leave anyone behind when it comes to protecting their rights in this country.

The scheme was born out of the spirit of friendship and co-operation we share with our European allies, and it mirrors similar programmes put in place for British citizens living in EU countries, albeit running for a longer period of time. I hope that that spirit will extend our friendship beyond Europe as we introduce a fair, points-based immigration system not too dissimilar to the one that the SNP advocated in its 2014 independence White Paper, only now to call it unjustifiable and damaging to Scotland.

Having emigrated to this country from New Zealand, I know how important our ties with the rest of the world are. I commend the Government for taking their responsibilities towards immigrants so seriously, especially as we build global Britain—a place where fairness, the rule of law and respect for each other prevails.

5.44 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I find it bizarre that the Scottish National party has chosen to use its valuable Opposition day slot to debate the EU settlement scheme, and I am in no doubt that the vast majority of Scots agree with me. There is little to address in the EU settlement scheme, as the SNP knows full well. For the SNP, it is all about sowing division, stirring up ill-founded resentment and stoking the same tired old debates on the 2016 Brexit vote. The truth is that the EU referendum was years ago, and we have since left the bloc for good. All Scots and all Britons want us to move forward and focus on improving this country.

The SNP may regret the end of freedom of movement, but the vast majority of British people wanted to end it. It is about our having the power and national sovereignty to decide who we should admit into our society, from anywhere in the world. The EU immigration system was ludicrous, as was recognised across Scotland. The fact the SNP is still in favour of it is baffling and quite irresponsible.

It is testimony to the settlement scheme's popularity that we predicted 3.7 million EU citizens would go through the process but instead, as we have heard today, over 6 million have done so. That is a great success. The simplicity, generosity and, some would say, leniency of the scheme reflects this Government's desire to make life easy for those settled Europeans who contribute to our country and make it what it is. It is therefore disingenuous of the SNP to level any accusations against the Government of making the process difficult or arcane—the numbers show that is simply not the case. It has worked incredibly well.

By trying to extend or scrap the deadline, the SNP is seeking an eternal transition that defies reality and defies logic. It is clear that the SNP is clinging on to any vestige of what it thinks relates to the EU, hankering after a broken union while destroying the precious one we have. The SNP hangs on to the coat tails of the EU because it has no confidence in Scotland. Any right-thinking Briton knows that the settlement status window must end, and they want it to end.

Tagging on to the end of the motion the transfer of immigration powers from Westminster to create a Scottish migration system and Scottish visa is pure madness. It is part of the SNP's fantasy to further isolate Scotland for the sake of division. This move would harm Scottish people, not to mention being completely impracticable, with a hard border being inevitable. How can the SNP seriously favour immigration rights for EU citizens into Scotland over Scots' rights to access the rest of the UK? It is bizarre. How can the SNP favour EU immigration over what is best for Scotland's young and vulnerable?

It is not possible for one country to have two different, opposing immigration systems, and it is not compatible with the devolution settlement or desirable for the people of Scotland. It is yet another example of the SNP causing trouble and sowing the seeds of division, without any concrete policies to improve Scots' lives.

Our UK immigration policy keeps us safe and attracts the best and brightest to our shores, whether they settle in London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast. It is bizarre that the SNP advocated a points-based immigration system in 2014, yet changes its tune when it smells political opportunity. It is rank hypocrisy.

It seems to have passed the SNP by that we have actually left the EU, and the SNP is wilfully ignoring all the opportunities now available to Scotland outside the EU, whether it is Scottish exports, farmers, fisheries, the repatriation of powers from Brussels to Edinburgh, UK business support or state aid. This latest attempt to score political points on the impressive EU settlement scheme underlines the fact that a Scotland without the SNP would surely be better off.

I am conscious of time so, on a lighter note, although football may not be coming home to Hampden, it may still be seeking settled status here in Britain. I have no doubt that every Scot, including every SNP Member here today, will be cheering on England tonight as the sole home nations representative left in the tournament.

5.49 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: During the Brexit referendum, the Prime Minister promised that nothing would change for EU citizens in the UK. Yet everything has changed, as millions of people who had settled here have had to apply for permission to remain in their homes and jobs. Conservative Members dismissed this as no big deal, but my husband is German, and, after spending more than 30 years working as a doctor in our NHS, he felt as if the rug had suddenly been pulled from under his feet.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) highlighted the importance of language, and I agree with him, but while our First Minister in Scotland reached out to EU citizens on the morning after the referendum, the language in this place described them as bargaining chips and playing cards. The most upsetting thing for my husband was when the former Prime Minister described EU citizens as “queue jumpers”, implying they had somehow cheated the immigration system to settle here. Such language already made EU citizens feel unwelcome even before Brexit was completed, and it contributed to an almost 90% drop in the number of EU nurses coming to the UK. That is a loss the four national health services could ill afford, especially with the challenges of this last year.

Apart from the emotional upheaval felt by many EU families such as mine, there are practical issues with the settled status system. Instead of automatically being granted indefinite leave to remain, as promised by the Prime Minister, it is an application process, which can be refused. While EU citizens would still have had to register, there would have been no question of refusal, and vulnerable groups such as the elderly or children in care would not now be in danger of becoming illegal. Only 2% of applications have been refused outright, but that is over 100,000 people, and 43% have been granted only the much less favourable pre-settled status, often despite living in the UK for many years. There is a real danger that many with permanent residency assume it means what it says and that they are secure, and do not understand that they now need to apply for settled status. Women in particular can struggle to gain full settled status if, owing to caring responsibilities, they do not have an unbroken tax record.

A widespread concern among EU citizens, as we have heard this afternoon, is the lack of physical proof of their status, particularly with the example of Windrush before them. Having to provide an online document creates problems for those with poor digital access, and

some landlords and employers are already excluding EU citizens from the opportunity to work or rent a home as they simply cannot be bothered with the hassle. Whether it is a lack of health and social care staff, farm workers, HGV drivers or academic researchers, the UK will be poorer without the EU citizens who no longer come to live and work here and contribute to our society. This is particularly an issue in Scotland because of our ageing demographics and the risk of rural depopulation. The UK Government's dismissal of Scottish requirements simply highlights the need for Scotland to be able to set our own immigration policies, and Government Members who dismiss that simply ignore the fact that Ireland still has freedom of movement.

Freedom of movement was the biggest benefit of EU membership that we all gained as individuals, and it worked in both directions. We have had the right to live, love, work or study in any one of 31 countries, yet we have taken that away from the younger generation, while EU citizens here contribute to our public services, communities and economy, as well as being our family, friends and neighbours. So despite the Prime Minister's original Brexit promises, I can tell you that many EU citizens do not feel secure in the UK, but rather feel unwelcome and unsettled.

5.53 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I rise to celebrate the fact that almost 6 million EU citizens have chosen to remain here and indicated they wish to make this place their home. I appreciate it might be difficult for the SNP to comprehend why, when it is seeking to leave the United Kingdom, a number of EU citizens greater than the total population of Scotland have chosen to stay in the United Kingdom. I think that puts the scale of this into perspective: the number of people who have applied for settled status and been granted it is actually greater than the total population of Scotland.

I want to place on record my thanks to the Home Office, the ministerial team, former Ministers and all the staff who have made the scheme so simple, so easy to apply and so successful. Compared with other immigration schemes of the past, the EUSS is a breath of fresh air. It is so simple and straightforward that it can be done on a smartphone, and, as we have heard, very many people have applied for it. The SNP do it a disservice by scaremongering, trying to present a picture of this scheme as difficult, uncertain, and something that applicants might have problems with. The reality is that for the vast majority of people, it is very easy and straightforward, and in some cases that I know of, they secure their settled status within hours of applying. We need to celebrate just how great this scheme has been.

By the end of last month, as has been said, almost 6 million people had applied for the EUSS. When we set up the scheme, we thought that only about 3.4 million people were likely to apply. That puts into perspective just how successful the scheme has been. Some have said that there are people who may be unaware that they need to apply for settled status, but my experience is that there are very few. The Government have done an incredible job working with local authorities and other bodies across the UK to get the message out, and the conversations I have had with EU citizens in Cornwall show that they have all been absolutely aware of the

[Steve Double]

scheme and how to apply for it, so again I think the Home Office needs to be commended for the incredible work it has done.

Some are calling for the scheme to be extended. I fully appreciate that the SNP wants to continue free movement and see this as a way of doing so through the back door, but we promised in our manifesto that we would end free movement, and it is right that the scheme has a deadline and comes to an end. However, I welcome the pragmatic and proportionate approach that the Minister has taken to dealing with those who may have applied to the scheme late.

We should celebrate the EU settled status scheme as a great success. It has demonstrated that, far from the claims made by those who want to paint our country now that we have left the EU as a closed country—an unfriendly place, a place that does not welcome people—exactly the opposite is true: we welcome all those from the EU who have been here over the years and who wish to make their home here. The scheme has been a success, and it demonstrates the very best of our nation. We should celebrate that fact, so I say to the SNP that I know this debate is not really about the EU settled status scheme: it is about having another go at the Westminster Government and working to their own agenda. However, the reality is that the scheme has been successful, and we should welcome it and celebrate all those who have applied to stay here.

5.57 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for his comprehensive and detailed explanation of the problems, obstacles, and failings of the settled status scheme system. I agree with him wholeheartedly about those drawbacks and failings, but as much as I am impressed by his explanation, I am astonished that he cannot recognise that he is also reciting a litany of the problems that Scotland and England would face if the SNP were to have its way over independence.

However, just as this is not another rerun of a debate on Brexit—the damage to our trade, the obstacles in the way of small businesses, and the problems that Brexit will create as we recover from it—nor should it be a debate about independence, because it is about something far more important than either of those things. It is about people: people who have come here, contributed, paid their taxes and raised their family here and regard this place as home, like so many of my constituents—almost 3,000, in fact.

One particular letter I received sums up this issue for me: “Dear Christine, I am a French citizen, having lived and worked in Scotland for more than 20 years. My husband is also French, and we have two children aged 12 and 9, both born in Scotland, and we have serious worries.” Their worries are about the future, about settled status, whether they will face another Windrush-type scandal, and how much it will cost them for their son, who was born here, to have British citizenship and a passport.

While I accept Ministers’ assurances about the extended deadline and that we will not face another Windrush, I do not believe that the Government have addressed the

fact that so many people like my constituents no longer feel welcome in the country that they made home and to which they have contributed.

There is also, frankly, panic among many people who live and work here, who perhaps married British citizens and are now confused about exactly what their future will hold. I do not blame them. We know that applications are taking longer to process than was promised and that the process is not as straightforward as was originally suggested. People have to make separate applications for children. We have heard all these promises today, but what the Government promised, as with so many things, has not materialised. We are not treating people with respect. What about all those still waiting for the decisions?

Much as I agree with the Scottish National party that the loss of freedom of movement is regrettable and about the situation that EU citizens now find themselves in, I am afraid that I cannot support the motion today because of that last sentence about immigration. Immigration should not, I believe, be the responsibility of one part of the United Kingdom. Yes, there are fruit pickers in Scotland who need staff and the NHS is calling out for migrants to come here and work—on that point, I feel that a great number of migrants in this country deserve indefinite leave to remain as a thank you for the contribution that they have made during covid.

But the need is not restricted to Scotland. Fruit pickers are needed in Cornwall as much as in Scotland; NHS staff are needed in Essex as much as in Scotland. As the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) pointed out, if it took as long to set up an immigration system as it has a benefit system, we would wait a long time before we got the people we needed.

Although I sympathise with much of what the SNP has said today, I regret that yet again an issue has been used as an opportunity to promote independence—and not, I believe, the best interests of EU citizens in this country. They should not become another weapon in the independence battle.

6.2 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

The decision to leave the EU was taken through a referendum. This was the will of the British people with all that entailed, including the loss of freedom of movement for EU citizens. It is difficult to understand the concerns that the Scottish National party is citing about the EU settlement scheme, given the efforts that the UK Government put in to ensuring that as many EU nationals as possible who are living in the UK had the support they needed to apply for settled status.

More than 1,500 Home Office staff were working on the EU settlement scheme. When it opened in March 2019, the Home Office estimated that between 3.5 million and 4.1 million EU nationals would apply for settled or pre-settled status. It is testament to the robust nature of the systems that the Government set up and the work put in by the Home Office team that over 6 million applications have been handled by the scheme. Most are turned around in five working days and over 5.1 million grants of status have been confirmed. The application figures are clear—they are a clear demonstration of the hard work that the Home Office, the DWP and other

partners have put in to reaching out to EU nationals across the UK through many different channels, including employers, landlords, charities and public bodies.

In my constituency of Ynys Môn, with its close ties to Ireland and direct link to Dublin, the Home Office engaged with key local employers such as Stena to ensure that their EU staff understood the requirements and could access the systems that they needed. To support EU nationals wishing to apply over the past two years, the Government have committed significant support and guidance. The EU settlement resolution centre, set up for those needing general assistance, has handled more than 1.5 million callers and responded to more than half a million online contacts. There was the assisted digital service for those without the appropriate skills, confidence or experience to complete online applications. Some £22 million of grant funding was given to 72 organisations across the UK to reach and give support to more than 310,000 vulnerable citizens and their families, including victims of human trafficking or domestic abuse. For those whose applications were submitted before the deadline but are still being considered, their right to live in the UK will be extended until a decision is reached.

Recognising that there may be good reasons for some to have missed the deadline, the Home Office has a late application process, and that means that those who could not or who did not apply for good reason, such as being in a coercive or abusive relationship, or who lacked the physical or mental capacity to do so will still be able to apply. It is right that there has been a settled status process because, going forward, EU nationals will be subject to the same immigration processes as people from other countries. It is difficult to see what more this Government could have done to ensure that those who have a right to settled status have had the opportunity to apply.

Along with my hon. Friend the Minister, I fully recognise and appreciate the contribution that EU nationals make to our lives and our economy in the UK. Over the past 18 months, EU nationals working in hospitals such as Ysbyty Gwynedd and in other key worker and frontline positions have been a critical part of our fight against covid-19. I end by saying that the UK will continue to have close ties to our continental neighbours and we still, as we always have, will warmly welcome the individuals, the skills and the cultural diversity that our migrant population brings to us.

6.6 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: The Minister boasts that the EU settlement scheme has been “a huge success”, with more than 6 million applications received. Let me be clear from the outset: these are not 6 million applicants. They are 6 million individuals who are our family members, our neighbours, our friends and our colleagues and their loved ones. Shamefully, they have had to face needless anxiety and bureaucracy ever since the disastrous vote to leave the EU five years ago. Each one of these individuals has a story of how they came to live here, why this is now their home, and why they should not have been put through this unnecessary, traumatic process simply to maintain the rights that they have always had.

I was particularly taken aback by the story of one of my constituents, Irena Jendrycha. Irena is 77 years old and was born in a Nazi concentration camp in 1943.

She was scheduled to be executed but was saved when the camp was liberated at the end of the war. Incinerators were being prepared for the extermination of all the camp's inhabitants at 12 o'clock that day but Irena and her mother were thankfully saved just in time, 10 minutes away from death, a moment Irena describes as an act of God.

After the camp's liberation, Irena and her mother were sent to a refugee camp in Italy where her mother met Irena's stepfather, after he had been released from a Russian gulag at the end of the war. As a family, they were transported to the UK and, at the age of four, Irena settled in Scotland. She has spent her life here since then and, in fact, has never even left the UK after arriving all those decades ago.

I am telling this story because Irena is one of the many millions who has had to apply for the EU settlement scheme. She is one of the UK's last Holocaust survivors and told me that the application process made her relive every horror of her past. In her own words, she described it by saying that

“any goodness within me was sucked out of me like a syringe”.

This is morally reprehensible and should shame the Government, but it is the reality of this scheme and their hostile environment. It is the consequence of being dragged far right by the UK Independence party and the Brexit party and treating individuals who contribute so much as mere statistics or a migration target to reach. I am sure that Irena is not the only one who has been left feeling like an outcast with no sense of belonging as a result of having to go through the scheme's process to remain in the place they call home. Simply put, this scheme clearly demonstrates that the Tories are living up to their reputation as the nasty party. Indeed, Irena made it clear that she was appalled by politicians who every year will pose for pictures, speak in debates and attend events remembering the Holocaust, yet are willing to make people like her feel unwelcome due to this hostile regime.

Irena has one question for this Government:

“Why are you putting me through this? I have to re-live it, through every horror... I went through this at school and now I am going through it again.”

I have a question for the Minister: after hearing all this, how can he judge the scheme as what he calls a huge success? This is not a country that I want to live in. The Scottish Government have always said that EU nationals are welcome here. The contrast in the message from the SNP and that from Conservative Members is crystal clear.

Finally, Irena asked me to tell her story today, as she wants to be a voice for the many who suffer in silence. I am deeply humbled that I have been able to do that. I want to assure Irena and all our citizens who call Scotland their home that, despite the cruel, callous and shameful approach of this UK Government, Scotland is their home and they should feel thoroughly welcome. I and all my SNP colleagues will continue to defend their rights wherever they come from and whatever their story is.

6.10 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow those comments from the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), although I disagree with almost all of them.

[Jerome Mayhew]

The settled status scheme has shown us that more than 6 million people have taken advantage of the opportunities that the United Kingdom offers and moved to this country. The first point to make is that this shows how successful the scheme has been. We have already heard that it is by far the most generous scheme in Europe, simple to apply for from home with a good app, well-advertised and well-supported by agencies. The numbers show how well the scheme has been developed and applied by the Government. Now that the scheme deadline has passed, it has been suggested, not least by the previous speaker, that applicants for this settled status might be at risk of what is described as a hostile environment. Yet the Government guidance to civil servants on how to approach applications after the deadline has been published and it simply explodes that myth. Rather than being a hostile environment, civil servants have been instructed to give applicants the benefit of the doubt when discrepancies arise, and to show a proportionate response. If mistakes in an application have been made, they should be pointed out to the applicant who then should be given a reasonable amount of time to correct them and resubmit without criticism. Applications out of time will also be permitted indefinitely if there are reasonable grounds for the delay.

This is the opposite of a hostile environment. To my mind the Government have bent over backwards, and continue to do so, to facilitate applications. They have commissioned £8 million of advertising to raise awareness. A wide range of support has also been offered and made available online, over the telephone if it has been needed, as well as from 72 organisations across the United Kingdom funded by the Government to help in the application process, and it has worked as the huge take-up proves.

Looking at the statistics, there is a key number that jumps out: just 290,000 out of more than 6 million EU citizens have chosen to make Scotland their home. These are figures that have been unaffected by any constraints on immigration. It is an historical measurement, so it is a measurement of the relative attraction of Scotland under the SNP to immigrants. Rather than seeking devolution of immigration powers, as the motion demands, the SNP might want to reflect on why it is that so many of these welcomed immigrants who have voted with their feet to make a new life for themselves here in the United Kingdom have decided not to make that life in Scotland.

The SNP has been in continuous power in Scotland since 2007, so this is the SNP Scotland that has been judged by European Union immigrants. What does it say about the anti-business approach of the SNP with the resulting underperformance of the Scottish economy with the SNP in charge, creating fewer job opportunities and successful careers? We should not forget that between 2007, when the SNP took over, and 2019, the Scottish economy has grown by 9.3%. The UK as a whole over the same period has grown by 16.5%, and that is including the drag of the SNP's Scottish economy. What does it say about the prospect of having to pay the SNP's higher taxes as an entrepreneur in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom? What does it say about the prospect of sending their children to the SNP schools that are going backwards in the international league tables when compared with the rest of the United Kingdom?

With the relentless focus on separation by the SNP, how welcoming is that message for immigrants, whether from the EU, the rest of the world, or the rest of the United Kingdom? Creating a border at Berwick is the last thing to encourage inward migration. This is another example of the SNP obsession with separation damaging the real interests of the country.

6.14 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The EU settlement scheme should never have needed to be put in place, and it is a travesty that our European friends and neighbours who have been living lawfully in this country, in some cases for many decades, should be forced into a situation where they have to apply for, and prove, their basic rights. The hon. Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), who I have the pleasure of following, hailed the scheme as a success, but he neglected to mention that the Government underestimated by 100% the number of EU citizens actually in the UK. Members of this Government promised that nothing would change—a promise that was quickly broken. The situation is now only worsening for the citizens to whom that promise was made and who are now arguably subject to a hostile environment. I noted the comments from the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), who is no longer in her place, on the steps that the Home Office had taken, but it does not sound like a particularly warm welcome to require those in coercive relationships to detail such trauma to prove that they have the right to stay in this country.

I have been inundated with correspondence from constituents to do with the EU settlement scheme, and I find it hard to believe that Conservative Members have not also heard from their constituents about that. I have heard from constituents who are appalled by the scheme and the risk it poses to their European friends and neighbours, and from those who are struggling to apply to the scheme themselves. I wrote to the Home Secretary on their behalf last month to highlight the issues that they raised, and I know that other Members have raised some of those issues this afternoon.

Those issues included, first, glitches on the app preventing the applications from being made. The Home Office has proudly said that it will be a digital system that will benefit EU citizens, but if the app does not work now, it is hard to trust that the system will work later. Secondly, there was supposed to be easy access to paper forms for those who need them. There are lots of reasons for people to need a paper form even when the app is working properly, but they can often be accessed only by phoning the helpline and getting them sent out in the post. That is ridiculous for a system that is meant to be making the most of digital technology, and disastrous for those who needed to apply by the deadline but could not get through on the helpline.

A third issue was that people had been unable to reach an adviser on the EU settlement scheme resolution centre helpline. I have received letters from those in considerable distress, because they are trying to apply for the scheme but either need assistance or have called the helpline repeatedly throughout the day over multiple days and have never been able to get through.

Finally, I sought an assurance that those who were unable to apply through no fault of their own would not be subject to a hostile environment. Some weeks later, and past the deadline to apply, I have yet to receive

a response. I therefore ask the Minister to provide an update in his closing remarks on when that will be forthcoming.

Here we are, one week past the deadline to apply, and I, like many Members, am still hearing about these problems. I have been working with the organisation Fife4Europe, which works with EU citizens from across the kingdom of Fife, covering not just my constituency of North East Fife but those of Dunfermline and West Fife, Glenrothes, and Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath. In my most recent conversation with the organisation earlier today, I was told about a number of issues that people are continuing to have with the scheme. I heard stories of parents not knowing they needed to apply for a child; of people being unable to access passports due to the closure of embassies; of incomprehensible forms and legal terminology; and, again, of that inability to get through to the resolution centre. These are not case studies for a campaign; they are anecdotes about what is happening to friends and neighbours, and I have no doubt that there are those experiencing the same thing throughout my constituency and the country as a whole.

I have also heard a huge amount of fear and confusion over how to apply and what might happen if the deadline was missed. What if those people were unable to access and fully complete the written forms? What about those people who have been unable to get the appropriate evidence to support their application by the cut-off point? I have heard that many people have ultimately put in incomplete applications just to get a certificate of application and get more time to jump over the hurdles set for them by the Home Office. By the deadline last week, there was an estimated backlog of 400,000 cases, and it is now estimated to be up to 570,000, according to the latest statistics.

It is clear the Home Office's inflexibility is just creating extra work for itself and adding to the anxiety of those left in limbo—and it is indeed limbo. The Home Office is providing a certificate of application, but that does nothing to demonstrate somebody's long-term rights to potential landlords or employers. Landlords and employers are looking for candidates who will be around in six months' time, and it would be understandable for them to prefer those candidates who can give that guarantee. I ask the Minister: what steps are being taken to deal with this backlog and when will the uncertainty be over for those hundreds of thousands of people?

What happens to those who were missed: those who did not know about the scheme despite the advertising, those who are not on the electoral roll or those who do not use the internet? The cut-off disproportionately impacts the vulnerable, those in social care, the old, the young, looked-after children and care leavers: those who need extra support but have now been made subject to the hostile environment. What support is there for them? What are this Government doing to ensure that those rights are upheld?

Even when somebody has managed to apply, we know that it is not plain sailing. We have been told time and time again that this is a digital status because that is easier, cheaper and safer, but it seems to be far from easy to make changes to that status—changes that are foreseeable over the course of a lifetime, such as getting new a passport with a new ID number, or getting married and changing one's name. Can the Minister explain how something that we were told was so simple can be more cumbersome than getting a new passport?

Speaking of ID cards, this Government seem happy to produce some ID cards, so why do they continue to reject physical proof of status? We are happy to use vaccine passports. If the Government say that they can find the money to produce voter ID cards, does the Minister agree that providing EU citizens with a usable physical proof of status is not too much of an ask? Clearly, much more needs to be done.

6.20 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I speak as the representative of the vibrant and diverse community in East Renfrewshire, whose population reflects a long tradition of migration into Scotland. The EU nationals in East Renfrewshire are our family, friends and neighbours. Many of them served on the frontline during the pandemic in our NHS, in our public services or in other essential roles.

The latest figures show that there have been more than 1,200 applications from East Renfrewshire alone, and that is before we get to those who missed out. How can they get absolute certainty over the right to live and remain, as they were promised by the Prime Minister? They need that or they face unemployment, homelessness and the refusal of benefits or healthcare. We should all be concerned about that, and we should be concerned to minimise the chances of people ending up in such distress through no fault of their own because the Tory Government are hellbent on pursuing their destructive race to the Brexit bottom—no matter our friends, neighbours, colleagues or Scotland's vote.

People in East Renfrewshire voted 74% to remain in the EU, and yet here they are having to deal with these serious issues in large numbers when they did not ask to have their lives thrown into turmoil. A major issue is that the UK Government try to provide reassurance, but no one can believe a word that they say. Their response to legitimate concerns can be summarised as, "Trust us—there's nothing to see here." The reality that we have all seen played out has been somewhat different. Anyone who wants a masterclass on why we cannot rely on a word that the Government say only needs to watch the Prime Minister tell a Northern Irish businessman that there will be no customs declarations on goods moving from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and then have a wee look at what the UK Government website says today.

The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary said after Brexit that there would be

"no change for EU citizens already lawfully resident in the UK" and that they would

"automatically be granted indefinite leave to remain".

There was no mention of a deadline to redeem that pledge. The concern is that unless guarantees are put in place now, the Tories might do what they did—indeed, what they continue to do—to the Windrush generation, tying applicants to the Windrush compensation scheme in a web of confusion, delay and further disrespect.

Last week, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) questioned the Prime Minister over an extension to the deadline, the Prime Minister brushed it off in his usual "Who cares about the details?" fashion. Within hours of that dismissive response, the system creaked to breaking point under more than 50,000 applications that were made as the deadline approached. The deadline was

[Kirsten Oswald]

extended, but instead of giving a reasonable extension, the UK Government shifted it by just nine hours. If an extension were possible, why not show good faith and make it a reasonable one? After all, the processing of applications will continue for months. Instead, late applications might wait months to be processed, leaving people unable to start jobs, enter new tenancies, obtain driving licences or make new benefit claims.

Scotland needs our EU citizens. We need workers in industries such as transport, hospitality, food, health and many other sectors, but the hostile environment created by this Tory Government runs counter to the needs of our economy and our values as a welcoming, open nation. Scotland needs an immigration system that works for our society. It is clear that that will not be delivered while crucial policy areas such as migration, citizenship, asylum and refugee policy remain under Westminster's control. That is why Scotland needs the full powers that will come only with independence.

6.24 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba) [V]: I am happy to support the SNP in this motion; the Alba party endorses it. It seems to us to be a microcosm of a wider issue, which is the diverging of two societies and different positions that have understandably been taken by their Governments, reflecting, perhaps, the wider views of their people. South of the border, immigration is being seen as a danger, a threat and something that has to be clamped down on, whereas in Scotland immigration is seen as a necessity, an opportunity and something to be supported. That is now reflected in the political directions of the two Governments.

Immigration has been with Scotland since almost time immemorial. It is reflected in our place names. Argyll, after all, is the land of the eastern Gael; it is where people came to when they originally came from Ireland. Sutherland may be in the north as part of Scotland, but it is actually the south lands for those coming from Scandinavia or the north. That has continued as people have come from south of the border, Italy and Ireland, and now from India, China and Africa. But especially in recent years they have come from the European Union, particularly from central and eastern Europe. That has been a good thing. They have come here and made Scotland their home. It is only a few years back that one in 10 children born in Scotland had a Polish mother. They have made Scotland a better place, enhanced our communities and benefited our economy.

The flipside to immigration is emigration. That is also why immigration is required in Scotland, because as well as immigration forging our nation, emigration has scarred our nation. Sometimes it has come about through hardship, or indeed through brutality, as with the highland clearances. More often, people have left for opportunity or for love. Equally, though, many people have had to go because they lack opportunities due to the mismanagement of the economy, especially by British Governments in recent years. Those of us who grew up in Scotland in the 1970s and '80s have seen our school classmates from the years before having to go south or abroad. That is why there is hardly a Scottish family who does not have a relative in Australia, Canada or some other place in the new world. That

gives a different perspective. It is why we recognise that emigration is part of what happens while immigration is something that we should have and is of benefit to our society.

The EU settlement scheme is causing fear and alarm, as people have narrated today. It is causing disruption in our economy, including in agriculture, hospitality and the HGV sector. Even today, our Transport Secretary is having to announce changes when things would be much easier if we just had the available labour that was primarily coming from eastern European drivers. That is why the Scottish economy requires immigration. Our economy as well as our society is being damaged by this. Some of the proposed changes by the Government in extending the scheme are of course welcome. The situation can be ameliorated. Any decision to take a view that is much more supportive of those who, for whatever reason, fail to apply is to be welcomed, but it does not go far enough.

Scotland requires its own immigration policy. I will not go into the question of an immigration policy at independence, as that is for another day, but immigration can most certainly be dealt with in a devolved system. That has previously been talked about by the Tory Government, and its failure to be delivered is shameful and is damaging us. It is available, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned, in the Isle of Man. It also applies in south Australia, where there are distinct needs for different economic areas such as New South Wales or Victoria. It also applies in Quebec, as has been mentioned. I listened to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) going on about how the policy was apparently opposed in some areas of Canada, but let us be quite clear that no federal Government in Canada has sought to remove the scheme whereby there is a distinct immigration policy for the province of Quebec. No mainstream political party in Quebec, as far as I am aware, is seeking to remove it or would seek to abandon it. That tells us that even Quebec Tories are more radical on immigration than Scottish Labour or the Scottish Liberal Democrats, who do not seem to want something that applies even in countries that operate with a federal or devolved structure. Scotland requires the same powers that are not only available in the Isle of Man but apply in Quebec and in Australia.

I support this motion not simply to stand up for those immigrants who have come here from the EU and who make our country a better place, but to make sure that our country can be the land that we know it can be. To do that, as throughout past centuries going back millennia, we require people to come here to make this their home, work here and make our society better. To achieve that, we require powers of immigration that can be dealt with without independence. But if the Tory Government will not give us that, then there is no alternative but to obtain independence to deliver the society that our people are entitled to live in.

