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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 15 July 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Steel Imports: Removal of Tariffs

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on the UK steel sector of removing tariffs on steel imports. [902790]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Trade Remedies Authority assesses the UK's trade remedies and makes recommendations to the Secretary of State. This includes the recent review of the UK steel safeguards. The Government accepted the recommendation of the TRA to extend 10 of 19 steel safeguards. The Government also introduced legislation to allow us to extend the current steel safeguards measure for an initial period of 12 months to a further five categories.

Marion Fellows: The Trade Remedies Authority recommended revoking nine of 19 steel safeguards despite calls from the sector and the all-party parliamentary group on steel, which wanted all tariffs extended, but the UK Government will keep only about 15 of them. The UK steel sector is not on a level playing field with competitors because of higher energy costs and the lack of a corporate industrial strategy from this and successive Tory Governments. Is this not another broken Brexit promise to a domestic industry and its workers?

Greg Hands: I remind the hon. Lady that we have invested £500 million in recent years to help with the cost of energy. I also remind her of the welcome from the sector for the Secretary of State's decision on 30 June, when Gareth Stace, director general of UK Steel, said:

"Today the UK steel sector applauds the Prime Minister...and Trade Secretary...for standing up for steel"

and

"taking back control".

Export Opportunities

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): What assessment her Department has made of the opportunities for businesses to export abroad. [902791]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Opportunities for UK exporters are significant. We are seeing exports rebounding this year and they are expected to grow by a further 8% next year, and further opportunities are being created all around the world as we have rolled over the existing EU deals, plus the EU itself, and started to negotiate other agreements. Of course, the first from-scratch agreement in principle was with Australia. I hope the hon. Gentleman would applaud and support this direction of travel.

Kenny MacAskill: That is all very well, but food production businesses in my constituency face a loss of trade, challenges with customs, and damage to their supply chains. They require to operate in today's land, not some promised land that their business might never survive to be able to see. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that their difficulties are minimised and that support for them is maximised? They need butter today, not a promise of jam tomorrow.

Graham Stuart: It would very much help if the Scottish Government and the Scottish National party, of which the hon. Gentleman used to be a member, were to support the trade deals that we do to open markets around the world. He ought to know, as should his former colleagues, although I know they are pretty split even among themselves, that actually Scotland trades more with the rest of the world than it does with the EU. He will also note that EU volumes in May were back to the highest level since October 2019, so we are back to pre-pandemic levels with the EU. The teething problems are being dealt with, other problems are being minimised, and Government support is there. [Interruption.] It is about time that Scottish National party Members, who like to chunter from a sedentary position, got behind our exporters and stopped talking them down.

UK Exports to the EU

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of UK exports to the EU. [902792]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Latest monthly figures for UK goods exports to the EU show that in May 2021 exports were £14 billion, up by 8% on the previous month. This is the highest monthly figure, as mentioned by the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), since October 2019, and it is £2 billion higher than the monthly average for 2020 and just £0.2 billion lower than the monthly average for 2019. Latest quarterly figures for UK services exports to the EU show exports for the first quarter up by 2% on the previous quarter of last year, but still 2% below the 2020 quarterly average and still some 20% below the 2019 quarterly average.

Alyn Smith: Well, there are lies, damned lies and statistics, and I do hesitate to criticise and rain on the Jackanory story we are hearing from those on the Government Benches, but let us look at some facts from the Office for National Statistics. Comparing quarter 1 of this year with 2019, UK-EU trade is down by 27%. Some of that is accounted for by covid; much of it is accounted for by Brexit. Make UK reports that 96% of its members are having problems with the new trading regime. These

are facts. What is the Minister's secret? How does he maintain his Panglossian optimism for the future while ignoring such pain and hurt in the here and now?

Greg Hands: I was quite deliberate in the use of those statistics. We do need to take care with monthly statistics. None the less, the first quarter data is already two months out of date. The hon. Gentleman is right that there was a dip in January, but that was due to the closure of the border at that time due to the prevalence of the alpha variant in this country. Since then, there has been a very significant recovery. The latest data from May shows £14 billion of exports, up by 8% on the previous month, and only just lower than the monthly average from before the pandemic. He can quote the ONS, but perhaps he might want to look at the latest data, refresh his briefing, and ask his questions according to the latest available data.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Three weeks ago, Lord Frost rejected the EU's offer of a veterinary agreement, saying:

"We are very ambitious about CPTPP membership... That is the problem."

Since we cannot ask Lord Frost himself, can the Minister perhaps tell us why the UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership is incompatible with reaching an agreement with Europe on food standards? From which of our current food standards do the Government wish to diverge?

Greg Hands: I think the hon. Gentleman is confusing a number of different things, but let me start by saying that the UK proposed an equivalence agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary rules in negotiations—that was proposed by Lord Frost—but the EU refused. The EU does have agreements with, for example, New Zealand and others that still respect regulatory autonomy. We are very happy to discuss with Brussels an agreement on SPS rules so long as it respects UK regulatory autonomy and we do not sign up to dynamic regulatory autonomy. That is the read-across to other trade agreements; it allows us to have an independent trade policy while maintaining the high-quality trade deal that we have with the European Union.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister can defend his Government's Brexit bourach all he likes, but EU-UK trade fell by 27% in quarter 1, with Scotland punished even further. He cannot blame covid, as the fall was over three times worse than the global comparison. Official statistics show that for every £245 that Brexit cost in lost trade, even if the Government were to agree multiple free trade agreements, it will bring in only around £18 in return. The UK is virtually alone in facing this kamikaze blow to its exports. Scotland voted against this trade catastrophe. When will the UK Government renegotiate this disaster—or do they intend to continue to be anti-trade?

Greg Hands: I take that with a bucket of salt from the SNP about being anti-trade. As we have heard so often in this House, the SNP has failed to support any trade agreement negotiated either by Brussels or by us in Westminster. I do not think there is a single party in this House that is more anti-trade than the Scottish National party. I urge the hon. Gentleman to have a look at the

latest data. Trade with the EU is recovering—it may not yet be fully recovered, but it is recovering—and the latest data, in May, shows a very significant 8% improvement on the previous quarter. I refer him to last Friday's data.

Drew Hendry: Mr Speaker, you can see why we do not support any trade deals from this Government—because they always sell Scotland out. Let us hear what industry is saying. Fishing representative bodies continue to say that the Prime Minister has betrayed them and that they have been sold out. Individual losses of tens of thousands of pounds are commonplace due to export delays. A perfect storm of red tape, driver shortages and other Brexit issues are destroying businesses across the board, but especially in food and drink. According to the Road Haulage Association, almost a third of UK hauliers say they are having to avoid working with the food and drink industry due to increased checks and admin. Costs are up everywhere on materials, admin and transport—20% in distilleries. What compensation is planned for those affected—or, when the Prime Minister said "eff business", was that an instruction?

Greg Hands: There was a lot in that further supplementary. May I just remind the hon. Gentleman that most of the trade deals that he and his party have not supported are actually the EU's trade deals? His party's policy is to re-join the EU. The SNP was against the EU-Japan deal in the European Parliament and abstained here; it was against the Canada deal; it was against the Singapore deal; it abstained on South Africa, and it abstained on Korea.

When it comes to fisheries, I refer the hon. Gentleman back to what the ONS said, not this past Friday but in relation to February's data—he is so out of date. This is what the ONS said in April:

"The disruptions to food exports in January 2021 appear to have largely been overcome and may have only had short-term impacts on trade."

That is what it said in April, yet he is still not up to date. On hauliers, we are discussing all the time with the Department for Transport what extra action needs to be taken.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asks for compensation. Perhaps he can come to this House and account for the £180 million given by this Government to the Scottish Government for dealing with the consequences and the impact of Brexit at the end of the transition period, because we are not at all sure where that money has gone.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: The reality on the ground is quite different from what the Minister may be claiming. I recently met many manufacturers and businesses in Warwick and Leamington, such as Bravissimo, Vitsoe and young British designers, and they are desperate. Their concerns are underlined by surveys by the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors and Make UK showing the serious and lasting damage being done to UK firms trying to maintain their trade with Europe in the face of the inadequacies of the Government's Brexit deal. Can I ask the Minister of State whether he thinks Lord Frost has the bandwidth to fix those problems, on top of the Northern Ireland protocol, or do we need someone else in Government to get a grip?

Greg Hands: The Government have full bandwidth on all these aspects. We are satisfied with the trade and co-operation agreement. It is an agreement that is working well. In terms of adding support to exporters, that is the role of this Department and other Departments. We have helplines in place. We have the Brexit business taskforce. We have the DIT internationalisation fund. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has a £23 million seafood disruption fund. We have recently opened trade hubs in Edinburgh and Darlington, and we will open hubs soon in Cardiff and Belfast. We have a refreshed export strategy coming later this year. The Government are fully engaged on assisting exporters to get their goods and services into the European Union.

New Free Trade Agreements

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What recent progress she has made on negotiating new free trade agreements. [902793]

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What recent progress she has made on negotiating new free trade agreements. [902807]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I wish the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) a happy birthday. I hope he has had all the answers he was looking for today.

We now have trade deals with 68 countries around the world, plus the EU, covering trade worth £744 billion last year. Last week, I signed a trade deal with the European Economic Area-European Free Trade Association countries Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein. It is one of the new generation of trade deals we are signing, which Britain has struck as an independent trading nation. It shows that Britain is a pioneering partner of choice when it comes to trade. They have gone further with us than with any other FTA partner, benefiting every corner of our country. From fish feed to cheese, sausages to strawberries, tariffs have been cut, backing jobs across Britain.

Mr Speaker: Let's go to Karl McCartney. *[Interruption.]* Maybe not. So we will go to Sir David Amess.

Sir David Amess [V]: While I wholeheartedly congratulate the Government on the agreements negotiated so far, as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for the Maldives, I urge my hon. Friend, following our meeting, to negotiate something that is slightly different, an economic partnership agreement, with the Maldives Government, which would benefit not only our country but the core industry of sustainable tuna fishing in the Maldives in the light of COP26.

Mr Jayawardena: It was a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend recently to discuss trade policy regarding the Maldives. He will know that we have agreed trade deals covering 31 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries already, showing our belief in trade for development. I can confirm to him that I am keen to find a route to short circuit the process of agreeing more trade deals like these with Commonwealth friends around the world.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: I concur with the previous speaker on the Maldives.

Some seafood companies in Scotland have seen their costs of selling to the continent treble from 32p a kilo to about £1 a kilo. Also, UK exports to Ireland have fallen by 47.6%. All that illustrates the current damage Brexit is doing. We know from Government figures that, for every £490 lost to GDP, trade deals are not bringing in very much, unfortunately: an Australian trade deal makes up only £2 of that; a New Zealand trade deal £1; an America deal, if it happens, £20; and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership will bring in £3 to £8, depending on the way the cards fall. Has the DIT identified any other trade deal that might make up merely 0.1% of GDP, the odd £10 for every £490 of Brexit loss? Is there a figure for India yet? It has been a number of weeks since I asked the Minister this, but is there a GDP figure for a trade deal with India, if it happens?

Mr Jayawardena: The question has been asked and it has already been answered. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome that, in the EEA-EFTA trade deal, we have secured great benefits for Scottish businesses exporting to Norway. According to the figures I have seen, Orkney Scottish Island cheddar could see its duty reduced by two thirds. There will also be an important new opportunity for fish feed exporters to export tariff-free to Norway—it will see previously high tariffs on fish feed slashed to nought—providing a potential boost to the aquaculture industry in Scotland.

Negotiations to Join the CPTPP

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): What recent progress she has made on negotiations to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. [902804]

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent progress she has made on negotiations to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. [902814]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Her Majesty's Government formally began negotiations on the UK's accession to CPTPP on 22 June. Negotiating teams will be working hard over the coming months to ensure a good deal for businesses, producers and consumers across the UK. The UK's accession would make CPTPP a truly global free trading area and strengthen the UK's relationship with 11 dynamic economies across four continents.

Paul Bristow [V]: Taiwan is one of the top 20 trading nations in the world, a vibrant democracy, a member of the WTO and an Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation member economy. Could the Minister confirm that the UK welcomes Taiwan's intention to join CPTPP alongside our own application and update the House on efforts to deepen our bilateral trade ties with Taiwan?

Greg Hands: Taiwan is a subject close to my heart, and we know that it is an important and growing trading partner for the UK. It is a highly valued member of the WTO as well. Future membership of CPTPP is a matter for the members at that time, but I note that

Taiwan is looking to align itself to CPTPP's high standards and is continuing its long-standing commitment to rules-based trade and the global trading system. We expect CPTPP to grow in size, and future members will be a matter for future consideration. I am looking forward to our next round of Joint Economic and Trade Committee talks with Taiwan, hopefully as soon as travel becomes possible again.

Martin Vickers [V]: I very much support the Government's efforts to become a member of CPTPP, which, as the Minister mentioned, offers great prospects. Indeed, my constituency is a major centre for renewable energy and has links with, for example, Taiwan. Does he anticipate that the renewable energy sector will gain great advantage from CPTPP membership and boost those industries in my constituency?

Greg Hands: Yes. CPTPP will of course liberalise trade in goods and services in the fast-growing markets in the Pacific, and fast-growing markets have fast-growing needs for clean energy. In recent times, I have been in Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan, pushing UK expertise and exports, for example, in the offshore wind sector. I remind the House that the UK has the world's largest offshore wind capacity. I am sure there will be opportunities for that and other renewable sectors in Yorkshire and the Humber, including in Cleethorpes.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Government are relying on increased trade with Malaysia for three quarters of the forecast benefits from joining the CPTPP. That may explain why Ministers have turned a blind eye to the growing use of slave labour in Malaysian factories. If the Minister disputes what I have just said, perhaps he can tell us what proportion of the 760 million medical gloves bought by the Government from Malaysia during the pandemic were manufactured using slave labour?

Greg Hands: We take our obligations and any allegations of the use of slave labour extremely seriously. I am happy to look into it if the hon. Member has specific allegations in relation to Malaysia. I might add that the Malaysian supply of latex gloves last year was extremely important for this country, but I am happy to look into it if he has specific evidence of the use of slave labour. Of course, Malaysia has not yet ratified CPTPP. We hope that it will and I remind him that CPTPP has a comprehensive chapter on labour and workers' rights.

Bill Esterson: The Minister really was not in a position to answer that question because his Department failed to act on warnings last year from the high commissioner in Kuala Lumpur telling them that their slavery audit function for glove manufacturing was not up to the task. It simply cannot be allowed to continue, so if I write to the Minister with the Government's current list of glove suppliers—I have a list of 19 companies so far—will he agree to conduct a proper audit of their factories? Bearing in mind what he just said about accession to CPTPP and Malaysia having yet to ratify it, will he also reconsider signing any trade agreement with Malaysia as long as its reliance on slave labour persists?

Greg Hands: I repeat my offer to have a look at the specifics, of course. The UK Government take all such accusations, allegations or reports extremely seriously. When it comes to Malaysia joining CPTPP, they have signed and it is up to them to ratify. The UK is not currently a member of CPTPP so it is not up to us who joins it at the moment, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that CPTPP does include a comprehensive labour chapter that ensures that the parties protect and enforce labour rights, improve working conditions and strengthen co-operation on labour issues, all of which would be very helpful in the sort of cases that he is talking about.

G7 Advocacy for Free and Fair Trade

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): What recent progress she has made with her G7 counterparts on advocating for free and fair trade throughout the world. [902795]

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What recent progress she has made with her G7 counterparts on advocating for free and fair trade throughout world. [902797]

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What recent progress she has made with her G7 counterparts on advocating for free and fair trade throughout world. [902816]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss) [V]: At the May Trade Ministers' meeting, we committed to a global trading system with open markets that are not undermined by unfair trade. We agreed to work together to reform the global trading system to be free and fair for all.

Tom Randall: I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that she is doing to improve global trading. Does she agree that the international community needs to get tough on China and improve the reputation of global trading?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we need to tackle unfair market practices, such as subsidies by state-owned enterprises in industries such as steel and aerospace. On Tuesday, I met my US counterpart, Katherine Tai, and we agreed to work together on this issue.

Ms Ghani: In the G7 Trade Ministers communiqué, issues around free and fair trade were balanced on transparency and supply chains being free of slave labour. Can the Secretary of State provide us with an update on the conversations that she has had with G7 leaders and, in particular, can she possibly let me know whether she will be congratulating the US Senate on passing a law last night that will ban all imports from Xinjiang because, of course, they are full of Uyghur slave labour?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with my hon. Friend that forced labour is an abhorrent practice. We have already taken action in the UK to ensure that there is no forced labour in our supply chains and G7 Trade Ministers are committed to tackling this issue. We are working on best practice to prevent, identify and eliminate forced labour in global supply chains ahead of the G7 October trade ministerial.

Henry Smith [V]: I welcome the work that my right hon. Friend is doing with her G7 counterparts to reform global trading and encourage a rules-based multilateral trading system. Does she agree that a free and fair trading system will help countries, including the UK, to build back better from the covid-19 pandemic as part of a strong economic recovery?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There has been a worrying rise in protectionism in recent years and I am proud that the UK is leading the way in liberalising trade, striking new free trade deals to bring more jobs and growth as we seek to build back better after covid. At the same time, we are defending UK industry against unfair practices.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I hope that the Secretary of State has had a productive visit to the United States. She will have seen the example set by the Biden Administration when it comes to taking concrete action against the use of slave labour and the abuse of workers' rights in countries ranging from Malaysia to Mexico. By contrast, may I ask her to name a country—one will do—with which the UK has a trade deal where she has taken any action of any kind to enforce the rights of workers?

Elizabeth Truss: We are extremely committed to making sure not only that we stand up for high standards across the globe, that our workers here in the United Kingdom are protected and that we do not diminish our workers' rights, but that we work together with other countries to do that. I point to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, which has a very strong labour chapter, for example insisting on minimum wages and the recognition of trade union rights. I look forward to the right hon. Lady's support for our accession to that agreement.

Emily Thornberry: The shocking reality is that more than a third of our non-EU deals have been with countries where workers' rights are systematically denied or violated, and in not a single case has the Secretary of State done anything about it. That is not good enough when slave labour is on the rise around the world and it is women, children, migrants and minorities who are too often the victims. Will she take a lesson from the Biden Administration, stop turning a blind eye to the abuse of workers' rights by our own trade partners and start taking action against them instead?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very proud of the role that the United Kingdom has played in setting very high labour standards and looking for them in the trade agreements that we are working on. That is part of our discussions with the CPTPP countries. I have also been talking to leading figures in the US about how we can ensure strong labour rights in future US agreements.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: China now produces 28% of carbon emissions—more than the US and the EU combined—with more than half the world's coal-fired power stations and a third more planned. To stop carbon-intensive Chinese products such as steel displacing greener alternatives, will the Secretary of State ensure that with the G7, at COP26 and with

Katherine Tai we pursue the carbon border tax being developed in the EU so that trade can help to save the planet, not destroy it?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about carbon leakage. We need to make sure that when we work to achieve our net zero target, we are not simply exporting carbon production elsewhere. That is why I am working with G7 partners on the issue of carbon leakage, but I think it is important that the solution is multilateral and embedded in the world trading system rather than unilateral from each individual country, so I am working with like-minded partners across the globe to make sure that we take account of carbon emissions.

Future Trade Deals: Workers' Rights

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on workers' rights into future trade deals. [902796]

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): What recent steps she has taken to ensure that the rights of workers are protected in future trade deals. [902801]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): While the detail of free trade agreements is necessarily sensitive, we have committed in our public mandates to protecting our world-leading labour standards. For example, in our agreement in principle with Australia, a commitment was made to a chapter on labour that will lock in high domestic protections for our workers.

Kate Osborne: Colombia remains the deadliest place in the world to be a trade unionist, with 22 union activists murdered in the past year alone, according to the latest global rights index. Does the Minister now regret the agreement of a trade deal with Colombia that is so utterly toothless when it comes to the protection and enforcement of workers' rights?

Mr Jayawardena: The hon. Lady will know that that was originally a deal negotiated by the EU. We provided continuity to businesses in this country and in Colombia to make sure that on our exit from the European Union, businesses could continue to trade. The truth is that some of the most vulnerable people will be affected by some of the knee-jerk policies suggested by the Labour party. In all our trade deals, we will uphold Britain's high standards for businesses, workers and consumers, and we will continue to meet our obligations under the International Labour Organisation.

Sir Mark Hendrick [V]: The Minister has made perfectly clear the Government's efforts to engage with Australia on the question of workers' rights in the run-up to the trade agreement. Countries such as Australia and New Zealand already have decent workers' rights. However, more than half—that is, 14 out of 24—of the countries where the Government are currently negotiating trade deals have very poor track records on labour rights, including Brazil, Malaysia and India. What pressure or influence will the Government bring to bear when negotiating a deal with those countries whose labour standards and rights are extremely poor, so that the trade can benefit UK workers and the workers of our trading partners too?