6.29 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): Like other Northern Irish MPs, I have spent a lot of time in the Chamber, in Select Committee meetings and in the media talking about the free movement of goods and about people's emotions and identity in the context of Northern Ireland. However, there has been much less

discussion of the plight and the rights of EU nationals who have been living, working and contributing in our community. The free movement of sausages has demanded a lot more political time and energy than the lives and horizons of our neighbours, friends and colleagues.

We know that, following the referendum, uncertainty was created in the lives and careers of many EU nationals, and that chill set in long before the settlement scheme was announced. Employers were not sure whether a person would be around long enough to justify the investment in a training course. Would a landlord be allowed to sign a one-year lease with a particular tenant? Would it not just be less hassle and less admin to hire a local worker, even if they were less qualified? There has been a cloud over the future of EU citizens, and their horizons have been limited. Of course, the horizons of young people in this country have been limited too, with curbs put on where their life and their work may take them in the future.

Overnight on 30 June, many people previously living legally here and in Northern Ireland found themselves more vulnerable to the hostile environment. I proudly represent the most diverse constituency in Northern Ireland, and my team and I have been helping constituents navigate the new system. We have experienced at first hand their difficulties, knowing the culture of “no” that pervades in the Home Office—a presumption of guilt and unsuitability, and a disregard for people and the emotional consequences of living a life in limbo.

The immigration frameworks that the UK is introducing devolve the hostile environment to the community. Despite assurances that EU nationals and their family members would not be required to provide evidence of their status in order to access services, unlawful checks and discrimination are a reality. We know of cases where GP practices, landlords, employers and social security providers have requested share codes and additional documentation. Public servants, in all their fields, have become immigration officials, and a chilling inevitability follows that. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to clarify the legal viability and the legal rights of those citizens, and to reiterate that they are legal and welcome and valued here.

I have been told by the Home Office that there is no service standard, so there is no indication of how long people might wait for a decision on their case, and, as others have outlined, many struggle to access the helpline. As well as taking steps to rectify that, will the Minister address the widespread calls for a physical record or manifestation, so that people do not have to share screen-grabs, with all the data protection issues that that raises?

The overall Brexit immigration policy delivers a further blow to our society and economy. Northern Ireland traditionally has had net neutral immigration. To the extent that we have had anything approaching an immigration problem, it has been an issue of young people leaving our shores and not coming back. In fact, over the last decades, EU workers have helped us to address those problems. They have brought hard work and have brought diversity and vitality, as generations of people from the island I live in have done to other countries over many years.

EU migrant workers have staffed core economic activities, such as agrifood, manufacturing, tourism and hospitality, and certainly health and social care. In 2016, 7% of employees were EEA nationals, making Northern Ireland,

outside London, the region with the highest level of labour migration from EEA countries. According to the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, that number has fallen by 26% since the referendum. A quarter of those workers—our colleagues and our neighbours—upped sticks and left rather than deal with the hostility that was created by a campaign that framed them as the cause of all our problems.

Members will know that the pandemic has absolutely nailed the lie that wages are synonymous with the skill or value of a worker. An immigration framework should not use salary level as the primary determinant of a person's ability to work in the UK, especially when the same Government do little to address chronic low pay. With lower wages than the UK average, the points-based threshold of £25,600 is particularly ill-suited to Northern Ireland. Fewer than a third of migrant workers are currently able to meet that threshold. I would love to believe that it will drive up wages for local workers or EEA workers, but I not believe that was in the hearts and minds of the system's architects.

While the protocol's measures against a hard land border for goods have mitigated some aspects of Brexit, the unfit-for-purpose immigration rule is an example of the creeping borderism that Brexit is bringing to the island of Ireland. A Spanish backpacker can no longer make their way along the Wild Atlantic way from Cork all the way up to Belfast by working in bars. An Estonian software engineer can no longer seamlessly transfer from the Dublin office to the Belfast office. Why would someone from the EU come to work in Derry when 10 minutes over the border in Donegal they can do so with no bureaucracy or paperwork? Why would a multinational company choose a location in Newry when there is less cost and less red tape a few miles down the road in Dundalk?

Northern Ireland's only saving grace in the competition for foreign direct investment is that the protocol offers companies the unique and alternative proposition of access to both markets and it is ironic that—in addition to the hostility of these immigration frameworks—the Government seem determined to spaff that up against the wall. That is why the people of Northern Ireland have rejected this approach for the last five years.

6.35 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Nobody who campaigned to leave the EU will have considered the human cost of Brexit and, despite many heartbreaking stories, the Tory Government still do not. EU citizens have been treated appallingly, and their hardship continues. Many find themselves in legal limbo and fear that their status will become unlawful. For those who moved to the UK—decades ago in some cases—and have lived, studied or worked here and have fallen in love or started a family here, this country has become their home, but the future is uncertain for all those who have not become British citizens.

For those with pre-settled status, the situation is even worse. The Government must show that they are serious about the rights of EU citizens and, at the very least, provide them with physical proof of status to prevent discrimination. Many EU citizens, including constituents in Bath, are struggling with the untried, untested digital-only status, and 89% have expressed unhappiness about a lack of physical proof. It is incomprehensible that the Government are still not listening to them.

[Wera Hobhouse]

EU citizens seem no longer to be of any interest to this Tory Government. It is hostile Britain par excellence. Each time an EU citizen returns to their adopted home, they cannot be certain that they will be allowed in. Such fears are not unfounded. Here is another example why digital-only proof does not work. Research from the Residential Landlords Association found that 20% of landlords were less likely to consider letting their property to an EU or EEA national. The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants found that, in 115 mystery shopping inquiries, only three landlords explicitly said that they were willing to conduct an online check; 85% did not even respond. People are required to prove their immigration status throughout their lives. They could be seeking a new job, finding a place to live, opening a bank account, getting treatment at a hospital or returning home from a holiday abroad. The big promises about a simple proof of the right to be here have been shamelessly broken. The EU has mandated all member states to issue British citizens a uniform physical residence document; the UK must reciprocate.

As a European migrant, I feel the pain and sadness of all such EU citizens that Britain—a country that we once admired and chose as our home—has turned into a country of small-minded insularity. I ask the Government once more to show more sense and compassion towards EU citizens. Economies and societies are about people. For decades, the UK has welcomed and nurtured those who came. The country was a good example of an open, tolerant society and has seen the benefits of being modern and diverse. The pendulum is swinging the other way, not by accident but by political design. Britain continues to be geographically, historically and economically part of the European world. Europe is a continent with few barriers between countries, where academic, business and private life is shared across non-existent borders. The UK is no longer part of this open Europe. Those with choices, those with skills and qualifications, the best and especially the young—those the Government want to attract—have already moved or will move and not return. This is the tragedy of my adopted country.

6.40 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: Five years after the Brexit poll and the initiation of the article 50 process, we are still discussing the fate of millions of EU nationals across the UK, including many of my constituents. The persisting uncertainty in the lives of many EU nationals across the UK is causing distress and worry.

I welcome the fact that more than 6 million applications have already been processed, and it is reassuring that the Minister has confirmed that none of the cases currently being processed will be subject to immigration enforcement, and that the EU nationals concerned will have their rights legally protected.

However, there remain many questions on the rights of those who missed the deadline, which could have disastrous consequences for vulnerable EU nationals in the UK, such as those fleeing domestic abuse. If the deadline for settled status is missed and a late application is made, their ability to access benefits and homelessness assistance will be halted until they receive a successful grant of status. That risk is not a hypothetical scenario but a reality.

According to Refuge, the domestic abuse charity, reports from its frontline services indicate that many domestic abuse survivors who come from EU countries remain unaware that they need to make an application to the scheme, and that a separate application needs to be made on behalf of their dependants. Migrant survivors of domestic abuse who face forms of precarity will be comforted to know that the Home Office pays attention to that when considering their status.

EU nationals who experience domestic abuse have often found it difficult to provide the necessary documentation for their application, with many reporting that the documentation has been destroyed by an abusive partner. Indeed, Refuge even reports that some of its clients have been told by their abusers that, due to Brexit, they can no longer contact the police or the health services, risking deportation if they take such steps.

Although it is reassuring that the Home Office has agreed to accept late applications in cases where an individual has reasonable grounds, and that experience of domestic abuse will be considered to be such reasonable grounds, it would be helpful if the Minister would detail whether and how the Home Office will ensure flexibility in what can be considered to be acceptable evidence for a late application on those grounds.

It is also noteworthy that guidance for late applicants to the settlement scheme considers serious medical conditions or significant medical treatment that prevents someone from being able to complete an application to be a reasonable ground. This is, of course, welcome, but it would be useful to know whether it extends to mental health issues. Where someone with depression is unable to perform day-to-day tasks, would that fall within the scope of the clause?

For many years now, EU nationals have been subjected to a state of permanent limbo, anxiety and uncertainty about their future, and I hope the Minister will consider these modest steps to help our EU national friends and neighbours remain here, where they belong.

6.43 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I do not welcome this debate, as it should not have been necessary. That said, there have been some very interesting contributions. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for being all over this subject, as he always is. I also thank the 3million for its ongoing support and campaigning for all those who are still worried.

My office is always busy with casework, but in recent months it has been snowed under with people who have real difficulties with the EU settlement scheme. They have gone above and beyond the call of duty, working all sorts of hours, so I put on record my thanks to them.

I do not think I have any new questions, because I have asked them all before—I have just had difficulty getting an answer other than, “It’ll be all right on the night.” I do want to ask about late applications. I know that the Minister is always happy to give the example he gave today of the five-year-old child in care who in 13 years’ time discovers that their status was never resolved, and to say that that is of course a good reason for a late application. That is great, but I would really like to hear other examples because—he will forgive me for saying so—that is quite an obvious one. Who would not overlook a late application in that instance?

We on the SNP Benches would feel more comforted if the Minister elaborated on who else could make a late application and in what circumstances. He said something today about people who do not have the mental capacity to apply, and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) talked about people in coercive relationships, but could we get a bit of detail? Are we are talking about people in domestic abuse situations? Anyone who has been trafficked or bereaved or who is homeless? Anyone experiencing mental or physical ill health or an addiction? And can we talk about what is likely to happen in the immediate future, rather than 13 years hence? It is not likely that anyone around today will be still around then to be held accountable—I do not mean they will not be alive, just that they will not be here to be questioned.

I am going to hazard a guess that the Government are not that bothered about the toll this is taking on individuals—it is not all guesswork, because I have a fair bit of evidence about how we treat all categories of migrants. But if the Government do not care about the people involved, they surely must care about the economy. Scottish Government analysis shows a decline in the number of EU nationals working in Scotland, and that is hitting industries such as agriculture and hospitality hard. As others have said, that is happening not just in Scotland but across the UK. I know that this Government do not listen to the Scottish Government, so will they listen to the National Farmers Union, whose figures show that last year only 11% of seasonal workers were UK residents? That was despite the big Pick for Britain campaign. Farmers need workers but are struggling to get them. How would the Minister do his job if he could not get support staff?

Will the Government listen to the owner of Wetherspoons, Tim Martin? I never expected to refer to him to make any point in this place but, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said, even the arch Brexiteer himself is now lamenting the fact that he cannot get the staff he needs and is calling for a special dispensation for his industry. If he of all people is saying that, we know what a terrible impact Brexit must be having in terms of people leaving, and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) spoke about why. If on top of that we have EU nationals who are living here and entitled and willing to work, but who are unable to prove it quickly or easily and are therefore unable to work, what does that do to the availability of labour and to the economy?

I will not repeat the arguments about how important the requirement for physical evidence is, because my colleagues have covered that. All I will say is that there is absolutely no reason to require it. If the Government can do it to prove that people have been vaccinated, they can do it for EU citizens, if they want to.

So we have lengthy delays; people who missed the deadline; no physical evidence of the right to remain; online systems that are unable to cope; employers scared to employ; and people feeling unwanted and heading off. Many of my colleagues have today echoed the calls of Jenny Gilruth, the Scottish Government Minister for Europe, for the deadline to be extended, but that is not our preference. As has been said, our preference is for a declaratory system and for the settlement scheme to be scrapped. We are not asking the Government to do something fanciful: 14 countries in Europe—including

Spain, Germany, Portugal and Italy—automatically granted residency status to UK nationals living in those countries. That is the thing we promised but did not do. The immigrants we sent to those EU countries were treated an awful lot better than we are treating people from those countries. But then, our people are never immigrants, are they? They are expats and we expect them to be treated with respect. I agree, but respect cuts both ways, and making people jump through hoops is not respectful.

There is no doubt about it: this is a sore one for those of us in the SNP. Nothing—I mean nothing—throws light on exactly what is wrong with this Union more than the Brexit vote. It is a tale of two countries with completely diverging views on migration, or at least on inward migration. The latter, Scotland, votes 62% to stay in Europe, but because the former is bigger, it gets the final say, and my country is dragged out of the EU completely against its will. Now, my country is supposed to stand by and watch while this Government break the promises of the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister who, as we have heard, signed the pledge that said that “EU citizens will automatically be granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK”.

That pledge was a lie, because the two people who signed it are the very two who could have made it happen, and still could. It does not matter what the Minister says—that cannot be denied. The people of Scotland did not fall for that lie. We voted against it, but still we are expected to stand by and watch our family, friends, neighbours and colleagues go through hell, waiting months, and not knowing whether they can stay or not. We will not stand by much longer.

We will not be party to treating people that way. We will not put up with watching whole sectors of Scotland's economy fail because they cannot get the workers that they need, because those workers cannot prove their right to be here, because we are not allowed to invite them to our country or because they just do not want to be somewhere they do not feel welcome any more. None of that is in our name, and if Government Members mean what they have been saying throughout the debate—I am tired of hearing it—they should lobby the Prime Minister. They should tell him to make up for the democratic deficit that is Brexit and do the only democratic thing that he can do when it comes to Scotland: give us our section 30 order so that we can have a referendum on independence.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) said that the debate should be about people. Independence is about people, and I am in no doubt that the people of Scotland will tell this place that none of this—not Brexit, the EU settlement scheme or the hostile environment—is in our name. They will know that the only way to be able to create the kind of country that reflects who we are is to take control of our own affairs by voting yes to independence.

6.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing it. Before I pick up on some of the points that have been raised, I send my best wishes to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire). I hope he

[Iain Stewart]

makes a full recovery from his condition. I also express my concern about what my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) told the House about the attack on his constituency office, which is not something that any of us should have to endure.

I absolutely agree that language is important in this debate, and I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who reminded us that this is about people. Some sensible questions have been posed, and I will endeavour over the next seven minutes or so to respond to as many as I can—apologies if I am unable to reference everyone—and to do so in the spirit in which they have been raised.

I agree with the point that many hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Guildford (Angela Richardson) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), made—that we welcome and cherish the contributions that our friends, neighbours, colleagues and partners from other EU countries have made to our constituencies and to the country as a whole.

I also put on the record that I could not disagree more with the point that the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) made—that Scotland's and England's views on immigration are somehow divergent. I absolutely refute that. I represent a very diverse constituency, with constituents from all parts of the world. To declare an interest, my partner is a Malaysian national, so I have every good reason to cherish immigrants to this country and the contribution that they make. I will not have this painting of Britain outside the EU as some insular place, hostile to immigration. I reference our bold and generous offer to British nationals in Hong Kong as evidence of our approach.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) said—I hope I picked her up correctly—I want to emphasise that Home Office caseworkers' priority is to look for reasons to grant status, not to find reasons not to, and refusals are a last resort. Where someone has not provided the necessary evidence, Home Office caseworkers will contact them to help them to provide the evidence required, and will exercise discretion in their favour, where appropriate, to minimise administrative burdens.

I assure the House that all options will be exhausted before refusing someone's application. Those who have been refused but are now able to provide evidence to confirm their eligibility can simply apply to the scheme again, free of charge, and there is a range of support available online, and by email and telephone, for those who have questions or need help in applying. At this point, I wish to acknowledge the hard work that civil servants and employers have done to help applicants gain their status—a point powerfully made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie)—and I thank them for that. It is also important to reinforce the message, which several Members raised during the debate, that those who applied before the deadline but have not yet had their response have their rights enshrined in law until the decision is made. We need to send that important message out from the House tonight.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) raised an important point about the support available to vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups, including adults and children in care settings. The Home Office has awarded £21.5 million to 72 organisations across the

UK to provide face-to-face appointments and support online, over the telephone or by email to help vulnerable people apply. That work continues to be funded, and we are continuing to reach out to those vulnerable groups to make sure we capture everyone we can. Further assistance is available from the Home Office's settlement resolution centre, which is open seven days a week for telephone and email inquiries.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), in replying to the debate, asked a perfectly fair question about other examples of what might be deemed a "reasonable ground" for a late application. I am happy to tell her that the Home Office has published a non-exhaustive list of 17 pages on its website, giving those reasons, with one being where someone is a victim of modern slavery or is in abusive relationship. If she needs more information on that, I am sure my colleagues in the Home Office would be happy to supply that to her.

A number of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, who moved the motion, and the hon. Members for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), raised the need for EU citizens to apply for status in the first instance. The Government's view is that the constitution of the system, in the form of the settlement scheme, is the best way to deliver our commitment to European economic areas citizens who have made the UK their home—in fact, it is the best way to prevent another Windrush-type situation from happening. It provides citizens and their family members with clarity about what they need to apply for and by when, and about the secure evidence of their status that they need. It also ensures that service providers such as employers and landlords have a way of confirming who has what status. On the other hand, a declaratory system could lead to a situation such as Windrush where EU nationals do not have sufficient evidence to prove their status and entitlements in the UK.

Stuart C. McDonald *rose*—

Iain Stewart: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not give way, as I have two minutes left before the conclusion of the debate. As I was saying, that system could also result in third parties making incorrect or inconsistent decisions on someone's status—we do not want to allow that to happen.

Finally, let me touch on the issue of physical documentation. We do consider digital evidence of immigration status to be secure, and it can be accessed anywhere and in real time. It cannot be lost, stolen or tampered with as a physical document can. It does put individuals in control of their own data; they have direct access to information held by the Home Office about their status. In line with the principles of data minimisation, we will also be able to share only the information required by a checker, rather than all the information held on a physical card.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) raised points about what happens where someone does not have the digital passport as they arrive in the UK. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) tells me that that is not required, and the presentation of their passport will be sufficient to give all the information they need to.

In the last few seconds of this debate, let me say that we have made it clear throughout that we want those who are eligible for the EU settlement scheme to stay, and we welcome the fact that so many of them want to do so. They have made an enormous contribution to this country and will continue to do so.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 54, Noes 365.

Division No. 47]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Callaghan, Amy
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Farry, Stephen
Ferrier, Margaret
Flynn, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Hendry, Drew
Hosie, rh Stewart

Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Linden, David
Lucas, Caroline
MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus
Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stewart
Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Qaisar-Javed, Anum
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Smith, Alyn
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:

Marion Fellows and
Richard Thomson

NOES

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

Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyins, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel

Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen

Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt

Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John

Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

**David Rutley and
 Maggie Throup**

Question accordingly negated.

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

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 and 4 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

HIGHWAYS

That the draft Business and Planning Act 2020 (Pavement Licences) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Bank of England Act 1998 (Macro-prudential Measures) (Amendment) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 14 June, be approved.—(*David Duguid.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Post Box in Stoke Village

7.10 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the people I represent in Stoke Village in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. Stoke Village is a vibrant community, and what every vibrant community needs is a post box, but it has been removed by Royal Mail. In the past year of lockdown, a written note or a birthday card—something to have and to hold—from the people we love has meant so much more. I hope Royal Mail takes note of this petition and restores the post box to Stoke Village as soon as possible.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the campaign for a new post box in Stoke Village and call on the Royal Mail to install it without delay.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Stoke and surrounding communities in Plymouth,

Declares that Stoke village is a vibrant shopping centre and the heart of the local community but that the loss of its post box is detrimental to the local shops and community;

and further that the Royal Mail should restore its post box in Stoke Village as soon as possible.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to support the campaign for a new post box in Stoke Village and call on the Royal Mail to install it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002673]

Mr Speaker: Just to let the hon. Gentleman know that I got one replaced at Charnock Richard after it was removed, so let us hope Royal Mail is listening to him.

Sprint Route and Car Park

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Can I start by wishing the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) a speedy recovery? He is a great person and a great parliamentarian.

My petition is about the Sprint route car park, and it is from the residents of Walsall South.

The petition declares:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Transport for West Midlands should withdraw its proposal to build a 300-space Park and Ride car park on land adjacent to the Bell Inn, Birmingham Road; further that the proposed location of the car park is green belt land, which contravenes the National Planning Policy Framework and Walsall MBC's Site Allocation Document; further that there was no consultation with local residents before this decision was made by Transport for West Midlands and that four mature trees have now been removed along Birmingham Road as part of this project, also without any consultation; further that no consultation was carried out by Walsall MBC before it approved an Environmental Impact Assessment Screening option for this site, removing important environmental safeguards by exempting the proposals from a full Environmental Impact Assessment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that Transport for West Midlands withdraws its application to build a car park on green belt land.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002674]

Wealden Railway Stations: Disability Access

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David Duguid.)

7.12 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The whole country and this House seem to be distracted, Mr Speaker, but I hope you agree with me that there is nothing more important than this debate on the matter of disability access at Crowborough, Eridge, Uckfield, Frant and Wadhurst train stations in my constituency of Wealden. Train travel is a vital form of transport for Wealden residents, and securing improvements to rail services and the stations in Wealden remains one of my priorities.

Having served as a Transport Minister, I was once responsible for delivering the groundbreaking accessibility strategy called the inclusive transport strategy to ensure that public transport was more inclusive and better accessible for those with disabilities. It was actually the world's first strategy to align itself with the United Nations accessibility goals, and it paved the way for equal access for disabled people on all transport networks. It promotes provisions such as step-free access, changing facilities at motorway service stations and the enhanced passenger assistance service.

While building this strategy, I worked with many disability groups, service providers and bodies that take care of the infrastructure to address the barriers on transport networks for those with visible and invisible disabilities. As I was then, so I am today grateful for their help in preparing this speech. I am grateful in particular to Leonard Cheshire and its paper entitled "Get on Board 2020: Making the economic case for 'levelling up' inclusive transport". I hope the Minister can reference it in this remarks. I am also grateful, of course, to Transport for All and particularly Mr Alan Benson.

Today, however, I want to focus on the rail network and stations in my constituency of Wealden. Some 41% of rail stations in Britain are not step-free, and in the south-east this rises to 52%—and of course Wealden is nestled in East Sussex—but we have had some success, especially at Eridge and Crowborough stations, thanks to our Conservative Government. I am grateful for the funds that I have already secured for fantastic accessibility upgrades to our local stations. As a part of the Access for All fund, both Eridge and Crowborough stations are currently undergoing multi-million-pound refurbishments to ensure step-free access. The staircase and bridge at Eridge station were removed last year and are being replaced a new, modern footbridge. A new lift shaft is being constructed and automatic doors will also be installed. Similar construction is under way at Crowborough station.

I am proud to have been part of the upgrades for both Eridge and Crowborough. But there is a tiny issue with Eridge, which was brought to my attention by Tim Barkley, the chair of the Southeast Communities Rail Partnership community interest group. Apparently, GTR is making volunteers park at a distance from Eridge station because blue badge parking is not being issued there. That is an issue: we need to make sure that blue badge parking at the station is close to the lift and that volunteers can access the station as the refurb carries on.

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

I now want to touch on improvements at Wadhurst and Frant stations. I am pleased that, working with Guide Dogs UK, we have been able to secure safety improvements at Wadhurst and Frant station platforms for visually impaired commuters. The warning tactile and painted contrasting lines on station platforms will help orientation and safety. It is incredibly important that we focus on both visible and invisible disabilities when it comes to making stations accessible.

I am incredibly pleased with the Guide Dogs UK campaign, which has also focused on what Network Rail can do to support people with visual impairment. Mr Alan Benson from Transport for All has raised an issue with me. Apparently, tactile paving is missing or incomplete across most of the network; that was raised particularly following the unfortunate death at Eden Park station. I hope that the Minister can confirm that Network Rail will be encouraged to prioritise the installation of tactile pavements, so that those with visual impairments can feel safe too.

I would, of course, also like to see step-free access at Wadhurst and Frant; I am hoping that the Minister can make a nod in a positive direction so that when we put in an application for funding, we will also be successful there.

I now draw the Minister's attention to the Uckfield line, which causes the most amount of tension for my constituents. It used to be called "the misery line" and for quite some time we have been trying to get it electrified and get a depot at Crowborough; at the moment the line is a real dinosaur. It would be fantastic if we could have an upgrade. As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Southern Rail, I have raised this matter repeatedly with the Department, the Minister and his predecessors. It would be fantastic if the Minister could make reference to that at the Dispatch Box or write to me to say if the campaign for an upgrade to the Uckfield line will be fruitful.

I turn quickly to the Passenger Assistance app, one of the most important parts of the inclusive transport strategy; we were very excited at its launch a few months ago. It is incredibly important for people setting off on their journeys to have an integrated service on their phones to make sure that any breakdown can be communicated effectively.

Any new app is going to have a few problems, but some particular ones were brought to my attention by Mr Alan Benson. Even though the app can offer some real potential, there is no way to process or co-ordinate buying a ticket, booking a wheelchair space and getting assistance in one place. It can take over an hour to get the app to function. Could that be resolved? The biggest issue is that operators need to adopt the app so that we can ensure that all journeys are integrated and all information is in one place. The lack of accurate information is always going to be a problem when people with disabilities try to use an app to get across the country using multiple forms of transport. It would be fantastic if the Minister explained whether there is a way to resolve the app so that it can become even more useful than it is at the moment.

Finally, three years on from the publication of the inclusive transport strategy, will the Minister confirm that it is meeting all the targets to ensure that the rail

network in particular can be accessible for all? There are some concerns that the Access for All funding may fall short due to budget cuts or because of covid pressure. We would not want to see that at all. I also invite the Minister to visit my constituency of Wealden; he may want to go to Frant or Wadhurst stations, with their tactile paving, or to Eridge and Crowborough stations, with their step free access. Of course, I would love it if the Minister could write to me about the electrification of the Uckfield line.

Finally, I want to leave the Minister with one thought from Leonard Cheshire's recent report. It is asking for the inclusive transport strategy to be legislated for, so that it becomes law and we do not lose track of the timetable we are setting ourselves. It is fantastic to know from its report, "Get On Board 2020", that investing between 1% and 3% of the total transport capital between now and 2030 in a fully step-free rail network would potentially enable 51,000 disabled people into work, and could boost our economic output by £1.3 billion. Making our railway stations accessible not only helps disabled passengers and customers, but whole communities. I look forward to the Minister's response.

7.20 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Speaker. Alas, my England top that we were debating on Twitter remains safely in my office for at least the next eight minutes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on having secured this debate on the important subject of accessibility to the rail network—possibly the second most important television event happening this evening.

Ms Ghani: Surely the first.

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend was, of course, responsible for accessibility in her time as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, and I thank her for her contributions and successes over that period. It is a subject that I take incredibly seriously; however, she will also be aware that I am a qualified and active football referee, just about to enter my 40th season in the middle, and an interesting and important game of association football commences shortly. I might just stick in the odd pun, because I am keen to kick off this debate, but I assure her that delivering a slightly light-hearted speech on this matter does not mean that I do not take it extremely seriously.

Mr Speaker: The Minister may be aware that we can also issue yellow cards from the Chair.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I was hoping that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would be here, so that he could Winks at me and then I could happily let him Calvert-Lewin.

I recognise how important it is for my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden's constituents to have access to the railway. It is an important part of all of our lives, whether it is used to see family and friends, to go about our daily lives, or perhaps to head to Wembley to watch Sancho, Foden and Pickford. Heading out to work is an important journey, as indeed is coming home: "It's coming home" is one of the most important journeys there is. Delivering a transport system that is accessible

to all is a must, not just a Rice-to-have, and it is of great importance to me and my hon. Friend. I know that she is aware of, and fully committed to, the Department for Transport's inclusive transport strategy, published in 2018, and that she recognises it as evidence of the Government's commitment to taking action to safeguard and promote the rights of all disabled passengers.

By 2030, we want disabled people to have the same access to transport as anyone else, and if physical infrastructure remains a barrier—or a wall—then assistance must play a role in guaranteeing those rights. An accessible transport network is central to the Government's wider ambition of building a society that works for all. Regardless of the nature of a person's disability, they should have the same access to transport and the same opportunity to travel as everyone else. No one should have to sacrifice—or sacrifice—their ability to use our public transport system.

Unfortunately, though, many of our stations date from the Victorian era, and their infrastructure is not fit for purpose for too many people. Some stations have very little space for us to carry out improvements: one could say that the Victorians, in some ways, Henderson. Those 19th-century stations were not built with the needs of 21st-century passengers in mind, which has left us with the huge task of opening up a rail network to disabled passengers that is not fit for it. Although 75% of all journeys are through step-free stations, only about a fifth of the stations have proper step-free access, as my hon. Friend detailed in her speech, into the station and between each platform. So we are not in a Dier place but we must aim higher—much, much Maguire indeed.

Clearly, accessible stations make a huge difference to people's journey experience, not only to people with reduced mobility but to those carrying heavy luggage or those with pushchairs, which is why we have continued the Access for All programme, and the inclusive transport strategy included a commitment to extend our Access for All programme across control period 6 between 2019 and 2024, with an additional £350 million Sterling of funding from the public purse. This new funding builds on the previous success of the programme, which was launched as a 10-year programme in 2006, and has so far included step-free routes at over 200 stations, and 1,500 stations have benefited from smaller-scale access improvements.

I am committed to ensuring that Network Rail speeds up the planning and delivery of tactile paving across the network. Tactile paving means that people with buggies and people with sight issues can feel by foot or by Kane when they are approaching the platform edge. The bumps underfoot almost feel like Stones and people can move around the platforms more confidently in a Shaw-footed fashion. We want to be in a place where every passenger can feel like a confident Walker at a station with there being no Trippier hazards. It is right that I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the role she played. What she did was a great Phillips for the accessibility cause and we are now reaping the benefits of her work.

I turn to the stations in Wealden. As my hon. Friend will know, Crowborough is more famous currently for being chanted by England fans in the song, "Sweet Crowborough Line", but Crowborough and Eridge stations were both nominated for Access for All funding and will receive funding to create accessible step-free routes via the Southgate, with works due to be completed by 2024 at the latest.

We are also pressing the industry to comply with its various legal requirements, and the Office of Road and Rail recently consulted on accessible travel policy guidance. The revised guidance will include proposals that will strengthen provisions put in place that ensure that disabled people can use our rail network, and I have encouraged the ORR to take enforcement action against train and station operators who are found not to be meeting their accessibility options. Let us hope there is no need for penalties.

In May, we published our White Paper—the Williams-Shapps plan for rail—the biggest shake-up of the network seen in three decades. We will be bringing the railway together under a single national leadership of a new public body, Great British Railways, with one overwhelming aim to deliver for passengers. This reinforces the Government's commitment on accessibility, too. Indeed, accessibility is threaded through the White Paper, like a pass from Jack Grealish weaving through the Danish defence to Marcus Rashford. Great British Railways will also own and be responsible for the entire passenger offer and will put accessibility at the core of its decision making. Our vision is that accessibility will become an integral part of the passenger offer for all.