Mr Jayawardena: Again, the question seems to have been asked and answered already. The comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership has a comprehensive labour and workers' rights chapter, and I would have thought that the people of Preston would welcome the fact that the CPTPP offers Britain access to two thirds of the world's middle classes by 2030.

UK-Israel Trade Deal

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What plans she has to enhance the UK's trade deal with Israel following her recent visit to that country; and if she will make a statement. [902798]

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): What plans she has to enhance the UK's trade deal with Israel. [902819]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss) [V]: We have a strong bilateral trade relationship with Israel worth £5 billion a year. On my recent visit to Israel, I discussed our ambitions for a new free trade agreement to create further opportunities for British business.

Michael Fabricant [V]: My right hon. Friend will know from her visit to Israel that it has the highest number of high-tech start-ups in the world. Moreover, the latest Intel chips in all our computers were designed in Israel by Intel. Does my right hon. Friend have any plans to enhance the trading relationship in high-tech products with the state of Israel?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is completely right. The UK and Israel are both leaders in technology, from agri-tech to gaming to med-tech, and there are huge opportunities for us to work together. What we will be seeking in the new trade deal with Israel is an advanced digital data and technology chapter that looks to the industries of the future to give both countries more opportunities.

Scott Benton: I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to sign an advanced free trade agreement with our close ally Israel, and I hope she enjoyed her first ever visit to the country this month. Israel is a growing export market for UK companies, so what steps is she taking to champion UK-made products being sold in Israel, and what more can be done to boost UK exports of things such as cars, machinery and clothing?

Elizabeth Truss: The current UK-Israel partnership is already worth £5 billion a year, but we want to turbo-charge that. We are providing practical assistance for UK firms through our trade adviser network, as well as strong support from UK Export Finance to help to finance those exports into Israel.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We all welcome the prospect of an enhanced trade deal with Israel, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on her efforts to secure it. Among the many improvements that we hope the new deal delivers, will she guarantee to remove the clause mistakenly included in the 2019 UK-Israel agreement that prohibits manufacturers in UK freeports from sharing in the benefits of that deal? Can she tell us when we can expect

revised deals with the 20 other countries, including Switzerland and Singapore, where the same freeport blunder still applies?

Elizabeth Truss: The clauses that the right hon. Lady is referring to are absolutely standard in free trade agreements. Every agreement is the result of a negotiation with the relevant country, and of course we secure the best possible outcome in terms of tariff reductions and rules of origin, but I will be absolutely clear that firms locating in our freeports are free to take advantage of whichever is better for their company: a given free trade agreement or the additional reductions from being in that freeport.

UK-India Trade Agreement

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on negotiating a free trade agreement with India. [902799]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I was delighted to devise the enhanced trade partnership concept last year, and after much work across Government, the Prime Minister agreed the ETP with his counterpart on 4 May. Trade with India has averaged around £20 billion over recent years, and with its population bigger than those of the EU and US combined, the scope for growth is great, so I am looking forward to discussing our future trade deal with my new counterpart very soon.

Andy Carter: I warmly welcome the work the Minister is doing to secure a trade agreement with the world's fastest growing economy. Does he agree that a trade deal with India will open the door for British goods—whisky from Scotland, fine wines from the vineyards of south Wales and handcrafted gin from Warrington, the best in the world?

Mr Jayawardena: I am in absolute agreement with my hon. Friend and I must make a visit to Warrington to sample some of this superb gin. India is projected to be the world's second largest economy by 2037, so the opportunities for British businesses, from financial services to pharmaceuticals, from food and drink to film and music, are huge. This people's Government are determined to make sure that every corner of our country benefits from international trade, securing growth and creating jobs.

Future Trade Deals: Human Rights

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights into future trade deals. [902825]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): The United Kingdom has long promoted her values globally. Although our approach to agreements will vary between partners, our strong economic relationships not only allow us to have open discussions on a range of issues, including rights and responsibilities, but secure jobs across our country, including in Hampshire.

Stephen Morgan: Successive UK Governments have believed in the principle that new trade treaties should contain essential human rights clauses. That makes the whole of the treaty conditional on the commitments relating to human rights. Will the Minister confirm whether that principle remains under his Government or whether it has disappeared, along with the commitment to a 0.7% international aid target?

Mr Jayawardena: We promote international objectives, including rights, through a mixture of approaches. On the point the hon. Gentleman made towards the end of his question, there has been much talk about global Britain this week and trade is the route to prosperity, for Britain and her friends around the world. Although others may be content with offering only handouts, we are determined to give our friends a hand up. So having taken back control of our trade policy, I can confirm that we will be looking to go further than the EU and we will be setting out our plans and launching a consultation on this very soon.¹

UK-Australia Tariff-free Trade in Agricultural Goods

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of tariff-free trade of agricultural goods between the UK and Australia on UK farmers and crofters. [902802]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): There will be more UK export opportunities for our food and drink industry with the removal of all Australia tariffs. We have considered the impact of additional market access for beef and lamb on UK farmers, which has been balanced by a lengthy 15-year staging period. An independently scrutinised impact assessment will be published prior to implementation.

Mr Carmichael: Patrick Krause, chief executive of the Scottish Crofting Foundation, recently made the point that the real risk for Scottish crofters from the Australia deal comes from the fact that other countries with which we do trade deals will want the same good terms that we have given to Australia. As he said,

“Crofting is good for food, and also has very impressive environmental and climate-change mitigation credentials. And crofting is about the people—crofting has maintained communities in remote rural places.”

How much of that does the Minister think will be said of the products that will be imported to replace crofted lamb?

Greg Hands: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his engagement and his interest. I have engaged extensively with Scottish farmers, crofters and Martin Kennedy of the National Farmers Union Scotland. I have done various roundtables with constituency MPs as well. On the impact of Australian beef and lamb imports, we think it is very unlikely that there will be a surge in imports into this country. Currently, there are strong incentives for Australia to sell into Asia. For example, the lamb quota is not currently fully used. Beef production prices in Asia are twice what they are in the UK. Australia exports 75% of its beef and 70% of its lamb to Asia, which is why I would expect that pattern to be continued. But this is also why we have built safeguards and a staging period of 15 years into the deal.

1.[Official Report, 19 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 4MC.]

Future Trade Deals: Environmental Standards

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on environmental standards into future trade deals. [902803]

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on environmental standards into future trade deals. [902815]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): We are seeking environmental provisions with all partners with which we are currently negotiating to ensure that future trade is sustainable and upholds the UK's high environmental standards. The precise deals of any free trade agreement are a matter for formal negotiations.

Rachael Maskell: Despite what the Minister says about calling for more control over trade, he has completely failed to advance the “polluter pays” principle through the carbon border tax, failed to advance the agenda at the G7, failed to put it into any of the trade agreements that he has drawn up and failed to put it into any of the negotiation frameworks that he is currently discussing. Can he tell me whether he will fail at the next stage when it comes to COP26? Is he already engaged in pre-negotiation talks with all the partners, and how will the principle fare on the COP26 agenda when the summits meets in November?

Greg Hands: We take a strong interest in carbon leakage and in how trade deals with carbon. We are studying carefully, for example, EU proposals on the carbon border adjustment mechanism. At the World Trade Organisation in general, we are looking to advance our environmental agenda. The hon. Lady will know of the different measures taken by the UK Government; for example there is the UK global tariff, which reduced and eliminated tariffs on 104 environmental goods. We are also seeking good environmental chapters in all of our future free trade agreements.

Mr Speaker: I call Kerry McCarthy for the final question.

Kerry McCarthy: Thank you for sneaking me in, Mr Speaker.

Today, we heard the devastating news that the Amazon is now a carbon source rather than a carbon sink. With deforestation at a 12-year high, it is emitting more CO₂ than it absorbs. Is the Minister following the progress of the land-grabbing legislation, which has been dubbed the destruction package, that is going through the Brazilian Parliament at the moment? What discussions has he had with his counterparts, and what impact would that have on trade negotiations with Brazil? May I urge him to rule them out if this package goes through?

Greg Hands: We are not currently negotiating a trade agreement with Brazil. We follow the position in Brazil very closely, and we engage strongly on a bilateral basis on all of these issues with the Brazilian Government. We have very good diplomatic representation not just in Brasilia but across different parts of Brazil, to make sure that the UK position and the importance of deforestation for the UK, particularly in this COP26 year, is upheld.

Topical Questions

[902760] **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss) [V]: The United States is our largest single country trading partner and an important ally. We have already made progress in the Airbus-Boeing dispute, getting tariffs removed on great British products such as machinery and whisky. I am now working closely with my US counterparts to tackle global issues on steel, aerospace and technology to make sure that trade is fair as well as free.

Brendan O'Hara: We are six months into Brexit and the sea of opportunity that the seafood producers of my Argyll and Bute constituency were promised has turned out to be swamp of bureaucracy. Alongside a mountain of paperwork and red tape, they all report falling prices, loss of markets, labour shortages and major transport and logistical problems. Six months into Brexit, they are facing an existential crisis. How has the Secretary of State's Department allowed that to happen?

Elizabeth Truss: We have seen trade with the EU bounce back after some initial issues. In particular, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has offered support to seafood producers to ensure that they have what they need to be able to deal with those issues.

[902761] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome the historic free trade agreement that my right hon. Friend has secured with Australia and congratulate her on it. As somebody who has done some exporting to Australia before coming here, I know that this presents significant opportunities for UK businesses and consumers. I was really pleased to see increased opportunities for younger people to travel and work there, which is a very valuable experience and an interesting element for a trade deal.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): My hon. Friend is correct. The Australia deal is a fundamentally liberalising agreement that removes tariffs and supports millions of jobs. It will strengthen the bonds of friendship—I speak as the parliamentary president of the Conservative Friends of Australia—for example by championing youth mobility, which he referred to. The deal also paves the way for joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership and the growing middle-class markets of the Pacific rim. We are realising the vision of a global Britain that looks to one of the most dynamic trading areas in the world.

[902762] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) [V]: Does the Minister think it is appropriate that HSBC continues to meet Trade Ministers privately and advise on UK trade policy with China while it supports the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and continues to freeze prominent activists' bank accounts?

Greg Hands: HSBC is an extremely important company and employer in this country. I do not have a problem with Ministers meeting HSBC, let us put that on the record. The hon. Gentleman will also be aware of the very strong action we have taken in relation to China and the measures announced by the Foreign Secretary in this House in January in relation to supply chains in Xinjiang and actions in Hong Kong, which had broad agreement across the House. We will continue to make vigorous representations in relation to China, and we are monitoring the situation very closely.

[902763] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): The UK is already one of the world's biggest exporters of services, with remotely delivered service exports worth £207 billion in 2019 alone. I am delighted to see that negotiations have been launched for a new digital economy agreement with Singapore. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this new advanced high-tech digital trade agreement could remove barriers to digital trade and thereby allow UK exports to expand into high-tech markets?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Services are 80% of the UK economy. We are the world's second largest exporter of services, and a huge number of those are digitally enabled. The digital economy agreement between the UK and Singapore will be a model for global digital trade rules, and I met Singapore Minister Alvin Tan just yesterday to discuss it. Singapore is a global leader in this area. We are looking forward to signing an excellent agreement with Singapore.

[902764] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) [V]: We cannot claim to have reached genuine net zero as a country or even have a plan to do so until we take into account the impact of our imports on global carbon emissions. The Secretary of State and the Minister for Trade Policy have acknowledged the importance of that, but neither has answered this very simple question: will the Government commit to ensuring that proposals for a carbon border tax are on the agenda for COP26 in November, so that meaningful progress can be made on accounting for and reducing carbon emissions from trade? Yes or no?

Greg Hands: We are following developments on the EU carbon border adjustment mechanism closely. The UK has ambitious carbon pricing through our emissions trading scheme and carbon price support mechanism, and we expect the EU CBAM to take account of that in its implementation. The COP President-designate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), has said that he does not anticipate carbon border adjustment mechanisms becoming an issue within the COP26 negotiations.

[902766] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Many of my farmers in South East Cornwall already find it difficult to deal with the amount of paperwork they have. Some will have seen the entertaining but very informative show by Jeremy Clarkson, as he worked his farm. How is the Department proactively going to help our farmers achieve global sales?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her championing of her constituency and Cornwall's farmers. We are opening markets, as we

have discussed. We are activating farmers with our “Open Doors” campaign, and we are grateful for the support of the National Farmers Union and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board. We have a mentoring scheme, which I was delighted to launch in the south-west, and we are leading trade missions such as “Spring into Japan”, to make sure that on a greater scale than ever before we are engaging more farmers’ produce with global markets, leading to jobs and prosperity in her constituency and beyond.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): [902769] In the national food strategy, which was published today, I note that despite the manifesto pledge in 2019, the Government have still not said what standards they propose to protect or what mechanism they will use to defend those standards in trade negotiations. Is the Minister prepared to do that now?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely categorical in our commitment on food standards and food safety standards. There will be no compromise on UK standards in relation to any trade agreement. That has been the case—[*Interruption.*] Our commitment is absolute. If the hon. Member were to take a look at all the trade agreements we have done with 67 countries—if she looked at the Australia trade deal agreement in principle and the Japan deal—she would see no diminution in our food safety and animal welfare standards so far.

[902768] **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con) [V]: Enshore Subsea, based at the port of Blyth, has a proud history of subsea trenching for the oil and gas industries, as well as the telecoms and offshore power industries, dating back over 25 years. It is a fine example of the incredible innovation offered by UK businesses excelling on the world stage. Will my hon. Friend come with me to the port of Blyth to visit this fantastic world-leading business, and discuss with it how we can best enable businesses like it to compete across the globe?

Graham Stuart: I would be delighted.

[902771] **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind) [V]: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and her team have completed 67 trade deals around the world, and she and I have spoken many times about the aspects and impacts of the deals that she has done on north Wales, particularly in relation to agriculture, which is such a significant part of my constituency. What assurances can the Minister give to the people of Delyn that maintaining the highest level of food and agriculture standards in our global trading is at the forefront of all our negotiations?

Greg Hands: I can absolutely give that commitment to the people of Delyn. The Government have been very clear that any trade deals must work for UK consumers and businesses, upholding our high regulatory standards. The Government, as I mentioned earlier, have manifesto commitments to no compromise on standards in animal welfare, food safety and the environment.

[902773] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con) [V]: Mr Speaker, I am delighted to be joining you from the 7th global forum for combating antisemitism here in Israel. With that in mind, as a newly independent sovereign trading nation, we have a number of trading opportunities ahead of us, including with

countries such as Israel, with which we already have a £5 billion continuity trade relationship. Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm what progress has been made on an advanced high-tech free trade agreement with Israel, and what help can she offer the likes of the Northern Health Science Alliance in conjunction with Israel?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): The Secretary of State had a successful visit to Israel herself in the last week of June, and she had productive discussions with her Israeli counterpart, focused on ambitions for upgrading our current trade relationship. As my hon. Friend suggests, I am very keen personally to strengthen our £5 billion trade relationship even further, and I look forward to taking these discussions forward to create further opportunities for British businesses in tech and beyond.

[902772] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: Following the recent investor-state dispute settlement challenge from Canadian fossil fuel company TC Energy to President Biden’s cancellation of the Keystone tar sands pipeline, seeking an unprecedented \$15 billion, what responses has the Secretary of State received on the issue of ISDS in the recent consultation on UK-Canada trading arrangements, and will she commit to dropping ISDS in the UK-Canada trade deal?

Greg Hands: We will be responding in due course to the call for input on going further on a trade deal with Canada, and we are looking forward to that negotiation starting in the autumn. I would remind the hon. Member that there are no ISDS provisions in the UK-Australia deal, but I would also remind her that the UK has never lost an ISDS case. We do have ISDS provisions in quite a number of our existing agreements, and the UK has never lost any such case.

[902776] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is thanks to UK Export Finance reacting so quickly to the economic challenges of the covid-19 pandemic with the full backing of the Treasury that it was able to help some 549 companies and all their suppliers sell to 77 countries around the world last year?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent question. I am tremendously proud of UK Export Finance and its staff for the innovative way in which they have responded to the pandemic, with the record level—more than £12 billion—given to UK businesses supporting more than 100,000 jobs up and down the country. Behind those 549 companies, of course, stand 10,000 or more supply chain companies. UKEF, at no cost to the taxpayer, makes an enormous difference to the prosperity and success of this country.

[902777] **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: Now that we have left the EU, we have fantastic opportunities ahead of us as an independent sovereign trading nation. Does my hon. Friend agree that the deals that have already been secured herald a new era for British businesses exporting around the globe and can assist Airbus, near my constituency, in ensuring that more airlines are flying on Welsh wings?

Mr Jayawardena: My Department continues to defend the interests of British industries in all parts of the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State is currently in the United States building on the historic arrangement that we secured in the Airbus-Boeing dispute, ensuring that the British aerospace sector can take off again after covid-19. Confidence in our fantastic aerospace manufacturing capability has never been at such heights. The United Airlines order of 70 A321neo aircraft last month will feature wonderful Welsh-made wings, and I look forward to further success in the future.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's ambitious strategy for growing exports needs to include more agricultural councils in our embassies, a UK export council to help co-ordinate that strategy, and better promotion and marketing of brand Britain abroad so that we can ensure

that farming and food companies in Eddisbury and right across the country can embrace the undoubted benefits and opportunities that UK free trade deals can deliver?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend cleverly tempts me to list the recommendations of the Trade and Agriculture Commission, which constructively seeks to improve our support for UK farmers. We look forward to responding to that as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: I am glad you were not tempted. I am now suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Newport Wafer Fab Sale

10.34 am

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) [V] (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the sale of the Newport Wafer Fab semiconductors plant in Duffryn, Newport, to the Chinese-owned firm Nexperia.

Thank you very much for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister also for being present to answer it. I understand that the Government cannot comment on security matters, but the purpose of the urgent question is to give Parliament an opportunity to make its views known about the strategic importance of the Chinese takeover of Wafer Fab, a semiconductor manufacturer based in Newport.

The Chinese firm Wingtech Technology has a controlling stake in the acquiring company Nexperia, which supplies Chinese companies that create smartphones, including Huawei. The Prime Minister stated at the Liaison Committee last week on 7 July:

“This Government is spending a huge quantity of taxpayers’ money to make sure that we get Huawei out of our telecommunications networks.”

Would it not therefore be completely inconsistent if Government policy allowed the takeover of a firm creating microchips of such importance to our national security? The Prime Minister also stated that we need to be more self-reliant, and that he was told that it costs £9 billion to build a semiconductor factory. Why would we allow such sophisticated national infrastructure to be sold?

Finally, while I agree with the Prime Minister that we do not want an

“anti-China spirit to lead to our trying to pitchfork away every investment from China into this country”,

in this particular case the security issues should be paramount. China considers this matter vital for its national security, as do other countries, including our ally the United States. Why are our Government not taking the same view?

Mr Speaker: We have gone slightly out of order. The hon. Member was meant to just ask the urgent question, and then come back. If the Minister can roll the two together, I will then go to the shadow Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): Of course, Mr Speaker. The Government recognise Newport Wafer Fab’s value as a company, and its contribution to consortia based at the south Wales compound semiconductor cluster. The Government are committed to the semiconductor cluster and the vital role that it plays in the UK’s economy. The Welsh Government have previously provided financial support to the company, as economic development is devolved and the responsibility of the Welsh Government.

Under the Enterprise Act 2002, the Government have powers to intervene in mergers and takeovers that raise national security concerns. We have recently strengthened those powers in the National Security and Investment Act 2021, which is expected to come into force at the end of this year, but it is right that commercial transactions are primarily a matter for the parties involved. The

Government have been in close contact with Newport Wafer Fab, but do not consider it appropriate to intervene in this case at the current time.

We will continue to monitor the situation closely, and, as part of that, the Prime Minister has asked the national security adviser to review this case. Separately, work is under way to review the wider semiconductor landscape in the United Kingdom. As I am sure the House will appreciate, I am unable to comment on the detail of commercial transactions, or of any national security assessment of a particular case.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing the urgent question.

Newport Wafer Fab is a symbol of British innovation and world-class employment—not just its 450 employees but the wider regional semiconductor cluster. It is also a testament to the long-term role of public investment in strategic economic planning by the Welsh Government, so the priority must be to secure a viable long-term future for what is the UK’s largest semiconductor manufacturer. With European automotives protesting over chips shortages and promising to ramp up domestic production, it is clear that Newport Wafer Fab is a strategic economic asset.

Labour welcomes investment in the business, as we welcome almost all inward investment in thriving British industries, but, given the importance of semiconductors to our country’s critical infrastructure, there is a clear case for examining this on national security grounds, and it is a pity that the Minister did not make it. Global competition to secure microchip development is accelerating. Our national security interests require a strong position in this contested market, so how will the Minister now ensure that this vital national economic and technology asset is protected? Will she use the powers in the National Security and Investment Act 2021 to urgently scrutinise this takeover? If the sale is blocked on national security grounds, will the Government work creatively and urgently to secure the financing that the business needs? All options must be kept on the table, including a role for potential public equity investment.

As Labour argued during the passage of the NSI Act, the Government have consistently outsourced British national security and economic interests, because Ministers have prioritised market zeal over British security, as in 2012 when they let the Centre for Integrated Photonics, a prize British research and development centre, be taken over by Huawei. That is why Labour is calling for the national security and public interest test regime to be strengthened. This is a critical test of whether the Government are willing to use these new powers or not, which goes to the heart of what kind of industrial strategy we have and what kind of country we want to be.

Amanda Solloway: As laid out in the integrated review, China is a systemic competitor. The scale and reach of China’s economy, the size of its population, its technological advancement and increasing ambition to project its influence on the global stage, for example through the belt and road initiative, will have profound implications worldwide. Open, trading economies such as the UK will need to engage with China and remain open to Chinese trade and investment, but they must protect

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themselves against practices that have an adverse effect on prosperity and security. Co-operation with China is vital in tackling transnational-type challenges, particularly climate change and biodiversity loss.

The UK wants a mature, positive relationship with China, based on mutual respect and trust. There is considerable scope for constructive engagement and co-operation, but as we strive for that positive relationship, we will not sacrifice either our values or our security. It has always been the case that where we have concerns, we will raise them, and where we need to intervene, we will. The Government have a range of legislative and regulatory powers to protect infrastructure and critical services, including the new National Security and Investment Act 2021. The NSI Act is nation-agnostic: acquisitions should be considered on a case-by-case basis, which will help to ensure that the Act is not discriminatory and that we uphold our World Trade Organisation obligations.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for the timing of his urgent question—which is clearly rather better than my timing. May I ask the Minister—who is very kindly in her place—about the National Security and Investment Act 2021? The Act set forth various conditions for securing various elements of British industry, but as set out, that was all to be done by central Government, not by devolved Administrations. Clearly this is one of those moments, because there is a global semiconductor chip shortage, delaying the production of white goods, cars and, indeed, military equipment.

I am told that Newport Wafer Fab is a key partner for the development of—I am afraid I will have to use the technical terms, because I am not qualified to translate them—RF MMIC high-frequency GaN designs for defence 5G radar systems. This is a £5.4 million project led by the Compound Semiconductor Applications Catapult and Cardiff University, with Newport Wafer Fab providing process development expertise and a route to scale up within a proposed expansion of Newport Wafer Fab 10.

If that does not put Newport Wafer Fab into the national security bracket, I do not know what does. The idea that this is a matter for the Assembly or the Government in Wales is, I am afraid, simply not the case. The Prime Minister seems to have pre-empted that, as he has asked the National Security Adviser, as he told the Liaison Committee the other day, to have a look into this. Will the Minister now commit, on behalf of her Department, to present the National Security Adviser's report to Parliament, to allow us to hear the evaluation of Her Majesty's Government and to debate it?

Amanda Solloway: I acknowledge the work that my hon. Friend does, which is greatly appreciated. As he will know, the Act focuses on acquisitions of control over qualifying and entitled assets. That means that once the Act is commenced we will be able to scrutinise and, if necessary, intervene in takeover companies and in the purchase of individual assets, such as intellectual property. The Government are absolutely clear that where concerns are raised we will intervene. However, my hon. Friend and the House will appreciate that I cannot go into any detail or comment on commercial transactions or national security assessments.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Seventy-seven days have passed since the National Security and Investment Act received Royal Assent. In the previous months, I and colleagues across the Chamber sought to work constructively with the Government to ensure that that legislation was as robust as it possibly could be. Notwithstanding the fact that the Government rejected most of our suggestions, we all backed the Act because it was in our collective interest to do so, yet it appears to have been rendered almost useless at its first hurdle. I respectfully suggest that had it not been for the intervention of the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, it is doubtful that the Prime Minister would have sought national security advice on this matter. Why did it take an intervention from a senior Government Back Bencher for the Government to take this matter seriously? Is the National Security and Investment Act as it stands simply not up to the task? Is it not worth the paper it is written on?

Amanda Solloway: The Government have looked closely at the transaction and do not consider it appropriate to intervene at the current time. However, as the Prime Minister made clear at the Liaison Committee last week, he has asked the National Security Adviser to review this.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) [V]: The pandemic has shown us the importance of supply chains and of the ability to produce the materials we need here in the UK. We also know that semiconductors are a vital component of many of the day-to-day items that we use and take for granted. A disruption to the supply chain of semiconductors will have far-reaching consequences. Will my hon. Friend set out what steps the Government are taking to strengthen their powers in relation to the threat of hostile investment?

Amanda Solloway: In 2020, the Government amended the Enterprise Act 2002 so that we could intervene in mergers and takeovers that threaten our ability to combat a public health emergency such as coronavirus. As the House will know, we have recently overhauled our investment screening system through the new National Security and Investment Act so that we can intervene in takeovers of companies or purchases of assets that pose a risk to national security. The NSI Act will allow the Government to scrutinise and intervene in acquisitions that may pose national security risks. It also provides businesses and investors with predictable, legally defined timelines and processes for decisions on acquisitions. The Act requires particularly sensitive acquisitions to be approved by Government before they are completed, but the vast majority of acquisitions will be unaffected by these powers.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for this morning's urgent question and for speaking to me about it last night. Newport Wafer Fab is in my constituency and I have in recent days had a number of meetings about the issue, and have spoken to many people across Newport West who are watching events very closely. Newport Wafer Fab is part of the unique semiconductor cluster in Newport West—the only one in the world, and I am so proud. It employs more than 450 people who are highly skilled, well paid and need job security. I fully understand the need for

scrutiny of any deal involving potentially hostile foreign takeovers and national security is of course paramount, but my constituents and I want to see an open, transparent and fair deal. Will the Minister meet me at the earliest possible opportunity so that we can ensure that whatever happens next, those jobs, the impact on the people of Newport West and the strategic nature of this plant will be kept in mind every step of the way?

Amanda Solloway: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The Government have looked closely at the transaction and do not consider it inappropriate, but as the Prime Minister has made clear, the National Security Adviser will review it. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady or at least facilitate a meeting with the appropriate Minister.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about mutual respect between ourselves and the Chinese people, which I believe is correct, but the Chinese Government do not respect rules-based order, particularly in enterprise and commerce. This semiconductor plant is critical to our UK economy, particularly at a time of rising demand for semiconductors, and the 450 jobs at Duffryn are also very important. Does she agree that the protection of those jobs, that plant and the UK-owned intellectual property is critically important to her and to this Government?

Amanda Solloway: Like my hon. Friend, I am of course totally committed to skills, as are the Government. In fact, the Government have invested £800 million in compound semiconductor research. In 2018, through UK Research and Innovation, we established a compound semiconductor applications catapult with £50 million of funding to collaborate with large companies and start-ups to develop and commercialise new applications utilising this technology. To date, the catapult has initiated projects worth more than £100 million. The UK has over 100 companies actively working with compound semiconductors. About 5,000 UK companies, 90% of which are small and medium-sized enterprises, are designing and making electronic components, devices, systems and products. The catapult is a national body dedicated to compound development across the United Kingdom. The UK Government, via UKRI and the Welsh Government, have additionally provided significant funds to help to establish south Wales university structures such as the Institute for Compound Semiconductors.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: This is a very important question. A few years ago, I fought the takeover of Syngenta in my constituency—one of the top world leaders in plant protection, fertiliser and all that complicated research stuff. It was taken over quickly by the Chinese—not by the Chinese, but by the Chinese Communist Government. There is nothing on the stock exchange; it is owned by the Chinese Government. Most people in this country do not realise just how widespread this insidious Chinese takeover of so many strategic assets in our country is. Will the Minister ask her bosses to have an audit of how far this takeover of British companies has now gone? As most people know, the whole of the electricity transmission in London and the south, with 10 million customers, is owned by the Chinese—or, again, the Chinese Government. How far can this go before we wake up to what is really going on? It is insidious, it is dangerous, and it is a real threat to our national security.

Amanda Solloway: The Government do have a wide range of legislative and regulatory powers to protect infrastructure and critical services, including the National Security and Investment Act 2021, which will allow the Government to scrutinise and intervene in acquisitions that may pose national security risks. It also provides businesses and investors with predictable, legally defined timelines and processes for decisions on acquisitions. The NSI Act requires particularly sensitive acquisitions to be approved by the Government before they are completed. However, the vast majority of acquisitions will be unaffected by these powers.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: When it comes to issues of national security, there can be no compromise. I am one of those who believes in the free market and believes in companies being bought and sold where appropriate, but national security must trump that. In these circumstances, this is such a vital aspect of both our industry and our national security that the Government must intervene. I understand that my hon. Friend cannot comment on issues of national security to the House today, but will she undertake to return to the House when a final decision is made and inform the House so that we can scrutinise it both for value for money and on national security grounds?

Amanda Solloway: As laid out in the integrated review, China is a systematic competitor. The scale and reach of China's economy, the size of its population, its technological advancement and its increasing ambition to project its influence on the global stage through programmes such as the belt and road initiative will have profound implications worldwide. Open trade economies such as the United Kingdom will need to engage with China and remain open to Chinese trade and investments, but they must protect themselves against practices that have an adverse effect on prosperity and security. Co-operation with China will also be vital in tackling transnational challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, as I have mentioned.

The UK wants a mature, positive relationship with China based on mutual respect and trust. There is considerable scope for constructive engagement and co-operation, but, as we strive for that positive relationship, we will not sacrifice either our values or our security. It has always been the case that we raise concerns where we have them, and where we need to intervene, we will. The Government have a range of legislative and regulatory powers to protect infrastructure and critical services including the New National Security and Investment Act 2021, which is nationally agnostic. Finally, acquisitions should be considered on a case-by-case basis, and that helps to ensure that the Act is not discriminatory. We will uphold our World Trade Organisation obligations.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: At a time when the Chinese regime is stepping up its human rights abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Britain should be increasing its sanctions. Instead, we are giving the CCP a bigger stake in our economy. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that state pension funds are not investing in companies linked to abuse of the Uyghurs? What actions will she take to further censure the CCP?

Amanda Solloway: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The evidence of the scale and severity of human rights violations perpetrated in Xinjiang against

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Uyghur Muslims is far reaching and paints a truly harrowing picture. China must be held to account for its human rights violations. As the Foreign Secretary set out in his statement to the House on 22 March,

“the evidence points to a highly disturbing programme of repression” in Xinjiang, and the world

“cannot simply look the other way.”—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 621.]

He announced the imposition of global human rights sanctions alongside the EU, US and Canada on the perpetrators of the gross human rights violations taking place against the Uyghurs and other minorities in China. He also, on 12 January, announced a series of measures to help ensure that UK businesses and the public sector are not complicit in human rights violations.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of what the Chinese have promised as part of the deal? I recognise the need to make semiconductor producers more efficient and, if she looks at Taiwan, she will see a company that has had billions poured into it to make it more efficient. Have the Chinese promised that for Wales?

Amanda Solloway: The Government have looked closely at the transaction and do not consider it appropriate to intervene at the current time. However, to reiterate, the Prime Minister made it clear at the Liaison Committee last week that he has asked the National Security Adviser to review that. Of course, the Government are reviewing their policy in the industrial sectors following the publication of “Build Back Better” and the introduction of the National Security and Investment Act. Significant support has been available through research and development funding. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is keen to support developments in supply chains and specific markets for UK growth.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I had the great pleasure of living in Newport for more than a decade. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and would not want to say anything that would deter investment in that great city, but I am also concerned about national security. The excellent Minister said that the Government have looked carefully at the sale. Have they done an impact assessment? If so, have they published it?

Amanda Solloway: As I have said, the Government have looked closely at the transaction and do not consider it appropriate to intervene at the current time. The Prime Minister made it clear at the Liaison Committee that he would ask the National Security Adviser to do a review. I am afraid that I will have to get back to my hon. Friend on an impact assessment as I do not know that.

Mr Speaker: I think that was a hint that the Government should provide them when they are promised.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on his question.

May I say to the Minister that I think the Government are in an unholy mess over this? It is no good their telling us that there is a very clear definition of what is

strategic and what is not strategic. In the course of this failure to make a decision, did they look at what China thinks of semiconductors? China is the biggest exporter in the world and is busy buying up semiconductor technology everywhere it can find it. It has identified semiconductor technology as one of the key areas that it needs to dominate globally, and it is busy stealing technology, getting other people's intellectual property rights and buying up companies. The idea that a semiconductor is not strategic! The technology will be used in almost everything we do—in everything we produce that is electronic.

My simple question is: are we now in a kind of Project Kowtow, where we just have to do business with the Chinese no matter what? That is outrageous. The Minister must take back to her Cabinet colleagues that it is not going to pass. We should have used the Act and blocked the deal.

Amanda Solloway: I reiterate that the Government have looked closely at the transaction and do not consider it appropriate to intervene at the present time. The Prime Minister made it clear at the Liaison Committee last week that he has asked the National Security Adviser to review this. The Government are committed to the semiconductor sector and work is under way to review the wider semiconductor landscape in the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I concur with the comments of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I ask a question along the same lines: in relation to national security and jobs, is this beneficial for the UK?

The Chinese Government have been, and are, responsible for human rights abuses—including of Christians, Falun Gong and Uyghur Muslims—on a level that is unknown in the rest of the world, despite world opinion and despite our representations on the matter. However, they do listen to economic arguments. How can we use this opportunity to challenge them to ensure that they act? We do not want the hollow words that we always get from them; we want action. Before any deal goes through and before any sale happens, let us make sure that human rights abuses are reduced and that they are totally committed to that.

Amanda Solloway: As I mentioned, the Government are completely committed to human rights and are mindful of everything we need to do on that. We have looked very closely at this transaction. I can give the hon. Gentleman my reassurance that the National Security and Investment Act will allow the Government to scrutinise and intervene on any acquisitions that may pose a national security risk. I reiterate that the Government want a mature, positive relationship with China based on mutual respect and trust. There is considerable scope for constructive engagement, but as we strive for a positive relationship, we must not sacrifice either our values or our security.

Mr Speaker: I now suspend the House for a few minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

11.2 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

11.8 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 19 July will include:

MONDAY 19 JULY—Second Reading of the Nationality and Borders Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 20 JULY—Conclusion of Second Reading of the Nationality and Borders Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 21 JULY—Second Reading of the Building Safety Bill.

THURSDAY 22 JULY—Debate on a motion relating to the fifth report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, entitled “A Public Inquiry into the Government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic”, followed by matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee.

At the conclusion of business on Thursday 22 July, the House will rise for the summer recess and return on Monday 6 September.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 September will include:

MONDAY 6 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the business. Visiting the covid wall of red hearts of remembrance across the Thames is a raw reminder of the pain and loss of the past year, and, of course, we all want to go back to the before times. Sadly, we cannot undo what has happened, but we want to look forward to better times and, to do that, we need our Government to learn lessons fast. I am afraid to say that the House business, as ever, tells its own tale: of a Government who seem to have learned nothing; a Government who decided to scrap all protections at once as if this is over, when they know it is not. If it is over, why is there nothing in the business statement about an announcement of a realtime, urgent public covid inquiry? If it is over, why are regional leaders, including Tory ones, deciding that it is essential to continue the compulsory wearing of masks on public transport? If it is over, why are we seeing a rise in infection rates? On Monday, clinically vulnerable people will experience not freedom, but fear.

Why have we still not got the Prime Minister’s plan for social care? Why are the Government imposing another top-down reorganisation with the Health and Care Bill on already exhausted NHS and care staff, rather than giving them the pay rise they so deserve? Where is the disability strategy promised in the Queen’s Speech in 2019, planned for 2020 and then delayed because of covid—which I understand—to early spring 2021? To spring—it is summer now. Is this strategy so poor that the Government intend to announce it with a whimper rather than a bang and without any debate?

Where is the plan for supporting schools and pupils to catch up on a lost year and to give them clarity about exam requirements for next year? I am afraid to say that

the evidence seems to suggest that the Government are driven more by online trolls than socially conscientious British values, yet the Prime Minister said yesterday:

“I do not want to engage in a political culture war of any kind; I want to get on with delivering for the people of this country”.—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 364.]

I have already listed just some of the ways that the Government are failing to get on with delivering for the British people.

On the culture war, we have the Bill on free speech in universities, a classic example of a pointless skirmish in a pointless culture war. Why is the Prime Minister unable to read the mood of this country? Last week, a Tory MP said he boycotted the football because of the players taking the knee—not because he does not like football but because he does not like footballers opposing racism. Another Tory MP criticised Marcus Rashford for campaigning to feed hungry children, a problem that the Government have created and exacerbated. Do the Government not want footballers to be good role models? Marcus Rashford has helped to get the England team to the Euro finals while feeding hungry children. The Tory MPs cannot manage to do their job properly and I know who the British people see as the more worthy role models. Maybe some of them should visit Withington in Manchester, where ugly, racist vandalism on the mural of Marcus Rashford was rapidly restored this week with love and admiration from people far and wide coming to wipe out hate. That is who we are. Racists and their apologists are not living out British values. All the Prime Minister said yesterday was that there will be a ban on racists at football matches. Okay, that is good, but will it be for one match, two matches or for life, as the campaigners want?

The Leader of the House has committed to closing the current loophole in legislation so that constituents of known sexual harassers can decide whether or not they want them to continue as their MP, so I am naturally disappointed not to see any mention of this on the timetable for next week. Does he wish to table the Labour motion for debate next week? While we are on staff safety, can I please encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to continue to wear masks next week in the Chamber and with social distancing, especially given rising rates and that young people in particular are not double-vaccinated?

Finally, guidance has been issued only today on what businesses are supposed to do from Monday on the covid risk. No wonder businesses such as those in the Bristol Food Union are telling me that all this chaos with the rules is putting the hospitality sector under massive strain. With just two working days to go, where is the Business Secretary? And today, we find out that Ministers are going to have a get-out clause and will not have to isolate when they have been pinged. Well, how very convenient for them, when up and down the country, people trying to do the right thing—which is leading to staff shortages from the NHS to cafés, from the public sector to businesses struggling to get going again—find that, once again, it is one rule for them and another for the rest of us.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady made a number of points, so let me try to take them in turn. First, however, let me deal with the very serious issue of racism in football. It is disturbing to the whole country and it is something that unites the whole House. The racist

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

tweets and abuse of a number of our footballers after the match last week were simply wrong, and people who have behaved in that way should be banned from attending football matches, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday. It is a determination of this Government to ensure that the legislative framework is correct, which is why my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary has been in discussions with a number of footballers. The Online Safety Bill, which is going to have pre-legislative scrutiny soon, will be focusing on this. It will give Ofcom the power to fine social media firms up to 10% of their global turnover if they fail to ensure that their spaces, their social media outlets, are free from this type of improper, wicked racist abuse. It is important that the House tries to show a united stance on this, because I think the reality is that the whole House is united.

The admiration that the House feels for the English football team is very widespread. I am no expert in football, nor, I know, is the hon. Lady, but the team did its best and they jolly nearly won. This country does have a history of heroic defeats that lead to great victories. Dunkirk led to victory in the end, as did Corunna, and we can therefore look to great things from this team.

While we are discussing football, may I say how proud I am, as a Somerset man, of Tyrone Mings, who is only the second player from God's own county to play football for England? My whole county rejoices in that about our fellow county man, and we wish him every success, regardless of any comments he may make about my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Coming on to freedom day, 19 July, let me say that 87% of the population have had one vaccine and two thirds have had two vaccines. Having two doses of the Oxford vaccine reduces the chance of getting an infection by 80%. This is a fundamental change in the risk from the risk that existed prior to the vaccine being rolled out.

We know that the risk of infection among the young, who are the most likely not to have had the vaccine, is much lower than among the elderly, who, by and large, have had it. Therefore, it is right to allow people to make choices. The hon. Lady complains that guidance has not been issued early enough. That is not the point—people will make choices for themselves, because the risk has been lowered.