I hope that I have, in the short time I have had available, demonstrated that this Government are committed to improving access at stations for disabled passengers, including in my hon. Friend's constituency. Like her, we think that these problems have been allowed to mount up for too long. Through specific projects such as Access for All and improvements delivered as part of our wider commitment to improving the rail network, we are doing our bit gradually, and I would like to speed up. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that, in the spending review, I will be putting in a healthy bid for the continuation of the Access for All programme.

I guess that I shall finish because I do not want to test the patience of the House staff, whom I thank for being here tonight. I thank you, Mr Speaker, and I wish good luck to England. I thank my hon. Friend for the contribution that she has made and I very much do look forward to visiting her constituency.

Mr Speaker: At least the Member has the good news. Let us hope that England do win tonight—that is the news that I want to put out there. Come on, England. Let us get there.

Question up and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Con)	Chris Elmore
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Ian Paisley
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Daly (Bury North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con)	Ben Everitt
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)	Ian Paisley
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Owen Thompson

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Wendy Chamberlain
Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Ian Paisley
John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Heappey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Johnston (Wantage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Ian Paisley
Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba)	Neale Hanvey
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Owen Thompson
Damien Moore (Southport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Peter Aldous
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)	Ian Paisley
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dean Russell (Watford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)	Ben Lake
Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Spellar (Warley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)	Ben Lake
Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP)	Ian Paisley
Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 July 2021

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

Regional Airports

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

9.25 am

Esther McVey (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 be suspensions between debates.

I remind Members participating, physically and virtually, that they must arrive for the start of a debate in Westminster Hall and are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate and that they will be visible at all times, both to one another and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before using them and before leaving the room. Please put the cleaning materials in the bin.

We are about to begin. The Minister has now arrived, so I will not ask whether we need to have a short delay, if that is what the Member introducing the debate would have liked to do.

9.26 am

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of regional airports.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and a great honour to open the debate on a matter that I feel passionately about. I know many colleagues feel the same, owing to the number of Members who have applied to speak.

I am speaking as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on general aviation and as the MP representing Cornwall airport Newquay. I draw the House's attention to the fact that my wife, Anne, was recently elected a Cornwall councillor and is now chairman of the Newquay airport consultative forum.

I am sure we are all aware of the unprecedented impact that the covid-19 pandemic has had on the UK aviation sector. Collapsed demand drove passenger levels at UK airports last summer to their lowest since 1975. In the first quarter of 2021, they were down 94% compared with 2019, and economic output for the air transport sector reduced by 89% between February and March 2020. As a result, many regional airports are losing many millions of pounds in revenue while incurring significant additional debt, leaving them in a perilous financial situation.

Although our national recovery has begun, many challenges remain for the sector. Our airlines and airports face a far longer road to recovery than many other sectors. Even with a successful global vaccine roll-out, 2025 is the earliest date by which the UK is predicted to return to 2019 passenger levels. Furthermore, that recovery is unlikely to be even, with regions outside London and the south-east set to recover far more slowly.

It is crucial that we recognise the role that the aviation sector and, in particular, regional air connectivity will play in our future economy. Pre-pandemic, the sector had an estimated value of more than £28 billion to the UK, and every year almost 80% of inbound visitors reached the UK by air. We enjoy one of the largest aviation networks in Europe and the third biggest globally, with more than 230,000 people working across more than 40 commercial airports.

Regional airports also play a vital role in supporting our national hub airports. Airports such as Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester rely on routes offering good connectivity to the regions of the UK to provide the passengers for their long-haul flights. In particular, regional airports are vital to the Government's levelling-up agenda, as they are crucial for economic development across our regions. They give regional communities the connectivity and accessibility they need to be part of the national economic and social fabric, and they allow people from all corners of the country to benefit from economic growth and prosperity.

The UK's regional airports are a vital catalyst for the economic growth of other sectors, as they facilitate inward investment in the services, products and tourism that support communities to thrive. Newquay airport, in my constituency, is vital to the prosperity of Cornwall and the wider south-west, and it contributed £50 million to the economy in 2015. We witnessed the importance of Newquay airport during the recent G7 leaders' summit in Cornwall. Given the distances involved and the aircraft that needed to be accommodated, there is a strong case that without Newquay airport it would not have been possible successfully to host the G7 in Cornwall. The collaboration between the Government, Cornwall Council and Newquay airport to fund and deliver the infrastructure required to host the summit in record time is an example of what can be achieved through effective collaboration between Government and regional airports to deliver short-term and long-term value across the UK.

It is therefore right that the Government have intervened with £7 billion of support for the aviation sector during the pandemic, through loans, grants for business rates and the job retention scheme. However, with many of our regional airports in a fight for survival as they bear the brunt of the global pandemic, the Government need to look at providing sufficient ongoing support to keep our regional airports open and planes flying. Many of our smaller regional airports have been hardest hit, will take the longest to recover, and are the least well-resourced to do so. Therefore, we need additional assistance if the economies they serve are to be prevented from falling even further behind during the recovery.

Unfortunately, experience tells us that, once a regional airport closes, all too often it never returns. With developers reallocating the land, large airports such as Heathrow and Gatwick will pull through the crisis—they really are too big to fail—but that is not true of our smaller regional airports. We must therefore protect regional

[Steve Double]

airports now. If we allow them to close, it is likely that the connections they provide and the economic contributions they make to the regions they serve will be lost forever.

I am particularly pleased to welcome the news of a review on cutting air passenger duty on domestic flights, which I and many other colleagues have been advocating for some time. Domestic UK operators bear a disproportionate burden owing to that tax because the charge is levied on the outbound and return journeys. Unfortunately, there has been a loss of connectivity since APD was introduced in 2006, with the tally of UK domestic routes falling by 27%.

Our departure from the EU provides us with a timely opportunity to cut the tax, which would be a critical move to support connectivity across the country and a welcome step to provide some vital relief to the airline industry. When will the Government make a decision on cutting domestic APD? I gently suggest to the Minister that that should be done as a matter of urgency, as one way to support our regional airports.

I am also pleased that, last year, the Government announced the regional air connectivity review as part of their commitment to levelling up the UK. I look forward to any update that the Minister can provide on the review, and he will know it is keenly anticipated by the sector.

I stress the important role that public service obligation routes can play in supporting our regional airports. PSOs could be a vital lifeline for many regions across the UK as we recover from the pandemic, and it is disappointing that the UK has only three PSO routes, all linking to London. That is far fewer than other European countries; for instance, France has around 40. Therefore, I would welcome the expansion of PSO routes to key non-London routes, which would boost the confidence of prospective operators to take on new routes and help with our regional connectivity.

Adding to the importance of our regional airports is their contribution to our transition to net zero—to a cleaner, greener and more sustainable future. Before we can reach the goal of net zero long-haul transatlantic flights, our regional airports will play a critical role in offering short-haul electric flights that are entirely carbon free. For example, I am delighted that the first hybrid electric aircraft will fly between Exeter and Newquay airports later this summer. I am also pleased that easyJet is committing itself to covering short-haul flights with a new electric fleet by 2030 and that Airbus is in the early stages of developing the world's first zero-emission aircraft.

My view is that, within the next 20 years, as we introduce clean methods of flight, flying will be the environmental transport choice. We are not too far from the opportunity for all domestic flights to be zero emission, which means that one of the biggest barriers to flying—the environmental impact—will be removed. When we reach that point, flying will become the mode of transport of choice for many travellers, but that will not be achieved if we do not have a network of regional airports to serve the whole of our country. With that in mind, our regional airports must be protected to allow us to realise the full potential of the new technology.

It is clear that aviation is still in the midst of the most challenging crisis it has ever faced, which leaves many of our regional airports in a fight for survival. The importance of the industry is evident: better connectivity, greener aviation and a more robust economy. I am pleased that the Government have intervened with billions of pounds to support the sector, but we must recognise the importance of our regional airports and provide them with the support they need to survive the pandemic and to thrive. Greater financial support, reduced APD and more PSO routes are some of the available options that I believe the Government should consider. I urge them to look at such options to ensure that the UK domestic aviation sector can thrive in the years to come and play a critical part in levelling up all regions of the UK.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I aim to start calling Front Benchers no later than 10.25 am, and the Minister needs to leave time for Steve Double to close the debate. I call Cherilyn Mackrory.

9.36 am

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, McVey, and I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), on securing the debate. Like him, I wish to support Cornwall airport Newquay because it serves the whole of Cornwall, including my Truro and Falmouth constituency. I will echo what my hon. Friend has said, but hope not to repeat too much of it.

Cornwall airport Newquay is a vital part of Cornwall's transport and economic infrastructure as it provides national and international connectivity to and from Cornwall and the whole south-west. Given the geographical location of Cornwall, which has water on three of its sides, the airport provides a fast and cheap alternative for longer-distance travel, and speed and choice for businesses, residents and visitors. The airport supports a growing and resilient modern transport system for Cornwall. Before the pandemic, our airport was one of the county's largest employers, employing over 600 people in different roles, including aircraft engineers, air traffic controllers, pilots, firefighters, instructors and so forth.

Aviation is a fundamental driver of international trade, and the connectivity it provides is a key component in delivering national competitiveness and enabling exports. Aviation and aerospace directly support over 250,000 UK jobs. They have been beacons of British engineering prowess for a hundred years, and, as we have heard, they still are. As my hon. Friend described, the aviation sector has unsurprisingly been hugely affected by the pandemic. We have seen countries across the globe shutting their borders and imposing multiple restrictions and regulations, which has meant that the movement of individuals and freight has been curbed. The pandemic is having an enormous impact on the aviation industry and our regional airports. Consequently, there are knock-on effects for the local economy.

In Cornwall, the knock-on effect on tourism, which relies heavily on aviation, is extremely significant. Building public confidence to kickstart aviation in order to aid the economy through tourism, while aiming to stem further job losses in aviation and aerospace, must be a priority. That will be important not only for our continued economic recovery, but for our hugely significant promise to level up the country. Cornwall must be part of that,

as it is one of the most socioeconomically challenged counties of the UK. Put simply, Cornwall must not be left isolated, and its airport is key to that.

However, the industry must become environmentally sustainable. Climate change is a clear and pressing issue for us, our businesses and Governments across the world, and we know aviation emissions will increase if decisive action is not taken. I am pleased that UK aviation is committed to achieving net zero by 2050 through taking an international approach by working with Governments around the world, and through the UN. Current circumstances present an opportunity to drive decarbonisation through such an agenda, and the UK is well positioned to become a leader on green technologies, as we have heard, through sustainable aviation fuels and the electric flight that is taking place later this year. That will also create new and exciting well-paid careers for people in Cornwall and in all our regions.

Amid the growing consensus that the global community must act now to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, the UK will host COP26, which takes place in November, and I believe aviation has a full part to play in the conference and in achieving the net zero future.

The industry has taken great strides forward, and electrification and alternative fuels will greatly reduce aviation's carbon impact. It is important that the research and development momentum and the commercialisation of those technologies from small and medium-sized enterprises are not lost. The UK must be bold. The crucial point here is that technologies continue to develop. UK companies should be encouraged to lead on that activity, and the UK should give clear support to those companies.

The Environmental Audit Committee, on which I sit, is due to launch its inquiry on net zero aviation and shipping before the summer recess. We will agree the terms of reference next week. Although I do not wish to pre-empt the work of the Committee, it is likely that we will want to examine the role, if any, that the Government can take in achieving net zero in this space. So, as they say, watch this space.

The Government must ensure that regional airports such as Cornwall airport Newquay are supported so that they can survive what is a dark period for them. They are essential to connecting people in Cornwall with the rest of country. We should not look to stop aviation travel, as I hear in some quarters, but should ensure that innovation creates a net zero industry in time.

9.41 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and I congratulate my good friend, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), on securing the debate. He represents Cornwall at one end of the United Kingdom, and I represent Caithness at the other.

I want to speak about Wick airport. For some time, there has been a question mark over its future, which worries me and everyone who lives in the far north of the United Kingdom. It worries us all a great deal. The point about trying to regenerate the economy of Caithness once Dounreay, the UK's first nuclear reactor, has been decommissioned is that we have to replace the employment

up there. The airport is crucial not only to the present local economy, but to the future local economy of the far north of Scotland.

We all know how enthusiastic the Prime Minister is for a space launch, which I completely support. There was a proposal to have one of Britain's first space launch sites in Sutherland, close to Wick airport. It strikes me that although we are forging ahead in a good way with a space launch, any question mark over Wick airport would take us in completely the wrong direction. In fact, if we lost Wick airport, that would be a major disaster for the north of Scotland and a big disaster for the United Kingdom, because, as the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay has said, our chain of regional airports is crucial to the way we run our country and our economy.

For some time, we have been campaigning in the north of Scotland for a public service obligation for Wick airport. To that end, I give credit where it is due. The Scottish Government have offered a sum of money towards that, which is good, and I congratulate a former Member of the Scottish Parliament, Ms Gail Ross, on having achieved it, but that is not enough money to run this.

My erstwhile council, Highland Council, on which I had the honour to serve for a number of years, does not have the deepest pockets in the United Kingdom, but it has, very much to its credit, come up with an offer of £300,000 per annum, but we have a shortfall. So, Ms McVey, my request is simple, and you can imagine what is coming. I would be deeply grateful if Ministers agreed to meet me, and probably Mr Raymond Bremner, chairman of the airport committee, to talk about how we could establish a joint funding package for a PSO that ensured the future prosperity of Wick airport.

This is my final point. If we can increase the flow of passengers through Wick airport, that is good for the economy of the country and it is good for the local economy. Part of keeping the United Kingdom united, frankly, is to have all the airports working with each other across the length and breadth of the country, all the way from Cornwall at the bottom of the country to Caithness at the top of the United Kingdom.

9.45 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). I represent the constituency in which Heathrow is located, which in no way can be described as a regional airport—I apologise if he feels that I am Zoom-bombing the debate—but I think it is absolutely critical to have a discussion about the need for a new aviation strategy, as a result of the development of regional airports over the recent period.

The aviation national policy statement previously before the House is no longer relevant. Aviation movements have changed. The way in which aviation will be used in the future has changed dramatically. As the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) said, we also now have to address aviation's role in achieving net zero, as well as the impact of the pandemic. All of those factors need to be taken into account in the discussion of the future of regional airports.

[John McDonnell]

The pattern of aviation is changing. We now know that the whole approach on which the last strategy and policy statement was based—with a major hub and a large number of regional airports that feed into that hub—no longer reflects the pattern of aviation. Even Howard Davies, the chair of the commission into the development of Heathrow and the potential for a third runway, identified that in the initial work and has confirmed it subsequently.

For my constituency, that means that we no longer want nor need a third runway at Heathrow, but we accept the need for investment in regional airports, because passengers simply want to fly point to point. In addition, we all want to overcome the environmental impact of aeroplanes coming from regional airports into Heathrow and outwards, which is wasteful and does not do regional economies any good whatever.

It is time for the Government to look at this matter overall. They need to look at a new national policy statement for aviation, which accepts that regional airports play a role in levelling up, of which there is no doubt; that the focus of concentration and investment should no longer be on a major hub at Heathrow and therefore a third runway is no longer necessary; and that if we are going to have an environmental aviation policy, it has to be localised and focus on minimising travel in some forms and, at the same time, on developing the science.

It is important that other hon. Members have time to speak in the debate about their own airports, so I have one final point. It is a plea from all of us for help on the pandemic. We are all hoping that we can come out of the pandemic as rapidly as possible, that people can start travelling again and enjoying their foreign holidays, and that we can maintain the level of jobs in our aviation sector. I still believe that will take some time and we have to be realistic, and therefore, communities that are dependent on aviation, on their local airports and on the aviation sector will need continuing support. I am worried about the run-down and closure of the furlough scheme.

The sector needs special assistance and our communities need longer term strategic support, particularly if jobs are to be shed in the sector. We need to ensure that we have a comprehensive strategy for the workers who will be displaced. That means investment in training and in developing local economies, which will be based on new high-paid, high-skilled jobs, particularly in artificial intelligence and technology, because many of our constituents who work in the aviation sector are highly trained. This is a time to stand back, put in motion some urgent measures to deal with the pandemic and then look at a long-term, stable aviation strategy that contributes to our economy and to tackling the existential threat of climate change.

9.50 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this very important debate.

As has been said, regional airports are key to our economy, particularly for those of us—such as those of us in Nottinghamshire and my part of the east midlands—who are so far from coastal ports. Our rail, air and road connections are key to our vitality and our economy.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on East Midlands airport. It is the largest pure freight airport in the country, but two thirds of its income comes from passenger travel—short-haul tourism flights—that obviously has not happened for the last 15 months. So, two thirds of the airport's income as a business has disappeared. Obviously, there has been no sector-specific support for the airport as a business. It has taken advantage of furlough and other general business support to stay afloat. However, given the importance of East Midlands airport to our regional economy, I hope that this week the Transport Secretary will lay out a clearer and much more certain plan for the sector to get moving again. The peak time for tourist travel has already begun and allowing travellers who are fully vaccinated to travel without quarantine, and allowing operators to get flights back up and running, would be a huge boost for the sector.

The key benefit in the east midlands—because, as I have said, we are very far from coastal ports—is the potential to link up a real multi-modal hub for travel around air, and around road and rail links. We can also boost East Midlands airport and its economic potential with improved connectivity if we can get freight onto rail. As I say, East Midlands airport is the biggest pure freight airport in the country. Decisions coming up around the integrated rail plan and the Toton hub in the east midlands will be key, and I am raising those issues with Ministers directly.

East Midlands airport also plays a key role in our wider economic plans, for example our freeport. It is a unique proposition—an inland freeport, based on customs tax incentives that will attract business to our region—but clearly East Midlands airport is the key to delivery of that proposal. I very much welcome the support that East Midlands airport as a business and its chief executive, Clare James, are giving to that plan and the work they are doing in trying to put that business case together and deliver it.

With our development corporation sitting alongside that plan, we have an incredible and highly attractive opportunity to masterplan these sites and to build something positive in terms of future-facing jobs and growth for our region, which will make it a highly attractive prospect for business to invest in. East Midlands airport is key to the delivery of all that.

As I have said, in my part of the country East Midlands airport is vital to our connectivity and our economic growth; it would be hugely challenging to deliver a levelling-up agenda in the east midlands without a strong East Midlands airport. We have the potential through our freeport to play the role in the heart of the country of connecting together other freeports around the UK, and to play a role, as we already do in the region, in central logistics; I think that 90% of the country is within four hours of East Midlands airport. The airport has huge potential, if we can help it to survive these very difficult times and if we can support it as part of our wider economic plans.

A couple of key decisions will be made later this year: the integrated rail plan and planning for our development corporation have the potential to kickstart a huge boost and a huge step forward for our regional economy, if—and only if—we are able to support our regional airports to continue to offer the current £300 million a

year gross value added, which is a huge uplift for other businesses, and if we are able to support the 9,000 people who work on site at East Midlands airport. EMA needs certainty on international travel. I hope that in his statement later in the week, the Secretary of State will be able to offer some of that certainty and a boost to our regional airports around the whole of the UK.

In summary, regional airports such as East Midlands airport will be key if the Government are to be able to deliver on the levelling-up agenda, to grow our economies and to create good, sustainable and well-paid jobs in the future. I urge the Minister to do everything he can to support East Midlands airport.

9.54 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under you as Chair, Ms McVey, and I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for securing this important and timely debate.

The UK's regional airports are important engines of economic development. As an international and domestic transport hub, Newcastle International airport in my constituency is a large regional employer that supports many regional jobs on site, off site and through its supply chain. It supports manufacturing business exports, higher education through its work with our world-class universities and, of course, the tourism sector, which thrived before this crisis. It is a strategic asset for the north-east and is central to our future economic growth but, like many other airports, its future and transition to sustainability is seriously challenged by the devastating impact of the current crisis on international travel, and the Government's apparent unwillingness to support and understand the special nature of this sector.

We all know the pandemic has taken an especially hard toll on aviation. Between April and December 2020, passenger numbers were down 89.3% year on year. In the first quarter of 2021, they were down 94% on 2019. It has been an absolute collapse. The numbers are not expected to return to pre-crisis levels until at least 2023, in the most optimistic scenario. Although I and colleagues have continually raised the need to support aviation throughout the crisis, the Government still do not seem truly to grasp the special circumstances faced by the sector.

Unlike almost every other kind of business, which we know have all struggled through this crisis, airports are by their nature unable to adapt and diversify their product in a meaningful way. When travel itself is the product and it has essentially been shut down by regulation, adaptation is not an option. The key reason airports find themselves in such tremendous difficulty, however, is because they are stuck with very high fixed costs for the provision and maintenance of infrastructure and services, such as safety and security. They are unable to adjust down their operating costs, let alone their fixed capital costs, to compensate for the low levels of traffic, at a time when they have been effectively shut down by Government.

It is widely accepted that airports are, therefore, looking at elevated costs for the next few years at least, if not longer. With travel demand likely to remain weaker in the short term, due to ongoing restrictions and travel hesitancy, they cannot pass those costs on

to airlines, nor would it be fair to do so. A level of ongoing, bespoke financial support to cover those costs should, therefore, be provided by Government, as we transition to the recovery phase.

The airport and ground operations support scheme provides some relief but a longer term and more extensive commitment is clearly needed. Ministers must urgently bring forward the long-delayed aviation recovery plan, and start thinking in earnest about linking the need for ongoing support to our wider goals as a country on climate change and sustainability. The immense problems airports are facing are due to factors entirely beyond their control. They are the result of understandable regulatory interventions from Governments, to prevent the spread of the virus, which include travel bans, traffic light lists and quarantine periods. From the Government's announcements over the past couple of days, it seems as though aviation will be the sole industry to remain under restrictions.

Ministers like to talk about their £7 billion package of support, but only a very small amount of that has been sector specific. Other European Governments have provided much greater levels of financial support for their aviation industries, and have specifically linked that support to meeting climate goals, something the UK has also refused to do. A big chunk of that Government support will end in two months' time, when the job retention scheme winds up. That scheme has been a lifeline for aviation workers currently on furlough, along with 51% of those working for tour operators. The Chancellor has been adamant that he will not consider continued sector-specific support for jobs. Unless he has a change of heart, significant redundancies will become stark reality for many in Newcastle, where Newcastle airport is a significant local employer. The loss of expertise will leave us with a less dynamic aviation sector when the recovery comes.

In 20 years, we will look back on the past year as a pivotal moment for UK aviation that will have long-term consequences. The covid-19 pandemic and the Government's lack of support have crippled airports' balance sheets. That will have a long-term effect on their ability to invest and create a sustainable future. It may not seem like much of an issue while international travel remains extremely limited, but problems are being stored up for when the recovery comes. The north-east needs Newcastle airport to thrive, to increase global connectivity and to drive our region's growth and development. We need a clear road map from the Government for the safe resumption of international travel. Particularly if aviation is to continue to remain under restrictions, we urgently need the long overdue aviation recovery plan, alongside a comprehensive package of sector-specific support.

10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on bringing forward this debate. Westminster Hall debates offer the opportunity for those with a deep interest to participate, so I thank him for providing the opportunity to do just that.

We need to make no mistake here. I know the Minister understands that; all the hon. Members who have spoken have expressed it and I hope to further express their

[Jim Shannon]

viewpoint. This is a UK-wide issue because the ripples of difficulties for the airports will affect every community in the United Kingdom, but I will speak specifically about Northern Ireland. I know the Minister has a deep interest in these matters and I am pleased to see him in his place. As a Northern Ireland MP, flight connectivity is vital for me. It is the reason I get here on time and get home on time. Flying over on a Monday or early on a Tuesday morning and flying back on a Thursday night is my routine. If Northern Ireland is to be on a path to fulfilling its full potential, some of that journey will be in the air, through reliable and frequent national and international flights.

Let me put on record my gratitude to the Minister for all his endeavours, his vast knowledge and his interest in this matter. I am not saying that other Ministers do not have that, but it is always good to represent our views to him and to get a response. I am very pleased to see the spokesperson from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and the Labour spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). They also have a deep interest in this matter and I know they will reinforce the opinion of other hon. Members.

The statistics are clear: aviation is still firmly in the grasp of the worst crisis it has ever faced. Numbers of passengers travelling through United Kingdom airports last summer were the lowest since 1975. My goodness, that is hard to believe. Between April and December 2020, passenger numbers were down 89.3% year on year. In quarter one of 2021, they were down 94% compared with 2019—a drastic reduction in figures and in revenue generated. In the same period, passenger numbers were down almost 89% in London airports, 91.1% in English regional airports, 89.1% in Scottish regional airports, 86.1% in Northern Irish airports and 96.8% in Welsh airports.

Taken together, that meant that the economic output for the air transport sector between February and December 2020 reduced by 89%. That is phenomenal and really shows the magnitude of the pressure on the sector. I am not a wealthy man and I do not come from a wealthy background, but I cannot imagine that anyone other than the very wealthiest in this country could afford to cut their income by 89%. It would be impossible to manage. Yes, furlough has helped and I thank the Government for all they have done with the furlough scheme, the grants and the assistance. But the fact is that regional airports are at crisis point and need help to get through and out the other side, where hopefully we will find ourselves in a better position. We will, but we are all asking just when that will happen.

It is nobody's fault, either. It is always very easy to point the finger but Government cannot respond to something that is not within their control. I asked the Secretary of State for Transport the other week how we can give confidence to travellers who want to go on holiday. But that is not within his control; it is controlled by all the other countries. It is hard for him to say, "I can tell you what is going to happen and give confidence to your constituents that they can travel to the States or Europe or wherever else they want to go and return safely." Between April and September 2020, UK airports lost £2.6 billion in revenue, with passenger numbers

peaking at 22.1% of 2019 levels in August 2020—up some 11.6% from July, but falling dramatically afterwards. On the current trajectory, summer 2021 will see significantly fewer passengers, meaning airports will lose at least another £2.6 billion in revenue.

We had hoped that we would be coming out of this situation this summer. The Government have set the trend. The Prime Minister's statement was welcome because, as he said and as the Government's strategy now seems to be, we need to live with covid and deal with it in such a way that life can hopefully resume as normally as possible. What can we do to alter this situation? We must look at how other nations handle their flight systems and how they treat those coming to their borders who are fully vaccinated. Perhaps the Minister and the Government are seeing a developing trend for how to deal with that.

Regional airports are clear on what they need. The Airport Operators Association briefing puts it well. Support measures should be extended. Office for National Statistics figures show that 57% of aviation jobs are currently furloughed, so the job retention scheme should be extended beyond 30 September for jobs in aviation and travel, or replaced by another grant scheme that supports such jobs beyond that. The restrictions are having an impact on regional airports as well as on international travel—they cannot be divorced. If we in Northern Ireland want to catch international flights, we have to go to Dublin in the Republic of Ireland, or to Manchester or Heathrow. If international flights are cut back, that will have an impact on regional airports and domestic travel.

The airport and ground operations support scheme should be extended beyond 30 September, and the £8 million gap should be removed. Currently, AGOSS provides only minimal financial support of £8 million at most—equivalent to the total business rate bill for airports. AGOSS grants cover fewer than 14 days' worth of an airport's operational losses, so they do not last long. Further financial support should be put in place, because airports remain open for critical services. We have to remember that it is not all about domestic travel; it is about the coastguard, the police, the air ambulances and maintenance for offshore oil gas and windfarms, despite near zero passenger numbers. This support should cover operational costs, including those for policing and air traffic, and regulatory costs such as the charges levelled by the Civil Aviation Authority. I gently and respectfully ask that consideration be given to that, because there are things that have to happen for the emergency services and for workers. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) referred to that, and I know that the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, will do so, too.

It is essential that we protect the viability of airports, especially in Northern Ireland, and indeed in all the regions of Wales and Scotland that are hampered by their distance from the mainland. We are very much an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I am always keen to put that on the record—and as such should be fully integrated in the decision making on the way forward. I join others in asking the Government and the Minister to step up and step out for this sector by providing long-term support in a clear and defined way to ensure viability and connectivity long beyond this debate.

10.9 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing the debate. He led it very well. I could not disagree with anything he said; in fact, that goes for pretty much every contribution.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of regional airports and regional connectivity being vital to the levelling-up agenda. It is also crucial to other sectors, as I outlined a couple of weeks ago. We have had a number of debates on a similar theme in recent weeks. I will try not to repeat too much of what I have said, but inevitably I will cover similar ground.

The hon. Gentleman also covered PSOs. He can correct me if I am wrong, but I think he said that there are only three in the UK and they are all linked to London. However, that is the English position, because there are a number in Scotland. There are three PSO routes linked to Glasgow—Barra, Tiree and Campbeltown—and a number of other PSO routes are subsidised by local authorities in the Shetlands, Orkneys, Western Isles and Argye and Bute. As we heard from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), there is a potential additional PSO route to Wick, which I would very much welcome.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) made a fantastic speech. Sadly and unusually, a number of Members have pulled out of the debate, but other contributors included the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who always takes part in these debates, and the hon. Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). And, of course, no Westminster Hall debate would be complete without a contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He said that we had regional airports to thank for getting him here on time each and every week. I do not think there is any better argument for regional aviation.

As well as being the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson on this topic, I also represent Glasgow airport, which is operating at just 10% of normal capacity at the moment. In addition, we are losing another summer. Let us not forget that, while we talk down here about the school holidays and summer season starting at the end of the month, in Scotland the summer season has been under way for two weeks, and the Northern Ireland school holidays started in the past week or so. The season is already getting beyond Scotland and, to a large degree, Northern Ireland. It is crucial to recognise that.

Glasgow has lost 100% of its long-haul routes, 70% of its international flights and half of its domestic flights. Last year, Glasgow carried 1.9 million passengers—bear in mind that some of last year's restrictions were not as bad as they are this year—compared with about 9 million in 2019. The last time passenger numbers from Glasgow were this low there was in 1970. Airlines UK has found that without Government support, UK airports will lose around 600 routes as a result of the pandemic. Crucially, it says that some 80% of those lost routes will be from the UK's regional airports. In other words, the Heathrows and the like will be shielded in the medium term from the worst of the damage.

Given that, and given the long delay in publication, will the Minister confirm when the regional connectivity review will see the light of day? If the Government are

genuinely serious about the levelling-up agenda, they must do something to address that specific point. Regional airports, as has been said by many speakers today, drive the regional economies they serve. It is not just about going on holiday. Commerce follows connectivity, and without a meaningful direct route network, Scotland's place on the world's stage is at risk, thereby affecting our ability to export and attract foreign direct investments—something we have been incredibly successful at for a number of years. Our successful inbound tourism industry is also at risk.

Pre-covid, tourists were, obviously, spending. Tourism in Scotland generated approximately £12 billion of economic activity for the wider Scottish supply chain and contributed around £6 billion to Scottish GDP, representing about 5% of Scotland's total GDP. Pre-covid, Glasgow exported over £1.7 billion-worth of goods—more than any other Scottish airport. The majority went out in the belly hold of passenger flights—the very flights we are at risk of losing for good.