It is, of course, very easy when the Government say everybody should stop, everybody should go home and nobody is allowed to see anybody. Saying no, as the socialists always want to do, is easy. It is always very easy to say no and to tell people they are not allowed to do anything at all, or to tell them how their life should be run: when to have breakfast, when to get out of bed, when to have lunch and what to eat for lunch. The socialists want to run every detail of our lives—that is what underpins their philosophy. The Conservatives believe in individual responsibility. The risk is much lower because of the success of the vaccine, and this is fundamental.

In this Chamber next week, looking around now, I would say that it would be pretty safe not to be wearing masks; the Chamber is not very full. On the other hand, if we were to have a Budget day special, which I am not announcing as business, Mr Speaker, people might feel that the closeness, proximity, hugger-mugger nature of

the House would make a mask sensible. But that is something we can decide for ourselves. After all, we, as legislators, are asked to make decisions for the country at large, so surely we have the mental capacity to work out whether or not it is suitable to wear a mask. On this broad issue, let me reassure the hon. Lady that the rules for Ministers are not different from those for other people. There have been tests, which are being considered, about how the pinging operates, but there are no different rules for Ministers, and nor should there be.

As regards education policies, £3 billion is being provided for catch-up. This is really important. It is crucial that children who have lost so much schooling should have the opportunity to get back some of the lost time. That is why there is an important programme to deal with that. It is fundamental that we help to rebuild the economy, having protected it with £407 billion of taxpayers' money over the last year, and education will be a key part of that.

The hon. Lady referred to decisions by the Commission. She is aware of the motion that was approved by the Commission. There are discussions continuing. It is very important that the independent expert panel is fully informed as to what is going on. There has been correspondence between Mr Speaker and the chairman of the IEP. I will bring forward a motion as soon as it is reasonable to do so because I think what the position should be is agreed by the Commission, but I will be acting for the Commission and not—I emphasise—as Leader of the House.

On free speech in universities, we on the Conservative Benches believe in freedom. We on this side believe that defending freedom is crucial. As we rebuild from the pandemic, yes, we need money to help students, but the whole point of university is that ideas should be challenged. There should be a great clash of intellects as people discuss what is right and what is wrong and as they put arguments from one side to the other, as we do in this House. A political correctness has been waving over our universities to try to stop this type of debate. We need to ensure that there is genuine freedom of debate and freedom of speech, one of the lynchpins of our constitution, in our finest world-beating educational institutions. It may be sad that we need to do it and it may be a shame that the universities have not been defending free speech themselves, but it is an even greater shame that the Opposition actually wish to limit our freedom of speech and they should be ashamed of themselves.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome the announcement of personal choice and independent health management being restored next week. I pay tribute to the young people who have been very negatively impacted throughout the pandemic. Jobs and opportunity are so important for their future. Does my right hon. Friend agree that opportunity for young people must be at the heart of our covid recovery strategy, and that apprenticeships and our kickstart programme are key to unlocking that growth for their future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do indeed agree. We have put young people at the heart of our economic recovery plan. They are absolutely at the centre of the circle. It is the right thing to do. I have the greatest sympathy for young people, who have made great sacrifices over the last year. The kickstart scheme has created over 230,000 jobs across the country and over the past month around

2,000 young people have started a kickstart job each week. This is just one part of the plan to build back better and help young people into good jobs after the pandemic. We are also providing a hire incentive payment of £3,000 for employers in England for each apprentice they hire, at all ages. We are increasing the number of traineeships, backed by £126 million of taxpayers' money.

I just want to add how successful apprentices can be. I am much looking forward to meeting a former apprentice tomorrow, a gentleman called Steve Pickston, who is the vice-president for support and services at Airbus Helicopters. He started at McAlpine Helicopters as a helicopter airframe and engine apprentice in 1985, which only goes to show that becoming an apprentice can really help your career lift off.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I suppose it is a case of what could have been: if only that shot from Stephen O'Donnell had gone in when England were holding out for a draw, how different it could have been.

What should have been a look back at a successful tournament has descended into dealing with the multiple issues around the appalling racist abuse received by those fine young England players. Will the Leader of the House agree to an urgent debate next week so that can be properly addressed and to hold everybody to that account, whether it is the anonymous thug on Twitter or the Prime Minister himself in *The Daily Telegraph*?

Monday brings the sense of freedom day—as I think we would call it now—as England opens up to allow covid in to do its worst. It also marks the end of our virtual proceedings. Monday could see the start of England heading towards 100,000 cases per day, with the prospect of a Johnson variant 2 emerging anytime from anywhere. Are we seriously going to do away with all these wonderful facilities when we have no clue where we will be when we come back in September? This has been a true parliamentary innovation. It has been led by the Leader of the House. Surely we want to retain some of these wonderful features, particularly if we do not know where this is going to go.

We in the SNP are still celebrating our stunning success in seeing off English votes for English laws on Tuesday evening, but now that we have beaten that anti-Scottish measure, there is still much work to do. Can we now deal with the anti-Scottish provisions in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the ones that put constraints on our parliamentary democracy and allow the British Government to determine priorities in Scottish devolved areas? Getting rid of EVEL is a good start. Can we now work together to deal with all the other anti-Scottish stuff, and give our nations what they seem to want?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It is always nice when he can be here, rather than sending one of his many very able deputies in his place. I reiterate what I said to the shadow Leader of the House: the whole House is united against racism, not just in football, but in the country at large. Racism is a scar upon society and, although it has much declined in recent years, the fact that it still exists remains a scar. That is why the powers that will be in the Online Safety Bill are important. In the most serious cases, Ofcom will have the authority to limit or prevent a company from operating in the United Kingdom. It has always seemed

to me obvious that the online and social media companies, which can see what people have searched for and said, and ping them an advert directly linked to that, have the technological sophistication to work out when people are putting racist abuse online. It is important that they follow their responsibilities.

I disagree with the hon. Gentleman about opening up. He raises the level of infections, but that is not the point; it is hospitalisation and death rates, and that link, that chain, has been broken. There is now a much lower death rate and much lower entry into hospital. There is still an effect of infections, but there is not the direct link that there was prior to the vaccination programme.

Therefore, to allow freedoms to return is the right thing to do. That is the fundamental philosophical difference between the Conservatives and the parties of the left. All parties of the left are always determined that the collective should tell people how to live their lives, whereas we on the right think that mass decisions made by 60 million individuals across this country lead to better outcomes for the country than ordering people about.

As I said in the debate on EVEL, I was strongly against it in 2011, before it had been introduced. I only supported and voted for it, when it came in in 2015, on the basis that, as it was only a Standing Order, it could be abolished. So I was pleased to be the Leader of the House who did abolish it. I am delighted by the conversion of the hon. Gentleman. I think we are all coming to the conclusion that he does really like being here, and therefore he has shown great commitment to a Union Parliament. That is an enormous public service for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): As we speak, the Prime Minister is delivering a crucial speech on levelling up, which for me has been a key motivator since I became an MP. Wherever people are from, be it Bishop Auckland, Bath or Birkenhead, they should have the same opportunities to get on in life. On that note, I am currently working on a key project to bring geothermal energy to Bishop Auckland, making the town cleaner and greener, but also creating good, sustainable jobs and incredible research opportunities to help our locals. Will my right hon. Friend encourage the Business Secretary to meet me in Bishop Auckland, to see the proposed site and talk about that incredible opportunity to truly level up?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am slightly disappointed that my hon. Friend is extending invitations to Bishop Auckland to other Ministers but is not giving me the opportunity to visit her fantastic constituency. I notice that she mentioned Bath in her list, along with Bishop Auckland, which of course also has geothermal energy, with the most famous spa water, which was much enjoyed by the ancient Romans when the city was called *Aquae Sulis*—the waters of Sulis, who was the god they worshipped.

Geothermal projects can seek capital funding from the Heat Networks Investment Project from 2018 to 2022. In terms of future support, the Government are currently considering geothermal energy as a low-carbon technology to be within scope of our new £270 million Green Heat Network Fund from 2022 to 2025. The eligibility criteria for the fund were the subject of our consultation, which closed on 29 January, and the response will be published in due course.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

So there are things going on. It is really important that we level up across the whole country and have a triangulation across the map of the United Kingdom to ensure that every part of the country benefits from the levelling-up process.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business and for our cordial meeting yesterday. I look forward to the time for Backbench Business debates that will undoubtedly flow when we return from the summer recess.

As Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, may I express my concern at the proposals to cut by a third the number of staff working in the BBC Regional Political Unit, based at Millbank? The unit is the eyes and ears of the BBC English regions in Westminster, co-ordinating political news gathering for the BBC's early evening regional TV news programmes, as well as the regional breakfast, lunchtime and late evening TV bulletins, the Sunday political programmes and all the local radio output. It is an important resource for our national and local democracy and should not be facing such a threat from BBC management.

The cuts will have a detrimental impact on Back-Bench MPs across the House, who get airtime on their regional BBC TV and radio outlets and regional coverage due to their activities in the House being covered by that unit. Will the Leader of the House and his Cabinet colleagues ask the BBC to rethink that proposal, which is detrimental to our democracy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be wrong of me to tell the BBC how to run its commercial operations, but I will say this. In Somerset, we are lucky enough to have "Points West", and I remember being told by it that its early evening programme is better watched, proportionally for the region, than "Eastenders", which I understand is a popular soap opera that some people enjoy watching. It seems to me that if there is a really popular, well-watched programme, it is quite wise and commercially sensible to invest resources in it, but as I say, it is not for me to give the BBC advice on how to run itself.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: May I join my right hon. Friend in congratulating Somerset's son, from the finest county in Britain, on making it to the English football team and doing quite so well?

My right hon. Friend has been very helpful in chasing Ministers about an answer on the local government consultation in Somerset. Unfortunately, the Government still refuse to tell us how many people in their consultation supported One Somerset and how many backed the council plan. I really cannot understand why—it is not secret. We know that 5,000 people filled in the questionnaire, which is somewhat pathetic given that 111,000 took part in the referendum, but surely honesty is the best policy. I am reminded of the English writer Samuel Johnson, who said:

"Where secrecy or mystery begins, vice or roguery is not far off."

Can we have a debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The great Dr Johnson said so many fantastic things. The pages of "The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations" are full of his bon mots. I am not

allowed a prop, but I were to bring in to the Chamber my very well-thumbed copy of "The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations", you would see, Mr Speaker, that the pages around Dr Johnson are particularly well thumbed.

I will always try to facilitate answers being given to Members, but I suggest that if my hon. Friend wants a detailed, specific answer, written questions are a very good way of getting one, because Ministers are obliged to give at least as much information in a written answer as would be given under a freedom of information request, and they are expected to do it faster.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I hope the Leader of the House is planning his holidays, and if next week's free-for-all does not force him into self-isolation, can I suggest that he makes time this summer to visit the reopened Nottingham castle? If he comes by train, he will understand why his Government must get on with a rolling programme of rail electrification, starting with the midland main line, as they promised six years ago. When he walks past the beautifully restored heritage shopfronts on Carrington Street and confronts the half-demolished eyesore that was the Intu Broadmarsh centre, he will know why his Government need to approve our levelling-up fund bid to support its regeneration. But most importantly, he will understand why, as Labour's Deputy Chief Whip, I am so very proud to represent the city of rebels.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was actually in the Chamber when the hon. Lady made her maiden speech and said how proud she was of her constituency, and that has been a constant theme of her contributions in this House. I am very grateful to her for inviting me to her constituency—unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), who invited somebody else to hers—to visit Nottingham castle. Had she invited me to Trent Bridge, I might have been even more tempted, but the offer is none the less a very tempting one.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend is always welcome to Southend-on-Sea, which is hopefully soon to become a city. Will he find time for a debate on the links between human, animal and environmental health? As we look forward to the easing of lockdown restrictions next week, we cannot overlook the fact that 60% of the emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic. Given that it is likely that the coronavirus pandemic is linked to the trade of wild animals, it is more important than ever to improve our relationship with animals, to prevent a future global health, climate and biodiversity crisis.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, my hon. Friend not only gets in a plug for Southend's request to become a city but raises an important point. We are of course concerned about the origins of coronavirus and links to the trade in wildlife. Mankind and the animal kingdom have had a long and close relationship since the very beginning of our creation, and it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we remain responsible stewards of the Earth. I remember as a child hoping to be given a parrot—Mr Speaker, I believe that you keep a parrot—but my father warned me that there was a danger of psittacosis. Then, I fear, it would have been Polly gone.

Mr Speaker: And, of course, my parrot is called Boris.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: Nearly 2,000 people in Luton North, including students at Challney High School for Girls, have contacted me over the past few weeks about the worsening situation in Palestine, where international law has clearly been broken. We have had Westminster Hall debates and urgent questions on this, all of which have been so oversubscribed by MPs that I have been unlucky in the ballot every time. Will the Leader of the House be able to offer Government time so that MPs like myself can put on record the massive strength of feeling on this issue and call for action on the human rights issues facing the Palestinian people?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that this is a matter of concern to a large number of Members of Parliament, and indeed to our constituents, who correspond with us regularly about it. The Government have long been committed to a two-state solution and we encourage conversation, diplomacy and moderation in the activities of everyone involved. I am aware of the demand for debates, but I would point the hon. Lady in the direction of the Backbench Business Committee, which I know is aware of the demand and interest in this subject.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This week we debated and voted on the important issue of compulsory vaccination for care home staff. On 22 June, the draft statutory instrument was published, along with the words:

“A full impact assessment of the costs and benefits of this instrument is available from the Department of Health and Social Care, 39 Victoria Street”.

That would have been very useful because, as the Leader of the House will know, an impact assessment helps Members to decide on the merits or otherwise of the Government's policy, but no such impact assessment was published. During the debate, the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), said that

“the impact assessment is being worked on”.—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 271.]

It seems to me that either there was an impact assessment, as the Department said there was on 22 June, or there was not, as the Minister said in the debate. But a third option came along, which was that in fact there was a full impact assessment but it was deliberately withheld from this House. Whichever is the case, this seems to be a very disappointing episode for scrutiny. This is a genuine request: could we have a statement from the Health Minister next week to clear up the situation, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, I can assure the House that it was a matter of considerable concern to me that, when an explanatory memorandum said that an impact assessment was being published alongside it, no such impact assessment was published. I did make inquiries and am assured that the impact assessment was, as the Minister said, and as far as I am aware, still not complete. I reiterate the apology to the House given by the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), towards the end of the debate that inaccurate information was given to the House. That sort of mistake should not happen and is taken very seriously by the Government. I add only one caveat and that is a general caveat about impact assessments: they tend to try to predict with certainty the fundamentally unpredictable.

Mr Speaker: Just to add to that, if there was not a statement and someone was to put in for an urgent question, it might be looked upon favourably.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): This morning, a contributor on Radio 4 said that it is only ever posh people who say that the less fortunate people in our communities do not want to be told by posh people what to do, but in fact they do, or, at least, they want some responsible guidance. The complete abdication of responsible guidance from this Government is shameful, and I for one, Mr Speaker, will continue to wear a face covering in this Chamber.

I do not need an excuse to talk about Bath's two excellent universities. I offer my congratulations to the University of Bath, which has recently been named as one of the top 100 universities in the world at which to study maths. Last Friday marked the 80th anniversary of the cracking of the Enigma Code. Alan Turing's great achievement continues to inspire the next generation of mathematicians, including those studying in Bath. Will the Leader of the House add his support to the Protect Pure Maths campaign and to renaming the Science and Technology Committee to the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths Committee, so that the value of pure maths is better reflected in Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, it is amazing how illiberal the Liberals nowadays are. They used to believe in freedom and Mill and all of that, who was closely associated with the Liberal party of old, but the modern version is very dour and controlling. I am happy though to be in absolute agreement with the hon. Lady, my neighbour, on the importance of mathematics. As she knows, Bath University is in her constituency and Bath Spa University is in mine, so we are fortunate to share in our area two very good universities. Mathematics will be at the forefront of how this country competes in future generations. I see that the Protect Pure Maths campaign places a great emphasis on the achievements and legacy of Alan Turing, as the hon. Lady mentioned, so it is good news that he is on the £50 note, which I am sure all of us wish to see more of in our daily lives for all sorts of good reasons. Unfortunately, it is not within my authority to decide the naming of the Committee; it is a matter for the House. I encourage the hon. Lady to have a word with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and see whether he, as Chairman of the Committee, is open to such a suggestion. I am sure that, if he were, the House would facilitate such a move.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) [V]: Is the Leader of the House aware that 2 million people rely on cash for every transaction that they make and that access to cash is a necessity for countless individuals and small businesses across the UK, particularly for many who are elderly, vulnerable or live in rural areas? Does he accept that people should need to travel only short distances to pay in or take out cash and that cash back without a purchase must be made widely available. On 1 July, the Government published a consultation on plans to protect access to cash. Does he agree that this initiative is not only welcome, but vital?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend's question follows perfectly from our previous discussion of £50 notes. The Government indeed recognise that access to cash remains important to millions across the UK, and we

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

are committed to legislating to protect access to cash and ensuring the UK's cash infrastructure is sustainable in the longer term. Already, as part of the Financial Services Act 2021, legislative changes have been made to support the widespread offering, by shops and other businesses, of cashback without a purchase. On 1 July, the Government published a consultation that sets out proposals for new laws to make sure people only need to travel a reasonable distance to pay in or take out cash. So I think Her Minister's Government and my right hon. Friend are very much at one on this issue.

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I would like to make the House aware that I am going to quote some offensive remarks, and that you, Mr Speaker, have been given advance sight of this question.

On social media, I have been told that I should not be involved in politics because I am not a Brit, but a "Paki". That is of course wrong on both accounts: I am neither a Brit, nor a "Paki"; I am a proud Scot. On social media, I have also been told to "fuck off home". That of course does not make sense—I was born in Edinburgh. Scotland is my home. I am not unique, however, in any sense, and we saw this with the horrific racial abuse that black England players have received on social media.

Every day, people are racially abused online because of a false narrative built on prejudice and assumptions—one that Ministers in this Government have encouraged, I am afraid to say. Yesterday, the Prime Minister admitted that there is a systemic issue of racism, particularly on social media. The House may be united against racism, but we need to see real action. What do the Government intend to do about this? I therefore ask: there was an urgent question yesterday, but will the Leader of the House make time for an urgent debate in this Chamber next week so that MPs of colour can also make their contributions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by saying how appalling it is that the hon. Lady has been treated in that way? Anyone who has sent her a message of that kind should, to use the Prime Minister's words,

"crawl back under the rock"

from which they came. They are people who should not behave in this way.

There is one fundamental thing that we should all know: in this country, there is a fundamental equality in every respect of every single British citizen—whether somebody who received a British passport a minute ago or somebody descended from the Picts. There is a fundamental equality, and this is so important. Every British citizen is equally honourable, justified and placed before the law in the same position as every other one. That must be fundamental to our understanding, and I think it is something the whole House agrees on.

I am sorry that the hon. Lady wishes to make this party political, because I really think it is not. I think the whole House is outraged by the way that she has been treated, and action is being taken. As the Prime Minister set out yesterday, he has had discussions with the social media companies to remind them of their responsibilities and of what will happen under the online safety Bill if they do not live up to their

responsibilities. Regrettably, social media is a sewer and some of the most disgusting bits of life get washed through it, but it is a sewer that is in need of cleansing.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The volunteers at the Blackpool station of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution have been particularly busy during the pandemic and their bravery has saved a number of lives. The charity is an incredibly important part of many coastal communities, but it does of course rely on the generosity of the British people to survive. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the incredible volunteers who put their own lives at risk to help others, and does he think it would be in order to have a debate in this place to recognise them and to discuss how their work can best be supported?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and I join him in thanking all the RNLI volunteers across the country, who show great dedication and bravery in the work they do keeping our communities safe at sea. In April last year, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor put forward another £750 million of taxpayers' money to support such charities through the pandemic.

It is one of the most wonderful things about our country; I went to speak once in Sutton Coldfield, which must be one of most landlocked constituencies in the country, and met a lady in her 90s who had been collecting money for the RNLI for almost her entire life. Over that long life, she had raised the best part of £1 million. The charitable work people do is so remarkable.

I note that there was a Westminster Hall debate entitled "RNLI and Independent Lifeboats: Covid-19" in October last year. If my hon. Friend thinks the time is right for another Adjournment debate, perhaps he will lobby Mr Speaker.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: The Leader of the House may know that between 1952 and 1991, an estimated 22,000 men were involved in 45 nuclear weapons tests overseas. Many have reported rare cancers, sterility, miscarriages for their wives, or birth defects in their children. Sadly, the UK is one of the only nuclear powers on earth that has so far denied recognition of any sort to its nuclear test veterans. Will the Leader of the House request that the Prime Minister meets nuclear test veterans, as the Leader of the Opposition has, and subsequently arrange for the Defence Secretary to make a statement to the House outlining the steps he will take to ensure that these veterans and their families finally receive the recognition and support they deserve?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The nation owes a great debt to those who keep us safe, and we have been kept safe by our nuclear deterrent now for many decades; it is a fundamental part of our defence strategy. The 22,000 men involved between 1952 and 1991 are people who deserve the thanks of a grateful nation. I will of course pass on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence what the hon. Lady has had to say about any proposals or anything that can be done for the people who were involved in those tests.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know, because I have raised the matter with him in the House on a number of occasions, that residents living in Steinbeck Grange in Warrington believe they were mis-sold leasehold properties by David

Wilson Homes more than 10 years ago. I welcome the work that the Competition and Markets Authority is undertaking to investigate these complaints, but my constituents and others around the country have an understandable need for the Government to take action to legislate to tackle historical problems.

May we have a debate in Government time on what actions the Government can take to support my constituents, particularly by looking at the use of incentivised solicitor arrangements, where discounts are offered for homebuyers to use friendly law firms that then disappear, leaving homebuyers with no opportunity to challenge their lawyers if they did not disclose the facts at the time of purchase?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The last point that my hon. Friend raised sounds almost like fraud. If somebody is proposing a solicitor who is not a real solicitors company and there is no comeback on the firm, that sounds like an extreme level of malpractice.

I can assure my hon. Friend that Her Majesty's Government are committed to promoting fairness and transparency for homeowners and ensuring that consumers are protected from abuse and poor service. The Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill is currently making its way through the House of Lords and will end ground rents for new qualifying long residential leasehold properties in England and Wales, which is a major change to property law. It is encouraging that the Competition and Markets Authority is taking enforcement action to tackle certain instances of mis-selling, but I encourage my hon. Friend keep campaigning on this and particularly raising that very troubling issue of vanishing solicitors.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: The tireless campaigners of the South East Northumberland Rail User Group say that the recent proposals for changes to the east coast main line timetables will make our national, regional and local journeys more difficult, and that the consultation supposes that the only place we want to travel is London. I can guarantee the Leader of the House that that is not the case. Morpeth station will lose 21 daily services, while Pegswood will add none to its total of three stops. The consultation is fragmented, disjointed and inaccessible. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the detrimental impact of these proposals, and on how cutting links between northern towns and cities simply to shave 15 minutes off the travel time from Edinburgh to London helps level up our region?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously the only place that people want to travel to is Somerset. The idea that everyone wants to travel to London is, I think, a mistaken one, so I am in agreement with the hon. Gentleman. I think he raises a really important point. These timetabling changes are very difficult, and he is also right that it is important that there are good connections within regions and not just to London, so I will take up his points with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: Recently I had the pleasure of visiting Culvers House Primary School in Hackbridge in my Carshalton and Wallington constituency, after pupils wrote to me to raise concerns about the levels of plastic pollution

around the world. They told me more about why this issue is so important to them, so can we have a debate about plastic pollution so that we can discuss and hear more about the UK's efforts to crack down on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his assiduous work in his constituency, which I had the pleasure of visiting not that long ago. The Government have done many things, with some inconvenience to consumers. We have accepted the price to be paid in banning plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds, and also in increasing the tax on plastic bags to 10p per bag. The 5p tax has cut usage by 95%, and there will be a new tax coming in from April 2022 for products that do not have at least 30% recycled content, so great steps are being made for unnecessary plastic, but I think he is right to suggest that the subject should be debated, because one should not forget how important it has been to have plastic for personal protective equipment during the course of the pandemic. It is about ensuring that plastic is used for good and essential purposes, and not ones where other materials are available, but I am afraid it will not be a debate in Government time; I think this is another request for the Backbench Business Committee.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Yesterday, this House debated for an hour the horrendous abuse suffered by three young black England players at the hands of, in the main, anonymous, faceless trolls. While I accept the intent—perhaps the good intent—of the Government to bring forward the online harms legislation later this year, does the Leader of the House agree that the main issue pertaining to online abuse is anonymity? Unfortunately, the Bill in its current form does not deal with those who want to hide behind the cloak of anonymity for purely abusive reasons. Does he agree that if this Government really want to get serious about tackling online abuse, the Bill must take anonymity into account?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises an important, but complex point. It is right to say that anonymity allows people to behave on social media in a way that they would not behave if they were named, and it is fascinating how many people, when something embarrassing has gone up, insist that their social media account was hacked to try to pretend that it was not them. As soon as people get found out, they immediately try and get away from responsibility for it, so I think anonymity is a problem, but there are occasions when anonymity could be important. It could be important for a whistleblower—somebody exposing corruption or other wrongdoing—so it is right that there should be pre-legislative scrutiny so that we can try to get this balance right and allow for anonymity where it will actually be beneficial. But if people want to say things on social media, they should have the courage of their convictions and put their name to it. As Members of this House, we all know that when we get anonymous letters, they are usually the rudest ones. They are usually the ones where people are ashamed really of what they are saying, which is why they do not dare put their name to it.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: Since taking control of North East Lincolnshire Council two years ago, the Conservative administration had made great strides in delivering what was the first town deal and attracting new investments, particularly in the renewable

[*Martin Vickers*]

energy sector. A vital part of the area's levelling up agenda is to improve the education and training of our young people in practical skills and academic performance, and also to overcome losing the scores of pupils who travel a few miles down the road to the county council area, which has retained its grammar schools. With that in mind, the council would like to establish a school based on academic selection. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State for Education to make a statement explaining the Government's policy and how it can assist the council in delivering on its ambitions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I first congratulate my hon. Friend, who is absolutely tireless? He is very modest in giving all the credit to the local council, because everyone in this House knows that everything that goes right in Cleethorpes is thanks to his campaigning efforts, energy, vim and vigour. He is right to say that existing grammar schools continue but that the law prevents the establishment of new selective schools. Wherever a local authority has identified a need for a new school, it must run a competition to establish a new free school. The local authority publishes a specification for a new school and invites bids from sponsors to run the school. However, he makes a very valuable point that I will of course take up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, although I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate to raise this specific issue, on behalf of his council, on the Floor of the House.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House ask Ministry of Justice Ministers to make a written statement about what is happening in the probate service? My constituent Mrs Dixon started probate in May 2020. Fourteen months on, she has yet to receive a satisfactory response from the probate service. This is not because of disputes within the family or because of issues with wills; it is because her paperwork has been lost by the probate service and has then been transferred between offices across the United Kingdom so that staff within the service were not able to confirm who was leading on her probate. This is clearly not acceptable in what can only be described as a truly distressing time under normal circumstances, never mind in a pandemic. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House made some inquiries to ensure that this is not a wider problem within the probate service, which is under enormous pressure because of the scale of the number of loved ones lost over the past 18 months.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My deepest sympathies go to Mrs Dixon. It must be terribly difficult when dealing with a death in the family then to find that probate is not working efficiently and that she is being passed from pillar to post. On the assumption that the hon. Gentleman has already been in touch with the Lord Chancellor and his Department, I will take this up with the Department immediately after business questions to try to ensure that at least he gets an answer in relation to Mrs Dixon, although I cannot necessarily promise a statement on the wider issues concerning the probate service.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now go by video link to James Murray. [HON. MEMBERS: "He's here!"] Oh, we don't. It tells me here that you are virtual, Mr Murray, but here you are.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is a pleasure to be here in person.

We in Ealing North could not be more proud of our local hero Bukayo Saka. He grew up in Greenford, he went to Edward Betham Primary School and Greenford High School, and at the age of 19 he has now shown courage and bravery that is inspiring to us all. In the last few days, local people have rushed to thank him and honour him and to stand united against those who have subjected him and his teammates to online racist abuse. Will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary to come to the House of Commons so that they can finally apologise for not backing the England team when they took the knee to oppose racism?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on managing to achieve what Padre Pio used to do, which is bilocation. It is an indication of great sanctity; that he should be both virtual and physical at the same time is a miracle in this very House. To come to his issue, he takes the same pride in Mr Saka from his constituency as I do in Mr Mings being a Somerset man. I think across the country we take pride in the British football team, even those of us like me who normally do not know one bit of the shape of a football from the other. It has united the whole country in an interest in football even for those who have not previously had it. When he was here yesterday, the Prime Minister made absolutely clear not only his support for the team but his condemnation of racism in football, which is likewise something that unites the House.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Even after lockdown release, the events industry will take some time to properly get back on its feet. It was fantastic to see the Great Yorkshire Show taking place in Harrogate this week, but it is operating at 50% capacity. There are other important events and event organisations, such as Harrogate International Festivals, that have been severely impacted. I am aware that we have talked about this sector before, but events and circumstances are evolving, so could we have please a further debate on long-term support for the events industry? It adds so much to the quality of life in the United Kingdom and it may need extra help in the future.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I very much sympathise with my hon. Friend. Business events are vital for the UK economy, directly contributing over £31 billion each year prior to the pandemic. They also support a vast supply chain and stimulate valuable trade opportunities. The events research programme plays an important role in our work fully to reopen the sector, with another business event pilot set to take place at the Harrogate Convention Centre next week. The Government know how badly the sector has been hit by the pandemic and will continue to encourage and engage with people to monitor the situation and try to support a recovery plan. I accept that this will be a longer-term effort, but I think that beginning to get back to normal from Monday will begin to be helpful.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can we take it from the Leader of the House's comments in response to the shadow Leader of the House that if this Chamber

is indeed a crowded place next Wednesday at Prime Minister's questions, he will be following his own Government's advice and wearing a mask?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Wait and see.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): My right hon. Friend will no doubt be aware of the campaigners Natasha Rattu and the team at Karma Nirvana, Sara Browne and the team at IKWRO Women's Rights Organisation, and Natasha Feroze and the team at MEWSO, the Middle Eastern Women and Society Organisation, who have been working with me and my team on a private Member's Bill last year and amendments to the Health and Care Bill in this Session to end so-called virginity testing and hymenoplasty. I pay particular tribute to Naomi Wiseman and Dr Charlotte Proudman, who have been helping me on that. However, along with many other Members, I did not get the chance to speak in yesterday's Second Reading debate on the Health and Care Bill, so will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on so-called virginity testing and hymenoplasty, along with other issues of violence against women and girls, at the earliest opportunity?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would point my hon. Friend to the end-of-session Adjournment debate next Thursday, which will be an opportunity to raise any issues that he wishes to. May I commend him for the work that he is doing to bring forward a private Member's Bill? I am sorry that he did not have the opportunity to speak in the debate yesterday. I am aware of the pressures on time, so I am quite pleased that there will be two days for the Second Reading debate on the Nationality and Borders Bill next week, because supply and demand do not always match in this House.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the issues surrounding quad bike use, with a view to exploring the banning of their on-road use? Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing both Castleford Tigers and St Helens the very best of luck this weekend at the rugby league challenge cup final at Wembley, where I am sure we will see the very best of our sporting values at play, both on and off the field?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, indeed, I would love to wish both sides every good fortune at the challenge cup final, and I am sure there will be impeccable behaviour. I hope that the hon. Lady will be in the box, watching and cheering on one of the sides.

As regards quad bike use on roads, I notice in North East Somerset that it is sometimes convenient for farmers to go on roads on their quad bikes, so I would be reluctant to advocate a complete ban, but it is obviously important that all road users are safe.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Millions of people across the United Kingdom depend on the BBC for impartial news being pumped into their living rooms. Indeed, people across the world depend on the BBC and trust it to be truly impartial. I have regularly received complaints about the lack of impartiality, about BBC News and about the bias that seems to be held in particular ways, but there is clear concern about the potential appointment of the ex-*Huffington Post* editor Jess Brammer as news editor for the BBC. Could the

Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time on the requirement for BBC News to be impartial, and to reflect the news rather than the opinions of those who preside over it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. I think the message to the BBC is that Caesar's wife must be above suspicion. It is crucial that the BBC is not only impartial but seen to be impartial. The BBC must ask itself, if it is going to make an appointment from the Huffington Post, whether it would make an appointment from the Guido Fawkes website, a similar news outlet, except a rather more accurate one, on the right rather than on the left. I think the BBC would be astonished by my suggestion. Would it make an appointment from Conservative Home or from *The Daily Telegraph*? It seems unlikely, and therefore it is problematic when the BBC looks at left-wing outlets and thinks that that is impartiality.

I also think that it is more serious than that, because the BBC has a number of dedicated, really good quality journalists, who are genuinely important—the Laura Kuenssbergs, the Martha Kearneys and the James Landales of this world. One has no idea of their political opinions at all, and rightly so. That is the model of the BBC. That is the best of the BBC, and people like that are undermined if Caesar's wife is seen to be suspect.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: The night-time economy is very important for Liverpool, and the Baltic Triangle is hugely important to Liverpool's cultural offering and nightlife. The agents of change principle was embedded in the national planning policy framework in 2018. It was designed to protect music and cultural spaces from noise complaints and potential closure in the event of new residential properties being developed beside venues. However, it is only advisory and not working in practice, so a well-loved and important music venue in my constituency, 24 Kitchen Street, now faces closure owing to neighbouring property developments. Will the Leader of the House provide a debate in Government time on how to strengthen the protection of pre-existing venues and businesses within the planning system?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand the importance of the night-time economy more broadly, and note the hon. Lady's reference to the Baltic Triangle in her city. My concern may be equal but different. People move into villages and then complain about the church bells and the church clock chiming. I think frankly that is idiotic. If one moves in somewhere, one must put up with what is there already, and one should not be able to stop things that have been going on for hundreds of years, in some cases. Some people move to the countryside and complain about cocks crowing. Why on earth did they move to the countryside? Why did they not stay in a town, or put ear plugs in or something? I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Lady is saying. I cannot promise her a debate in Government time, but I will ensure that her very good point is raised in the right quarter.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): On Monday evening, my constituency suffered from extreme flooding, with Portobello Road in effect becoming a river and more than 2,500 reports of flooding being logged. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our drainage and sewerage

[Felicity Buchan]

systems need to be able to cope with thunderstorms, and the water companies need to do everything to achieve that end?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed I do. Flooding causes devastation for communities, homes and businesses. Local flood risk management, including surface water, falls to local flood authorities—county and unitary authorities—which must identify and manage those risks as part of their local flood risk management strategy. I understand that Thames Water is building a huge super sewer around London, which I hope will be better able to cope with flooding or sudden storms when they come, rather than having the marvellous sewer built by Bazalgette in the 19th century overwhelmed. My hon. Friend raises a point that is of great concern to Members across the House. In a country such as ours, with the rainfall that we have, we need to be able to cope with storms.

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

12.14 pm

Sitting suspended.

BILLS PRESENTED

TIBET AND XINJIANG (RECIPROCAL ACCESS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Loughton, supported by Sir Peter Bottomley, Chris Law, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Christine Jardine, Ms Nusrat Ghani, Jim Shannon, Henry Smith, Chris Bryant, Wera Hobhouse, Marion Fellows, and Dame Diana Johnson presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report annually on restrictions on access by UK nationals to Tibet and Xinjiang in comparison with other regions of China; to make provision to deny persons involved in imposing such restrictions permission to enter the UK; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 18 March 2022, and to be printed (Bill 148) with explanatory notes (Bill 148-EN).

CHILDREN (ACCESS TO TREATMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bambos Charalambous presented a Bill to make provision about children's access to medical services; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 19 November 2021, and to be printed (Bill 149) with explanatory notes (Bill 149-EN).

Backbench Business

Northern Ireland Protocol

[Relevant documents: *First Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Session 2019–21, Unfettered Access: Customs Arrangements in Northern Ireland after Brexit, HC 161; and the Government Response, Session 2019–21, HC 783; Oral evidence taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 6 January, 10 February, 24 February, 17 March, 28 April, 26 May and 16 June 2021, on Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, HC 767; Oral evidence taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 23 June 2021, on the Work of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, HC 264; e-petition 573209, Trigger Article 16. We want unfettered GB-NI Trade; Oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee on 22 February 2021, on the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, HC 1232]*

12.20 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), I have to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution, which repeats the position taken on these matters yesterday.

Mr Speaker has been advised that there are active legal proceedings on the legality of the Northern Ireland protocol and active legal proceedings and open inquests in relation to historic troubles-related deaths. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on matters sub judice to allow full reference to the challenge to the Northern Ireland protocol as it concerns issues of national importance. Further, I am exercising that discretion to allow limited reference to active legal proceedings and open inquests in relation to historic troubles-related deaths. However, references to these cases should be limited to the context and the events which led to the cases but should not include details of the cases themselves nor the names of those involved in them. All hon. Members should, however, be mindful of matters that may be the subject of future legal proceedings and should exercise caution in making reference to individual cases.

12.22 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House supports the primary aims of the Northern Ireland Protocol of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, which are to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its dimensions and to respect the integrity of the EU and UK internal markets; recognises that new infrastructure and controls at the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic must be avoided to maintain the peace in Northern Ireland and to encourage stability and trade; notes that the volume of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland far exceeds the trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; further notes that significant provisions of the Protocol remain subject to grace periods and have not yet been applied to trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and that there is no evidence that this has presented any significant risk to the EU internal market; regards flexibility in the application of the Protocol as being in the mutual interests of the EU and UK, given the unique constitutional and political circumstances of Northern Ireland; regrets EU threats of legal action; notes the EU and UK have made a mutual commitment to adopt measures with a view to avoiding controls

at the ports and airports of Northern Ireland to the extent possible; is conscious of the need to avoid separating the Unionist community from the rest of the UK, consistent with the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement; and also recognises that Article 13(8) of the Protocol provides for potentially superior arrangements to those currently in place.

Thank you for that statement, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I would like to record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate. I am also very grateful that so many right hon. and hon. Members have put in to take part in it. I believe that this is a debate of significance, and at a time of significance.

The purpose of the debate is for the House to agree on how the Government should approach the issues that have arisen in Northern Ireland since the UK left the European Union. I remind the House that the Northern Ireland protocol was part of the 2019 EU withdrawal agreement, not part of the trade and co-operation agreement, which was ratified only this year. It is the protocol that is creating strains on power sharing under the Good Friday agreement, pressures on political stability and an upsurge in tension between the two communities in Northern Ireland.

Let me just say what this debate is not about. There is absolutely no value in point scoring about past divisions and disputes that we have had in this House. That would just further undermine public confidence. This debate is about looking forward, about what we must now agree to do to set things right. The proposals I will come to are in the interests of the EU as much as they are in the interests of the UK.

The motion sets out

“the primary aims of the Northern Ireland Protocol of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, which are to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its dimensions and to respect the integrity of the EU and UK internal markets”

and states that

“new infrastructure and controls at the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic must be avoided to maintain the peace in Northern Ireland and to encourage stability and trade”.

The motion then points out an indisputable fact—that

“the volume of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland far exceeds the trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland”.

Why is this significant? In 2019, the Northern Ireland Executive found that over 90% of medicines, fruit and vegetables, books, clothes, household goods and baby equipment sold in Northern Ireland was arriving from other parts of the United Kingdom. In 2018, Northern Ireland sales to Great Britain were two and a half times greater than those to the Republic.

The protocol is clear: it is not intended to create what it refers to as “diversion of trade”. On the contrary, article 16 states:

“If the application of this Protocol leads to serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist, or to diversion of trade, the Union or the United Kingdom may unilaterally take appropriate safeguard measures.”

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Is it not significant that since the protocol came into operation, there has been a dramatic increase in imports from the Irish Republic into Northern Ireland and a fall in trade between GB and Northern Ireland? Indeed, Irish Ministers have boasted that one reason for having a delay in further border checks is to encourage further diversion of trade towards the Irish Republic.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I could not be more grateful for that intervention, and I will amplify the points that the right hon. Gentleman makes, because he is absolutely right. Have no doubt that there has been and continues to be diversion of trade due to the protocol. Article 16 exists in order that either party can take unilateral action to prevent that.

The Central Statistics Office Ireland reports that Republic of Ireland exports to Northern Ireland in the first four months of this year increased by 25% and by 40% relative to the first four months of 2019 and 2020. Northern Ireland exports to the Republic increased by 59% and 61% on the same comparison. Some are heralding that as the birth of an all-Ireland economy, but that is wholly contrary to the letter and spirit of the protocol.

The motion in my name continues by noting that “significant provisions of the Protocol remain subject to grace periods and have not yet been applied to trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and that there is no evidence that this has presented any significant risk to the EU internal market”.

Those grace periods, applying to chilled meats, medicines and the requirement of export health certificates, are intended to lapse in the coming months. The UK Government may choose to extend them, as we already have, with or without the EU’s permission, and they would be justified in doing so because the grace periods are not doing any harm, but that is not a long-term solution.

The Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Simon Coveney, says that the grace periods exist

“to give supermarkets in particular, the opportunity to readjust their supply chains to adapt to”

what he refers to as “these new realities”. I am afraid that confirms in the minds of many that the protocol is being used to create diversion of trade.

Diversion of trade as a goal can form no basis for the rebuilding of trust and public confidence in both communities in Northern Ireland. Article 6 of the protocol requires the EU and the UK to

“use their best endeavours to facilitate the trade between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom”.

I regret to say that, thus far, there is little evidence to suggest that the Republic of Ireland or the EU are attaching any importance to that vital commitment, and that is what is destroying trust.

The motion then states that this House

“regards flexibility in the application of the Protocol as being in the mutual interests of the EU and UK, given the unique constitutional and political circumstances of Northern Ireland; regrets EU threats of legal action; notes the EU and UK have made a mutual commitment to adopt measures with a view to avoiding controls at the ports and airports of Northern Ireland to the extent possible; is conscious of the need to avoid separating the Unionist community from the rest of the UK, consistent with the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement; and also recognises that Article 13(8) of the Protocol provides for potentially superior arrangements to those currently in place.”

That is the real point of the motion: that the protocol is only one solution to the challenge of avoiding a hard border in Ireland while also respecting the integrity of the EU and UK internal markets.

There always was more than one way to skin a cat, and the EU agreed to that in article 13(8). Unfortunately, the EU seems implacably opposed to any discussion about how a subsequent agreement under article 13(8) of the protocol could supersede the protocol in whole or in part. Paragraph 25 of the political declaration accompanying the withdrawal agreement also envisaged:

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

“Such facilitative arrangements and technologies will also be considered in alternative arrangements for ensuring the absence of a hard border on the island of Ireland.”

Sadly, the protocol was not superseded by the trade and co-operation agreement, but now is the time for the EU to accept that its application of the protocol is not achieving its legitimate aims. Either the protocol must be changed by agreement or the UK must exercise its sovereign right to jettison the whole thing as a fundamental threat to peace and stability in Northern Ireland and to the integrity of the United Kingdom.

The EU could start by agreeing to an expanded category of goods that are not at risk of onward travel to the Republic of Ireland. We already have an authorised trader scheme for supermarkets; that could also be expanded, creating far less paperwork than there is now and a permanent exemption from unnecessary sanitary and phytosanitary checks. The EU could also agree to allow non-EU-compliant UK products to be imported into Northern Ireland if they are not at risk of moving into the rest of the EU internal market. The question is whether the EU is capable of being flexible and pragmatic, or whether it will continue to insist on imposing its rules, whatever the cost to peace and stability in Northern Ireland.

The noble Lord, Lord Trimble, was one of the two leaders who won the Nobel peace prize for negotiating the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. He has proposed a new solution: replacing the protocol with a system of mutual enforcement. This would mean that the UK and the EU would each ensure and guarantee that goods travelling across the shared border would be compliant with each other's standards. Light checks would occur, but away from the border, and both sides would share relevant data on exports.

That proposal would remove the need for direct EU jurisdiction over Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland would be under UK law and fully restored as part of the UK internal market. It would ensure the absence of any new infrastructure on the border itself, it would guarantee the integrity of the EU internal market and, most importantly, it would accord equal respect to the concerns of both communities in Northern Ireland in a way that the present protocol utterly fails to do.

The proposal has not yet been tabled by the UK Government, but my understanding is that they broadly support the sentiments of the motion. Ideally, the EU would accept its obligations under paragraph 25 of the 2019 political declaration and agree in principle that the protocol will be superseded by these pragmatic and practical proposals.

We must hope that the EU lives up to its own ideals. Article 8 of the treaty on European Union obliges the EU to

“develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness...based on cooperation.”

If the EU refuses in principle even to open these discussions, the UK will have no option but to resort to article 16 of the protocol and take unilateral action. The world is watching how the EU is dealing with the United Kingdom.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Sometimes, over the course of this, the view is taken in the EU, or even in Ireland, that somehow

the rest of the UK, or Great Britain, has no regard at all for the status of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. May I just read back to my hon. Friend two facts from a recent poll, which shows that to be completely wrong? When asked whether it is unfair to Northern Ireland that it is treated differently from the rest of the UK, over 50% of the residents from the whole of the United Kingdom said, yes, it was unfair. The second question, which is really important, was: how important or unimportant is it that Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom. Again, well over half—53%—said “important”. Interestingly, that is a margin of 41% over those in the United Kingdom who said it was unimportant. We want Northern Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My right hon. Friend puts down an important marker. We can dismiss any idea that the United Kingdom as a whole is not interested in the interests of Northern Ireland or in Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom. That is an established fact and he has dealt with that very capably.

In conclusion, the world is watching how the EU is dealing with the United Kingdom. The UK will offer agreement on what the problems are and how they must be resolved. Together, the EU and the UK can look for common ground about how to do so; otherwise the rest of the world will see that the grounds for invoking article 16 have indeed already been met, and action will have to be taken.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have to impose an immediate six-minute time limit on Back Bench speeches, but that is quite generous as compared with recent times.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on securing this debate today and on giving Members the opportunity to express their views.

For people in Northern Ireland, the political and economic stakes could not be higher, as the protocol presents the greatest ever threat to the economic integrity of the United Kingdom. The rigorous implementation of the protocol that some anti-Brexit parties in Northern Ireland have called for would be bad for consumers and bad for business. It would be socially disruptive, economically ruinous and politically disastrous for Northern Ireland. As Lord Frost has repeatedly pointed out, the Northern Ireland protocol in its present form is unsustainable, and it needs to go.

Over the last 50 years, if we have learned anything in Northern Ireland it is that, if our political arrangements are to last, they will require support from right across the community, and there is not a single elected representative in any Unionist party who supports the Northern Ireland protocol. The Government have promised that they will publish their plans for the future of the protocol before Parliament rises for the summer recess, and that cannot come a moment too soon.

Much has been said about how we got here, but, today, I want to set out where we need to go from here. My party will not prejudge what the Government have to say, but I want to make it clear what any new approach needs to achieve. That is why, today, I am setting out seven tests that I believe are important for any new arrangements. Our tests are grounded not in a

Unionist wish list, but in promises that have already been made in one form or another to the people of Northern Ireland. It is not too much to ask that the Government stand by these promises.

First, new arrangements must fulfil the guarantee of the sixth article of the Act of Union 1800. That Act of Union is no ordinary statute; it is the constitutional statute that created the United Kingdom for the people whom I represent. The sixth article essentially requires that everyone in the United Kingdom is entitled to the same privileges and to be on the same footing as to goods in either country and in respect of trade within the United Kingdom. Under the protocol, this is clearly no longer the case. The House will be aware—you made reference to the legal challenge on this point, Madam Deputy Speaker—that the High Court has held that the protocol does not put the people of Northern Ireland on an equal footing with those in the rest of the United Kingdom. In defending their position, the Government lawyers made it clear that the protocol impliedly repeals article 6 of the Act of Union. That is a matter of grave concern to us, and it is a matter that needs to be put right.

Secondly, any new arrangements must avoid any diversion of trade, and I welcome what has been said already. It is simply not acceptable that consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland are told that they must purchase certain goods from the EU and not from Great Britain. In this regard it is notable that article 16 of the protocol already permits the UK to take unilateral safeguarding measures to ensure that there is no diversion of trade, and the Government must do that.

Thirdly, it is essential that any new arrangements that are negotiated do not constitute a border in the Irish sea between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In line with the Act of Union, there should be no internal trade border in the UK. Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market must be fully restored. Fourthly, new arrangements must give the people of Northern Ireland a say in making the laws that govern them. That guarantee is implicit in article 3 of protocol 1 of the European convention on human rights, which clearly states that where people are subject to laws, they should be able freely to express their opinion on those laws. Northern Ireland does not have that in relation to EU regulations being imposed on it. Fifthly, new arrangements must result in no checks on goods going from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, or from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister gave that commitment on 8 December 2019, and it should be honoured.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): On that point about goods moving from Northern Ireland to GB unmolested and unhindered, was my right hon. Friend as shocked as I was when Retail NI, Manufacturing NI, Ulster Farmers Union and haulage representatives confirmed before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this morning that from January 2022, they will have to put in place documentary evidence of what they are moving from one part of the United Kingdom to the other part of the United Kingdom? Moving those goods does no damage and places no impediment on the European single market. My right hon. Friend must be appalled by that requirement.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend makes the point very powerfully.

Sixthly, new arrangements should ensure that no new regulatory barriers develop between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, unless agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. That commitment was made in paragraph 50 of the joint report by negotiators from the European Union and the United Kingdom Government in December 2017. Our Government sadly failed to honour that paragraph when they concluded the Northern Ireland protocol. We expect that commitment, which was made by the Government, to be honoured.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): On those last two points about no new regulatory barriers and the checks on goods going between GB and NI, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm, as it would be helpful for the House, that there were already checks on animal health, given that the island of Ireland was a single animal health zone? Is he saying that the checks that already existed pre-Brexit are not encompassed by his point, and he is talking about new checks that have come along as a result of us leaving the European Union?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Of course we accept that checks that were in place before Brexit should continue, and goods that are proceeding on from Great Britain through Northern Ireland to the EU may of course have different arrangements. We object to goods that are moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland being subject to new checks under the protocol.

Seventhly, new arrangements must preserve the letter and the spirit of Northern Ireland's constitutional guarantee, set out most recently in the Belfast agreement, which requires in advance the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland for any diminution in its status as part of the United Kingdom. Our consent was not sought for the diminution in our status and the repealing of a key element of the Act of Union that changed our status with the Northern Ireland protocol. To reduce the constitutional status to our having a say in the final step of leaving the United Kingdom would mean that, in effect, it is no meaningful guarantee at all. If the constitutional guarantee for Northern Ireland is to have any meaning, it applies not just to the question of whether we are part of a united Ireland or remain in the United Kingdom. The Belfast agreement is clear that it is about any change to the status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and our consent was not sought and has most certainly not been given.

In conclusion, there is no practical or pragmatic reason why arrangements cannot be put in place that satisfy those tests and prove no meaningful threat to the integrity of the EU single market. We require that Northern Ireland's place within the UK internal market is restored and we expect that the Government will take steps to do that in line with the previous commitments that they have given, from the Prime Minister down. My party will assess any new arrangements against these seven tests. I hope that for the sake of the integrity of the United Kingdom and the people of Northern Ireland we will not be disappointed.

12.45 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for instigating the debate. It is nice

[Simon Hoare]

to see a mainstream debate on the affairs of Northern Ireland taking place on the Floor of the House.

Let us remind ourselves of two things at the start. Lord Frost confirmed to our Committee, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, just a few weeks ago that he negotiated the protocol, he understood the protocol and he signed off the protocol. How people have interpreted one or two parts of it may be surprising, but it is not legitimate for the Government effectively to say, "This was new, it was an impost, it crept up on us." This was a negotiated document between the two parties.

Without the protocol, there would still have to be checks. We are talking about the defence, for want of a better phrase, of an internal market and a single market. Those alternative arrangements, as some called them some little while ago, would, according to HM Revenue and Customs, be likely to be as, if not more, complicated and possibly more costly. For those who may be thinking that, if we get rid of the protocol, everything will go back to being normal, that will not happen. We are all in a new normal now.

This is important because there are a lot of concerns, predominantly among the loyalist community, that this is in some way a stepping stone to a united Ireland or a move to a border poll. Everybody, from the Taoiseach to the Prime Minister—at last week's Liaison Committee, in response to a question from me—to those in Brussels and anywhere else, has to recognise that the integrity of Northern Ireland as an intrinsic and key part of the United Kingdom remains. The protocol does not change that constitutional balance one way or another.

I take the point just made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I have yet to be persuaded that anybody, in their heart of hearts, ever defines their sense of belonging or loyalty by invisible trading arrangements. Citizenship, a sense of belonging and a sense of nationhood are far more powerful and emotive than that.

We should remind ourselves that there are some—there will be none in this House, I know—who refuse to accept the referendum result on the Good Friday agreement itself, and have gone around saying, "Unless we get our way on the protocol and unless it is scrapped". Let us pause there for a moment to say that there is no majority view in support of the scrapping of the protocol. Nobody by the same token is saying that it is perfect; there is scope for change and improvement. But let us not inadvertently fall into the trap of using this debate on the protocol as a Trojan horse to undermine the Good Friday agreement. Everybody knows that, without that bedrock, there can be no progress in Northern Ireland, and none that we have seen over the past several decades.

Business wants to be engaged. Let me say to the Minister, and I look forward to her summing up: let us have that investment conference. Let us maximise those opportunities. Invest Northern Ireland is dealing with 30 requests at the moment. The business engagement forum needs to be formalised with a set agenda and regular meetings.

Trust is so important here. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex talked about the need for the EU to change. I agree in many respects. We need to

see flexibility on goods at risk. We need to see flexibility on the precautionary principle and the differential of how we use laws. It is either illegal unless it is made legal, or legal unless it is made illegal. The benefit of the extensions of the grace periods has illustrated that the single market does not collapse as a result of that. Common sense is required.

I am not here to act as an apologist for the EU, but from all my conversations with them I think the issue is one of trust. They still remain uncertain as to whether Her Majesty's Government are intent upon implementing a reformed protocol using the offices of the Joint Committee. Without that trust or certainty, there can be no progress. We need to switch our mindset from negotiate or renegotiate, to reform and implement. Let us remind ourselves that the Vice President has no mandate to renegotiate. That would have to be given by the member states and any hope for that would come only if we see that trust rebuilt. I therefore urge the Government to have that joint investment conference, build on the trust and formalise business engagement.

The Select Committee heard today from two witnesses. Let me quote both of them. Aodhán Connolly, from Northern Ireland Retail Consortium said: "The most frustrating thing for business in Northern Ireland is we can see the solutions, we just don't see the political will to do them." From the Ulster Farmers' Union, Victor Chestnutt said: "Solutions are sitting there." Well, let us not just let them sit there; let us grab them. Let us make them work and let the twin benefits of access to the UK internal market and the European Union's single market be that blue touch paper that will reignite and light a post-covid Northern Ireland economy where the benefits to business and to citizens can be fully felt.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): To confirm the answer to the question which is being silently asked, there is no mechanism whereby Members can intervene on someone who is speaking virtually. I just ask for patience from hon. Members. Hopefully, we will only have three more days of this arrangement—we all hope.

12.52 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: It is a genuine pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), whose very sensible and pragmatic approach to the issue of the protocol is one I commend to his hon. and right hon. Friends on the Government Benches.

It is remarkable that it is the Prime Minister and Lord Frost who negotiated the protocol. I now read that Lord Frost is saying things like, "I had not really understood the chilling effect of the agreement." We have to ask whether he did understand, really, what he was signing up to, or whether this is now part of political rhetoric and the unfortunate cycle of distrust and increasing mistrust between not just the United Kingdom and the European Union, but the United Kingdom and the United States and even, alas, the population in Northern Ireland. I understand that only 6% of the population in Northern Ireland have any trust in our United Kingdom Government. That is a staggering statistic. On the answer to this, I share the Select Committee Chair's view that we have to rebuild trust in our relationships.

One of the bizarre things is that for an awful lot of industry and commerce in Northern Ireland, the reality is that the world is going on very well. If we cast our minds back to 9 January, I think it was, the *Belfast News Letter* carried an article that quoted the Road Haulage Association saying that we were within five days of our supply chains to Northern Ireland breaking down. We are now in day 208. Those supply chains have not broken down and most businesses are getting on with getting around some of the undoubted issues that arose through the protocol.

Manufacturing Northern Ireland tells me that its members are overwhelmingly in favour of keeping the protocol, not necessarily entirely as is, but as the basis going forward. They do not want to see another big change. The Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently reported in its quarterly economic survey that two thirds of its members believe that Northern Ireland's unique status post EU exit presents opportunities for the region. These are not the cries that we have heard today about business and commerce being savaged by the protocol.

I accept that there are specific circumstances that are difficult. These are technical issues and technical issues require technical answers. Some of that can happen by us agreeing to adopt veterinary standards that are compatible with the EU. That would be a very sensible way forward. It would mean that even chilled meats could travel through Great Britain into Northern Ireland. If we make sure that we have that alignment, that is not necessarily against our interests, not simply with regard to Northern Ireland but in allowing GB produce from our farms to be sold into the rest of the European Union. We have to look for a common-sense solution.

These technical issues can be resolved only if we build back the relationship of trust between Brussels and London, and, as the Chair of the Select Committee said, recognise that we need to extend that climate of trust to all 27 capitals of the European Union countries if we are to go forward. The real tragedy is that the erosion of trust has been built on political advantage in terms of domestic politics by our Prime Minister. He has to turn away from that because it is so dangerous. The threat to the Good Friday agreement does not come through the protocol; it comes through the drip-drip erosion of trust in governance in the United Kingdom on the part of the people of Northern Ireland. The 6% who do trust this Government are now a remarkably small minority. We have to rebuild that trust now. Dial down the rhetoric, Prime Minister, and, yes, dial down the rhetoric in Brussels as well. We must recognise that the erosion of trust is damaging for the United Kingdom not simply in terms of UK-EU relations, and not even simply in the context of Northern Ireland—it is also massively damaging in our relationship with, for example, President Biden. We know that he reported that strong words were spoken advising the UK Government to dial down the climate of antagonism and distrust.

Let us get the technical solutions sorted out. Let us get issues around common veterinary standards sorted out. That would be popular in both GB and Northern Ireland. Let us dial down, as I say, this climate of mistrust. Let us begin to rebuild capacity to have these negotiations on the basis of not public rhetoric and public diplomacy, but the hard work that we expect our diplomats to do in quiet rooms. In that way, we can all move forward.

12.58 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on landing this debate at a very timely time. It is a really important debate that I hope the Government are listening to carefully. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd). I do not entirely agree with his analysis but I do admire his intentions.

I still go to Northern Ireland on a regular basis having been Secretary of State, and shadow Secretary of State before that. I am detecting real concern and a sense of bewilderment in Northern Ireland. Businesses are having trouble getting materials. Basic products are not available in the shops: not just food but simple gardening equipment and other elements of everyday life. My concern is that that sense of bewilderment is turning to anger. That is justified, because the people of Northern Ireland are in a different constitutional place owing to the protocol.

It is not just a Northern Ireland issue. I am the chairman of the Centre for Brexit Policy, which is an all-party think-tank—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Between 2 and 4 July, we commissioned Savanta ComRes to do some national polling and the results are very interesting: 53% of UK adults say it is important that Northern Ireland remains part of UK; 50% say that the protocol is unfair to Northern Ireland and that it is treated differently from the rest of the UK; 57% say that the protocol is a threat to peace and stability in Northern Ireland; and 42% agree that by tying Northern Ireland to the EU single market rules, the protocol acts in a way not to implement Brexit. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) should listen to that comment carefully.

All of that goes back to the issue of the border, which was always hugely exaggerated by those who wanted the UK to stay in the EU. In the last recorded total of all Northern Ireland's sales, 68% were local, 17% went to Great Britain and only 6% went to the Republic of Ireland. Going the other way, the Republic of Ireland's sales to Northern Ireland were only £2.6 billion in 2017—that is 0.16%, or one six-hundred-and-twenty-fifth of total EU exports. It is simply inconceivable that that trade could utterly pollute the single market's integrity. That trade is being conducted by big international companies such as Diageo and Lactalis—highly competent, professional people who already dealt with the currency border, the excise duty border and the VAT border. The border was always massively exaggerated. There were always other solutions, and certainly better solutions than those we have in the protocol.

Let us look at what is happening. The permanent secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland said to the Stormont Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs that Northern Ireland's population

“is under half a percent of that across the European Union, yet the documentary checks...represent one fifth of the equivalent documentation right across the EU.”

A monster has been created around a very limited problem. Everyone should listen carefully to the noble Lord Trimble, who won a Nobel prize and put his whole career on the line to work through the peace agreement that was signed as the Belfast agreement with John Hume. He has pointed out that Northern Ireland has

[Mr Owen Paterson]

2.5 times more customs checks than Rotterdam. When President Biden was here recently, Lord Trimble made it clear in *The Times* that the Good Friday agreement is threatened by the protocol because the constitution has been changed and the vital principle of consent—the basis on which he got the Belfast agreement through—has been breached. It is quite clear that laws are now being imposed on citizens in Northern Ireland on which they have no say.

A couple of days ago, Lord Frost of Allenton, who has manfully tried to make the protocol work, reported to the House of Lords that 800 new pieces of legislation have been dumped on Northern Ireland from the EU. It did not have to be like this. Back in October 2018, I took Lord Trimble and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) to see Michel Barnier and Sabine Weyand. We explained that we would respect the single market. We said, “If we sell goods to the US market, we respect their regulations. If we are to sell into the EU’s single market as a third country, we would always respect the regulations.” That is the way forward. They listened carefully, but, sadly, that approach was not pursued by the then Government.