There has been much understandable consternation in the industry and beyond with regard to the decision-making process behind the traffic light system. The Government must be more transparent about the decisions they are making regarding why country X, with a potentially lower incidence rate, is on the amber list, while country Z, with a significantly higher rate, is on the green list. Despite what the Secretary of State said during Transport questions the week before last, that level of data is simply not available. The virus is a big enough variable for the industry to cope with—it does not need an even bigger variable in the form of completely unpredictable Government decision making on the traffic light system. The public also need to be convinced and to trust a traffic light system. It has to be said again that the decision to put India on the red list for England was delayed for far too long, and we can see the direct result in our current incidence rate.

One third of on-site jobs at Glasgow airport have already gone, and countless more off-site jobs have been lost from supply chain companies. As I said in this very room two weeks ago, the crucial point is that, such is the cash burn of and outlook for the sector, thousands of jobs have gone while there is a furlough scheme in place. As the Minister knows, jobs in aviation and, indeed, in the wider travel and tourism industry will be decimated in September if the furlough scheme is not extended for those sectors. Not only will that be an economic and social tragedy for thousands of families across Renfrewshire, and perhaps hundreds of thousands around the UK, but the loss in economic output and the cost to the Treasury of short to medium-term unemployment support and associated benefits would be an act of economically illiterate self-harm. There is no pontification or equivocation here—furlough must be extended for these sectors, or many parts of the industry and the hundreds of thousands who work in it face ruin.

The Minister will get up and repeat the sums about the support given to industry. Much of that is furlough, which I and many others of course welcome and which must continue, but in essence the rest is debt, resulting in our airline industry having a much higher debt ratio than much of its international competition, where support, as outlined already, is largely through non-repayable grants. The sum in the USA is £23 billion, in Germany nearly £8 billion, in France £6.5 billion, and in the Netherlands more than £3 billion.

[Gavin Newlands]

As others have mentioned, limited relief was provided to English airports in November, when the UK Government finally introduced a limited business rate support scheme for the sector. That was seven months after the Scottish Government had announced a similar but more generous scheme in Scotland, where it is not capped and extends to airlines based there, too. Moreover, the Scottish Government moratorium has been extended by a full year, whereas the UK Government's limited and capped version will continue for only six months. That is clearly an unsustainable position. Will the Minister, in summing up, confirm that an extension is being considered?

Another issue that has hit regional airports a lot harder than the bigger airports was the loss of VAT-free shopping on 1 January, through the scrapping of the extra-statutory concession scheme. I was reminded of that by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who travelled through Glasgow airport a bit earlier than me on Monday. He spoke to a member of the duty-free staff who said that, just prior to my colleague going in, they had lost out on £6,000-worth of whisky sales to an individual, because the rules now do not allow for that. That was £6,000 lost in just one transaction.

The result of the Government consultation on the extra-statutory concession was overwhelming. In fact, it was near unanimous, such was the support for the continuation of some form of ESC after Brexit, but again the Treasury ignored those responses. This is yet another revenue stream that helps employ thousands of people across the country and is vital for many airports. Regional airports depend on the revenue from air-side shopping to a far greater degree than the Heathrows of this world. In fact, up to 40% of a smaller airport's revenue is generated through shopping, as a higher proportion of passengers are flying point to point, rather than domestically through a hub such as Heathrow.

Kicking away that financial structure at a time of huge pressure on the finances of airports is another unnecessary blow to an industry that is reeling from the pandemic, and many regional airports in England are still dealing with the after-effects of the collapse of Flybe. In Scotland, it is estimated that the abolition of the concession will potentially result in the closure of most retail outlets at airports and lost revenue of about £20 million and hundreds more jobs, which neither retail or airports can afford. In fact, in Glasgow five retail outlets and at least three food outlets have closed and will not reopen. The UK Travel Retail Forum said:

"This could be the final nail in the coffin of several UK regional airports."

The entire industry is on its knees, and I am concerned that the forum is right.

To come to a conclusion, I have made this point recently, such that I sound like a broken record. This is about the 37th time I have asked about support for the aviation sector. That is not just the furlough scheme, crucial though it is, but bespoke support for the sector, which let us not forget is the sector hardest hit by covid. Indeed, we need the kind of bespoke support that the Chancellor and the Secretary of State promised at the outset of the pandemic. I well remember being in the room when the Secretary of State, having claimed to have saved Flybe only to watch it collapse, said to the industry:

"I understand the enormity of what you are facing, and this Government will stand by your side."

No one in the industry feels that the Government have been by its side. I ask the Minister again: are the Government actively considering a bespoke aviation, travel and tours recovery package? Many sectors that have been far less affected than aviation have had that kind of support.

As I have said, the UK started the pandemic with the world's third-largest aviation sector, but as one third of that workforce are already gone, it will certainly not come out of this as the third largest. Thousands of people in my constituency alone are losing their jobs. Parts of the industry are on the verge of collapse. As I said two weeks ago, time is running out. We need action, and we need it now.

10.20 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, as you are my constituency neighbour.

I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this timely debate and on his superb chairmanship of the APPG on general aviation. He was followed by the hon. Members for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone)—it was almost Land's End to John O' Groats, but not quite. They gave strong defences of their airports, including Wick airport in the north, and spoke of the exciting prospect of the first hybrid flight from Newquay to Exeter.

There have been a few common themes. As ever, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke about the need for continuing support, as did the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who said that there is no sector-specific support. Indeed, those Members will know that 19,000 BA staff are still on furlough. Those section notices have to go out in the next few weeks. We are standing on a cliff edge and something needs to happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) spoke eloquently about how uneven the opening-up process of international travel has been. Less than two weeks ago, the Minister got uncharacteristically upset with me when I diverged on policy and said that Labour's view was to scrap the amber list. We now know that, as *The Times* reported this morning, the Government will scrap the amber list tomorrow when the Secretary of State makes his announcement, so there we have it.

Following on from the remarks by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), I am glad that peace has prevailed between our nations. The people's republic of Greater Manchester and the Scottish nation were almost going to go to war when the First Minister banned us from travelling. Some 2.8 million of us were going to march up the M6 in our City and United shirts, under our Oasis parkas, and stand at the border at Gretna shouting, "Nice one, nice one!" but the First Minister has backed down. That decision alone has cost businesses in my constituency tens of thousands of pounds. I hope that the Scottish Government will now think about adequately compensating business for that, but peace now reigns in our time.

I have listened intently to the debate, and to unions, airports, operators and representatives of the aviation industry. What is clear is that without a genuine sectoral deal, the sector and our regional airports will be in peril. Look back at all that the regional airports have had to contend with over the last few years: the collapse of airlines such as Flybe and Monarch, and of the operator Thomas Cook, which are hugely significant in our part of the world in Manchester, as well as for regional connectivity.

Those low-cost carriers opened up areas such as Southampton, Blackpool, Newquay and Birmingham for business and leisure travellers, and they opened up the rest of the world to the people who live there. Welcoming tourists to those areas boosted the economy, hotels, restaurants and taxi drivers. My hometown is currently hosting the wonderful Manchester international festival. Without Humberside airport, would we have seen such a fantastic event at Hull city of culture? Airports are vital for regional economies.

It is not merely culture and tourism that are affected. I understand only too well the value, economically or otherwise, of representing an airport community. I am sure that colleagues who have spoken to represent their constituencies know how important those communities are when it comes to connectivity, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I must ask him: do airlines arrange their schedules around his interventions in debates? I really wish to know the answer to that question.

Although the Government repeatedly refer to the package of support that aviation has had, there are some specific industry concerns that do not seem to be recognised at all. The covid pandemic has hit this country and its people hard. We have one of the worst death tolls in the world, and we cannot allow the death of the aviation sector and the closure of regional airports to exacerbate the devastation. The often-talked-about £7 billion package of support, which the Minister will mention in his response, is in the form of loans to the industry—it is debt to the industry. As we move into our lost second summer, the ability to service those debts while being unable to operate is striking fear throughout the industry, and there is the looming spectre of further job losses.

We must consider broader sector-specific support. It is not just about airlines and airports; it is about a whole range of other businesses. My colleagues and I have worked with stakeholders to reach a position that protects jobs, the wider supply chain and—crucially, as we head towards 2050—the environment. The sectoral deal that we suggest is based on six conditions. It will save jobs, tackle climate change and ensure that companies benefiting from the sector support rebase their tax affairs in the UK, which is the patriotic thing to do.

We support global Britain, but we are falling behind the rest of the world. If the Government are serious about rebalancing our economy, they must provide a sector-specific deal. The fund was announced last March, but here we are in July and there is no meaningful restart for aviation. If the Government are to provide confidence for travellers and protect these vital hubs, they have to give us a deal.

My last point—I am sure we are all in agreement—is that we absolutely must rebuild the sector, get businesses going again and get people flying again. As far as possible, we must make this a green recovery. There is

no easy way to mitigate the environmental impact of aviation, but whether the green recovery is achieved by reducing fuel consumption, by introducing smarter flight operations and new aircraft engine technology, by modernising the airspace, on which I hope to work with the Minister, or by using sustainable aviation fuels, we must make the industry cleaner and greener. What better footnote to the terrible impact that we have all felt from the coronavirus pandemic than to have our regional airports thriving, with green jobs alongside the other jobs that we previously mentioned? Our regions are crying out for new types of well-paid, highly skilled employment. Let us use this opportunity to save our regional airports and create a greener, sustainable recovery in every region of this nation.

10.27 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): It is a real pleasure and honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for securing this important debate. He and I have spoken on many occasions—not just about his vital airport, but about regional connectivity in general. He is hugely knowledgeable and passionate. As a consequence, he is an incredibly powerful advocate not just for his local community, but for regional air connectivity in Cornwall and the whole of the UK.

I thank all hon. Members for the varied and excellent points that they have made, and I will do my best in the time available to respond to as many of them as possible. The Government entirely understand and recognise the severe economic impact that the covid-19 pandemic has had on regional airports. They are critical regional and national infrastructure, and we continue to work to understand the industry and to see how it can be best supported at this time. Before I address some of the wider points that have been made, I will say a word or two about Newquay airport, because it is so important to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay.

Newquay airport is vital for connections to the south-western corner of our nation. It connects to nine UK airports, the Isles of Scilly, Faro and Alicante. Newquay airport provided vital access for world leaders accessing the G7 summit last month and, as my hon. Friend rightly says, it was clearly vital to the success of the summit. The £7.8 million provided by the Cabinet Office for infrastructure improvements for the G7 enabled the efficient handling of air traffic and the aircraft that were required for the summit. I am pleased that the works will also ensure that the summit leaves a long-term economic legacy at Newquay airport.

I will be in Cornwall tomorrow as part of the Maritime Safety Week programme. I will be returning from Newquay airport, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend will, I hope, be joining me on a visit to and tour of the airport. We will see again, for ourselves, quite how vital this airport is, not only to him, his area and the constituencies surrounding it but to the whole of the UK. That is because the UK enjoys one of the best connected, best value and safest aviation industries anywhere in the world. The aviation industry creates jobs, encourages our economy to grow and connects us, as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) eloquently explained, with the rest of the

[Robert Courts]

world. It consolidates and expands this country's position as a dynamic trading nation. That is doubly the case with regional airports.

Regional airports serve our local communities. As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) vividly explained today, they support thousands of jobs and act as a gateway to the international opportunities to which I have already referred. They maintain social and family ties, and strengthen the bonds between our four nations.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as ever, made a wonderful contribution. He explained that regional aviation is vital not only to Northern Ireland as a whole but to his weekly commute. The hon. Member is the personification of the vital economic and social link that regional aviation provides for Northern Ireland and for the United Kingdom.

Prior to the pandemic, the aviation sector directly contributed at least £22 billion to GDP each year and supported half a million jobs in the UK. Maintaining a strong, privately operated and competitive aviation industry is vital to our economy. It supports a truly global Britain and the communities that surround airports.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) used a wonderful phrase: “the airport community.” He is absolutely right. He referred in particular to Humberside and, of course, to Manchester, which is so important to him. The phrase “the airport community” could apply, and does apply, to so many of the Members who have contributed to this debate, and to many others who would have liked to have done so.

I would like to dwell for a moment, Chair, on some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley). He made powerfully clear the importance of East Midlands airport to his constituency and region. Regional airports are vital for levelling up. They enable local communities and businesses to connect with London and beyond. They play a key role in levelling up our regions and building global Britain. It is absolutely vital that that air network is maintained, because it is key to achieving positive and growing economic outcomes for our regions. Our objective is to ensure that all nations and regions of the UK have the domestic and international air transport connections that local communities and businesses rely on, while of course ensuring that we meet our net zero commitments. I will come to that in a moment.

The importance of this regional aviation network has been seen as never before during the covid crisis. Although it has clearly impacted regional airports across the UK, and the airlines that operate out of them, the sector has continued to perform well and has adapted despite the challenges. We have spoken of Newquay already. The Newquay to London route is operating during the summer, as commercial operators are offering enough flights to be able to meet the demand for staycations. We have heard that the G7 summit was facilitated by that.

As of last week, a new route began operating from Teesside airport to London Heathrow. It will link passengers from Teesside, via Heathrow, to 134 destinations throughout the world. We have seen vividly over the course of the last year that the sector has adapted to provide critical

support during the pandemic. For example, aviation freight has been vital for getting the amount of personal protective equipment the UK has needed, both through airports that are freight specialists and through passenger airports that also deal with a heavy amount of freight. My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield has clearly explained the importance of East Midlands to his region, and Birmingham airport has also stepped up to provide more red-list terminal capability and capacity.

Gavin Newlands: The Minister has made a very good argument and case for regional air connectivity, so can he tell us if and when the regional air connectivity review will be published?

Robert Courts: I shall return to the hon. Gentleman's points, but on that point, in brief, we will look to publish that regional connectivity piece as part of the strategic framework for recovery of the sector that we will publish later this year. I will come on to some of the regional connectivity review points in a little while, but that is the brief answer to his question.

I would like to say a word or two about the wider use of airfields, the diversification of them, and the ability for airports and airfields to provide highly skilled, dynamic and innovative businesses with opportunities to grow and flourish. That involves things such as the maintenance of aircraft, manufacturing, aviation services, and research and innovation. Airports and airfields are not just vital for their local economies, but critical to the success of the aviation sector more broadly. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay of course chairs the APPG on general aviation and will know how important they are for that. I know that he shares my passion for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth spoke about the use of commercial airports for aerospace or military aerospace. There are of course many examples all over the country, but Cobham at Teesside airport is one that immediately springs to mind. Then there are regional airports that have diversified into other, additional functions—things such as pilot training. Oxford airport, just outside my own constituency, is a powerful example of that. Perhaps the most vivid example of all is Newquay airport in hosting a spaceport.

The hon. Member for Strangford pointed out that many services need regional aviation. He rightly referred to search-and-rescue helicopters, to police helicopters and, of course, to oil and gas maintenance and facilitation. The mixed use of aviation and airspace is absolutely vital, going far beyond the immediate core vital function that we have spoken about today.

I would like to say a word or two about route support and PSOs—an issue raised by a number of hon. Members, including of course my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay but also the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who spoke just a moment ago. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross had the wonderful phrase “from Cornwall to Caithness”. I suspect that other hon. Members might wish to add some stops en route, so that we have Cornwall to Caithness via Manchester, via Glasgow and via Belfast, for example; there are many other places. His phrase was wonderful; I apologise to him for having mangled it in the course of including other hon.

Members. His essential point, that regional aviation covers the country from Cornwall to Caithness, is of course a very important one.

We continue jointly to fund public service obligation routes from, for example, Londonderry and Dundee into London, protecting air connectivity from some of the most far-flung parts of the UK. We are, as I have stated already, very pleased that commercial services have operated between Newquay and London over the summer and will continue until the end of October. We are working closely with Cornwall Council to ensure that air connectivity on the route can continue beyond the end of the summer season.

I recognise, of course, the significant impact that covid-19 has had on regional airports, airlines, economies and connectivity. We will consider whether there are further opportunities to utilise PSOs alongside other policy measures that look towards meeting our ongoing regional-connectivity and levelling-up objectives.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross asked to meet me about Wick airport. Of course I would be delighted to meet him to discuss that and any other issue that he may wish to discuss with me. He will of course realise that if a PSO is considered to be intra-Scotland, the Scottish Government would be the right place for him to direct his inquiries, but of course I am happy to work with him to see what more we can do to strengthen regional aviation in his part of the world.

A number of Members mentioned air passenger duty. Of course, as part of its plan to boost regional connectivity to support the commitment to net zero by 2050, the Treasury launched a consultation on aviation tax reform that explores reforms to air passenger duty. It is an area often cited by the sector as a barrier to domestic connectivity. That consultation has set out the Government's initial policy position that, following our departure from the EU, the effective rate of APD on domestic flights should be reduced. The consultation closed on 15 June. The Treasury is now considering responses and will give an update on response timings in due course.

I have already briefly referred to the regional connectivity review, in answer to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North. The Union connectivity review by Sir Peter Hendy is under way and will be published later this year. That will explore how improvements to transport connectivity between the four nations of the United Kingdom can continue. That is independent of Government and is expected to examine various modes, including air links.

A number of hon. Members rightly mentioned decarbonisation: my hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay and for Truro and Falmouth, and the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, in particular. The Government have introduced a wide range of measures to support the decarbonisation of the aviation sector, including a £15 million competition to support the UK production of sustainable aviation fuels—SAF, as they are called—and the introduction of the UK's emissions trading scheme, which is 5% tougher than the EU equivalent, and covers all domestic and UK to European economic area flights. In June, we launched the first round of the £3 million zero emission flight infrastructure competition, supporting

the development of the infrastructure that is required to aid electric and hydrogen aircraft. That will help to build the UK airports and airfields of the future.

The UK's domestic aviation sector is well placed to be at the forefront of decarbonisation. I welcome the recent announcement from Loganair that its operations will be carbon neutral by 2040, to be achieved through the use of SAF, hydrogen and battery-electric propulsion, as technological advances allow. The Government will shortly consult on our jet zero strategy, setting out the steps that the sector will need to take to achieve net zero by 2050.

A number of hon. Members asked about the future, the recovery of the sector and the strategy: my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) who was not Zoom-bombing—his contributions are always very welcome, whether on Heathrow, the green recovery or any other matter concerning aviation. We will be looking ahead for the sector and will need to set out the path for recovery in a way that supports not only the aviation market but the wider objectives of levelling up and building back greener.

We are working on the strategy for the future of aviation in the UK, to be published later this year. It will explore the sector's return to growth, including workforce and skills, aviation noise, innovation and regulation, consumer issues and, critically, regional connectivity, as I have explained. It will also consider climate change and decarbonisation, as well as the critical role that aviation plays in retaining the UK's global reach. As I explained, the strategic framework will be published later this year.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the UK's aviation sector but regional connectivity and regional airports are a vital part of it, and we are committed to ensuring that they are at the forefront of Government plans to help the sector to recover. The Government are always keen to engage with aviation stakeholders to find ways to ensure the swift recovery of the sector.

Although uncertainty remains in the path ahead, we are committed to this world-leading aviation sector, both its international and regional parts. We will ensure that the sector has the tools it needs to return and grow in a safe and sustainable way. I thank all hon. Members who spoke for such an excellent, wide-ranging, highly knowledgeable and helpful debate on this critical topic.

10.43 am

Steve Double: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. The level of concern and commitment to our regional airports from colleagues across the country is clear. I also thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I know he shares our passion and commitment to regional connectivity. I hope he continues in his role for a long time, because we have someone who champions aviation. There was a clear message from all contributions, and I know from his response that the Minister gets it.

We are at a critical moment for our regional airports. The impact of the pandemic, on top of a fairly tough environment even before the pandemic with the collapse of Flybe and other factors, means that we need to do all we can to support them. I acknowledge and welcome

[Steve Double]

the Minister's comments about the Government's determination to support the sector going forward. There is no time to be lost, particularly with the phasing out of the furlough scheme. We need to see something come forward sooner rather than later for those jobs and businesses. As many hon. Members have commented, there are so many different businesses that support our regional airports. They need to know what the support will be going forward, so that they are able to plan for the immediate future as we emerge from the pandemic.

This has been an excellent debate. I thank everyone who has contributed. I am sure we will continue to engage together and with the Minister to champion each of our regional airports and the vital role they play.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of regional airports.

10.46 am

Sitting suspended.

Immigration Rules

11 am

Esther McVey (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 suspensions between each debate. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room, putting the cleaning materials in the bin.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Immigration Rules and highly skilled migrants.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Ms McVey. With yesterday's announcement of the new Nationality and Borders Bill, I am pleased to have the opportunity to lead this debate on the immigration rules and highly skilled migrants. I want to start by thanking the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who originally secured this debate and asked me to take it on. I know he is doing a lot of work in this area.

I also want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who recently challenged the Chancellor and the Home Secretary on the introduction of yet another scheme to bring in highly skilled migrants in the 2021 Budget. I echo her sentiments that the Chancellor, the Home Secretary and the UK Government must sort out this injustice once and for all before another person is given a highly skilled migrant visa. I am sure that people of colour from Commonwealth nations contemplating bringing their talents to the UK, including under the new scheme, will want to know of any potential risks to their and their families' immigration status prior to applying. I also want to commend BBC "Newsnight" for covering the issue a few weeks back, raising awareness and prompting people to contact me.

What is it that has got everyone so exercised? It is complicated and simple. The nub of it is this. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has been sharing information about a subset of non-white highly skilled migrants from specific Commonwealth countries in the global south with the Home Office. That enables the Home Office to then refuse their visas to remain in the UK. The basis for the refusals are historical, non-criminal tax discrepancies, some very minor—I understand one was for only £1.30—and most dating back years, long ago resolved, and none of which HMRC felt required further action. Let us bear in mind that the people we are talking about have been here for 10 years or more. Finally, the legal basis on which this has been done is questionable. So that is the summary.

These individuals, who were invited to these islands to contribute to our economy and wider society, now find themselves in a precarious immigration limbo, without any investigations into the circumstances or nature of people's tax discrepancies before the visa refusals. There remain many questions about whether the decisions taken have allowed fair assessments and hearings, and how proportionate visa refusals are for something that has not even been proven to be deliberate

or careless under HMRC's own threshold for discrepancies and within HMRC's normal 12-month timeframe for investigation.

Through a number of Government initiatives spanning decades, there has been a consistent call to invite the brightest and best to these islands, with the idea being that the UK would take control over who they allowed to work and live here. Yet somehow the UK Government have systematically failed to build the immigration system that they say they want. Instead, they have adhered to a policy of hostility, exclusion and really disproportionate punishment. I am sure the Minister will likely talk about "minded to refuse" letters that allow migrants to explain the discrepancies, but, in 80% of the remaining cases, those have not been received and, where they have, some have contained more than 100 questions for response within 14 days. Also, it is about issues much wider than tax discrepancies.

There is a concern that the letters are being used not to give a fair and timely hearing of evidence, but to double down on the initial decisions made. The deeply precarious situations that many of these highly skilled migrants and their families are now experiencing highlight the issue only too well.

Highly skilled migrants in the UK have been criminalised and denied indefinite leave to remain based on the Home Office's discretionary and subjective bad character or dishonesty judgments in paragraph 322(5) of the rules, as I said, for historic tax discrepancies, many up to 10 years ago. Paragraph 322(5) sets out the general grounds for refusal. Unlike other immigration provisions for criminal behaviour, which this is not, it seems to be still applicable even after 10 years. Clarity is needed—I hope the Minister will provide it—about how this immigration rule will be used in future immigration applications of highly skilled migrants who have been granted some form of leave.

I also note with concern that paragraph 322(5) and related clauses in the immigration rules have recently been redacted online. I hope that this redaction is not a means of limiting scrutiny of how these clauses are being used in immigration decisions, and I expect the Minister to have an explanation for that.

I am not the only one saying that the Government are wrong; the Court of Appeal has already ruled in two separate cases that the Home Office has acted unlawfully in this regard. Paragraph 322(5) permits refusal when an applicant is considered

"undesirable...in light of their conduct, character or associations", or the fact that they represent a threat to national security. This measure also allows discretionary refusal by inferring "undesirable" character. According to the latest guidance, that could be because of criminal-related activity short of a conviction, or for what are called "wider reasons". So, with no convictions and no reasoning, the Home Office can unfairly label someone as being "undesirable" or of bad "character". Can Members imagine how such labels affect someone's ability to live and work in a community, or impact on their self-esteem?

Being denied their indefinite leave to remain has left these highly skilled migrants in a legal limbo; they are unable to work, rent, drive, receive NHS healthcare, open bank accounts, or get vital access to public funds. Imagine a situation in which someone has a minor tax discrepancy hanging over their head. And bear in mind

that, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, around 60% of self-assessment tax returns in the UK contain discrepancies. For anyone who has had to complete one of these returns, that is not difficult to believe; they are not easy. For most of us, a minor tax discrepancy would just mean reminding ourselves to amend our tax return, or we would call an accountant to sort the problem out for us; the worst that can happen is that we will get a slap on the wrist and a cursory fine. We would not be in a situation where we were left destitute, as is the case with so many of the people who we are talking about today.

Understandably, this situation has been described as a "personal purgatory" by some of those experiencing it: a half-life, in which someone is unable to contribute, without any recourse to appeal or explanation. It must be a truly devastating prospect for someone to think that they could be treated as criminal under an immigration rule that was reserved for those deemed a national security threat, based on a simple discrepancy in a tax return.

Although the actual amount of these discrepancies ranges widely, some of the figures involved are shockingly small. As I have already said, a discrepancy of around just £1.30 could see someone being deemed as dishonest or of bad character by the Home Office. In the two cases that were heard in the courts, one involved a small amount of money and one involved a larger figure, but the courts found the people concerned to be honest and granted them leave, which shows that the amount of tax discrepancy per se should not matter and does not automatically mean that the person responsible for such a discrepancy is a criminal. The courts certainly did not think so.

Investigation into the circumstances and a balancing exercise regarding the person involved and their family is key. Indeed, this cohort of people are not criminals. They are hard-working migrants who were invited to this country, which is now determined to use a system of legal loopholes and loose statutory interpretation, which I will come on to, in order to remove them.

Tax discrepancies are neither a criminal nor an immigration offence, and in all of the cases reported, HMRC did not independently pursue the discrepancies at the time of filing. So why is the Home Office pursuing these migrants? Why are the thousands of other cases are uncovered every year—including those of the 60% of people who fill in tax returns inaccurately—not being pursued with the same vigour? And I am not suggesting that they should be.

Tellingly, UK Visas and Immigration has refused applications under this rule, instead of using certain other provisions in the immigration rules that it could use, such as those related to dishonesty. I would suggest that UKVI has done that because of the broad wording of this measure and the lower burden of proof required, because using this rule is an easy and fast way to dispose of the migrants we invited to these islands.

Paul Garlick QC, who specialises in extradition and human rights law, said the following in regard to the Home Office investigations:

"They genuinely have no idea of the difference between tax years and accounting years, or what is a legitimately deductible expense. My feeling is that since Theresa May's announcement of a 'hostile environment' for immigrants, caseworkers have been

[Anne McLaughlin]

told to look for discrepancies that could form the basis of an accusation that the applicant is lying, because that's the quickest way to dispose of an application".

That is some accusation, and not one that any QC would make lightly.

Since 2016, 1,697 of these highly skilled migrants have been denied indefinite leave to remain after the establishment of a very untransparent Home Office and HMRC data-sharing memorandum of understanding—one that allowed HMRC data to be analysed if an immigration offence had been suspected. I will come on to that point in greater detail later.

These highly skilled migrants have been living in the UK for at least 10 years and contributing significantly to our skills base and our economy. They were once welcomed here because they were needed. What is most worrying of all is that all of those affected are migrants of colour, from six south Asian and African countries. More than half of the remaining indefinite-leave-to-remain refusals are Pakistani nationals, and 70% are Muslim. Tellingly, no one whose data was shared and used to refuse their visa was white. As a long-standing antiracism activist, that profiling and targeting of ethnic minorities by the state chills me.

I want to focus on the worrying aspects of data sharing. The people we are talking about were refused indefinite leave to remain through the use of detailed, historical, HMRC-held tax data. According to research by the Migrants' Rights Network, it is unclear whether any due processes or protections were in place for the access and sharing of that data, especially those that would now meet GDPR requirements.

The memorandum of understanding for data sharing between both Departments was accessed via a freedom of information request. It is an enlightening piece of evidence. It is not a contract, nor is it legally binding. It does not in itself create a lawful means for the exchange of information. It simply documents the processes and procedures for information sharing agreed between the Departments. Yet, when I pushed the Treasury on this issue recently, the Minister who responded leaned heavily on the provisions within the MOU as being

"well-designed, information-sharing gateways...grounded in strict obedience with the law."—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 748.]

The annexe of the document provides the legal basis for the sharing of information and conveniently links to several pieces of legislation, including the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006, the UK Borders Act 2007 and the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001. There are others. What we discover when directed to the signposted sections is that the minor tax discrepancies in question do not amount to the offences described in the memorandum of understanding that could permit the sharing of data between HMRC and the Home Office. The MOU provides no evident lawful due process or safeguards for sharing the data that was used to refuse indefinite leave to remain to highly skilled migrants.

There are huge questions to be asked about how this information was accessed and shared and whether unlawful lists of people of concern, based on a traffic light system of nationalities, were used. I appreciate this cannot all be resolved today, but I would very much appreciate if the Minister would agree to meeting me,

other interested Members and the Migrants' Rights Network to unpick all this and to, I hope, put an end to it.

The tech justice group Foxglove successfully forced the Home Office to scrap its visa streaming algorithm in response to legal action in 2020 and there are analogous similarities with the data-sharing system that I am talking about today. The streaming tool took decades of institutionally racist practices, such as targeting particular nationalities for immigration raids, and it turned them into software. The Home Secretary was willing to admit that the system was required to be rebuilt from the ground up. Surely serious consideration should be given to the system currently persecuting highly skilled migrants.

The Government's threat to increase their use of data sharing and data matching is now, unfortunately, becoming a reality. There are plans to expand the national fraud initiative. If that happens, we will see the current data-matching powers used in tackling fraud extended to cover other criminal activity, as well as debt recovery and data quality.

I knew little about data matching until this highly skilled migrants issue was brought to light. It involves combining, comparing or matching personal data obtained from multiple sources. The national fraud initiative already collects more than 20 data types over 8,000 datasets from 1,300 participant organisations. That can include public sector payroll, housing benefit, social housing waiting lists, council tax and the electoral register—the list goes on.

An information law specialist, Chris Pounder, has already given examples of how migrants' details are mixed up in the national fraud initiative, with housing benefit, tenancy waiting lists and the electoral roll all cross-matched with immigration records. We have seen the Home Office go from losing application forms, passports and all sorts of documentation in 2001, to being determined to gather every single tiny piece of data that it can on every migrant in 2021. Information sharing or data matching—call it what you will—has been utilised to unfairly target highly skilled migrants. This cohort sets an incredibly important precedent for how personal tax data could be gathered, shared and used in immigration decisions, highlighting why we need to ensure transparency around data sharing for immigration enforcement.