Lord Trimble helped to write an important paper on mutual enforcement, published recently by the Centre for Brexit Policy. It says, in simple terms, that under UK law, and justiciable in the UK courts, all exports into the EU will meet EU standards and vice versa. All the fuss about regulation would therefore apply only to the tiny number of exports. We are not going to see some Indonesian tyre manufacturer trying to smuggle containers of tyres through to west German car plants from Larne and out through Dublin—that is simply not going to happen. Many of these problems could be sorted out through the concept of mutual enforcement. I take my hat off to Lord Frost, who has really tried to make the protocol work, but the EU has been obtuse and pig-headed and rebuffed every attempt.

When something clearly does not work, is causing damage in Northern Ireland and, as the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) pointed out, is clearly a breach of the Acts of Union, we should recognise that, not fight it. We should not overrule the result of the EU referendum and adopt a whole lot of EU law just to sort out a tiny problem on the Northern Ireland–Republic of Ireland border. Mutual enforcement is the way ahead. Everybody in the debate should respect the views of a Nobel peace prize winner, and that is his solution. I would like to see the Government adopt it.

1.4 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on getting this matter on to the Floor of the House. I also welcome the comments from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the encouragement he has given with the survey results he has put on the record today saying to all the people of the United Kingdom that we are all as one in this. I would say, and I encourage my Conservative colleagues across the House to say, that Brexit cannot be properly done or properly

completed until we resolve the issue of the Northern Ireland protocol, because it is an outstanding matter that does need to be resolved.

Daily, I am horrified whenever parcels arrive from GB to my constituents in Northern Ireland with a label on saying “Northern Ireland” and “foreign parcel”. Coming from post offices in GB to my constituents, this is reminding them day and daily that they are receiving foreign goods in their own country, when they are not; this is about ordinary commerce within the single market of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom has in effect been partitioned by this protocol, and that is why we welcome this debate and why we welcome the fact that it must be fixed.

I must put on record my declaration—and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—that I am currently engaged as part of the commercial case in the High Court against the protocol on behalf of commercial entities in Northern Ireland.

All the litigation, that has been ongoing really will not solve this issue. What we actually need is political determination. The courts of the land are not there to drive this matter forward; it is for this House to do so. This House is sovereign for all of the United Kingdom, and the sooner this House and the Government determine that they are going to change the protocol, the better for us all. We are, in effect, at a fork in the road.

The protocol, of course, contains its own recipe to fix this: under article 16, it can be unilaterally removed where there is seismic social, community and commercial activity detrimental to a part of the United Kingdom. Section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 also allows for it to be changed unilaterally by the Government, because this House is sovereign. So let us urge the Government to use their majority and to use the sovereignty of this House to fix this matter and to get Brexit done, as we all want to see it done, and let us use this House to put in place the mutual enforcement agreements that we know will be better for all of Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy recently wrote to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee saying that he had “significant concern” about the protocol because of the economic divergence that it is clearly creating for British firms in GB trading with British companies in Northern Ireland. He went on to say that this was creating “commercial discrimination”—commercial discrimination because of a protocol that was supposed to help us and that was supposed to give us the best of both worlds. It is not acceptable, and it has got to be changed.

At the heart of this protocol lies confusion. When a President of one of our European neighbours—Monsieur Macron—does not even know and acknowledge that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom how could there not be confusion? The essence of the protocol is not constructive ambiguity. The essence of the protocol has been confusion about Northern Ireland’s place: is it in the EU customs union; is it out of EU territory; is it in UK territory; what is its actual status? That has confused the mix, and we have to make sure we move away from that confusion.

We do not in Northern Ireland have the best of both worlds; we are essentially in a commercial no-man’s land. Let me put some issues to the House on that basis.

One of the last-minute revisions made to the protocol on 10 December last year—one that was shoehorned in under the radar—was aspects of the EU's single-use plastics directive. That means that on top of the already burdensome, costly adaptations that businesses are having to make to continue to sell products in Northern Ireland, regulations will widen even further in January. This will mean that plastics labelling requirements will be imposed on producers for a range of items from wet wipes to drinking cups to tobacco products—a whole host of products that contain plastic—but no transposing regulations have yet been put in place, so we do not know what companies are going to have to do. We now have even more confusion and nonsensical red tape over the trade of wet wipes from GB to Northern Ireland. This will pose incredible problems for Northern Ireland.

Other commercial realities were identified this morning in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, when manufacturing, haulage, retail and farming all came together and gave us the sorry picture that over 77% of their base is still experiencing daily problems with the operation of the protocol. There is an increase in wage inflation and an unacceptable spectre coming down the tracks that will mean Northern Ireland having to put in place even more red tape in January 2022 whenever it comes to putting its goods into GB. The overwhelming consensus is that this is not acceptable. Words have been very good, but we now require action by the Government.

1.11 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: I very much welcome this debate. A lot has been said about the Northern Ireland protocol over recent months. Particular attention has been given to the concerns expressed by Unionists and loyalists, and there has been a focus on street protests and the risk of wider tensions and even violence, but it is worth stressing that this does not reflect Northern Ireland as a whole. Indeed, it does not reflect the majority viewpoint in Northern Ireland politically.

It is fair to say that no one in Northern Ireland particularly likes or wants the protocol, but the majority of people, businesses and elected representatives understand why it is there and why it is necessary to protect the Good Friday agreement. They are not calling for it to be scrapped. Instead, they recognise that there are genuine problems, but they want to make it work through reform and change, and to take advantage of some of the relative opportunities for Northern Ireland from having a footprint in both the UK and EU markets.

The protocol reflects the choices made by the UK Government and Parliament, and also by the DUP, in relation to Brexit. It was not imposed upon the UK; it was a free choice in order to facilitate a choice around Brexit. Those advocating for the protocol to be scrapped need to answer the question as to what their plausible, realistic alternative is. We are seeing a lot of wishful thinking on supposed alternatives, including from a number of speakers today, but alternative arrangements, mutual enforcement and Ireland leaving the single market are nonsensical avenues, all of which have been raised, discussed and dismissed over the past number of years. It is like a trip down memory lane, hearing them all being recycled. We have to get real and focus on the general parameters for getting this sorted.

This is also not a constitutional or identity issue, and those who are framing it as such are making a fundamental error in doing so, as well as backing themselves into a corner from which they will have difficulty extracting themselves. Rather, it should be seen as a genuine economic issue and challenge. The nature of the Union has evolved over the past 200 years. It was never a fixed entity. The fact that we have seen the union with Ireland become the union with Northern Ireland and then seen the Good Friday agreement are key testaments to that change. However, Northern Ireland remains as much a part of the United Kingdom as it did on its creation 100 years ago this year.

There has also been a lot of talk about the issue of consent. I have to say that there was very little consideration of the issue of consent when Northern Ireland was dragged out of the European Union against the wishes of majority of the people there, but if we are talking about consent today, we have to recognise that once again the Government and Parliament have consented to the protocol. The issue of dual consent inside Northern Ireland does not apply in this case, because this is an issue that pertains to what is an excepted matter in terms of the devolved settlement, in that it is a matter of international affairs.

All that said, there is much we can do to make what is otherwise a solid line down the Irish sea into a dotted line. That involves finding as many flexibilities and mitigations as possible, consistent with the respective legal requirements of both the UK and the EU. That must be done by agreement; unilateral action leaves us in a very difficult position, particularly our businesses, which have to trade on a firm legal footing.

Fundamentally, it must be understood that there is a trade-off between the degree of alignment between the UK and the EU, and the level of checks and frictions across the Irish sea. The solutions do not lie simply in pushing the boundaries in relation to the protocol. In many respects, the trade and co-operation agreement is a minimal trade deal, especially in relation to non-tariff barriers. The UK has the option of making supplemental agreements with the European Union, including a veterinary agreement.

That is imperative, not just to address the issue across the Irish sea but to help all UK agrifood exporters to the EU, who are currently suffering from major drops in sales. Many independent sovereign states have concluded veterinary agreements with the EU, and so can and should the UK. Every MP who today professes concern for Northern Ireland but at the same time insists on Brexit purity needs to reflect very strongly on this. A Swiss-style deal would be optimal, but there are other options. I call for much responsibility and creativity in this regard from both the UK and the EU.

However, in reaching an outcome, there is one key ingredient: trust. That is a particular challenge for the UK Government, who face a trust paradox. Flexibility and pragmatism requires the EU to trust the UK as and when we seek to bend the rules to accommodate the particular challenges facing Northern Ireland, but so far we have seen the Government fail to honour existing agreements, make unilateral moves, and even have legal action taken against them. Next week, we are expecting another statement from Lord Frost in relation to unilateral actions.

[Stephen Farry]

Indeed, we have seen Lord Frost and others seek to rewrite history and deny the reality of what they negotiated and signed up to regarding the protocol, and we have seen mixed signals, with acknowledgement on the one hand of the need to fix and work the protocol, and the suggestion on the other hand that article 16 could be invoked and the protocol suspended or even ditched. That is not viable and would bring huge consequences for the UK.

1.17 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) [V]: The United Kingdom left the EU lawfully and democratically under our own constitutional arrangements by sovereign Acts of Parliament, including a referendum, all based on our fundamental internal domestic law of sovereignty under our own unwritten constitution. The EU has always known that.

We left the EU and the European Communities Act 1972, in the light of previous centuries of democratic self-government and contribution to European peace, because of long-standing concerns about European integration, undemocratic majority voting for law making behind closed doors without even a transcript, EU regulations incompatible with our desire for competitive global trading, and awareness that there has never been a level playing field.

Our sovereign Acts of Parliament are Acts of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. They cover trading co-operation, withdrawal itself, and the Northern Ireland protocol, which was made during parliamentary paralysis in 2019 before the last general election. There is also, of course, the Good Friday agreement, which is important. It is in the mutual neighbourly interests of the United Kingdom and the EU to recognise that we have left the EU and are no longer in its legislative and judicial sphere.

Crucially, in addition to article 16, section 38(2)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom passed by a large majority—what is known as the “notwithstanding” section—expressly enacted, after the protocol was made, that we are able to pass our own primary legislation to override the withdrawal agreement and the protocol should Parliament so decide, notwithstanding those instruments. That is within our sovereign constitutional framework of national interest and the constitutional and territorial integrity of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and to maintain peace and stability.

Indeed, Mr Lauterpacht and other great authorities have made it abundantly clear that, as far as they are concerned, international law and the Vienna convention include provision for terminating treaties and for recognising fundamental errors in their composition and implementation. Section 38, therefore, is consistent with clear universal recognition of our fundamental internal constitutional domestic law of sovereignty and fully respects international law. It is in our mutual interests, therefore, with mutual enforcement, to protect the constitutional integrity of the UK and to maintain trade stability and order, and to protect the peace process, as is clearly stated in the legal instruments. We also need to do that, as has been stated, given the unique political circumstances of the constitutional and political situation in Northern Ireland.

The Government will be well aware of all this and, I believe, will not be deflected from insisting on our sovereignty when the EU persists in its current attitudes. Therefore, I urge the Government to continue negotiations in the short term, bearing in mind what I and others have said in this debate, and mindful of the necessity in our national interest to take such action as is our right if the EU does not alter its current approach, as Madame von der Leyen has previously indicated repeatedly, along with the leaders of some of the member states, in a way that is consistent with how the protocol should be interpreted.

1.21 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I am grateful to the Members who tabled the motion.

The rigorous implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol would be economically disastrous for Northern Ireland and an affront to Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. Concerns about the protocol are not limited to Unionists in Northern Ireland, but are shared by businesses and consumers from right across the community. For the sake of Northern Ireland, the protocol cannot stand and must be superseded or replaced. With the Government stating that they will announce their plans for the protocol before the summer recess, I hope this will be the last time that many—indeed, any—of these arguments need to be rehearsed.

Unfortunately, discussions of the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol and Brexit have too often been characterised by fundamental misapprehensions, which have in part led to the present difficulties. It has been said so often that Brexit or any hardening of the border with the Republic of Ireland is a breach of the Belfast agreement that people could be forgiven for believing it. Some have made these claims out of ignorance, but it is hard to believe that others could be given such a fool's pardon. No matter how many times such sentiments are expressed by those in Ireland, the EU, the United States or even this House, it does not make them true. To those who make such claims, I ask one simple question: what specific provision in the agreement does Brexit or a border hardened in any way offend against?

In the High Court in Belfast in 2019, Lord Justice McCloskey made it clear that Brexit was not contrary to the Belfast agreement, nor did the agreement require a customs union or continued regulatory alignment. It is not Brexit but the protocol that offends against Northern Ireland's constitutional guarantee in the Belfast agreement. Yet there is barely a mention, by those who were prepared to weaponise the Belfast agreement against an imaginary breach, when a real one is evident. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the prospect of a border on the island of Ireland is being cynically used by the EU.

I have no greater wish to see a hard border in the island of Ireland than anyone else, but the fact is that there is no realistic prospect of such a border. Politically, no one wants it; it would be difficult practically; and even from an EU perspective it is not necessary to protect the integrity of the single market. For three reasons, it is clear that even the EU does not believe that the Irish sea border is not required to protect its single market. First, the grace periods have operated without any obvious damage to the single market. That

demonstrates that the application of single market laws for goods is not necessary, and is a political choice, not a law of nature.

Secondly, article 16 of the protocol agreed by the European Commission makes provision for unilateral steps to be taken by the EU where, for example, there has been a diversion of trade. Given the low threshold for such intervention, it must have been within the contemplation of the EU that certain safeguarding steps would be required that presumably would not have resulted in a hardening of the Irish border.

Thirdly, the EU agreed a consent mechanism for the Northern Ireland Assembly—although it was completely unacceptable from a Unionist perspective—that could see articles 5 to 10 cease to have effect. Again, it must have been assumed that a lack of consent for these provisions would not result in the restoration of a border on the island of Ireland.

The reality is that there are solutions that allow the EU to protect its single market in a sensible and pragmatic way that is consistent with the economic integrity of Northern Ireland and does not require a border on the island of Ireland. If the EU is not prepared to take such a course, it is incumbent on our Government to prioritise the interests of this country over the unrealistic demands of the European Union.

Today, this House has had the opportunity to debate the protocol, but the real test for this Government and their commitment to the Union will come in the next week. Only then will we know whether their words are met by their actions.

1.26 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing it; it is long overdue, but through his persistence we have achieved it.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). Before I get on with my own thoughts, I want to pick up on something she said. She is quite right that if anyone reads the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, they will see, first and foremost, that the border is not specifically mentioned in it. We have had all the wonderful great and good wandering around demanding that the agreement stand, when in fact the border is never once mentioned. Secondly, there has always been a border—my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) has made the point that there is a border for VAT, excise and currency. The whole point that the hon. Member for Upper Bann makes is right, and it stands, but that is the bit that has gone missing.

The more something is said and the bigger the lie, the more people believe it—but it has been a lie from start to finish, which has meant that there has been no rational discussion of exactly what will happen under the protocol and thereafter. The protocol itself has failed to support the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, is creating division and does not really keep an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Lord Trimble has been quoted several times. I have to say that it is only in this country that a Nobel peace prize winner is not really given great distinction.

Interestingly, when we took Lord Trimble to Brussels, he was treated with the utmost respect; when he spoke, Mr Barnier and everybody else fell silent and agreed with him. He said that the arrangements that needed to be in place were those that I will come to later—essentially, mutual enforcement. As he says, not only does the protocol “shatter Northern Ireland’s constitutional relationship with the UK,” as has been referred to, but it subverts the very agreement that they keep on saying that they want to preserve: the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is breaking that agreement and directly setting one part of the community against the other because of the way in which it is implemented and because of its very nature.

The protocol simply cannot stand. I disagree with the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare); I do not think that this is just about a group of people picking away at it and trying to object to it on ideological grounds. The reality is that, practically, it does not work—and if it does not work, it has to be radically changed or replaced. I am for replacing it.

The other bit that has come out of this is that the EU has become very partisan. A claim was made that somehow the British Government have to be completely independent of this, but they are the Government of Northern Ireland as well. The reality is that the European Union has become very partial. It has sided with one side of the argument and has driven this as a weapon aimed at the Brexit negotiations from start to finish.

I went with a team of people to see Monsieur Barnier, and, as was said earlier, we presented mutual enforcement to him at the table. That was before the British Government got in a mess over their arrangements in 2018 and came up with that poor resolution. The EU team listened, and we corresponded with them for at least another two to three weeks about where this could go. It was interesting that they were open-minded about it until the UK Government decided that they were going to go for equivalence and all the rest of it, and it did not work. They were very keen on the proposal and knew it would work. This is the point I make: there is another solution that will work.

It is worth reminding those who keep saying, “Well, you all voted for this,” that we voted for it because we knew it was not permanent. That was made clear in every single article: article 184 of the withdrawal agreement, article 13 of the protocol and, importantly, paragraph 35 of the political declaration, which envisages an agreement superseding the protocol with alternative arrangements. The idea that this is somehow set in stone and we only have to work to make it better is an absurdity in itself.

It is something to watch the Irish Foreign Minister almost boasting that diversion of trade is taking place which will only settle the natural order of things through the supply chains—these new realities. This is a breach of article 16, and it is very clear that he has admitted that. That is exactly what is going on, and it should have never been agreed to in the first place.

I want to turn my attention now to what the alternative is. We now have a situation where there are two and a half times more checks at the border in Northern Ireland than there are in Rotterdam. Northern Ireland represents 0.5% of the total population of the EU, but it now has 20% of the EU’s customs checks and more checks than France in total. This is quite ludicrous and

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

an utter disaster. The solution, therefore, is to move to mutual enforcement, where both sides take responsibility for their own requirement to uphold the other side's regulations. We do not need a border, but if prosecutions need to take place, the UK will prosecute those who transgress, and the EU will do the same.

Sammy Wilson: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the most important part of mutual enforcement is that there will no longer be any need for EU law to automatically apply to Northern Ireland, and therefore the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom would not be compromised?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am going to refer to the right hon. Gentleman as my right hon. Friend for this because he is absolutely right. That is the key point about mutual enforcement. We have been working with a group of the brightest and smartest lawyers—experts in European law, experts in trade law and experts financial regulations—and it is quite fascinating. They believe that if we make it an offence to export items in breach of EU law across the north-south border, that becomes our responsibility and the EU's responsibility. That is exactly the point that my right hon. Friend makes. The EU does exactly the same for us, and it does not breach our sovereignty since the exporters are opting to comply with the importers' laws anyway from the moment their goods cross the invisible border.

I simply say in conclusion to my right hon. Friend the Minister that the Government now have to make the point that this is the way forward. They have to present this to the EU, and the EU has to recognise the damage it is doing in Northern Ireland and here in the United Kingdom. I urge her to press forward with these arrangements and agree that this is the solution to an outstanding problem.

1.34 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the opening portion of the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), specifically where it states that he

“supports the primary aims of the Northern Ireland Protocol of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, which are to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its dimensions and to respect the integrity of the EU and UK internal markets”.

We should all support those aims. In this Parliament, we have a historical and moral responsibility in relation to the whole of Ireland, yet we debate Government policy on this matter too little. It is a reminder that both the Good Friday agreement and the protocol are solemn and binding international treaties. From a moral point of view, this country should uphold the treaties that it signs. Supporting our commercial and other self-interests also dictates that we should follow the spirit and letter of these treaties.

I am afraid to say, however, that the Government have not fully upheld either treaty. Please do not just take my word for it—this is what the EU negotiators and the US Government believe. Why else would they issue this country with a formal diplomatic reprimand or a *démarche*? Otherwise, most importantly, it is what parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly believe. They think that this Government are trying to rip up the

Northern Ireland protocol, which is a part of the Brexit treaty. They believe, too, that the Government are behaving recklessly in terms of the effect of undermining the Good Friday agreement. They also think that if loyalists commit violence on the streets of Belfast and in other areas, they believe that they are encouraged by the British Government in their joint aim of tearing up the protocol. What other inference are they supposed to draw when Ministers go to Belfast, meet members of the Loyalist Communities Council and say afterwards that the protocol they signed is not sustainable in its current form?

The motion also talks of upholding the Good Friday agreement in all its dimensions, with which I wholeheartedly agree, but I think we may mean very different things by that. The Good Friday agreement is 23 years old, but large parts of it remain unimplemented. Where is the Bill of Rights that was promised? Where, too, is the recourse to the European convention on human rights in the courts of Northern Ireland that was also promised, or the convention's full incorporation in British law, or the language Act? I could go on.