Through freedom of information requests, we now know that between 2015 and 2020, 463,000 people's HMRC tax data were shared with UKVI at the Home Office. That is a staggering amount of data sharing that the public are simply not aware of. Any expansion of this already expanding regime will mean a lot more data being shared about migrants, and it will provide numerous opportunities for abuse by the Government, who are already determined to pursue a hostile environment policy. Such data needs protection and safeguards. Any system that seeks to share the data must be built with legal restrictions and strict adherence to GDPR.

The UK Government consultation document on data matching refers to the need to recover debt post covid, but it fails to recognise that any inequalities present before the covid pandemic have both increased and widened, and that extending the powers will serve only to unfairly discriminate further against minorities. I am aghast that the cover of covid recovery is being used to usher in further intrusion into our personal data, and I

have no doubt that the wider public would be just as alarmed if this was affecting their right to work, rent, drive or even open a bank account.

When previous and successive Governments implemented schemes that were designed to welcome highly skilled migrants to these islands, it was done with fanfare. The brightest and best would help us fill the gaps that our economy desperately needed to be filled. Nobody arriving on these shores to such a welcome would ever suspect that, a decade later, they would be subjected to an invasive sweep of their personal and financial data in a bid to remove them and their families from the country they now call home. Nobody would have dreamt that, 10 years later, they would be labelled dishonest or as being of bad character, when they are clearly not. Nobody would have imagined that they could have been made unemployed, bankrupt or homeless by the state that invited them to build their lives here, but that is exactly what is happening.

I hope that today's debate will allow a conversation to be started where it has not been possible thus far. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, and I repeat my request for him to sit down with me, the right hon. Member for East Ham, the other Members who have been pushing this issue and Migrants' Rights Network, in order to resolve the situation for the families suffering now, but also for the success of the Chancellor's new highly skilled migrants scheme.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vey. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for securing the debate with the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and for the contribution that she has made. Such debates are an important aspect of the Home Office's accountability, and they ensure that our decisions are held up to scrutiny. I am therefore pleased to have the opportunity to set out some of the background to this particular cohort of cases and what we are doing to ensure that all the applications involved are treated fairly. There are some legal actions going on, but I would be happy to meet hon. Members and groups that are not involved. Perhaps we can discuss the details separately, given the limited time.

It has to be said that the tier 1 general route, to which highly skilled migrants applied, was beset with problems and opportunities for abuse, which is why the Government closed it to new applications back in 2011. The investigations that we have concluded so far show that the principal issue is not tax records and the evasion of tax payments that should have been made, but applicants falsifying their earnings to obtain their immigration status, often involving five-figure sums. It would be simple to ignore those concerns and grant all the outstanding applications. However, that would not be a right or just outcome for those who did play by the rules, given that the scale of the discrepancies is often far beyond those that might be attributed to innocent mistakes or accounting practice.

Anne McLaughlin: Surely the Minister is not suggesting that everyone I am talking about has been denied indefinite leave to remain because they falsified earnings in order to get themselves here. Those people were invited and allowed to come in. He is not suggesting that, is he?

Kevin Foster: I am afraid that we have evidence from a range of cases showing that people did look to inflate their earnings from self-employment. In each case we will make an individual decision, but in each case we are satisfied that there is evidence. There will be an opportunity for people to make their representations directly, but we should not ignore the fact that there has been some quite clear evidence. We are not talking about a difference of a couple of quid between their tax return and what they told the Home Office; we are talking about quite significant amounts. We will continue to consider all the evidence fairly and objectively in each individual case and not generalise about them all. We will give applicants the chance to respond to any concerns we have. But, as anyone would expect, we will be firm with those who have sought to play the system.

Anne McLaughlin: The Minister says that he will consider every case on its merits, but what happens to those people in the meantime? They are not allowed to work, rent, drive or have a bank account, and they are not allowed any recourse to public funds. Those people have families, with children at school. The kids will not be allowed to go to school. What happens to them in the meantime, because it is taking a very long time to reach decisions?

Kevin Foster: There are a number of processes that we are going through, but it might be helpful if I set out the scale of the discrepancies. In cases where investigations have been completed, there were instances of applicants claiming points for earnings that were, in 80% of cases refused, at least £10,000 higher and, on average, £27,600 higher than the earnings shown by their tax records. We would all agree that those are not minor errors. In any context where we were talking about someone with a discrepancy of £27,000 on their tax return, we would probably make a point about whether they were paying the tax they should be paying.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) on securing the debate. Will the Minister outline what steps his Department will take in conjunction with HMRC to investigate whether the tax discrepancies of highly skilled migrants refused indefinite leave to remain met the normal HMRC deliberate or careless threshold? How did the Department determine that such discrepancies constitute bad character?

Kevin Foster: We do so by sharing information between the two Departments. If someone gives information about their salary to one part of Government, saying that it is an honest declaration of their tax position to meet taxation laws, it should not come as a huge surprise if that is then considered when looking at a declaration of income that they have made to another part of Government relating to rules on immigration status.

Let us be clear that not all tier 1 general cases share those characteristics. Many applicants did find highly skilled employment, and the vast majority were successful in their applications. There are outstanding cases because it is important that we take the time to get to the bottom of concerns in those outstanding cases and establish whose earnings were genuine and whose were not.

With regard to the tax discrepancies, the Home Office does not trawl through people's tax records looking for any errors or discrepancies in order to refuse applications.

[Kevin Foster]

Where we have checked tax records, it is because the evidence of an applicant's claimed earnings was not strong, and we were actually looking for further evidence to support their claims and grant their applications, as we are doing in other parts of the immigration system. Sadly, all too often our investigations found their tax records did not support the claims they made to the Home Office about their earnings.

It is interesting to note that when it became widely known that we were doing that, HMRC saw a surge in requests from tier 1 general visa holders to make some highly unusual amendments to their tax records, often involving large amounts solely for the earnings periods relied on in visa applications. That pattern was actually so unusual that HMRC brought it directly to the Home Office's attention.

Again, we are not talking about the sorts of minor discrepancies or tax errors that HMRC deals with day in, day out. Our investigations show instances of individuals increasing their earnings on their tax records, waiting until a Home Office application is granted and then amending their earnings back down again so that they do not have to pay the extra tax that these variations would have incurred.

Anne McLaughlin: I need to put on the record that I am not for one minute suggesting that in those circumstances, when someone has done all three things, that person has done nothing wrong. However, not all of these people fit that category. Is it just a coincidence that not a single person who has been refused a visa on that basis is white? Is it just a coincidence that 70% of them are Pakistani nationals? What is the explanation for that?

Kevin Foster: I will come on to our response to the Migrants' Rights Network report in a moment. However, to be very clear, in each instance it is the evidence in the case and not any other factors, such as nationality, that is looked at. Of course, given that there was free movement at the time, those from the European economic area would not have been applying under this type of migration system—again, there is a narrower scope for it.

In response to some of the points made earlier, let us be clear that the principal concern is not tax avoidance—it is not the idea that people have not paid tax on £27,000 of earnings, for example—but visa fraud. It is people effectively saying to the Home Office that they made earnings that meet this bar that they did not actually make—not that they did not pay tax on significant earnings. Just saying, "HMRC did not take action, so neither should the Home Office" misses this rather crucial point.

Particular reference was made to paragraph 322(5). It does not relate only to serious criminality or terrorism; it has always had a much broader remit, including an applicant's general conduct in the UK, which unsurprisingly has always formed a part of immigration decision making. The courts consistently agreed that the use of paragraph 322(5) was appropriate in cases in which applicants failed to give any convincing explanations of

discrepancies in the earnings for which they had claimed points. Yet, to touch on the point made earlier, as part of our new immigration system we have been overhauling and simplifying the immigration rules, so this paragraph will no longer apply to future applications. Under our new rules, we no longer group criminality and terrorism together with issues such as conduct or false representation, which is a clearer approach. However, those were not the rules that applied at that time.

I am aware of the recent report by the Migrants' Rights Network suggesting that only people of certain Commonwealth and former Commonwealth nationalities are being refused. Sadly, the Migrants' Rights Network has not shared its data with us. However, our own data show that the six nationalities mentioned in its report accounted for 68% of all people in the tier 1 general route since 2010. The same nationalities represent 65% of those granted settlement in the route since 2010. What difference exists relates to the greater proportion, for whatever reason, of applicants of these nationalities who relied on self-employed earnings, rather than earnings via pay-as-you-earn, in their applications. Our approach is therefore to examine each case individually, look at all the evidence on its merits and not make assumptions based on an applicant's nationality or any other attributes. We have strengthened our processes further since the Court of Appeal judgment in the Balajigari case to avoid any possibility of procedural unfairness.

For those investigations that we have concluded, we have found that, in a small minority of cases, applicants have provided new and more credible evidence of their earnings, and their cases have now been granted. In all others, we are carrying out a balancing exercise, weighing any false representations that applicants made in the past against any compelling reasons for allowing their stay in the UK in spite of this conduct. Where there are strong grounds for doing so, we are granting these applications. We have also supported applicants through the process and given them extra time to provide evidence, especially when their ability to do so has been affected by the pandemic.

Turning to the queries about the approach for highly skilled migrants in the future, we are looking to implement an unsponsored route. We are going to learn very clearly from the issues and problems of the previous tier 1 route, especially the issue of how earnings were declared to the Home Office. We will shortly provide details of the new route in the forthcoming innovation strategy, and I hope Members concerned to avoid these issues will be reassured by what they read.

We will not ignore the actions of those who sought to play the system by inflating their earnings to seek an immigration advantage, but we will ensure that all applicants are treated fairly, based on the individual circumstances of their cases, and given a fair opportunity to rebut any queries about the earnings they have declared to HMRC and the Home Office. However, no one should be surprised that we check each other's notes.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Delays in the Asylum System

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

David Mundell (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 be suspensions between each debate.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate. They will be 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, whose email address is westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk.

Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

2.31 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered delays in the asylum system.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the many Members attending the debate for their ongoing efforts to push the Government to address the delays in the asylum system. It is shocking that not a single Conservative Member thought it necessary to take part in a debate on such an important issue.

I pay tribute to the many organisations and charities that campaign tirelessly to raise awareness of the issue, as well as those—including the Refugee Council, Detention Action, the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, and Lift the Ban, to name just a few—that provide vital support to some of the most vulnerable people on our planet. So many people are worthy of recognition for their incredible work, such as Councillor Wilson Nkurunziza, Councillor Irfan Syed and Stockport's own Mrs Sandy Broadhurst. There are also those who do so much at national level to keep the issue at the forefront of everyone's minds, such as Lord Alf Dubs.

In my region, Refugee Action Manchester and the Refugee Council provide life-saving and life-changing support to asylum seekers, while Stockport Baptist church in my constituency has done so much over the years to help to raise funds to provide accommodation, food, pocket money and transport to those in need. I am grateful to the volunteers from the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, who support the incredibly vulnerable people who are subject to immigration control. Significantly, they have worked with local authorities across Greater Manchester, and seven of the 10 councils have signed up to remote asylum interviewing for looked-after children: Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford and Wigan.

Our country has a proud history of standing up for and protecting refugees, who are among the most vulnerable people on earth, having undertaken perilous journeys to reach our shores to seek sanctuary from the very

worst of humanity. We are the fifth richest country in the world and that is absolutely the right thing to do. It is also right that our country provides shelter to people—not excluding them, but enabling them to earn a living to support themselves and their family.

I am proud that my part of the world, the north-west, is the largest asylum dispersal conurbation in the UK, housing 25% of our country's applicants, with 70% of those living in Greater Manchester. Data provided by the House of Commons Library reveals that 138 asylum seekers are based in Stockport and more than 6,000 in Greater Manchester as a whole, which is two thirds of the total in the north-west region. It is heart-warming to see how my community has embraced those people and helped them to integrate into our community. I have long been an admirer of the work of Stockport Baptist church, whose congregation and supporters have raised funds to support refugees with food, pocket money, accommodation and transport costs.

It cannot be right, however, that so many are simply stuck in the system for long periods, unsure of what their fate will be. Detention Action revealed that more than half of the almost 40,000 people in detention centres have been waiting for a decision for more than a year. A similar number have been waiting for up to five years, with almost 25,000 people indefinitely detained last year.

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid provides urgent assistance to more than 50 young people who have been waiting the best part of a year for an asylum decision, despite half already having had a remote interview. Even when the asylum system is functioning marginally more efficiently, the average wait for those handled by my local unit is 51 days, with the longest wait being 82 days—almost three months. That is completely unacceptable, and it involves the livelihoods of some of the poorest people in our society, including young people.

It is vital that the Government look again at how those in the system are treated. One issue that must be addressed is the Aspen card handover debacle. I focus on that issue because it reflects many of the problems in the system. Aspen is a debit payment card given to UK asylum seekers by the Home Office to provide basic subsistence support via a chip-and-pin system. However, purchases made using the card are closely monitored by the Home Office, making it an insidious surveillance tool. Recently, the Home Office switched providers, which proved nothing short of disastrous owing to the 48-hour period between the old card being deactivated and the new one going live, forcing people to live off what little means they had.

That is just one of myriad problems, from claimants not receiving their cards to their receiving cards carrying the wrong name, cards without money on them or cards that do not work, or people being unable to activate their cards. When cards were not working, asylum seekers could apply for emergency cash payments from accommodation providers, but those have been inconsistently applied and people could not access any more payments. There are stories from the Refugee Council of such people having to survive for days without food.

That is an absolute disgrace, and it can never be allowed to happen again. Why was it even allowed to happen in the first place? Perhaps the Minister will answer that question today. However, well before the card changeover took place, multiple organisations

[Navendu Mishra]

forewarned the Home Office that there could be problems, and it is clear they were simply not listened to. When the matter was raised in Parliament, the Government attempted to give the impression that it was a minor issue, rather than one that had gone on for weeks. Their claims could not be further from the truth, with many asylum experts describing the Government's handling of the issue as the worst failure they have seen in the system. That is why the likes of Asylum Matters are continuing to raise awareness of it—they want the Home Office not only to acknowledge its failings, but to learn from them so that we never again put the neediest people in society in this desperate situation.

There are also well documented and widespread concerns about the way women are dealt with in the asylum process, particularly whether that process is sensitive to specific issues faced by women. The expectation that a woman has been the victim of domestic abuse or rape, and will be able to disclose that during her interview with a UK visa and immigration caseworker, has been pointed to as a serious problem.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. We must acknowledge that these are incredibly vulnerable people in the most desperate of circumstances and act accordingly. That means shining a light on the failings of the system, rather than demonising those within it. Just last month, asylum seekers held at the Home Office's widely criticised Napier military barracks claimed they would be blacklisted if they spoke out following the High Court ruling that to use the site was unlawful. That included them being told that their asylum application would be at risk if they talked to the media about conditions at the camp. Instead of attacking those in the barracks who are in conditions described as "squalid" during the successful legal challenge, the Government should have acted immediately to close the camp.

The failures in our system cause untold distress and are a considerable factor in the high levels of mental health problems among asylum seekers. Refugees are five times more likely to have mental health needs than people in the general UK population, while 61% report that they have suffered serious mental distress as a result of their ordeal, including higher rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other anxiety disorders.

The way the Government treat asylum seekers in this country—the fifth richest in the world—is truly shameful. That lack of humanity was exposed during the 2015 migrant crisis when our European counterparts, such as Germany, showed benevolence, true compassion and leadership by giving asylum to more than 1 million people fleeing war in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. In stark contrast, the UK allowed a paltry 25,000 the safety and sanctuary of our shores.

I am sure Members on both sides of the House agree that on this issue language is important. Asylum seekers are people—fellow human beings who deserve to be treated with respect and in a fair manner—and following a decade when we have experienced the hostile environment orchestrated by the Home Office under this Government, I urge the Minister to do the right thing and offer those people a route out of poverty and destitution.

We do not need more distressing words and scenes from the Home Secretary. Sadly, just yesterday, we bore witness to the Home Secretary's latest demonisation of migrants, with her shamefully describing those vulnerable

people as "vile criminals", smearing the vast majority of honest, law-abiding citizens who seek sanctuary in our country. As HOPE not hate made clear in its response, the Home Secretary's words were disgraceful.

The Home Secretary also set out callous plans with proposals revealed for new legislation that will pave the way for offshore centres for asylum seekers, and criminal charges for migrants arriving in the UK without permission. The new laws will likely see thousands of refugees turned away and vulnerable migrants criminalised for seeking a better life. Furthermore, a Refugee Council analysis of Home Office data suggests that 9,000 people who would be accepted as refugees under the current rules—those confirmed by official checks to have left war and persecution—might no longer be given safety in the UK because of how they arrived. That really would be an all-time low for this Government.

The Government must do more to enable those seeking asylum to have the right to work. Last year, the Lift the Ban campaign—a coalition of more than 240 charities and trade unions, including Unison, the National Education Union and the NASUWT, as well as businesses, faith groups and think-tanks—presented the Home Office with a petition signed by more than 180,000 people, which called on the Government to lift the ban. They are still waiting for that ban to be overturned, which is why I recently tabled an early-day motion, which has been signed by 42 MPs to date. It calls on the Government to "recognise the injustice of preventing people seeking asylum from working",

particularly when they are forced to live on a derisory £5.66 a day. After all, that is in the Government's own interest: if those seeking asylum had the right to work, that would lead to fewer support payments and increased income tax and national insurance receipts of up to £100 million for the public purse.

The bottom line is that the pandemic has exposed the harsh reality that asylum seekers cannot be safe under such restrictive rules. Far from being looked after, they are forced to depend on tiny handouts each day and to choose between food, medicine and hygiene products, while being prevented from having the dignity of work.

The Government must do far more to address their unfair dispersal system. The majority of asylum seekers are housed in disadvantaged local authority areas while dozens of councils support none at all. Figures show that more than half of those who seek asylum or who have been brought to Britain for resettlement are accommodated by just 6% of local councils, all of which have household incomes that are below average.

Finally, the Government must heed the United Nations Human Rights Council proposal to reform the registration, screening and decision making process, including introducing an effective triaging and prioritisation system, as well as simplified asylum case processing and front-loading the asylum system to enable more information to be gathered earlier in the process.

It is time our Government stopped their gunboat diplomacy and treated asylum seekers with the dignity and humanity that they deserve. When most are fleeing war-torn countries that the UK helped to play a role in devastating, that is surely the very least we can do.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I am not going to enforce a formal time limit on speeches at this stage, but I expect Members to adhere to an informal limit of around four minutes. I call Virendra Sharma.

2.43 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on securing this important debate.

This country had a long-standing tradition of providing sanctuary to those fleeing danger and violence. It is our duty to assist those in need, and in a timely manner, especially those who have already suffered grievously through war and persecution, yet when those most in need arrive here, they immediately find themselves confronted by an asylum system seemingly broken beyond repair.

The Refugee Council's latest report, "Living In Limbo", found that the number of people awaiting an initial decision for more than a year increased tenfold from over 3,000 people in 2010 to 33,000 in 2020. The cost of that failure is staggering, with every year of delay costing the Home Office at least an additional £8,000 per person. The Refugee Council estimates that the total cost of delays is over £200 million.

The Home Affairs Committee, among many other bodies, has made that message very clear over many years, yet nothing has been done to ease the plight of asylum seekers. The Home Office must simplify its asylum case processes and recruit more caseworkers. It must also undergo a thorough review to find out why it has gone so badly wrong over the last 10 years and then take appropriate action in good faith. None of the proposals in the Government's report, entitled "New Plan for Immigration", will get even remotely close to achieving that. In fact, the Home Secretary's response seems to be to follow the merciless responses of her predecessors, as she suggests that asylum seekers should be held on disused ferries, or even oil rigs, or using floating walls to deter them.

We must lead by example. Tens of thousands of asylum seekers living in the UK receive just £37 a week on which to survive. After all they have gone through, that paltry sum forces even greater indignity on people who have overcome tremendous hardship just to make it here. Their suffering must not be allowed to continue in their sanctuary. In my view, asylum seekers need to be given the right to work, which would give them the chance to prosper in this country and stand on their own two feet.

Amid the despair and the delays, there is still great hope among asylum seekers. During Refugee Week at the end of June, I took part in a Working West London employment event hosted by East London Advanced Technology Training, which offers training and skills development courses for asylum seekers and refugees. I met a group of people who were crying out for the chance to contribute to this country, and I could see the rich array of skills, talent and passion they have to offer.

The Government must fix this broken asylum system urgently and once again embody the fundamentally British values of compassion and humanity, and a commitment to protecting the most vulnerable.

2.48 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this vital debate. I say to the Minister that I am angry. I am angry because, as an MP, I see the daily occurrence of the human misery caused by the failings in his Government's asylum system. I see that everywhere in my constituency. I am angry because I see my staff dedicating so much of their time to asylum cases, although that is a mere sticking plaster on his Government's shortcomings.

Countless examples demonstrate how the chaos in the system is inextricably linked to the human misery on display in our urban centres. Let me give one example. I will refer to the man involved as C. He was in the asylum system for four years. He made an initial application followed by a fresh claim. He waited 18 months for a decision on his fresh claim. During that time, his mental health deteriorated. He was hospitalised on several occasions following serious incidents of self-harm. He repeatedly told those helping him that he needed a decision, one way or another. The waiting was so unbearable for him that he resorted to going to the Home Office building in Liverpool and attempted to take his own life in its reception area.

I pay tribute to the work of organisations such as Asylum Link Merseyside, which, alongside MPs' staff, do the vital work of supporting those in need of support. For all the tough talk that emanates from the Home Secretary's mouth, it is not her self-styled steeliness that will come to define her tenure; it is incompetence. The Home Secretary is more concerned with playing to the gallery than with tackling any of the causes, symptoms or problems that exist in the system. That incompetence fails asylum seekers, fails communities and fails the British people.

Let us understand the facts. First, the problems in our asylum system long predate the pandemic. As of March 2021, the total work in progress asylum case load consisted of 109,000 cases. Since 2014, the asylum case load has doubled—yes, doubled—in size. It has been driven by both applicants waiting longer for initial decision and a growth in the number of people subject to removal action following a negative decision. Minister, we cannot separate that spiralling case load from workforce issues. These range from downgrading the decision-making grade in the Home Office earlier in the last decade, to announcing increases in weekly targets to 10, as well as failing to initiate recruitment in a timely fashion when higher executive officers started to jump ship. All of those issues have been raised time and again by the Public and Commercial Services Union and ignored by the powers that be. Even one of the former permanent secretaries, Mark Sedwill, called the decision "ill-judged". This caused so much chaos that attrition rates in the asylum workforce reached 37%.

Alongside the PCS, I want to thank the Refugee Council for its excellent briefing on these related topics. Its summary of evidence shows that the size of the backlog is most evidently influenced by the difference between the number of applications and the number of initial decisions made each year. The delays in the asylum system are of the Government's own making.

Sadly, it gets worse. In March 2021, the Government published their "New Plan for Immigration" and began a six-week public consultation on proposals to make wide-ranging changes—changes that I have opposed for their contravention of the 1951 United Nations refugee

[Paula Barker]

convention. While asylum seekers end up being treated like animals at Napier barracks, the Minister for Future Borders and Immigration wrote in a letter to me two days ago that

“our New Plan for Immigration will reform the broken asylum system”.

Minister, it will not. None of the proposals outlined in the paper was aimed at addressing the backlog of asylum cases. To describe it as a missed opportunity would be an understatement. Instead, all we have is more posturing from a Government who benefit from their own chaos. It is that chaos that has brought the system to breaking point.

2.52 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on both securing and leading this debate.

As we have heard today, delays in the asylum system are currently all too common, and the impact they have on those trying to navigate that system should not be underestimated. Almost every day, I receive communications from constituents who have been left in limbo by the Home Office—constituents like Hanna, who arrived in this country from Yemen. Having made an asylum claim in early 2019, Hanna did not get a response until my office stepped in almost two years later. For years, Hanna had dreamed of completing a PhD, and she received an offer from a good university only to have to refuse it because of Home Office delays. She described that as

“one of the worst moments of my life”.

That is one example of the impact that delays have, but each week I see many more, like my constituent Erkin, a Uyghur Muslim who fled the genocide in China three years ago. He approached my office in March 2020, at which point he had been waiting more than a year for an asylum interview. It was not until earlier this year that the Home Office decided that he did not need an asylum interview after all and granted Erkin and his family refugee status on the evidence available.

With the experiences of my constituents in mind, I have three proposals for the Minister. I know that he understands these issues very well, and I look forward to hearing his response. First, the Home Office’s decision to move away from the six-month service standard needs to be reversed. As every Member will know, one of the main points of distress for our constituents who are experiencing Home Office delays is that they do not know when their torment will end or at what point they can take action to expedite the process. Giving claimants a clear timescale is a key part of reducing delays and the distress those delays cause our constituents.

Secondly, the Minister must do more to reduce the number of unnecessary asylum interviews, which only delay the decision-making process, particularly in cases where individuals have arrived from countries where the Secretary of State accepts a universal risk of persecution or violence. I think we can all agree that in such cases there must be an effort to reduce the number of interviews.

Finally, it is vital that the frontline workers at the Home Office are given the resources they need to do their job. Data show that by the end of 2020 more than 33,000 asylum seekers had been waiting at least 12 months for an initial response to their application. As previously stated, the pandemic alone cannot explain that. From the length of delays that so many experience, it is clear that the Government need to recruit more staff and conclude asylum interviews online whenever possible. It is the duty of the Secretary of State to decide asylum cases as soon as possible. That means that, whenever the evidence is sufficient, a decision should be made without resorting to an asylum interview. I urge the Minister to look into what can be done and to act quickly.

As I draw to a close, I want to highlight that this is a cross-party issue. Whatever one’s views of the Government’s immigration policies, nobody believes that we should leave thousands of people in limbo, unable to participate in society. I urge the Minister to consider carefully the points that I and other hon. Members have made and will make today, and to commit to putting forward a concrete plan to bring delays in the asylum system under control.

2.56 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this important debate.

Only this morning I received an email from a constituent who has been waiting for more than four and a half years for a decision on her asylum claim. That is four and a half years she has been unable to work, four and a half years of mental anguish, and four and a half years excluded from the fabric of the country to which she desperately wants to contribute because it offered her a place of safety. This is no way to treat a fellow human being who fled unimaginable horrors in search of a safe, secure life.

We are lucky in Salford to have the brilliant Salford Forum for Refugees and People Seeking Asylum, which is led by Councillors Wilson Nkurunziza, Irfan Syed, Alexis Shama and a team of brilliant people who have established a support network for people such as my constituent. Sadly, her case is one of thousands and most areas do not have a support network like ours. The Select Committee on Home Affairs, the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, the National Audit Office and the all-party parliamentary group on refugees have all raised concerns over the rise in the backlog of cases over recent years and the failure of the Home Office so far to address the issue.

As we have heard, the Government’s “New Plan for Immigration” sadly appears to contain no proposals to address this backlog, and I fear it will make the problem much worse. The most dangerous part of the proposals is that someone’s means of arrival will determine how worthy they are of protection in the UK. Asylum seekers arriving through anything other than resettlement will receive a lesser form of protection, including temporary status, with no access to financial support and limited rights to family reunion. In fact, the new proposals go as far as criminalising anyone arriving “irregularly”,

not through official channels. As we know, people fleeing war and persecution are rarely afforded the luxury of arriving through official channels.

I would argue that those proposals are in breach of the refugee convention, which protects people seeking asylum from persecution on the grounds of their method of entry, and guarantees them access to claim asylum, for the very reason that there is no viable way to seek permission to enter a country in order to apply for asylum. To conclude, those are cruel and unworkable new immigration plans. As Refugee Action has said:

“Compassion, evidence, and 193 refugee and voluntary organisations tell us to fight against the principle of these plans, not help to thrash out the details.”

I hope that the Minister has listened to my concerns and will not just address the backlog at the Home Office, but throw out the unworkable and callous new immigration proposals.

3 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for raising this massively important issue. How we treat people who come to this country seeking sanctuary is probably the most significant measure of whether we are allowed to call ourselves Great Britain. It speaks of us as a people and it speaks around the world about what kind of country we are.

I have some figures of which people will perhaps be aware. At present, 66,185 people in our asylum system are waiting for a decision—that is the highest figure for a decade. Of those people, 50,000 have been waiting for an initial decision for more than six months—again, that figure is the highest for a decade. In 2014, 87% of cases were decided within six months; in 2020, it was just 20%.

I understand, as we have heard it before, that Ministers will say that that is down to the covid crisis, the pressure on the system and excessive numbers. The reality, of course, is that the number of asylum seekers coming to this country fell by 21% last year, to among the lowest recent levels, with just 35,355 applications—down from the height of 84,000 in 2002. That gives us a bit of a sense that what we have is a massive backlog that has a colossal impact on the lives of people who have already gone through desperate situations.

Let us not have any nonsense about them being bogus asylum seekers, because we know that the majority of them will succeed in claiming refugee status and a right to remain in the end. By the way, if I apply for a job and I do not get it, I was not bogus; I was unsuccessful. The notion that people who come here seeking asylum are doing something nefarious is a rotten thing to start off with in any event.

The idea that we are being swamped by asylum seekers, and that that is why there is a problem, does not stack up. What does stack up is a failure of Government—perhaps we could be generous and argue that it is a failure of Governments over the years—to tackle this issue. Their lack of competence is being disguised by the bogus rhetoric that we have too many asylum seekers. As I say, we have fewer this year than last year by the order of 21%, so there is even less excuse for this backlog than there has been in the past.

The notion that we are overwhelmed with asylum seekers is, again, the same rhetoric and the basis on which the “New Plan for Immigration” is formed. We will get bad legislation if it is formed on a bogus basis. That bogus basis is that we are overwhelmed with asylum seekers, but we had 35,000 asylum seekers in 2020, while Germany had 120,000 and France and 96,000. If we were to add ourselves back into the EU for the purpose of a league table, we would be 17th out of 28—we would be a Blackburn Rovers, in the lower-mid table. The notion that we have a problem is nonsense. Actually, we do have a problem, but it is the competence of the Home Office’s systems, not that we are “overwhelmed” with asylum seekers. Because this country is an island, we find ourselves with fewer of those desperate people to help, so why on earth are we making it so hard for them when they are here?

Imagine the things that they have gone through and experienced on their way here. We then make them wait six months, a year, 18 months and longer, in poverty and often in totally inappropriate accommodation, almost punishing them for having fled appalling circumstances. The “New Plan for Immigration” will make that worse. It will formalise the incompetence in the process because it will mean that some people will have to wait more than six months before they can even be looked at, and then they will be given a maximum right to stay of only 20 months.

I will finish by challenging the Minister to think about an intelligent, compassionate way through this: giving people the right to work. Why cannot people who are waiting for asylum be given the right to work? That would be good not just for the Exchequer, because they would pay their way, but for their mental health, their personal income and, given that we know that most of them will be given the right to remain, their ability to integrate into our community. As the MP for the Lake district, which is desperate for staff because the Government’s new visa rules have robbed my businesses of a workforce this year, I say that that might be one way of helping us through this.

I will end with this cheeky request. Will the Minister meet me and, more importantly, Cumbria Tourism chiefs to talk about how the Government’s immigration policy could help rather than hinder the Lake district’s tourism industry? Finally, surely we have to prioritise solving the backlog in a compassionate and competent way, not legislate to make things worse, which is the Government’s current plan.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Our virtual participants were very good at sticking to the four-minute time limit. Members here physically should try to do that as well.

3.5 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on securing this hugely important debate.

The current delays in the asylum system are appalling, with 66,000 people waiting for an initial decision from the Home Office on their asylum claim—the highest number for more than a decade. Three quarters of them have been waiting for more than six months, with many waiting in a state of severe anxiety for as long as three years or more. I am dealing with cases in my

[*Claudia Webbe*]

constituency of people waiting seven or eight years for a decision. That is why we must fully support the Lift the Ban campaign, which calls on the Government to overturn the ban on people seeking asylum being able to work. How do the Government expect people to survive for months and years without earning a living?

Under this Government, the number of children waiting for an initial decision for more than a year has increased more than twelvefold—from 563 in 2010, to 6,887 in 2020. That appalling record robs those children and young people, who have already endured unimaginable suffering, of their childhood. The size of the backlog is a result not of an increasing number of asylum applications but rather of the inability of the Home Office to keep pace with initial decisions. This is a crisis of the Government's own making and it stems from their utter disregard towards those seeking safety. I fear that this crisis will only get worse, as the Government's immigration plans lack basic humanity and represent the latest step in their pernicious demonisation of migrants and asylum seekers. They have rightly been criticised by human rights organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the British Red Cross.

Yesterday, as we heard, the Government confirmed that they will press ahead with the Nationality and Borders Bill, which is anti-refugee to its core. The Bill will enable the UK Government to block visas for overseas visitors if the Home Secretary believes that their country of origin is refusing to co-operate in taking back rejected asylum seekers or offenders. It will also allow for the removal of asylum seekers from the UK while their asylum claim or appeal is pending, which opens the door to offshore asylum processing, and family reunion rights will be further curtailed as well. Analysis of Home Office data by the Refugee Council found that, under the reforms, 9,000 people who would be accepted as refugees under the current rules may no longer be given a place of safety in the UK due to their method of arrival. Time and again, the Government have chosen to turn their back on those seeking protection from climate catastrophe, war, torture, persecution and other heinous acts. The Bill will compound the misery of people fleeing intolerable conditions.

The Government must end the delays in the asylum system, as well as the abhorrent practice of indefinite detention, which has led to inhumane treatment in centres such as Yarl's Wood and Napier barracks. Ultimately, the Government must repeal the Immigration Act 2014; end the destructive demonisation of undocumented people, migrants and asylum seekers; address the backlog of those seeking asylum; and abandon the deeply damaging Nationality and Borders Bill.

3.9 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I pay tribute to my 2019 colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), for calling for this important debate and bringing the matter to the Government's attention.

Our asylum system is in disarray. A recent report by the Refugee Council found that more 50,000 people had waited for more than six months for an initial decision

on their applications, the highest number for a decade. In the past 10 years, the number of people waiting for more than a year for an initial decision has increased almost tenfold.

Hon Members have noted the fact that most asylum seekers are not allowed to work and that many are denied the assistance and support to which they are entitled. In its findings, Refugee Action discovered that fewer than half of the initial applications for emergency assistance were granted, although 92% of applications were upheld when challenging the initial decision, that initial refusal. The barriers to people accessing support and their being wrongly denied assistance mean that people are further pushed into poverty and destitution. The delays have an immense impact on the mental health and wellbeing of asylum applicants.

My hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) have highlighted cases in their constituencies. I, too, will talk about two of my constituents, because these are real people we are talking about—they are not just stats from the Home Office figures.

The first is a Yemeni national, who contacted me while he was in the immigration centre waiting to be deported. He told me that he had been the victim of trafficking to the UK. I contacted the Home Office to ask for his deportation to be halted. Since then, the Home Office has confirmed that my constituent is a victim of trafficking and it has halted the deportation. That is good news for my constituent, but that was more than a year ago. Since entering the UK in June 2020, he has still not been invited for that initial interview.

My second case is that of an Eritrean national, who entered the UK in January 2020. Since then, he has been moved by the Home Office to four different hotels while waiting for an initial interview. When he was staying in one of the hotels, he and his friend were the victims of a suspected hate crime, an acid attack that led to his friend losing his vision at just 18 years old. Only yesterday, I received a response from the Home Office confirming that he is still waiting for that initial interview—18 months after he claimed asylum, and despite that horrific attack.

My constituents' experiences speak for themselves, without me needing to state the obvious or to impress on the Minister just how shameful this is: that is how we treat asylum seekers when they come here for safety and shelter. The Minister must not only offer warm words of reassurance today; he must give us concrete guarantees that that disgraceful situation will be corrected immediately.

3.13 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this important and timely debate. I also thank organisations such as Asylum Link, Migrant Help and Our Liverpool in my constituency for their tireless and invaluable work and the support that they give to asylum seekers in Liverpool, stepping in to fill the role of Government in supporting some of the most vulnerable people who have fled unimaginable circumstances, seeking safety on our shores, because Liverpool has a proud history as a city of sanctuary.

Asylum seekers are met with appalling treatment by the Home Office, forced to live on just £5 a day, not permitted to work, housed in substandard accommodation and trapped within a system that was never designed to be used over the long term. On top of the desperate living conditions that asylum seekers are forced into, the toll of living in protracted states of limbo with so little support is extremely damaging, cruel and unjust. Many asylum seekers are already desperately vulnerable when they reach the UK.

I receive many emails about the delays from victims of war, persecution, modern slavery, torture and sexual abuse. After entering the system here, their mental health deteriorates drastically through years of uncertainty and powerlessness. Women stuck in abusive marriages are left unable to leave their husbands, who are the principal asylum applicants, because they would be left without status or support. The separation of families torn apart by conflict is prolonged indefinitely, with no family reunion rights for the years that they are stuck in the asylum system. Countless constituents have contacted my office describing sleepless nights, escalating medical problems due to the stress and anxiety, endless months of waiting without the ability to work or get an education, and the devastating sense of powerlessness and hopelessness that creates.

The Government's new plans for immigration contain no plan to reduce the backlog. Its provisions are instead likely to worsen waiting times for applicants, so even more vulnerable people will be living in limbo, plagued by uncertainty and anxiety. We need urgent action to ensure that the system is fair, humane, efficient and effective. We must implement the proposal set out by the UNHCR for reform of the registration, screening and decision-making processes, including investing in more caseworkers, establishing a dedicated backlog clearance team and putting in place an action plan to determine and address the reasons for the backlog by a given deadline, among many other recommendations.

The Government's Nationality and Borders Bill, to be debated next week, not only fails to protect those in need of safety but treats them as criminals. All people seeking protection should be allowed to make an asylum claim, no matter how they have arrived. Creating a two-tier system that grants lesser rights to those who arrive in the UK outside the so-called official route flies in the face of the refugee convention. Instead of tackling the current inhumane conditions in our asylum system, the Bill will leave those asylum seekers with a wait of up to six months while the Government try to remove them to so-called safe countries. The provisions will only add to the backlog of cases and create further anxiety and uncertainty for those people who deserve our compassion and protection.

Instead of treating people fleeing war, persecution and trauma as criminals and forcing them into poverty and destitution with no prospect of escape for years, I implore the Government to show humanity and to stop punishing people for seeking protection. Instead, they should address delays in the asylum system, improve the provision of support and legal aid, publish data on waiting times of all those in the asylum system, restore permission to work and grant an immediate uplift in asylum support rates to lift asylum seekers out of destitution.

3.17 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing this debate. I wholeheartedly welcome the debate because it provides me with another opportunity to raise the plight of those who are the hardest hit victims of the delays in the asylum system—those who are detained.

As we heard, the process for claiming asylum is complex, slow and, at times, chaotic. It can be inhumane, degrading and a humiliating experience. Many of the people who reach us to seek asylum have experienced severe trauma on their journey of hope to reach safety and security in our country. In my community, the most recent arrivals have been from Iran, Syria and Eritrea—some of the most dangerous areas on the planet where human rights count for very little. Many have lived in destitution. Doctors in my local community whom I met recently have identified many of them as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the suffering they have endured and the hardships they have experienced, even on their travels to our country.

The processing of claims can be a lengthy process of uncertainty, which just piles additional worry and distress on these people whom I count as my constituents. As we have seen from reports today of the breakdown in the Aspen card system, the refusal to allow those people to work, who desperately want to work, leaves them dependent on the vagaries of financial support from the state and struggling to live on just over £5 a day. As has been said, nearly 80% of them have to wait at least six months for their asylum claim to be considered, but example after example today has demonstrated that it can be so much longer.

I want to raise the plight of those who are the hardest hit by the current system—those who have been forced into detention. I have two detention centres in my constituency—Harmondsworth and Colnbrook—which can hold more than 1,000 detainees. The UK has been described as an outlier when it comes to the scale of the number of asylum seekers that this country detains. On average, more than 20,000 people are detained every year. The covid pandemic has resulted in the numbers being reduced, but I fear that number will rise again as we come through the pandemic. Why? Well, the detention centres produce significant profits for the private companies that run them. The detainees have become valuable, profitable economic units under this system. As we have witnessed in the United States, incarceration pays for these companies.

Detention can be a brutal experience. There have been 38 deaths in detention since 2000 and self-harm is endemic within the system. We have seen the reports of brutal treatment of women at Yarl's Wood in the past, and the suicides and deaths in Harmondsworth in my constituency. Despite the strength of the condemnation from human rights bodies across the world, the UK has retained indefinite detention. The Government have even recently, to their shame, changed the rules—it is disgraceful—and they have admitted that more people who are potential victims of trafficking will now be detained.

There is a savage irony in the fact that about 60% of those detained will be released. In the light of various UNHCR investigations and reports, Governments across

[John McDonnell]

the world are now promoting alternatives to detention. I urge the Government to bring forward their own strategy for developing alternatives to detention, because the aim should be to close down these monstrous institutions.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Mundell—thank you for calling me. I thank the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for securing the debate. He and I have been in many debates together over the last two days, and I am sure there will be many more where we will be on the same side.

The way we treat asylum seekers is something that I have spoken about on numerous times in this House and the message remains the same. I am not changing my stance; I cannot give encouragement to the Government. I believe in the immigration system, I understand that an open-door policy cannot work in terms of security and in distribution of resources, but I also believe that we have a duty of care to help those who do not have the capacity to help themselves. While they are in the process of determining their status, we must do better by them.

The hon. Member for Stockport referred to the Baptist church in his town and I want to refer to all the faith groups in my constituency who are enormously active in trying to help in every way. I give credit to the Government and the Minister in particular for the Syrian resettlement scheme, which was an excellent scheme in my constituency. Six Syrian families needed help at a time when they were under pressure. The churches came together collectively and ecumenically in a great way, Government bodies came together, and the people came together. It was a superb scheme. Is there any intention of doing something similar in a wider sense in the future?

I was contacted by the British Red Cross regarding the asylum process. It highlighted the need we are facing and the steps that it believes must be taken. I am happy to give it voice this afternoon. Since the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, we have supported more than 30,000 people at all stages of the refugee and asylum process across 58 UK cities and towns, including people who are being accommodated in hotels and military barracks. That shows the scale of the issue faced by the asylum system at present.

I am quite fond of the British Red Cross, which does excellent work. We should give it credit. It asks for the expansion of safe routes for people to reach the UK; improvements in asylum decision making to ensure decisions are made quickly and are right the first time, which is important to retaining confidence; and the provision of the right support to people, at the right time, so that they can engage with the asylum system and integrate successfully.

I totally agree with all those requests. Last week, or perhaps this week, the Home Secretary referred to the family who were trafficked from across the water and who were forced on to a dinghy at gunpoint. The two wee girls were left on the shore. They have not seen them since. That is an example that makes your heart ache. We are all touched by the images of children in dinghies trying to make their way here, but I agree that they should not have gotten this far. However, given that they are here, should we not treat them with the

same care and respect with which we would want our own children to be treated? Should we not ensure that they are living free from fear? Above all, should we not extend our compassion? We should and we must.

I recently read an article highlighting that the queue for asylum decisions is nine times longer than it was 10 years ago, rising from 3,588 in 2010 to 33,016 in 2020. The number of children waiting more than a year for an initial decision has risen twelvefold from 563 to 6,887, and 55 applicants who applied as children have been waiting five years, as referred to by some hon. Members here. I have great respect for the Minister and believe that he has an interest in this subject and wants to help, so what is being done to shorten those waiting times?

In conclusion, there are simple and straightforward changes that can and must be made. They will not allow more people in; they will simply help us to treat those who are here better. They seek to cut the waiting times for decisions and improve the mechanisms for living while waiting, which is right and proper. I look forward to working with the Minister and charitable bodies, such as Red Cross and Mears, which has the contract in Northern Ireland to supply accommodation for asylum seekers, to see how we can collectively do this in a better way.

3.26 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on securing this debate, which provides Members with an opportunity to raise concerns about both specific cases and the generality of the increasing and increasingly worrying delays experienced by so many people in the asylum and immigration system. It is pretty clear from today's debate that the delays are just one failure among many in a system that is no longer fit for purpose, and has not been for many years, and is one that—whether by accident or, as is more likely, design—contributes to the continuing hostile environment for people seeking safety and refuge in this country.

We should thank the Refugee Council and some of the other organisations that have been mentioned for their hard work in producing the report that has provided the statistics about difficulties and delays in the system, which are borne out by the experiences from our own case work. That is, I suspect, a cross-party experience—even in the absence of any Government Back Benchers. To ensure that the Minister and the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson have plenty of time to respond, I will briefly consider the situation, the evidence, the consequences, some specific examples, the wider context of the hostile environment, and the need for action from the Government.

The stark reality of the situation has been set out in the report from the Refugee Council and in today's speeches. There is a significant and growing backlog of cases and asylum applications waiting to be cleared, and that simply compounds the pressure, with things starting to spiral out of control. In recent months, we have all become familiar with the difficulties of exponential growth, and that is almost happening here. That comes despite the fact that, yes, there has been some investment in Home Office caseworkers. It is worth noting that many of them are hard-working—like our own caseworkers, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker)

pointed out—and have to deal with incredibly difficult situations and listen to people’s difficult life stories. This is challenging for our caseworkers and for Home Office staff.

Individual Home Office officials are not to blame, but they are implementing the policies that are to blame. What they are having to do is ultimately driven by political decisions and a culture that pervades the Home Office. Earlier today in this Chamber there was a debate about visas for high-value migrants who are having their status denied due to minor tax return issues. I have spoken repeatedly in Westminster Hall and in Adjournment debates about the trouble with visas for artists, for priests and even for diplomats invited to this House to speak to all-party parliamentary groups. Later on, my SNP colleagues will be debating the impact of the bringing to an end of the European settled status scheme.

The basic message from the UK Government seems to be that people are simply not welcome in this country unless they have an awful lot of money that they are prepared to spend very quickly before they leave again. So, despite all of the rhetoric, it is clear that the “hostile environment” is still very much in operation, not least in the detention system, as the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) pointed out.

We have heard about plenty of individual cases today. In my own constituency, by May 2021 we had at least eight cases waiting more than six months for a response, and it was not the individual asylum seekers who were waiting more than six months for a response—it was our constituency office. Eventually we got some of those cases cleared by writing directly to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, but it should not have to be that way. Going to Members of Parliament to get a case dealt with should be a worst-case scenario, not a routine part of the process. Having a case raised by a Member on the Floor of the House, either in Westminster Hall or in Prime Minister’s Question Time, as we hear so frequently now, should not be a normal part of the process.

It is clear that the UK simply wants to make it as difficult and unpleasant as possible for people to apply for asylum in this country, despite the fact that, as Members have said, many of those who come here have been driven here by factors that we helped to cause, whether it is conflict, the use of weapons that we have manufactured and sold, or climate change caused by pollution from this country and other countries in the west. They have had to overcome extreme hardship and make incredibly difficult journeys, and they have not done that so they can live on £5 a day or so that they cannot even access things by using their Aspen card, which we have also heard about today.

Meanwhile, we deny our economy the opportunity to benefit from the skills and experience that people bring by denying them the right to work. The Conservatives are supposed to be in favour of entrepreneurship and a liberal, free-market economy, yet the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) spoke about the fact, which is true across the country, that tourist areas are crying out for people to work and the health service is crying out for support during covid. How many doctors and nurses do we know who are waiting for their asylum claims to be processed, but are being denied the opportunity to help others in this society?

In addition, people are forced into substandard and inappropriate accommodation, not least in Glasgow. There was the tragic situation of the people caught up in the incident in the Park Inn hotel. Just in the past couple of weeks, I have spoken to two constituents who were traumatised by their experiences there, as if they were not traumatised enough by the situations that caused them to come here and seek asylum in the first place. I would particularly like to hear from the Minister about what support, including what trauma counselling, is being provided to people who were caught up in that incident through no fault of their own, but through a decision taken by the Home Office to force people into hotel accommodation.

Many asylum seekers receive support from incredible community-based organisations, a number of which have been mentioned today. In particular, the hon. Members for Stockport and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) spoke about the local organisations in their areas. I will just mention the Maryhill Integration Network, which does incredible work in Glasgow, North. This year, it is celebrating 20 years of working with the community and its outgoing director, Rema Sherifi, has worked for it for over 17 of those years. I wish her all the best.

Such organisations should not have to be firefighting. They are supposed to be about proactive integration across the community as a whole, building stronger communities. Many of them do that, but they could do more.

Navendu Mishra: On the point of voluntary organisations and professional organisations that campaign on these issues, lots of them have said that lifting the ban on work is very important. However, there is also a toxic environment in the media—perpetrated by the Home Office and several Government Members—that these humans should not be treated as humans. Does he agree that treating people with basic decency and kindness is extremely important?

Patrick Grady: Yes, absolutely, and that is the approach taken by the Scottish Government. They have published their “New Scots” strategy, to ensure that people arriving are supported and integrated from day one. That strategy sets out the vision:

“For a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives from the day they arrive.”

The strategy commits to better access to essential services, such as education, housing, health and employment, recognising the skills, knowledge and resilience that refugees bring, and it aims to help people to settle, become part of the community and pursue their ambitions. The message that comes from Scotland, and from many of the Members here despite the message that comes from the UK Government, is that refugees are welcome and we want them to stay.

I endorse all the calls in the report from the Refugee Council; the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) in particular spoke about them in detail. However, what is clearly needed is a step change in attitude, and that is not provided in the “New Plan For Immigration” and the forthcoming Nationality and Borders Bill. Debates such as this one will help to make sure that the UK Government continue to be held to account, even if it is uncomfortable for the Minister that none of his party’s Back Benchers are here, either to support the Government’s

[Patrick Grady]

policy or to speak about the difficulties that their constituents are facing. The message from the rest of us who have spoken in this debate today is very clear indeed—refugees are welcome and we will do all that we can to continue to make that a reality.

3.35 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on securing this timely and important debate, his excellent speech and his commitment to raising the serious issue of delays and the myriad of associated problems with the asylum system.

Many people, myself included, are proud of the British values of fairness and decency. Those values underpin our shared sense that people in the UK will get a fair hearing, backed up by the rule of law. However, chronic delays in the asylum system are undermining and eroding those values, causing human suffering and creating a system that is unfair and chaotic. There is copious evidence of this in the “Living in Limbo” report, published by the Refugee Council earlier this month, and referred to by hon. Members throughout the debate.

The Minister should be alarmed and appalled by its findings. The raw data obtained from the Home Office via freedom of information requests are truly shocking. The data make it crystal clear that delays in the asylum system are endemic and have got worse and worse over the last decade. If the asylum system were a hospital patient, it would be in intensive care on a life support machine with a prognosis of a slow but terminal decline. The facts speak for themselves. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made compelling cases illustrating the Government’s failures via the data. More than 30,000 people are currently waiting between one and three years for an initial decision—in 2013 this was only 4,500 people—and 6,388 of those in 2020 were children, which is a tenfold increase since 2012.

The data and the facts say one thing, but the decision to propel myths about asylum seekers is a cruel and politically calculated choice by the Government. Instead of blaming the people, the Government should hold up the mirror to themselves to address the actual problems they have caused by refusing to fix the broken asylum system. Even more staggering is that at the end of March, over 66,000 people were waiting for an initial decision from the Home Office—more than will watch England at Wembley tonight. That is the highest number in over a decade and a truly shocking state of affairs.

The statistics are shocking enough, but the human cost of the delays is even worse. I am talking about people—many of them children—whose trauma of lived experience is compounded by being left in limbo in the asylum system, in many cases for years on end. My hon. Friends the Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) gave examples of worrying cases of constituents who have been caught up in the asylum system and whose cases are unresolved.

I have an example of constituent F who came to the UK from Afghanistan as a child and applied for asylum in August 2013. It took seven and a half years, and my involvement as his MP, for the matter to be resolved this February. As the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, it should not take an MP’s intervention to resolve such problems: it is not good enough. The impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people in this position is devastating.

During the time before a decision is made, people live on just £5 a day and are not permitted to work. People awaiting a decision are accommodated within a system that was not designed to be used for the long term. People are becoming increasingly mentally unwell as the years of uncertainty, trauma and demonisation erode their mental and physical health. The Refugee Council reported that this has led to an increase in the numbers of individuals self-harming and reporting suicidal thoughts. We heard of the appalling situation for the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), which is really concerning. The Children’s Society report “Distress Signals” also outlines serious concerns about the damage done to children’s mental health in those conditions—damage done at a formative age that will last a lifetime.

As a lawyer, I am fond of the axiom that justice delayed is justice denied. Those cases, where people are placed in limbo, is justice denied on a vast scale. Beyond the human cost of these delays is the financial cost. The backlog adds considerably to the overall cost of the asylum process. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) spoke about the cost and failure of the asylum system. The Refugee Council has calculated that, for every month of delay, the additional cost to the Home Office per person is at least £730.41, equating to £8,765 per year. Therefore, the total cost per year of the current backlog of people awaiting an initial decision for more than six months is estimated to be approximately £220 million. The delays make absolutely no financial sense. What is clear is that the Home Office needs to get a grip of why it is that staffing increases have not helped to reduce the unacceptable delays and backlog.

What further concerns me is the fact that the Government appear to have very little by way of a plan to solve the backlog issue. For instance, the Government’s Nationality and Borders Bill, published yesterday, contains no measures for tackling the backlog. The Government’s desire to define safe and legal routes in an increasingly narrow way while criminalising irregular routes will do nothing to help with the backlog. The measures are likely to make delays in the system far worse, because the inadmissibility proposals will result in more people having to wait six months before their claims are even looked at.

Rather than chasing headlines through the draconian measures outlined in the Nationality and Borders Bill, there are practical steps the Government could take to make the asylum system function in an effective, fair and humane way. Some actions could be taken straightaway to tackle the unacceptable delays in the system, which cost so much in terms of both human suffering and public money. In February 2021 the UNHCR outlined proposals that would address the current backlog and prevent future ones from building up. Those proposals include introducing an effective case prioritisation system and introducing simplified asylum case processing procedures.

I also urge the Government to stop the increased pressure on our judicial system by ensuring that there is better decision making at the outset, with fair, quick decision-making processes instead of processes that drag on and leave lives in limbo. The Government must look at the proposals seriously and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Only by making concrete change to the system will they enable it to be effective, fair and humane. That, I believe, is what everyone wants to see. We must reflect on what the Government's plan would mean for Britain as a society: I do not want to see our British values of decency and humanity eroded.

The end of this month, 28 July, marks the 70th anniversary of the refugee convention. In the aftermath of the second world war, in a shattered Europe, Britain came together with 26 other countries to form a strong foundation and create the convention. That is true British pride and patriotism, and a historical legacy. Almost 70 years later to the day, the UK Government are seeking to step back from that agreement. That is the sobering reality, and one of the many social and political impacts of the Government's proposals.

We can look back on how we treat people seeking sanctuary here today with pride, or we can look back on this time as one that could and should have been much better. The humane treatment of those seeking sanctuary is as much about us rescuing our own values as it is about rescuing people in need. The Government must not delay in dealing with this issue.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Thank you very much. I now call the Minister, Chris Philp. Please be mindful that Mr Mishra will have a few moments at the end to wind up the debate.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): Thank you, Mr Mundell. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship—I think for the first time, and I hope not for the last.

It is worth mentioning that I am appearing here today on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is participating in an Opposition day debate at the moment. He has direct responsibility for the area that we are discussing this afternoon.

Let me start by adding my congratulations to the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) on raising this important issue and on the thoughtful speech he gave in opening the debate.

Let me outline the steps that the United Kingdom has been taking and is taking to discharge our obligations to people who are in need of protection; they are obligations that we stand by and will not resile from. I first point to our resettlement programme, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referenced in his speech earlier. The programme has been going for some time, but it really took off in around 2015. Working with the UNHCR, we directly resettle into the United Kingdom people who are most directly in danger. The scheme is particularly focused on people in and around the Syria area, for obvious reasons. Over six years, a total of 25,000 people have been resettled directly into the United Kingdom from places of danger; 20,000 of them under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which focused particularly on Syria. That 25,000 is

more than any other European country, which is something that the Government and we as a nation can be extremely proud of.

We also offer safe and legal routes via refugee family reunion, where people granted refugee status can bring in close family members and, in exceptional circumstances, wider family members. That scheme, over the past five or six years, has seen about 29,000 people come into the UK, about half of whom were children. We can also be proud of our record in that area.

Some comments were made earlier, particularly by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), asking whether we were playing our fair part. I have already pointed out that our resettlement programme is the largest of any European country. He also mentioned asylum numbers. In 2019, the last full year for which the European Union published data, the UK received 44,800 individual applications, according to the European Union's website. Of the 28 countries covered, including the UK at that time, we came fifth. As far as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under 18 are concerned, in 2019 the UK's intake was, from memory, 3,775—higher than any other country in Europe. Last year, 2020, only Greece had a higher UASC intake than we did. All of that shows that the UK is committed to meeting its obligations.

When it comes to supporting asylum seekers, referred to by a number of hon. Members, the provisions we make are more generous than many European countries. We provide accommodation and free health care. Council tax and utilities are paid for. There is free education for those under 18, and a cash allowance is paid in addition, which has been endorsed by the courts as adequate to cover essential costs. We are meeting our obligations. That system as a whole is extremely expensive, partly because of the backlog, which I will come to. It costs about £1 billion a year, so we are spending a huge amount of money supporting the asylum-seeking population. Those measures we are taking are more generous than most other European countries.

Hon. Members referred to the “New Plan for Immigration”, a policy statement published a few months ago, and the Nationality and Borders Bill, which was introduced yesterday. Second Reading will be shortly before the summer recess, so we will have the opportunity to debate that more fully in a few weeks' time. I would like to make a couple of points regarding the policy statement and the Bill. The Bill is intended to be fair to those who are genuinely in need but firm where people are trying to abuse the system. By fair, we mean continuing to commit to that resettlement programme. We have already continued the resettlement programme beyond the 20,000 people I mentioned earlier. The VPRS 20,000 commitment was met in February of this year, a few months than expected because of coronavirus. We are still resettling people under the replacement UK resettlement scheme.

Navendu Mishra: I appreciate the figures that the Minister is quoting. What does he feel about the contribution the German Government made in accepting more than 1 million people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq? How does he compare that to the UK figures?

Chris Philp: The German scheme was not a resettlement scheme. What Angela Merkel did briefly in 2015 was simply declare that their borders were open. About

[Chris Philp]

1 million people irregularly just crossed into Germany, many of whom were not from Syria or Afghanistan. That was not a resettlement scheme; that was essentially mass illegal migration. With our resettlement scheme, which we do properly in partnership with the UNHCR, we go directly to dangerous places around Syria, although we plan to expand that in future. We identify people in need of protection and bring them to the UK from dangerous places such as Syria, or near Syria, rather than have them make dangerous, illegal journeys across Europe first. That is the right way to do it. We are committing to safe and legal routes and to being fair to people in genuine need via the Bill, but at the same time it is important that we are firm where people abuse the system.

There are problems with our legal system, to which the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) referred. The legal system often gets protracted in the most extraordinary way when people make repeated claims often over a period of years, many of which turn out to be without merit, and yet they can do that repeatedly, which does not serve anybody's interest. Partly as a result of that, there are now for the first time ever more than 10,000 foreign national offenders circulating in the community, which is an unacceptable situation that we intend to act on.

It is worth saying a word about illegal migration. When people come here from France—I am thinking about the small boats—that journey is unnecessary, because somebody coming from France is not directly fleeing a war zone. Calais, and France more generally, is not a dangerous place. They do not need to leave France to claim protection or asylum because France has a well-functioning asylum system, and so does Germany, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Italy and the other European countries that people have passed through. No one needs to cross the English channel in a rubber dinghy to claim asylum. They should claim it ideally in the first safe place that they arrive in, which would include France.

Such journeys are dangerous. People have died. A family of five, including an 18-month-old boy, died trying to cross the channel last October. There have been incidents where ruthless people smugglers who take money to facilitate illegal routes have threatened people with guns, including a family that was separated because the people smuggler they had paid to smuggle them into the country turned on them. We should all seek to shut down those routes. It is not humanitarian to have people smugglers paid to smuggle people across the channel. It is dangerous and unnecessary, and we should stop it. Routes into the country should be safe and legal, not dangerous and illegal, and that is the objective of the Nationality and Borders Bill, which I am sure we will debate at length in a few weeks' time.

Specifically on delays in the asylum system, it is true to say that the delays are considerably higher now than they were a year ago. A great deal of that is due to the disruption caused to the asylum decision-making system by covid, which has obviously affected many areas of our life. It has affected us here in Parliament. We are still sitting here wearing masks and having remote

proceedings. It has affected the NHS, our call system, all of our national life, and the asylum system has been affected in the same way.

For some months last year, asylum interviews stopped entirely because it was considered unsafe to have a face-to-face asylum interview. People who worked in asylum decision-making offices, including in my own borough of Croydon and elsewhere in Glasgow, Liverpool, Leeds and other places, were not able to go into the office in the normal way to take asylum decisions and conduct interviews, and that has been enormously disruptive over, roughly speaking, the past year and three months, which means that the number of decisions taken in the past year has been dramatically lower, and we have not yet fully recovered.

We are still sitting here wearing masks, and the asylum decision-making process has not fully recovered either, which means the backlog and delays have built up. I agree with the points made by hon. Members that the delays are not what we want to see at all. For those whose claims will be granted, clearly we do not want to see them kept in limbo for protracted periods of time. If they are going to have their asylum claim granted, it is much better that it is done quickly so that they can move on with their lives. Equally, if the asylum claim is rejected, we should then look to move them to the country of origin quickly, because if someone's claim is not genuine, it is only right and fair that they are removed. Whether it is accepted or rejected, we need faster decision making. That is a completely fair point.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister and the Government set targets for the reduction in numbers? If targets were set, we could see goals being achieved.

Chris Philp: That is an interesting point. We had a six-month operational guideline previously, but that was moved away from in order to try to focus resources on the cases that most need attention. For example, priority is given to cases involving children. Hon. Members have mentioned that some cases have been waiting a long time. We are now putting a particular focus on trying to resolve those long-standing cases, so a slightly more holistic view has been taken, but I will take away the hon. Gentleman's point and mention the idea, which I know was offered in a constructive spirit, to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay.

Actions are being taken to address the issue that we have been discussing. First, we have been introducing remote interviewing by video link, like we are using now. We did not really have that at all about a year ago. It has now been introduced and its usage is more widespread. Indeed, for reasons of convenience for applicants and others, it is something that we may well continue with, even after the pandemic, I hope, subsides in the near future. That investment in remote interviewing technology has been made and is being rolled out.

Secondly, we are interviewing on sites outside the Home Office. We are trialling interviews in places such as the Napier barracks in Folkestone, as well as in the hotels where some people are accommodated, to try to speed things up a bit. We have also opened up additional registration centres where people can register their asylum claim, so there are now offices in Glasgow, Belfast, Liverpool, Leeds, Solihull and Cardiff, in addition to Croydon—it used to be that Lunar House in my borough

was principally the place where people went before. Those places are now available, too, which was intended as a covid measure, but continues to this day.

We are also investing in better IT systems. We are trying to make the work rate of the caseworkers more efficient by, for example, shortening the letter to someone who is granted asylum. When someone is granted asylum, they are not going to argue with it, clearly, so rather than writing a great long letter, it has been shortened to make the whole process a little faster. There is some effort to prioritise cases in which we think a quick decision can be made. If particular indicators suggest that the case is likely to receive a positive response, we would like to do that. We are also introducing specialist caseworkers, such as specialists in a particular nationality. If people feel familiar with a particular country and its circumstances, that will facilitate quicker decision making.

My hon. Friend for Torbay intends to increase staffing levels, to which hon. Members have referred. About 550 people are currently engaged in making those casework decisions—550 full-time equivalents—and the objective is, over time, to get that up to 1,000, which is almost double. That investment in people should clearly have a dramatic effect on speeding things up. As someone said earlier in the debate, wherever someone sits on the immigration issue—we believe in proper border control, as well as fairness—it should not be difficult or contentious to say that it serves everybody's interests to get those decisions made quickly, whether they end up being positive or negative.

I have outlined the steps that my hon. Friend is taking, and I am sure that all hon. Members present will hope and expect that the measures I have outlined will have the desired effect and that waiting times will come down. We are of course somewhat in the hands of the intake. We have had an extremely high intake in the

last few weeks because of the dangerous, unnecessary, illegal English channel crossings, and if they continue in large numbers, that will add to the backlog. The intake is somewhat unpredictable—I mention that caveat for completeness. In the interests of giving the hon. Member for Stockport an opportunity to reply, I will conclude my remarks.

3.58 pm

Navendu Mishra: I am incredibly grateful to all hon. Members who contributed to the debate and brought many powerful stories from constituency casework. I thank the Minister for his contribution, although I must highlight that he did not comment on the Aspen card disaster and people being left without food or hygiene products, or on my remarks on the special requirements for women asylum seekers fleeing domestic abuse and rape. The one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work. Asylum seekers and refugees are five times more likely than British nationals to have serious mental health issues.

Clearly, there is a lot of appetite among MPs for the Government to lift the ban on people working. Just over £5 a day is simply unacceptable. We also want to see an end to the toxic and divisive language from the Home Office, the Home Secretary and some MPs on the Government Benches. Treating people like insects is not acceptable; everyone deserves decency and respect. We also want proper financial support for local authorities that support asylum seekers. We have a system whereby some local authorities support asylum seekers and will accept them, while others do not—that needs to be changed. We need reform to the system.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK Casino Industry

4.5 pm

David Mundell (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UK casino industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. Before I begin, I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

People's perceptions of casinos often fall into two categories, either James Bond at the Monte Carlo Casino or problem gamblers chasing their next win. For 99% of people, however, that is simply not the reality. Casino goers are just ordinary people enjoying time out with family and friends. They have budgeted an acceptable cost for an evening's entertainment, which is no different from purchasing an admission ticket to the theatre or attending the football on a Saturday afternoon.

Casinos bring many benefits to local communities. In Great Britain, 13,000 people are directly employed in casinos, with thousands more additional jobs generated in their supply chains. More than half of those working in the gambling industry are under the age of 35, a far higher proportion than in the wider economy, demonstrating the importance of the industry in providing entry-level jobs for young people looking for experience in the workplace.

Hundreds of people in Blackpool are directly employed in the three casinos across the town, as croupiers, waiters, security and chefs. Casinos offer long-term, year-round employment in my constituency, in what is otherwise a tourism-focused and therefore seasonal local economy.

Casinos also make a substantial contribution to the Treasury. In the financial year 2019-20, 128 casinos were operating in this country, paying a total of £213 million in gaming duty. Their contribution to the national economy and the job opportunities created in many towns, therefore, must be taken into account in the upcoming review of the Gambling Act 2005. The review has to be established on the evidence, not on preconceived ideas and ideology.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman may give me the answer that I wish to hear, and I hope that the Minister will endorse it when he responds. I have a real problem with some people in my constituency who are worried about gambling addiction. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that for casinos overall—I know we do not have them in Northern Ireland—there will be protection for those with a gambling addiction? If they enter a casino, will that protection be in place, with the help they need to prevent them spending the money they should not be spending? I am very concerned about people with gambling addictions and need that reassurance.

Scott Benton: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid contribution. I am sure that many people across the country share such concerns. I have visited a number of casinos, including the ones in my constituency, and I

can honestly say that the safe gambling practices they have in place are second to none. I am sure that the Minister will address that point further in his remarks.

The gambling review needs to allow for the casino sector to implement much-needed modernisation and allow the industry to provide the services and experiences that its customers desire. Thankfully, I know that the Government's objective is to ensure that the legislation is fit for the modern day, while of course committing to player protection and safer gambling measures, to which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) just alluded.

Legislation for casinos should have been updated in the 2005 Act. That in effect introduced an experiment for the sector: it legalised two new types of casinos, eight large and eight small, in predetermined areas. However, the truth is that that experiment has stalled. Fewer than half the 16 permitted casinos are now open but, crucially, an evaluation of the changes introduced by the 2005 Act has not occurred, meaning that there has been no consideration whatever of how the vast majority of other casinos, still governed by the 1968 legislation, would be modernised. Now is the time to do exactly that.

The outdated rules are exemplified by the number of gaming machines allowed in casinos. The 2005 Act allowed a maximum of 80 gaming machines on the premises of the small licence category casinos and 150 for the large licence category casinos, but the rest are limited to just 20 machines, regardless of their size. Most casinos across the world have thousands of machines. Let us take, for example, Belgium and Denmark, which have up to 140 times as many gaming machines per customer compared with casinos in Great Britain.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does my hon. Friend agree that if restrictions are too stringent, there is a great danger that people will play on the black market? PricewaterhouseCoopers, in a recent report, estimated that the value of people's gambling on the black market had increased from £1.4 billion in 2018 to £2.8 billion just two years later. Is that not a worrying trend that we need to be careful of?

Scott Benton: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. Of course, many people will be concerned about some of the Gambling Commission's proposals on affordability and the extent to which they could drive people into the arms of black-market operators. I know that that will be tied up in the gambling review, and the Minister will potentially address those points—if not today, then as the review continues on its way to the autumn.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to regional casinos, but does he, like me, find strange the Government's lack of desire to improve and upgrade the legislation? It is especially strange given that casinos are part of the tourist attraction offer not only domestically, but internationally, particularly in London, with high-value visitors, and that that is an enormous contributor to national revenue through gambling tax—let alone some of the changes that are taking place, such as the disappearance of cheques. Is there not an urgent need to recognise this industry's importance for the Treasury, but also for the wider ecosystem that makes Britain a desirable destination?

Scott Benton: Absolutely. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his valid points. I hope that, as part of the review that is ongoing, those points can be addressed. Over the last 14 years or so, it would have been hoped that the experiment that I just alluded to from the 2005 Act would have allowed ordinary casinos to be updated, in terms of their practices and regulation. Disappointingly, that has not happened, but the review offers a golden opportunity to now do exactly that.

I was talking about the number of machines operated in some ordinary casinos. The Hippodrome in Leicester Square is restricted to just 20 machines. That in effect means that during busy periods there can be up to 75 customers in the building for every one gaming machine, which is incredibly perverse. Of course, there is little, if any, evidence to link problem gambling to the number of slot machines available. Gamblers can only play on one machine at a time. And there have not been any such issues from the casinos licensed under the 2005 Act that have substantially more machines. Instead, the lack of available machines means that potential customers face long delays to play and, when they finally are able to play, they feel uncomfortable, knowing that others are waiting to do so as well. In fact, it stops people leaving their machines, through fear of losing their spot—counter-intuitive to safer gambling practice.

Introducing a machine-to-table ratio would relate the number of machines to the size of the casino. That would ensure a suitable number of machines for the size of premises and stop ridiculous scenarios such as that at the Hippodrome. Rank Group, which operates 52 casinos, has suggested starting with a five-to-one ratio to cater for customer demand. The size of a casino, and therefore the number of machines, would be for local authorities to decide during planning applications, which would enable them to ensure a suitable local offering.

Existing laws also limit the choice for customers using gaming machines by restricting electronic versions of casino games to those based on physical events. In effect, that restricts casinos to offering only electronic roulette, as games such as blackjack are much more difficult to offer electronically with the necessary physical event. That makes little sense as there is no identifiable reason that a customer is safer or receives any additional protections from a random physical event rather than a random number generated game. *[Interruption.]*

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I do not intend to suspend the sitting for the Division in the House because both you, Mr Benton, and the Minister have proxy votes. Let us continue.

Scott Benton: Thank you, Mr Mundell. Legislation fit for the modern-day customer would also enable casinos to offer a wider range of casino games via electronic terminals. That would allow gamblers to play at much lower stakes than on live tables.

A second inconsistency between the 2005 Act and the Gaming Act 1968 relates to the ability to offer sports betting. The new legislation allows for sports betting at the casino, yet the historical legislation does not. There is a relatively small number of casinos in the UK compared with the thousands of licensed betting offices. Therefore, any change to legislation to allow sports betting in casinos would have little effect on the betting offices sector. Casinos would not become the favoured place for sports betting, yet they would be able to offer a

complementary service to the casino floor. It is archaic and puzzling that casinos cannot offer sports betting when casino customers can simply pick up their phone, open an app and make a sports bet online. There have been no reported issues from casinos that can offer that facility. Yet again, internationally that means we are lagging behind, because that is normally a standard offering in a casino.

It is not just placing bets that people increasingly do electronically. Society is rapidly moving away from using physical cash in all transactions, with electronic payments estimated to be used in up to 80% of transactions in the retail industry. Yet the majority of payments in casinos remain cash-based. No doubt accelerated by the pandemic, in many situations across the UK it is impossible to pay for goods or services with cash. As such, it is scarcely believable that restrictions would bind an industry to cash payments only.

Casinos need to be able to offer a cashless option to keep up with changing customer expectations. The controls on cashless opportunities in casinos are detrimental to business and restrict customer choice. There would be no additional risks to customers, as operators would continue to ensure that safeguards were in place to prevent people from spending beyond their means. That could be similar to the measures casino operators have in place elsewhere.

Other credit issues relate to high-end casinos in Mayfair, which bring in incredibly wealthy individuals from around the globe. Those casinos can accept cheques from players to facilitate the transfer of funds from abroad. However, the future of cheques is constantly in doubt, and some countries have already stopped their use in favour of electronic payments. Without the ability somehow to accept payments from those individuals, casinos would close overnight. Jobs and the significant contributions to the Treasury in gaming duty would be lost, along with the indirect investment and spending brought by those gamblers when they visit the UK. Electronic payments and permitting those casinos to give credit for gambling to high net worth individuals, with robust anti-money laundering controls in place, would make it possible to continue offering that service.

No part of the betting and gaming industry has been as severely affected by the pandemic as land-based casinos. These are small asks that would future-proof the sector while safely increasing what it could offer to consumers. Refusing to bring legislation into the 21st century, and ignoring the demand for gambling by over-regulating the industry, will only see casinos left behind, unable to compete and match the modern-day expectations of customers, which in turn will lead to a decline in jobs and tax revenue, and the sector's contribution to economic growth. I hope the Minister will address those issues in the review, and I look forward to his response to those points.

The 2005 Act allows for one regional casino, or super-casino as it is sometimes known. A regional casino is defined as having a minimum total customer area of 5,000 square metres, and will be permitted to have up to 1,250 gaming machines. Paul Ward, a hotel operator in my constituency, has experience of working in a large casino abroad, and he has said:

"A super-casino isn't just about gambling. I worked in a casino in Perth, Western Australia for a while. The employment opportunities were incredible... it created jobs for 1,500 people. The tourism it generated on top was amazing."

[Scott Benton]

The Government of the time agreed with that assessment and expected that a regional casino would be a major development, offering clear potential for regeneration and bringing in major investment and providing accommodation, as well as conference facilities, restaurants, bars, areas for live entertainment, leisure attractions and, of course, a premium gambling experience.

The primary criteria laid down by the Secretary of State at the time were to ensure that any chosen location would satisfy the need for the best possible social impact, and focus on areas needing regeneration. In a 2019 study comparing 32,000 neighbourhood areas across England, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government looked at income, employment, education, health and a few other factors. All the neighbourhoods were then ranked against each other. The sad result of the study was that eight of the top 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England are based in Blackpool—a shocking statistic that clearly underlines the desperate need for substantial regeneration in my constituency.

There is widespread support across town for a regional casino. Ian White, a director of the approved hoteliers' group, StayBlackpool, has said:

"A super-casino, bringing in dynamic investment would stimulate and support a truly year-round economy that the resort needs."

Following the introduction of the 2005 Act, local authorities could bid for small, large or regional casino licences. Blackpool, of course, was a clear frontrunner to be awarded the regional casino. However, somewhat surprisingly, the panel recommended that it should be awarded to Manchester. Partly owing to that, a statutory instrument that was required to approve its location was defeated in the House of Lords in 2007. The issue has since been swept under the carpet, ignored and never returned to.

The Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport looked at casinos in its 2012 report on the Gambling Act, as I am sure the Minister recalls. On regional casinos, the report said that there was

"a general reluctance to discuss the development of regional casinos".

Perhaps now, 14 years after that SI, the time has come to re-examine the issue. Allow me to share the words of Amanda Thompson OBE, owner and managing director of the Pleasure Beach:

"The creation of a super-casino in Blackpool would herald a new powerful tourism brand for the resort and create a new holiday experience that would be a catalyst for inward investment, supporting growth, development and prosperity across all sectors."

Although there is clearly no silver bullet to change Blackpool's fortunes, a super-casino would create many jobs in the town, from contractors working on the site initially to staff at the premises once completed. There would also be a significant boost for local companies that could offer goods and services to the casino, its staff and its customers.

Will the Minister commit himself to reviewing the case for a regional casino during the gambling review and assess the significant positive economic impact that a regional casino could make to a town such as Blackpool, which would be the obvious location to host such a casino?

4.24 pm

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) on, and thank him for, giving us the opportunity to debate these issues. I also thank the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for their contributions.

Casinos come in all shapes and sizes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South said, I have been involved in the issue as Opposition spokesman during the passage of the 2005 Act and as Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport for 10 years. As a result, I have visited quite a number of casinos, ranging from the Venetian in Macau, which I believe is the biggest in the world, and the Crown in Melbourne all the way down to the Genting in Westcliff, in Southend-on-Sea, and Aspers in Stratford, which is one of the few operating under one of the new licences.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress that, obviously, casinos are centres for gambling, but that they offer much more. Last week, I was at the Hippodrome in Leicester Square, where I was able to observe not only the gambling, but the excellent restaurant in that place. It is possible to enjoy hospitality there right through the night, unlike many other places in London. Although I did not attend, there is also regular entertainment by, I believe, Magic Mike.

My hon. Friend is right that casinos provide a significant tourist attraction, as well as a major economic contribution. They were, obviously, badly hit during the lockdown, in particular because, even when we were able to relax the measures, there was still a 10 o'clock curfew, and of course a lot of casinos do their business after 10 pm. It was with great relief, I know, that the casino industry was able to reopen on 17 May without a curfew in place. Casinos are still impacted by some restrictions. That affects the income of the local area, especially as casinos provide employment for a large number of people. My hon. Friend is right to remind us that the Chancellor also benefits considerably from the income from gambling duties.

The hon. Member for Strangford referred to the risk of problem gambling, which is at the top of our minds throughout. The gambling review that is taking place will address whether additional measures are needed to offer greater protection to those who may be susceptible to problem gambling. However, there has always been a pyramid of risk in the different places where one can gamble. Casinos have been seen to offer a safer environment than almost any other form of gambling. I have certainly observed that to be so, given the scrutiny of people who are gambling to ensure that they show no sign of having problems, as well as that regular intervention and the self-exclusion schemes. For that reason, it was felt right to allow more casinos to open.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South talked about the 2005 Act, and he is absolutely right that consideration in Committee was a tortuous process. We ended up with the creation of just eight small licences and eight large licences for new casinos. In actual fact, not all those licences have been taken up, or at least they

have not been utilised. The majority of casinos still operate under the licensing arrangements of the original 1968 Act.

My hon. Friend made an excellent case that that has thrown up some bizarre anomalies, in particular the number of machines allowed under the licences pertaining to the new small and large casinos compared with those operating under the 1968 Act. As he said, a large casino under a new licence may have up to 150 machines, but, whatever the size, a casino is limited to 20 under the old Act. The House of Lords Gambling Industry Committee drew attention to that and said it needed to be addressed. That is certainly a matter that we are considering as part of the gambling review.

My hon. Friend flagged up one or two other anomalies, such as the fact that sports betting is allowed under the new licences but not under the old, despite the fact that someone who goes to a casino that operates under one of the 1968 Act licences can bet on sports—they just do it on their mobile phone, rather than through the casino itself. There are anomalies that are difficult to provide justification for and that we have said we will look at. There is also the development of technology. Furthermore, my hon. Friend flagged the fact that the requirement to have cash is becoming harder to fulfil as more and more people do not actually use cash any longer, which we need to take account of.

My hon. Friend rightly identified, and the right hon. Member for Warley alluded to, a very small but significant group of people whom I believe are known in the slang as whales, which means those people who tour casinos around the world and are quite capable of losing £1 million in an evening—the high rollers. This is an intensely competitive area, with maybe half a dozen or 10 venues in different countries around the world competing for their custom. The fact that we still require cheques when, as my hon. Friend said, they are becoming outmoded and more countries are not even using them is also something that we need to look at and on which the industry has made a case. The gambling review is considering all those issues.

John Spellar: Can the Minister convey a greater sense of urgency? We are competing in a very competitive world—not only in this industry, but across a spectrum. Do we not need more urgency to improve and continue Britain's attractiveness?

Mr Whittingdale: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's wish for these matters to be addressed as soon as possible, but that is likely to require legislation, possibly primary legislation, which will need to be considered against all the other demands on Parliament. However, we are hopeful that we will be able at least to come forward with the conclusions of the review in the autumn. I would like to be able to say a little more ahead of that time, although I absolutely take his point that these matters need to be addressed soon.

Finally, I will touch on the case made for Blackpool by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South. I was Opposition spokesman on these issues in 2005, and originally, we were going to say we should not have any super-casinos or regional casinos because of the risk that they might lead to a significant increase in problem gambling. We changed our mind and supported the Government in making available one licence. Everybody in the House of Commons believed that that one licence, if awarded, should go to Blackpool, and we were all somewhat mystified when the panel advised that it should go to Manchester.

That is history, but it is why a regional casino has not yet been built. We would need to consider whether there was support for one—my hon. Friend quoted a number of people from his constituency—but obviously that is a decision for the local authority as well. We would also need to establish whether an operator was prepared to make that investment. If those two things were the case, I would certainly be willing to talk to my hon. Friend and others from his constituency about that possibility. As he knows, the legislation is still on the statute book and could therefore be utilised if those two things were proven.

I am most grateful to you, Mr Mundell, and to my hon. Friend. I assure hon. Members that these matters are under very active consideration as part of the gambling review.

Question put and agreed to.

4.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Government Support

4.50 pm

David Mundell (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 this debate and the preceding debate. There will also be suspensions between debates.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they should be present for the start of the debate. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate, and that they will be 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 at westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall debates.

4.51 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered eligibility for Government support during the covid-19 outbreak.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to move the motion, but I find it genuinely hard to believe that we are having to have this debate again. It is now 16 months since the Government should have filled the gaps on eligibility for their covid support schemes. In that time, I and countless other Members from across the House have raised the issue of the exclusion of 3 million people from Government support. I have personally asked five oral questions, made seven speeches, submitted dozens of written questions and led three debates, yet progress has been minimal.

At the start of the pandemic, I and many others could understand the Government's argument that it was inevitable that some people would temporarily fall through the gaps during such an unprecedented time. Likewise, I accept and welcome the instances where the Government have taken constructive steps to plug the gaps. I do not dispute that some progress has been made, so I would be grateful if the Minister does not squander his valuable time by simply listing all the things that have been done. Perhaps we could focus on where the gaps still exist.

If it is the role of the Government to protect and improve the lives and livelihoods of citizens, it is incomprehensible that 10% of the working population can be accepted as collateral damage and left to be ground down by poverty and despair by a Government who claim to be business-friendly. Instead of looking backwards at what has already been done, I want to focus on where the gaps still exist and to look ahead to what can be done to tackle the long-term effects of the Government's decision to let temporary gaps in support become a full-blown crisis of debt, poverty and mental health problems.

The Minister will be well aware that over 800,000 people have been unable to access the coronavirus job retention scheme due to last year's real-time information cut-off

date. He is no doubt champing at the bit to stand up and give the Treasury a pat on the back for the decision to amend the date to November, but those affected are telling us that this does nothing to support those who missed out on furlough because of their roles as pay-as-you-earn freelancers or annually paid limited company directors. Although the inclusion in March's Budget of the 2019-20 tax returns for calculating eligibility for the self-employment income support scheme is welcome, the Treasury's assertion that this will open eligibility to 6000,000 more self-employed people is categorically disputed by campaigners.

Likewise, the discretionary grant funds devised by the UK Government and the devolved Governments have been effective in plugging some of the gaps in places, but the eligibility criteria vary from council to council, keeping some groups excluded based on postcode alone—some because they do not have a premises, and some because they have too many employees. The list goes on. This is something that the Treasury could fix, either by issuing clear guidance on whom councils should consider to be eligible, or by distributing its own grant scheme rather than devolving the blame.

To save the Minister a bit of time later, I point out that I am well aware of the Government's culture recovery fund, but the scheme does not do much at all to support many of my constituents who work in the supply chain—businesses in the events sector that have remained formally open but have been badly affected by the cancellation of live events. Only 3% of the fund went to supply chain businesses in the first round. That figure did rise to 12.5% in the second round, but only because of the campaigning efforts of groups such as We Make Events. Will the Minister explain how he intends to support the supply chain businesses excluded from this fund, rather than repeat the lines that we already know?

Finally on this point, as much as the Government point to universal credit as the last resort when all else fails, the reality is quite different. ExcludedUK estimates that about 60% of the excluded have been unable to access universal credit, often because they have partners working or savings set aside for business expenditures, such as tax bills, which is natural for any self-employed person.

I hope the Minister will be grateful that we have covered what the Government have already done and that we can focus today instead on the gaps that still exist. Some gaps have certainly been filled—I have no qualms about that, and I would certainly not try to detract from it. However, the onus is now on the Government to fill the rest, and not rest on their laurels.

Plenty of solutions have been presented only to end up being dismissed for spurious reasons; they have sat on a Minister's desk while people who could have been helped languished in stress and deprivation. For instance, proposals for a directors income support scheme were dismissed by the Treasury because of concerns about fraud and an inability to gather data on dividends, despite the scheme using the Government's own anti-fraud gold standard and avoiding dealing with dividends at all. Where there is political will, there is always a way, and the Government have displayed nothing but a lack of political will in this.

Throughout this sorry saga, the Treasury has shown that it believes that many Members, such as myself, sound like broken records and that the excluded are

nuisances trying to swindle public funds. Perhaps there is a bit of projection going on. Time and again, the tone has been nothing but dismissive. The Treasury has used blatant straw-manning to paint limited company directors as fat cats and imply that the majority are actually just directors' children and spouses.

With the Prime Minister pressing on with the ditching of all restrictions with trademark recklessness, I imagine that Ministers are rubbing their hands with glee at the chance to redirect attention to reopening and simply to dismiss or brush off the excluded as yesterday's news. However, if the Government think that the end of restrictions will make the issue go away, they are very wrong; for many of the excluded, the hardest times are still to come. The fact that many jobs and businesses have survived until now does not mean that they are in the clear. Those who have been excluded from support have relied on the loan schemes, so by tapering off support now the Government are exposing them to an unimaginable crisis of toxic debt.

In a Westminster Hall debate in November last year, I raised warnings from TheCityUK recapitalisation group that UK businesses will have £100 billion of toxic debt by 2021, with £35 billion of that related to Government schemes. The report warned that up to 3 million jobs across the UK and 780,000 small and medium-sized enterprises are at risk. Now we are standing at the edge of that very precipice, with many having only just managed to scrape by in meeting the first repayment deadlines for coronavirus business interruption loans or bounce back loans. How does the Treasury expect entrepreneurs to reap the benefits of an open economy when the profits of so many are simply going to go straight to repaying ever-mounting debts? How many businesses that were saved through the pandemic will fold, collapsing in debt when the health crisis is finally over? Are the Government really content with giving some companies a competitive advantage by saddling others in the same sector with debt?

As we reopen, things are more uncertain than ever for the excluded, especially with the reopening process likely to be bumpy. As long as covid is still out there, cancellations and changes of plan can create deep uncertainty. Only last week, in my own constituency, Midlothian, a Tough Mudder event that had been planned over the space of seven months was cancelled at 6.30 pm on the night before it was due to start. While the health situation remains uncertain, there must at least be certainty in support, as well as quality decision making, which was sadly lacking in the Tough Mudder case.

The excluded are not a niche group. They are the backbone of our economy: business owners and risk takers. To take one example, the events industry demonstrates its incredible potential to build a world-beating sector that boosts both our economy and our spirits. It relies on the efforts of a diverse and highly skilled supply chain of around 1 million people. Those people's skills should be used to boost the recovery, yet so many have taken such an economic beating that they literally cannot carry on in their current roles and sectors, with 1 million people leaving self-employment in the last year alone.

For all the Government's talk of a strong economic recovery, we have been left with a looming toxic debt crisis and the decimation of key industries and sectors. The supposedly strong shoulders of the Treasury are quite happy to shrug off millions of livelihoods, and I

have not even mentioned the human cost: poverty, hunger, and a serious mental health crisis. The Trussell Trust reports that gaps in social security have driven people to food banks and that universal credit has been totally insufficient in preventing the excluded from falling into food poverty. Many are already been forced to sell their homes to repay CBILS and bounce back debt. Tragically, some have already taken their own lives. It speaks volumes that groups such as #ForgottenLtd have established formal links with suicide prevention charities such as the Samaritans. I really hope the Minister will join me in expressing a deep appreciation for the work that those charities do in supporting the excluded.

In conclusion, never before has a Government been so complacent about a debt crisis, a mental health crisis and a grave injustice all rolled into one. Let us talk about solutions: backdated parity of support; eligibility for support as we come out of the pandemic; support for repaying CBILs and bounce back debt; delayed repayments; or perhaps even a student loan-style repayment scheme that kicks in only past a certain threshold. Those are just ideas, but they are ideas that the Government need to look at now.

Will the Minister recognise the graveness of the crisis we are about to enter and commit to exploring solutions as a matter of urgency? Doing so will require striking a new tone with campaigning Members and groups such as ExcludedUK and We Make Events, so will the Minister agree to co-ordinate a meeting between the various excluded groups?

It is worth noting that the people who have been excluded watch these debates, and the last thing they want to hear today is another generic list of the people who have been supported. Not only is that a waste of our time, it is an insult to them, rubbing their faces in the injustice of the situation. It is taunting to the level of trolling. I implore him to throw away the script and speak today as though he were speaking face to face with one of the excluded themselves. He should listen to their hardships and their stories and recognise the hurt that is out there, listen to those affected and commit to working constructively to resolve one of the greatest injustices of this generation.

David Mundell (in the Chair): In order to allow all Back Benchers to contribute to the debate, I am imposing a three-minute time limit that will be enforced. I call David Warburton to speak now.

5.2 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and to speak on this subject today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing the debate.

Like all of us, I have been contacted by constituents from a kaleidoscope of different situations who have been unable to access Government support in spite of having been hit hard by the pandemic and the lockdown restrictions. From visiting businesses in Somerset and talking to owners and managers and those in their supply chains, it seems the economy is like a pointillist painting with apparently discrete specks of colour, but when one steps back they merge into a cohesive picture. The Government have provided huge support to countless businesses and individuals—to many of those specks of

[David Warburton]

colour. It has been unparalleled in peacetime, and the package of support has ended up costing more than £300 billion, with some 14 million people supported. However, some have not been able to access that.

I met the Chancellor a few days ago and talked to him about those people. I very much understand both his intention to try to help as many as possible and the challenges in bringing more into the safety net through proper assessment. Of course, restrictions on livelihoods are about to be lifted. Those who managed to keep the show on the road ought to be back in business very soon, but there will be challenging months ahead, and we should now look carefully at those who have had to struggle without support for the past 15 months.

The different types of ineligibility are numerous and complex. We have the newly self-employed, anyone earning over £50,000 and those drawing their salaries as a dividend. This is a common one in the music sector where I have been trying to get more support. There are those with mixed income and those on zero-hour contracts such as peripatetic music teachers. This is not academic or theoretical. It is tangible and real. I know my right hon. Friend the Minister is more than sympathetic to it. The impact means businesses going bust and mounting personal debt, and there is a particular impact on younger and older workers, new parents, parents of young children and their families. I will not go into the detail of specific cases or numbers. I am sure we will hear more about that and we can argue or dispute numbers. However, we are talking about millions of people.

I hope, as we climb out of the abyss of the pandemic, we have the perspective to take a breath, look closer at overcoming the technical assessment difficulties, which I fully appreciate, and fish more people out of the pond with a net that is slightly more tightly meshed. Without wanting to mix my metaphors, that would protect those specks of entrepreneurial colour that together make up our national economic picture.

5.5 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this important debate.

I raise the issue of the covid recovery loan scheme, described on the Government's own website as supporting "access to finance for UK businesses as they grow and recover from the disruption of the covid-19 pandemic". It also describes how businesses can receive up to £10 million and is clear the Government are guaranteeing 80% of the finance to the lender. Not all lenders appear to be engaged in this scheme, and those who are have varying degrees of enthusiasm—but I set that aside for the moment.

The rules say that eligible businesses must be trading in the UK, would be viable were it not for the pandemic, have been adversely affected by covid, but are not in collective insolvency proceedings—and there is the rub. There was, quite rightly, a large degree of forbearance during the crisis from the public and private sectors but

many creditors are now calling in debts that result from covid before debtor companies have returned to pre-crisis cashflow and profitability levels.

I know of many otherwise viable businesses, who in normal times could perfectly well service their debts, now finding themselves financially distressed as a result. They may fall foul of the recovery loan scheme criteria or lenders' risk management practices if they are subject to a Scottish decree or an English county court judgment. In short, they are being punished for being adversely affected by covid—one of the criteria to get the money in the first place—and are unable to apply for funds because of how that impact is being felt. Decisions by the lenders and banks are more irrational precisely because the Government are guaranteeing 80% of the loan.

I hope the Government will put pressure on the lenders to take part in the scheme and persuade them to analyse the underlying viability of a business, rather than issuing a hard no simply because of a CCJ or a decree. It would be irrational if a business meets the criteria of being adversely affected by covid, but is denied access to the help it needs at precisely the time it needs it the most because the financial distress caused has resulted in a court order.

I will briefly raise another problem. I have been told by a business finance brokerage that of the 60 businesses he has supported to make full applications for the recovery loan scheme, only a single, solitary one has received the money, and that is deeply troubling.

5.8 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I am grateful to serve under your chairship for the second time in one day, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this debate.

In March last year, the Chancellor declared that the Government would do whatever it takes to support the country through the covid-19 crisis. While the furlough scheme, which the trade unions were central in establishing, and other financial support have provided a lifeline for millions, sadly far too many individuals and small businesses have still been excluded. I have countless constituents, most commonly the self-employed or owners of small businesses, contact my office saying they have gone a year without receiving any financial support, despite not operating at anywhere near their normal capacities. Time and again, the Government have ignored those excluded from financial support. To be clear, any policy that seeks to ensure financial security while tackling the pandemic must include, above all else, listening to the voices and experiences of people such as my constituents, and addressing their concerns.

When the Minister sums up, will he consider the following two proposals? First, will the Government expand the eligibility requirements for the fifth grant of the self-employment income support scheme. Millions of self-employed people have faced considerable hardship, which has left many of them in serious debt and poverty, struggling to make ends meet with little or no income. There are more than 1 million people who receive less than 50% of their income from self-employment or who have profits in excess of £50,000. They must receive a reprieve after facing uncertainty and financial insecurity for more than a year.

Secondly, the Minister cannot use the lifting of restrictions to wash his hands of offering financial support through this crisis. Some businesses will still be severely hampered despite the planned lifting of almost all restrictions. I am largely thinking of those in the aviation and travel sector, including an independent travel agent in my constituency. Sectors such as these may need long-term, targeted and tailored financial support to survive.

I will draw my remarks to a close. The pandemic disrupted many businesses, but the support offered by the Treasury failed to meet the needs of those small and medium-sized enterprises, including in my constituency, that no doubt will have, or have already had, no choice but to close, through no fault of their own.

5.11 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell.

Since the first covid cases in the UK were identified in York 18 months ago, we have been inundated by businesses that are challenged. Although Government relief has been welcome, those ineligible for it have struggled. As covid cases soar again, we worry. This last year, those denied help have seen their life's work slip through their hands. Many self-employed directors are an example, as are those in the tourism, theatre, events and travel sectors, and those in the supply chains. Even when safe solutions were offered, the Government simply said that they were unwilling to build the capacity to implement them.

Often, it has been the inconsistencies in Government guidance and support that have caused confusion and hardship. For instance, caravan parks with shared showers were open but holiday flats with shared hallways were closed, and those running them were not eligible for support.

As restrictions lift, we are already seeing infection levels spike in York, meaning staff isolating and businesses closing. It is set to get worse, given the Government's illiterate plans. The economy is being hit and loyal customers are retreating into their homes, once more feeling unsafe. Reality and Government rhetoric are far apart in communities such as mine. The Government have seriously misjudged things and once again businesses and charities are calling for help, both for now and the longer term. Ineligible for support, they cannot depend on this season either. They urgently need a bridge to carry them through, so that they can then grow again.

I will turn to charities. On 8 April, the Government provided support lasting just 12 weeks. Charities have been ineligible for much Government funding. Many have had nothing at all and have had to cut back, yet all the while demand for their services has increased. Understanding of this sector, which forms a crucial part of our social infrastructure, has been severely lacking from the Treasury, which fails to recognise the role that charities have played throughout the pandemic and will play throughout the recovery. Generic schemes simply do not work for them. Will the Minister at least meet the sector's leaders and listen to their calls for the support they need right now?

Perhaps the most frustrating thing of all has been how impervious the Treasury team have been when they have been written to. We hold the future of local companies in our hands, but we have been given a stock response,

often unrelated to the issues that we have been trying to resolve. Businesses have been ignored; support has been denied. Recovery funds for businesses and charities are needed. While the Government are trying to race on, covid infections are racing up. Businesses and charities that have worked so hard to cling on feel that the rope is being cut. We have called for help; we have offered solutions. All we need is for the Government to engage, to rebuild socially and economically. That need has never been greater than it is now.

5.14 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to share in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. We go back a long way. I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this important debate.

I wish to talk about a subject that I have mentioned before: insurance for live events. Even those who have been eligible for support will struggle in the recovery phase if they are unable actually to stage live music events. Many events cited by the Government as examples of cultural recovery fund support have been unable to go ahead this year due to a lack of insurance, including huge events such as the Glastonbury festival.

Why are they cancelling? Because they cannot get commercial covid insurance cover, or not at a competitive rate. Since January, I and others in all parties have been calling for the Government to put in place a Government-backed covid cancellation insurance solution. I have said it before, but such a scheme is not unprecedented. It has been done before with insurance for terrorism losses and—I point out yet again—the Government made a profit on that, which is worth remembering. I have said that repeatedly to Ministers and I hope that they will heed my call.

If we do not get events back up and running again, I fear that, in addition to losing good events in this country, we will erode something that is very important to Britain. Our culture and music are part of our soft power and, as we know, people come from all over the world to attend such events. Again, that is exactly why it would be helpful if insurance could be put in place.

Before I conclude, as Members know, I have the honour of being the joint chair of the gaps in support all-party parliamentary group. I want to put on the record my sincere thanks to my joint chairs and all the many Members who pulled together to form the APPG. I think it is the biggest in the history of the House of Commons. That shows just how important the issue that the hon. Member for Midlothian has brought to our attention today is.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Stone. It has been a pleasure to chair you for once.

5.17 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I echo the thanks and appreciation to my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for securing this debate and for the comprehensive way in which he set out the challenges faced by too many people. More than 3 million people went to work every day to pay their bills and to look after their families, only to find that when coronavirus took hold, the Government built

[Patricia Gibson]

a lifeboat called furlough—but they were not allowed a place on that lifeboat. In what at times appeared to be an act of random cruelty, they were left without support for themselves or their families.

When those people complained about their concerns, or their elected representatives did so on their behalf, the Government simply responded by pointing out all the support that was available for other people, as though the excluded could be comforted by the fact that their exclusion from support would be made more bearable by knowing that others had received support. I sincerely hope that the Minister does not repeat that bizarre cycle when he gets to his feet.

In fact, the self-employment support scheme failed to help most self-employed workers, with many left out in the cold. As the Government gradually withdraw furlough support—too early in my view and that of many others—it is clear, and has been for some time, that the excluded are to remain so. They have been left to manage as best they can.

On 25 March 2020, the Prime Minister promised to put his

“arms around every single worker”.—[*Official Report*, 25 March 2020; Vol. 674, c. 334.]

But he did not and he has not, despite all entreaties to do so. Now, we face a summer of redundancies, as furlough has started to be eased back before firms have had the time to scale up. Families will fall further into debt and many will fear losing their homes, while we see the scandal of lucrative covid contracts for pals without formal processes, as well as all the other questionable practices that were set out in the House of Commons in a debate earlier this afternoon.

It makes no economic sense to force people on to benefits rather than support them with assistance that might just enable them to keep their businesses and their jobs up and running, helping them to reach a point where they can again start to generate tax revenues. It is bad enough that millions were excluded from Government support, but if the purpose of furlough was to save jobs, as we were told, removing it before businesses have had time to scale up their operations runs counter to that aim. The Minister should reflect on that. I urge him to urge the Chancellor to tread carefully and realistically when people's livelihoods are at stake.

5.20 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for securing this important debate.

It is excellent that more than 10 million people in the UK have been able to benefit from the extended furlough scheme throughout the pandemic. However, for many people, access to much-needed funds was marked by one bureaucratic nightmare after another. For one group in particular, the challenge of receiving financial support is ongoing. The Government have repeatedly failed to reconcile the glaring imbalance in access to covid-19 support for the self-employed. Many self-employed workers continue to be unfairly marked as ineligible for Government support schemes.

Throughout the pandemic, I have received distressing emails and phone calls from constituents excluded from funding because of the obscure eligibility rules for the self-employment income support scheme. One such constituent started a business five years ago and in that timeframe experienced one year of minimal profit. Because of the initial year's lack of return, they were deemed ineligible for funding. This constituent's appeal to the Government to discount their start-up year fell on deaf ears and their appeal was rejected without due consideration of their circumstances. If the Government are to ensure that the process of granting SEISS funds is fair, they must do a much better job of providing transparent guidance for this seemingly arbitrary system of eligibility.

Although circumstances vary in detail, my self-employed constituents have collectively faced needless obstacles in trying to access grant money that they deserve. The difficulty, and often inability, of many of them to access Government funds has become the rule, not the exception. The Government must do better at offering accessible support to the self-employed instead of blocking them through non-uniform exceptions.

As we discuss continued access to covid-19 relief refunds, I also urge the Government to consider the devastating consequences of cutting off overall grant access too quickly. Over the past 18 months, businesses—particularly small, independent businesses—have faced a devastating financial fall-out from covid-19. They have seen their savings depleted, taken on massive loans and bent over backwards to accommodate safety restrictions, often at great expense. UK businesses have borrowed more than £75 billion during this pandemic, and it will take many small businesses decades to pay back loans.

This month, banks will begin to ask for the first repayments, and if the Government withdraw financial support completely, small business owners will need to grapple with repaying huge debt, often with little savings, with no safety net. The Government simply cannot throw small businesses under a bus. Instead, they must be prepared to provide greater flexibility on repayments and to consider what grants should continue to be made available for the self-employed and small business owners over the coming months as the economy recovers from the pandemic. Simply cutting away all existing support and then demanding repayment is a recipe for disaster.

5.23 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I warmly congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing the debate, on his consistent leadership on this topic and on looking after small businesses and folks in Midlothian and elsewhere. That has been really important. I also pay tribute to ForgottenLtd and ExcludedUK, two great organisations that have worked cross-party to represent people who really have needed a voice throughout this process.

There is strong representation from the SNP in the debate because a lot of people are being let down by the UK Government at present. I pay tribute to the UK Government for what they have done, but we have to engage with them because under the current constitutional arrangements—and contrary to our worldview—the UK Treasury holds most of the purse strings. The Scottish

Government have some flexibility, as does local government in Scotland, but they do not have most of the levers that we have needed, as we have seen throughout this crisis. It is important that we make sure that decisions taken on Scottish taxes mean that they are spent well—or, in this case, that the debt taken on our behalf is.

The UK Government have not been idle—I acknowledge that. A lot of these decisions had to be made at speed, and the situation has moved very fast. However, as we heard from my hon. Friend, the excuses for excluding people in the early days do not wash any more. Deliberate policy choices have excluded millions of people from Government support. We have seen corporate welfare for big organisations and organisations that were already in the system, but a lack of flexibility has meant that a lot of people have been missed out. That is curious and I find it difficult to conceive the logic, because one would have thought that the real lifeblood of the economy—the entrepreneurs, the pram shops, the company directors, the music shops and the gym owners—would have been prioritised a while ago by the Conservative party, but that is not what we have seen in reality.

I am conscious of time, but I want to make a plea of the Minister. We are very far from out of this crisis. There has been a lot of cross-party work and I am doing my best not to score party political points here. We need to find solutions for a lot of people who will need long-term support in the future. I am thinking in particular of hospitality businesses and event businesses—businesses that will struggle with the transition from furlough to non-furlough. The idea that we will be out of this crisis in a matter of weeks is for the birds. We must keep these doors open and we must be flexible about better targeted means of support for organisations. If that is the way the Minister will go forward, he will find a ready ally in the SNP, because we must find solutions. It is too important for party politics.

5.26 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing it.

Over the past 18 months, the people of this country have made extraordinary sacrifices to control the spread of coronavirus and to protect one another. At every turn, they have done what was required of them, but the Government have not been as reliable or committed. The financial support schemes put in place have often fallen short of what was needed. As we have heard, more than 3 million people have been excluded from Government support throughout the pandemic. Be it zero-hours workers who have been denied furlough by their employers, or sole traders who were excluded from self-employment schemes because of their registration status, the Government have consistently failed to plug the gaps in their support packages.

The greatest impact on many people in my constituency has been the gap between furlough and the self-employment income support scheme. For those working in the creative industries, it is common to work across a mix of short-term, pay-as-you-earn contracts and self-employed contract work. Unless more than half their income came from self-employed work, they could not get any support through the self-employment income support scheme.

However, unless they happened to be working on a pay-as-you-earn contract at the start of the pandemic, they could not be furloughed.

People trapped in that situation have been left without support for 18 months, causing immense financial stress and leaving them trying to make impossible choices. Savings have been used up and I have heard from constituents who simply do not see how they can continue to pay their bills. I want to put it in their words and express their hurt. A constituent of mine who is self-employed and normally works in the entertainment industry described their situation:

“Through no fault of my own I’ve had no income since the grant in late November...It has been incredibly difficult trying to get through the last few months...All I want to do is earn a living in the way I have for the last 20 years. I’ve never asked for help and over the years I’ve had many ups and downs, but I need help now. The bills are mounting up and the wolves are at the door...I’ve had no option of work for 8 months out of the last 11.”

Another constituent described how they now owe money to HMRC:

“After being excluded and denied furlough for over a year, I now find myself somehow owing HMRC”

a sum of thousands. They continued:

“There has been no work, and schemes and jobs I applied for were suspended. I have no idea how I am going to be able to pay it back. I feel it is so unfair how I am being treated as a taxpayer. For me it’s like I’m being blamed for what the government did which isn’t my fault”.

As we move forward, my constituents and others excluded from the schemes need real financial support to make up for the debts that they have built over the last year. I hope the Minister can confirm that support will be offered as soon as possible.

5.29 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for securing the debate.

The increase in debt as a result of the coronavirus has been significant, and it has been particularly bad among groups of people who have fallen into the gaps of various furlough and other schemes. There seems to be an enormous lack of balance in who has been helped during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, if your name is David Cameron and you have a few handy phone numbers, you seem to have managed to do much better, by lobbying the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy eight times, whereas if you are a single parent living in Wood Green, you have been much more disproportionately affected by debt.

There are a number of options I believe the Government should look at to address some of the issues raised in this afternoon’s debate. First, they should review their decision, or impending decision, to take back the £20 per week top-up that they wisely gave to universal credit recipients earlier in the crisis. Now would be absolutely the wrong time. If we were to take a vote in this room, I am sure the answer would be that it was the wrong thing to do right now.

Secondly, the Government should take up the recommendations of the Excluded UK all-party parliamentary group, which the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has already mentioned—he has very much led from the front on that.

[Catherine West]

We have heard from a number of people, particularly in the creative sectors and in travel and aviation, about the uncertainty and the increase in rent. For example, in my constituency, a poor travel agent has been hit with a rent bill that has increased by 45% during this terrible time.

I would also like the Government to ensure that every single citizens advice bureau in the country is properly funded and that there are sufficient volunteers. I pay tribute to Daniel Blake, chief executive of my own CAB, and Lorna Reith, the chair. Other Members, too, will have excellent CABs.

Finally, the impact on many of the terrible ineligibility for schemes has led to an exponential growth in food banks and 1.3 million more children eligible for school meals—1,700 in my own local government area. We live for a future where there are no food banks. That rise shows the terrible situation for many who work in the informal economy and for small and medium-sized businesses. I look forward to the Minister's speech.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call the SNP spokesman. Your time, Mr Grant, is trimmed to four minutes. We have been able to allow everyone to participate.

5.32 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Mundell. I am pleased to sum up for the Scottish National party this evening. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for securing the debate, and, as others have mentioned, for his tenacity in refusing to let the excluded become the forgotten. I commend everyone else who has contributed.

I summed up in a Petitions Committee debate on the same subject in December 2020. Most of what has been said today was said in December 2020. It was ignored then. It cannot continue to be ignored. What did not happen in December 2020 did not happen today either. Nobody has made a fulsome defence of the Government's action, or inaction. In 2020, eight Conservative MPs spoke. None of them defended the Government. In 2020, we got platitudes and fake sympathy from the Minister who responded. I hope that that is one thing that will not be repeated here tonight.

There is a saying much loved by a certain type of business analyst, which is, "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail." That is exactly what the Government did in the 10 years between knowing that a serious potentially lethal viral pandemic was coming and it actually appearing. They planned for the public health implications. There was no planning at all as to what they would do in the almost inevitable situation where significant sections of the economy would have to be shut down to protect public health from the ravages of the virus.

It is safe to say that when the Prime Minister made his famous, or infamous, "Don't go to the pub" speech, neither he nor the rest of the Government had any idea what they were going to do to protect those in the hospitality sector from the immediate and inevitable collapse of their businesses, or indeed, to help anybody else in any other sector. An indication of how hasty and ill-thought-out the Government's response was is that one of the mainstays of that support, announced on 11 March 2020—the business interruption loan scheme—had to be completely rewritten 23 days later.

It would be tempting to assume that that same chaotic, shambolic approach is the reason that so many self-employed people and small business owners got overlooked, but that would be wrong because it was not a mistake. It was not an oversight. It was not an accident. It was absolutely deliberate.

The Chancellor told the House in his 11 March Budget statement last year:

"There are millions of people working hard who are self-employed or in the gig economy. They will need our help too."—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 280.]

He knew—the Government knew—that those people did not fit into the packages of support that had already been identified, but he went on to announce that the help they were getting was being allowed to apply for universal credit—a benefit that has been deliberately designed to be not enough to live on for any sustained period.

Let us look at one group of excluded workers: people who were persuaded in the past, by previous Governments, to set up their self-employed business as a limited company with themselves as the only shareholder and themselves as the only director, or perhaps with a close family member as another director. When the Government claimed in May 2020 that they had not had time to work out proper eligibility criteria to apply to that massive group of workers, that was tenuous, two months into the pandemic. It is beyond ludicrous to continue—to keep saying that 16 months in—but that is exactly the excuse the Government are using. The other excuse is that it is too hard to tell the difference between a shareholder of a company who actively works in the company and a shareholder whose only involvement is to take the dividends at the end of the year.

This is not difficult; it is not rocket science. It is easy. If only Governments and Government agencies were as willing to use data-matching technology to help people through a crisis as they are, quite rightly, to use it to catch benefit fraudsters and other crooks fleecing the finances of the public sector. That is all it needs; it needs only the will. If the Minister, as I expect, is going to defend the Government's inaction, all I ask of him is that he do the excluded the courtesy of admitting to them that the reason the Government are doing nothing is that the Government do not care.

David Mundell (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister. Again, if you could stick to four minutes, that would be extremely helpful.

5.36 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this important debate and thank all hon. Members for their contributions. My hon. Friends the Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) all made passionate speeches on behalf of their constituents. I hope the Minister will address their specific points.

For nearly 16 months, Labour has argued that public health measures and economic support must go hand in hand. We have called on the Government to address the

gaps in support and ensure that no one is left behind. We have called on the Government to do more to support businesses and workers in the most affected industries. Time after time, we have called on the Government to fix the broken self-isolation system and ensure that no one is financially penalised for doing the right thing. Too often during the past year and a half, the Government have either ignored those calls or acted too slowly.

We are at a critical moment in the pandemic and the economic recovery. Thanks to our scientists and NHS staff, the vaccine roll-out is providing a route back to normality. We all hope that that will arrive sooner rather than later. In the meantime, businesses and working people face an uncertain future. Many companies worry about how they will clear covid debts over the coming years. Workers on furlough worry about whether they will have a job to return to. Millions of people who have gone without support simply worry about how they will make ends meet.

As hon. Members have said, a variety of groups have been repeatedly left out of the various covid support schemes. Those groups include people who make less than half their income from self-employment, company directors of small businesses, and people who regularly move between jobs in common creative industries. I want to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the many organisations that have made their voices heard on the issue—ExcludedUK and the trade unions, including Community, Prospect and the Musicians' Union. Many of those excluded face mounting debts, which have been building during the pandemic. Therefore, will the Minister set out the Government's plans to address both personal and business debt?

When asked what support is available for people who have been unable to access various covid schemes, Ministers have pointed to universal credit and the £20 uplift, but the Government propose to cut that very uplift completely in September. On Monday, six former Work and Pensions Secretaries—all Conservatives—called on the Government to rethink cutting universal credit for 5 million households. I truly hope that the Government will think again about that disastrous decision.

Let me turn to the winding down of the covid support schemes for businesses. Last week, the House of Commons Library produced new analysis showing that just under 400,000 businesses in England—400,000 businesses—will be affected by the cut in business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from 1 July. Many of those businesses will face significant restrictions on their ability to trade until 19 July. At the very moment those businesses need support, the Government are sending them a bill.

We have called on the Government to learn lessons from the Welsh Government, who have given the majority of businesses 100% rate relief for the financial year. At the same time, the Government have increased employer contributions despite the fact that many businesses remain closed and most people who are still on furlough are employed in the sector affected by ongoing restrictions. I urge the Government not to repeat the mistakes of the past, when too many people fell through the gaps, and to introduce a comprehensive system of self-isolation support without delay.

5.40 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for bringing the debate to Westminster Hall and to colleagues across the House for their comments and remarks.

I have been very struck by the difference in tone among the contributions made. There has been a lot of denunciation, but there has also been a rather fair-minded strand of discussion that acknowledged the extraordinary circumstances in which we as a nation have been placed, and the scale and effectiveness of the Government's interventions. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) for their fair-minded engagement with the issue.

If I may, I will talk a little about where we are and then come to the questions raised by colleagues. Let me be perfectly clear—it is important, as the hon. Member for Midlothian and others mentioned, for us to be tonally clear—that the Government absolutely understand the depth and difficulty of the situation that people have faced throughout the pandemic. That is why we have tried to support as many people and businesses as we possibly can, and to do so as quickly and as effectively as possible. The hon. Gentleman was highly dismissive of that, but actually, I am pleased to say that other hon. Members were not; they recognised that the Government provided a very wide-ranging package of national financial assistance worth over £350 billion, and that international commentators have recognised that. I think of the International Monetary Fund, which described it as “one of the best examples of coordinated action globally”.

Those packages and bits of concentrated but wide-ranging support include the coronavirus job retention scheme—CJRS—which has supported 11.5 million jobs since its inception, and the self-employment income support scheme—SEISS—which has so far provided grants to almost 3 million people.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I am not giving way; I am sorry. I have no time whatever and I want to respond to all the comments made in the debate.

It is understood that the schemes continue to be the most generous of their kind in the world, and it is recognised by all fair-minded people that as restrictions start to ease, economic activity and demand will pick up. The Government need to tailor support accordingly, and that is why—I refer to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor)—we have announced that the fifth and final SEISS grant will have the value of the grant determined by a turnover test. That is because of the need to target support towards those most affected by the pandemic. I do not think that is a principle that people should wish to contest, given the overall financial impact of the crisis on taxpayers. For that reason, in relation to CJRS, we have also introduced an employer contribution.

Let me focus for a moment on the effects of that set of interventions. In its May forecast, the Bank of England projects the economy to return to its pre-crisis level by

[Jesse Norman]

the end of the year—significantly earlier than previous forecasts. At the start of the crisis, forecasts suggested that unemployment would reach 12% or more. The numbers are now close to half that, which could mean almost 2 million fewer people losing their job than originally feared. We hope it must be so.

The five SEISS grants combined will have provided individual claimants with support of up to £36,570. That makes clear the scale of the support. I recognise, of course, that some people have not been eligible or not been able to receive support from those schemes. That is why so many other aspects of the interventions, including the support for local authorities, have been put in place.

If I may, let me pick up on some of the points made by colleagues. It was suggested by the hon. Member for Midlothian that the Government were somehow dismissing solutions that have been put in front of us by reputable independent groups for, as he put it, “spurious reasons”. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross recognised in another context, we have leant into all those debates.

We carefully scrutinised the TIGS and DISS—target income grant scheme and directors’ income support scheme—proposals. In different meetings, I have met groups including the Federation of Small Businesses, ForgottenLtd, ACCA—Association of Chartered Certified Accountants—the gaps in support group, the Refused Furlough Group, the maternity petition campaign, Forgotten PAYE and a host of others. We will continue to entertain, and we very much welcome, thoughtful interventions designed to help us, recognising the constraints under which we operate.

The trouble, as I think colleagues understand, is that we are caught by the need to put in place schemes that respect fraud and error concerns. Let me remind colleagues, including the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) who raised this, that the very people who would denounce the Government for failing to extend support would themselves be the very ones to denounce the Government if it turned out that the fraud and error incurred by overly expensive support were to lead to a loss of revenue to the taxpayer. People cannot have it both ways. We are trying to bend over backwards to support those groups, and in many respects we are doing so.

Let me pick up a few other words. The hon. Member for Midlothian talked about “straw-manning”, but nothing could be further from the truth. There is no suggestion on my part that any limited company director is a fat cat—absolutely not. We recognise that in many cases those are extremely effective individuals. What we are trying to do is find an effective way to meet all the constraints I have described when supporting the wide range of people who have been affected.

The hon. Gentleman talked about debt management. Let me remind him that we have put in place a pioneering VAT deferral new payment scheme and that HMRC has made it clear that it is trying extremely carefully to manage the impact of different tax schemes and tax reliefs, and the withdrawal of those reliefs, on different groups.

The hon. Gentleman talked about whether the Government will show appreciation for the charities that support people through the crisis. Of course we will. We have expanded support for voluntary and charitable groups with HMRC. We very warmly support and recognise—and, as I said in another context, I work closely with—the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group, specifically trying to support people on low incomes. Of course we are working as hard as we can, and we have been for 15 or more months, to make things work.

Let me pick up a couple of important points made by other colleagues. The hon. Member for Stirling kindly referred to the work that the Government have done. He acknowledged, rightly, that the devolved Administrations and local authorities do have resources in part—they are heavily resourced by UK Government. In many cases, they have the capacity to amplify and extend their resources through local taxation of their own. That flexibility is one that they may wish to use in support of local people. I would support and welcome that as an exercise in devolved responsibility. With that, let me sit down.

5.48 pm

Owen Thompson: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. Clearly, across the board, there is a recognition that those gaps still exist and a frustration that, again, we are not hearing anything about how they can be addressed. I played out a hope that we could look forward, instead of backwards, but that has clearly not happened. The record will show that I was very welcoming of the support that has been provided to those who have it, but that is no comfort to those who have been left out.

In July 2020, the Chancellor said that although hardship lies ahead, “no one” will be left behind; he did not say “as many people as possible”. In October 2020, the Prime Minister said:

“We are wrapping our arms around the country to give people the support they need to get through this.”

That has not happened. On that basis, it is safe to say that this is clearly not the last time that we will have this conversation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered eligibility for Government support during the covid-19 outbreak.

5.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 7 July 2021

TREASURY

Finance Bill 2021-22: L-Day

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government will introduce the Finance Bill following the next Budget.

In line with the approach to tax policy making set out in the Government's documents "Tax policy making: a new approach", published in 2010, and "The new Budget timetable and the tax policy making process", published in 2017, the Government are committed, where possible, to publishing most tax legislation in draft for technical consultation before the legislation is laid before Parliament.

The Government will publish draft clauses for the next Finance Bill, which will largely cover preannounced policy changes, on 20 July along with accompanying explanatory notes, tax information and impact notes, responses to consultations and other supporting documents. All publications will be available on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS155]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Life Sciences Vision

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Innovation) (Lord Bethell), has made the following written statement:

In "Build Back Better: our plan for growth", the Government committed to publishing a series of sector visions that back

the sectors and technologies that will shape the UK's future. I am delighted to announce the publication of the first of these, on life sciences.

The "Life Sciences Vision" sets our ambitious plans, jointly developed by Government, the NHS and the sector, to maintain the UK's position as a global life sciences leader. It builds on the successes of the science and research response to the covid-19 pandemic, especially in vaccines and research, and benefits from new regulatory freedoms and opportunities now that we have left the European Union.

The policy content of the vision focuses on three areas:

1) science and research, capitalising on the UK's deep industrial and academic expertise, and realising the significant potential of genomics and health data to consolidate the UK's status as a world leader in research;

2) NHS as an innovation partner, ensuring the NHS is using the latest and most innovative science and technology; and

3) business environment, making sure the incentives are right for life science companies to start, grow and invest in the UK.

The vision also highlights seven core disease and technology areas where there is an opportunity for the Government, industry, the NHS, medical research charities and academia to work together to meaningfully improve treatment options. These key disease areas are: cancer, dementia, mental health, obesity, ageing, respiratory disease and vaccines.

The pandemic shows the importance of a flourishing life sciences sector to resilience and economic growth across the nations and regions of the UK. This vision will plot the course for the UK to maintain its global leadership in this important sector.

In developing this vision, we have undertaken extensive engagement with stakeholders representing small and large businesses, charities, patient interest groups, and businesses representative organisations around the country, as well as the NHS and the devolved Administrations. We will continue to do so as we begin to develop our implementation plans.

[HCWS156]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 7 July 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	895	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—continued	
Engagements	895	Covid-19: Disabled People on Legacy Benefits	888
Post Box in Stoke Village	1020	Covid-19 Vaccine: Ethnic Minority Communities..	889
Transport for West Midlands	1021	Employment Gap: Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority People	891
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	885	Official Development Assistance: Gender Equality	890
BAME Students	892	Online Abuse and Hate towards Women	891
Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds: Geographic Equality of Opportunity	885	Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination	887
Conversion Therapy: Support for Victims	885	Topical Questions	892

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 7 July 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	35WS	TREASURY	35WS
Life Sciences Vision	35WS	Finance Bill 2021-22: L-Day	35WS

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 7 July 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 885] [see index inside back page]

Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Israel Arms Trade (Prohibition) [Col. 908]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Dogs (DNA Databases) [Col. 909]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Andrew Griffith)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Opposition Day [4th allotted day]

Covid-19: Contracts and Public Inquiry [Col. 912]

Motion—(Ian Blackford)—on a Division, negatived

EU Settlement Scheme [Col. 970]

Motion—(Stuart C. McDonald)—on a Division, negatived

Petitions [Col. 1020]

Wealden Railway Stations: Disability Access [Col. 1022]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Regional Airports [Col. 201WH]

Immigration Rules [Col. 224WH]

Delays in the Asylum System [Col. 233WH]

UK Casino Industry [Col. 259WH]

Covid-19: Government Support [Col. 267WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