I fear that opponents of the protocol want to rip out one phrase of the Good Friday agreement regarding not changing the constitutional position without consent, but this cuts both ways. It was the determination of Government Members to have a disastrous Brexit that changed the constitutional position, and it was against the will of the people in Ireland who voted clearly to remain in the EU. Consent was not given. It is this Government who have upset the status quo, this Government who signed the treaty and this Government who now want to change elements they do not like. I am afraid that that is not how treaties work. If they continue to try to have their cake and eat it on the protocol, they will come up against opposition from Labour Members, the EU Commission, President Biden and from the people of Ireland.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister personally negotiated this protocol. He has a personal responsibility to make it work for communities, and the peace process must always come first, yet this Government's actions repeatedly destabilise it. This is a reckless path and they should cease and desist.

1.37 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): If I may, I shall begin by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for so ably introducing this very important debate and by agreeing with him that we should thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding valuable time for it, especially as our Prime Minister is now due to meet senior members of the Irish Government on these matters only next week.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex has pointed out, the Northern Ireland protocol contains a safeguarding clause in article 16 in the event that the protocol is not working as intended. Either party can activate article 16, in which case they then have to proceed under the provisions of annex 7. It should be remembered that the European Commission, not the UK Government, invoked article 16 on the evening of 29 January 2021. If the rumours were to be believed, Dublin was not even consulted about this action. Dublin found out from London, not from Brussels.

The supreme irony is that, in doing so, the European Commission, which took the decision, effectively sought to create a hard border on the island of Ireland for medicines and, crucially, vaccines, despite having sworn blind for three years, during what I describe as the battle for Brexit in this House, that that was absolutely the last thing that they ever wanted to do. I am sure that the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who has helpfully reassured us this afternoon that he is not an apologist for the European Union, will be the first to acknowledge that.

Invoking article 16 in that way was, I think it is fair to say, widely derided as a mistake, and the European Commission withdrew it by the cold light of morning. The Commission was really doing it for internal reasons, because of, among other things, the slow roll-out of vaccines, unfortunately, on the continent; nevertheless, the fact that it did it, when it clearly should not have done, means that our Prime Minister is absolutely entitled, as he has said many times, to keep article 16 on the table if the European Commission refuses to be reasonable in renegotiating the Northern Ireland protocol, or even replacing it.

One thing, though, that all protagonists in this debate seem to agree about is their willingness and, in fact, strong desire to uphold the 1998 Good Friday agreement, which has indeed been crucial in bringing peace and stability to Northern Ireland for over two decades. It is fundamentally based on the principle of consent, as the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and his colleagues have reminded us, but it is now as plain as a pikestaff that the Northern Ireland protocol no longer enjoys the consent of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland.

If the House will not take that from me, it could take it from the new leader of the DUP, whom I wish all the best with his onerous responsibilities at this time. If the House will not take it from him, it could take it from the Nobel prize winner Lord Trimble, who has pointed out, importantly in this context also to audiences in the United States, who follow these matters closely, that the Northern Ireland protocol no longer enjoys the consent of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. Very wisely, in my view, he has recommended a system of mutual enforcement as a far better alternative.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does my right hon. Friend recognise that Lord Trimble is not just a Nobel peace prize winner, but one of the two architects of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, the other of whom is now dead, and therefore the greatest authority on what is going on? I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Is it not the reality, therefore, that those who had nothing to do with it now say they are experts, when the real expert says that it is exactly what it is—damaging?

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Lord Trimble helped to create the Good Friday agreement, at great risk not just to his political career but arguably to his own life, and not least because of that he is respected around the world. If people will not listen to me or even, though I find it difficult to believe, to my right hon. Friend, they should listen to David Trimble.

In February 2021, the European Research Group, which I have the privilege to chair, produced a detailed report on the Northern Ireland protocol, entitled “Reuniting the Kingdom: How and why to replace the Northern Ireland Protocol”. A copy has been lodged in the Library of the House of Commons. The executive summary of that document says:

“The European Commission’s bungled invocation of Article 16, regarding vaccines, in late January 2021 has, rightfully, been widely criticised. Nevertheless, it has created a unique political opportunity for the United Kingdom Government to seek to negotiate a replacement of the Protocol with alternative arrangements, based on the concept of ‘Mutual Enforcement’...If the EU remains unwilling to contemplate this, the U.K. Government should retain the option of invoking Article 16 itself and/or consider instigating domestic legislation, to replace the Protocol, via utilising Section 38 (The Sovereignty Clause) of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act, 2020.”

We want to renegotiate this, and we hope that the European Commission and member states will be reasonable. After all, it swore blind that it would never remove the backstop, but after three months of negotiation it did, so there is a clear precedent for it. We would rather do this in a spirit of mutual negotiation, but I am reminded of the words of the late Baroness Thatcher, who famously said: “Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley”. Baroness Thatcher may no longer be with us, but her spirit lives on. We must retain Northern Ireland as a fundamental part of the United Kingdom. If, when push comes to shove, that means that the Northern Ireland protocol has to go, so that the vital principle of consent within the Good Friday agreement can be maintained for the peace and wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland, then so be it.

1.45 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: After all these months, it is hard to know what is left to say on the protocol. It was nobody’s first choice. It was the last thing left on the table after a series of choices made by the UK Government based on votes made by the Conservative Party and the DUP. Having a very hard Brexit and frictionless trade are regrettably not both possible, and they never have been, and it is dishonest to pretend otherwise. People and businesses in Northern Ireland do not wish to leave the single market, with all that that would entail. It was discussed for years, and the protocol, voluntarily signed by the UK Government, was the outcome. All that remains to do is calmly, as adults, leaders and good neighbours, work through the challenges that Brexit has generated, streamline processes where possible and find workarounds where not.

I am pleased at least to see commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement on the face of this motion, because there are those who never supported it and who are only too keen to try and throw the agreement baby out with the protocol bathwater. Members have referred to the right hon. David Trimble. My party colleague and former leader John Hume also got the Nobel peace prize, as well as the Gandhi peace prize and the Martin Luther King peace award, and he knew a thing or two about interdependent relationships and statecraft. I urge all Members to widen their sources on this issue.

Brexit has, as the Social Democratic and Labour party cautioned for years, sharpened lines around identity, sovereignty and borders that we worked hard to soften.

[Claire Hanna]

It has created perceived winners and losers in a place that lives or dies on compromise. The SDLP is very alive to the sense of many, particularly Unionists, that this is a parity of esteem issue, but we also see how those fears have been exacerbated and exploited, with the protocol being used as a receptacle for decades of grievance and frustration about everything from power sharing to minority languages.

In all the discussion about consent, it is also important to reiterate that the Brexit that many who have spoken on this motion seek, has never been consented to by people in Northern Ireland. Our constitutional status is a matter for people here, by referendum, and it is a dangerous conspiracy theory to pretend that that is being changed over their heads.

We all have our views on Brexit and its outworkings, and goodness knows we have discussed it plenty, so I want to reflect on the views expressed by some of those for whom this is not just a hobby horse, but who are dealing with the consequences—people in the business community and people working on peacebuilding and picking up the pieces of this fallout.

This morning at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee we heard from representatives of agriculture, logistics, retail and manufacturing. None of them loves the protocol either, but they all want it to work because they know that there are no alternatives. All spoke about changes that the UK Government and the EU could make to their own choices and behaviour to ease the burden. Crucially, they all made it clear that the best solution available was an EU-UK veterinary and sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. If the aim of those who brought this motion really is to protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and to protect the UK internal market and to protect against a hard border, that is the only and obvious solution. Business representatives could not have been clearer about that, and no Northern Ireland Executive party opposes it. It would be a rational choice for a sovereign UK to make for itself in its own political and economic interests.

Last week, our Committee heard from women working in peacebuilding and community work in rural and urban communities—from people of all political outlooks and none. Their words were a rebuke to all of us in politics. Elaine Crory of the Women's Resource and Development Agency spoke of a perception among the women that she works with that these issues are not in the hands of people

“that are thinking primarily of the effects...on me, my community and my family. It is in the hands of people driven by a particular perspective that...does not care about the effects it might have on me”.

Eileen Weir of the Shankhill Women's Centre spoke openly about the challenges that Brexit and the protocol are bringing to identity, to community relations and to domestic budgets, but she wanted to hear more about the positives, too. She spoke about the need to

“encourage industry to come into Northern Ireland, to give our young people a future. We need hope within these communities...If we are able to attract industry...and fix the outstanding issues with the single market trade. There are ways of fixing it.”

However, we are only hearing the negatives, because many, including the UK Government and the DUP, are only looking for the negatives and doing nothing to

harness the first economic unique selling point we have had in the history of Northern Ireland by being at the crossroads of the EU and UK single markets.

Elaine also said:

“When you hold a microphone out and point it directly at the people who oppose it...but you hold it only in that direction, you get the impression that everyone opposes it, when...they do not.”

Rachel Powell warned of

“outright manipulation of working-class communities across Northern Ireland.”

and said that the unrest we saw in April was not organic. She spoke further about the attacks and risks for those who tried to counteract those narratives. Kate Clifford of the Rural Community Network spoke about the challenge of upholding a culture of lawfulness when senior politicians such as the Secretary of State stand up and say that they are willing to break international law. She said:

“The difficulty for us is when the language of Parliament and the language of Governments is one of brinkmanship and posturing, and that is almost testosterone-driven. That then plays out in our communities... My plea to...all who are doing the negotiation is that, although it makes great headlines to talk about the ‘great British banger’ and all of that, the reality is that there are lives at stake on the ground...and it is not fun.”

It is not fun at all. It is deeply worrying to all of us in Northern Ireland who value cohesion and economic and political stability. The best way to address that is an SPS arrangement, and the second best way is not to manufacture a crisis, but to accept responsibility and the choices, be honest with people, engage with businesses and the EU, and make the situation work.

1.51 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this important debate, which highlights the problems sadly afflicting the people of Northern Ireland as a consequence of the protocol. As he pointed out, the purposes of the protocol ostensibly are benign. The problem is the effect that the application of the protocol is having on the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom, and the day-to-day lives of the people of Northern Ireland.

It should not be necessary to state this, but it is fundamental to remember that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. It became so as a consequence of the Act of Union 1800, article 6 of which effectively provides that citizens of Great Britain and Northern Ireland shall be entitled to the same privileges in respect of trade. I am conscious of the proceedings currently going on in Belfast, but it is fair to say that equal treatment and trade with the rest of the UK, as a consequence of the 1800 Act, became a constitutional right of Northern Ireland citizens, and so it should be.

There is little doubt that the European Union is insisting on an over-assiduous interpretation of the protocol, which is resulting in disruption to trade and everyday life in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, and arguably even more worryingly, the protocol is imperilling the Belfast agreement, which for more than 20 years has been the guarantee of peace in Northern Ireland. It must be perfectly apparent to the European Union that the officious, over-punctilious application of the protocol is having those effects.

We are not talking about major movements of goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland; by and large we are talking about small movements of goods, frequently for personal consumption, which are necessary for the continuation of life in Northern Ireland. This is already having a profound and adverse effect on the stability of civil society in Northern Ireland, which must be a matter of huge concern.

As the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) pointed out, the Belfast agreement is being threatened by the EU's purist approach to the protocol. Even more ironic is the fact that the EU justifies that approach by saying that it does so in order to defend the Belfast agreement. There have, of course, been some extensions to the grace periods provided for in the withdrawal agreement, but in reality those will be of no long-term benefit, and may result in a permanent diversion of established trade between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

It is fortunate that the protocol itself foresees that such problems may arise and therefore makes provision for addressing them. Article 16 sets up a safeguards procedure, which may be invoked unilaterally by either side in the event that the application of the protocol is leading to

"serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist, or to diversion of trade".

It is clear that those conditions currently prevail in Northern Ireland. I therefore also urge the Government to consider very carefully invoking article 16 in order to address and, it is to be hoped, to cure the problem, but this could be avoided if the EU were to adopt a more proportionate approach to the protocol's implementation. The EU might also wish to consider the sensible proposals that are outlined in the excellent document to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) has just referred.

What is absolutely certain is that we simply cannot continue like this. For the good of Northern Ireland, for the maintenance of the Belfast agreement and for the integrity of the Union, this issue must be resolved, and if the EU continues to refuse to co-operate then the only course remaining to the Government is to invoke article 16, and that is what I strongly urge them to do.

1.56 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this debate, and thank him for the continued support that he has given to us in our opposition to the Northern Ireland protocol and the effects that it has had on Northern Ireland.

The protocol, if it continues to exist, is a threat to Brexit. Indeed, that was borne out by the survey carried out last weekend by Savanta, in which 57% of those who were surveyed indicated that they believed that the Northern Ireland protocol was designed to frustrate Brexit. Indeed, 40% of remainers made the same point. It represents a bridgehead that the EU still has on the United Kingdom, a salient from which it will continue to attack our sovereignty and try to claw back the influence that it lost when this country decided to leave the EU.

There are three reasons why the protocol must go. The first is that it will be an ongoing means by which Brexit will be frustrated. We have already seen how the

EU has used the protocol. In fact, it is taking the UK Government to court because the UK Government will not accept the EU's interpretation of the protocol and how it should be implemented to impose the kind of restrictions that the EU demands. The British Government argue that the protocol was meant to deal with only those goods that could be at risk of going into the EU through the Irish Republic; any other goods were not at risk. The EU takes the view that we must prove that goods are not at risk before we can avoid the checks. In other words, 97% of goods that are currently being checked do not need to be checked. They do not go any further than Northern Ireland. Yet the EU is insisting that there is a risk that they might go into the Irish Republic. That is why we have such a high level of checks. There will be future laws that will create more need for restrictions. For example, the EU is bringing in changes to the law regarding the testing of lawnmowers. Lawnmowers could be the next goods that are refused entry into Northern Ireland because they do not comply with EU law, which now applies to Northern Ireland. That is the first reason. If we do not get rid of the protocol, there is always that opportunity for friction in relations between the UK and the EU.

Secondly, I do not care what people have said about there being no constitutional impact. Of course, there is a constitutional impact. The Act of Union has been changed. The Government's own lawyers argued in the courts that the Act of Union was changed—that when this House voted for the protocol it voted impliedly to change one of the fundamental pillars of the Act of Union, which is that there should be unimpeded and equal trade between the different countries of this nation.

The protocol's other constitutional impact has been to take powers from the Northern Ireland Assembly. I find it amazing that those who have representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly, such as the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), can argue that there is nothing to worry about. His party has a Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly and his party has Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, yet 60% of the laws that will govern manufacturing in Northern Ireland will never be discussed, cannot be discussed, and, indeed, have to be implemented by the Northern Ireland Assembly without its having any say. The democratic responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Assembly have been undermined, and, of course, there has been a change in the Act of Union and in the constitutional position, and that contravenes the Good Friday agreement, which says that any change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland has to have the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

The last reason, which people have outlined very well, is the economic impact that all this is having on Northern Ireland. We already see the disruption to trade. Indeed, just this month the Ulster Bank purchasing managers index survey indicated that inflation in Northern Ireland is significantly higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom and about 50% more than the lowest region in the rest of the United Kingdom. Although that does not lie completely at the door of the protocol, it indicates that costs are rising higher in Northern Ireland because of the costs of the protocol—the delay in supply chains, the additional costs in administration and so on.

The protocol has a real impact on the future ability of Northern Ireland to compete. Of course, as laws in

[Sammy Wilson]

Northern Ireland change because EU laws are imposed, that will make it much more difficult for us to compete in our biggest market in GB. There will be those who say that we will get the best of both worlds, with a foot in the EU camp and a foot in the GB camp. That is not true, of course.

Ian Paisley: On the issue of having a foot in both camps, at today's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee the Ulster Farmers' Union made the point that Northern Ireland agriculture is now in a no man's land and does not have the best of both worlds. How does my hon. Friend respond to the fact that that multimillion pound industry, our most successful, is now placed in that terrible situation?

Sammy Wilson: I have heard time and again the argument that we have the best of both worlds, but I have not heard any examples of where being in the EU single market and being cut off from the GB market has had any beneficial effect. Indeed, any examples I have heard of improved trade have been a result of the trade agreement that the whole of the United Kingdom has with the EU. That is all that has ensured that those markets are open to companies in Northern Ireland.

There are alternatives. We have heard them mentioned today, including the mutual enforcement of each other's rules. It is not that it is technically impossible—it is technically possible. It is not that it is economically impossible—it is possible. It is not that it is constitutionally impossible—it is simply a question of whether there is political will. Lord Frost must push this with the EU. There are alternatives that can satisfy both sides and ensure that the single market of the UK is maintained while the single market of the EU is protected.

2.4 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: As long ago as 2016, the British people voted to take back control. We voted to re-establish our sovereignty. The last Parliament sought to subvert and undermine that view, so in 2019, given the opportunity, the British public voted again, by a substantial margin, to take back control. They elected, with a decent majority, a Government of a party pledged to do just that, and this Government moved with speed and purpose to take back control. Unfortunately we still need to debate this matter today because of the conduct of the European Union. There is outstanding business. We still have not taken back proper control in Northern Ireland or over our fishing grounds. I am glad to take the opportunity provided by this Back-Bench debate to urge the Government to fully implement the mandate of the British people given to them both in the referendum and in the general election to take back that control.

I have been angered, but not surprised, by the conduct of the European Union. There is a long history of the European Union antagonising neighbours and potentially friendly states and attempting to use distorted, twisted or simply wrong legal arguments to force things in its own direction against the interests of its neighbours. The EU, in the long negotiations with the UK, always said that it respected the UK's wish to restore its sovereignty and did not wish to deny it, and yet here we have a case where the EU is trying to wrestle our sovereignty away

from us in an important part of our country. The EU always promised to respect our internal market, as is reflected in the agreements that we are currently discussing, yet now it wishes to hijack it. It wishes to divert a substantial proportion of GB-to-Northern Ireland trade to the EU for its purposes against the spirit and the letter of the agreement.

Above all, the EU promised to respect the peace agreement. It went on and on about an imaginary border that the UK had no intention of making more complicated or more difficult, and denying the actual border that was already there that was necessary for its purposes and the UK's purposes for taxation, currency and regulatory matters. It has gone out of its way to antagonise the loyalist majority community in Northern Ireland. That is the very opposite of working with us to promote the peace and to reduce the tensions within those important communities.

So what should we do now? Our Government have shown enormous tolerance, restraint and flexibility. I make no secret of the fact that I would not have shown as much flexibility or restraint as they have done, because I am already very angry about the EU's conduct. But they are right that we need to show that we have tried to negotiate a settlement, and I hope they will have one more go at trying to get the EU to agree to a common-sense approach to these border issues whereby proper trade can be sustained and promoted so that GB-NI trade is also restored and not interfered with by the EU, because that was never part of the idea behind the original agreement.

I hope the Government will have success in these matters, but we do need to be ready now, as soon as possible, to make our own decisions and to make our own moves if the EU is not yet ready to negotiate a sensible solution, of which there are several on offer in this debate and in the discussions that have been held over the years. The agreement makes it clear that we can indeed move unilaterally and assert our sovereignty where our internal market is being violated and trade is being diverted, and where there are other failures by the EU to comply with the agreement, which are now several and manifest.

I say to the Government: do not delay over the whole of this summer. Take action now. The trade is being diverted now. The community sentiments are being disrupted now. The peace agreement is being wobbled now. The sovereignty of the United Kingdom is being deeply infringed now. There is plenty of evidence for that, and a good case can be made in the court of world opinion for those who are interested. But this is, above all, a matter between the Government and the British people—the people of the United Kingdom as a whole. We, the Parliament of the United Kingdom, owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to ensure that they are fully part of our single market and country, just as we wish them, with us, to have friendly and good trading relations with the EU.

But if there has to be a choice between peace and our internal matters on the one hand, and our trade with the EU on the other, of course we must put Northern Ireland, peace and the integrity of our country first, whatever threats the EU may make. The EU is the disrupter of trade; the UK is the promoter of free trade worldwide. The EU is the one that is doing harm to the constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland. We must be rock-fast in our support for the people of

Northern Ireland, for the constitution of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and for a good solution that allows the restoration of our internal market.

2.11 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is a privilege to take part in today's debate on an issue of profound importance to the future not just of Northern Ireland but the rest of the United Kingdom. I appeal to Members to—to paraphrase the President of the United States—dial down the rhetoric a little and listen to the many contributions that we have heard from hon. Members from Northern Ireland about the importance of making the protocol work for the people of Northern Ireland. Listening to them, I am reminded of how much the people of Northern Ireland have endured and I feel perhaps more strongly than ever that it is our responsibility, on this issue but also every issue, to do whatever we can to support them in avoiding any further suffering of any kind. That is why, as I will explain, the Liberal Democrats believe that, despite its faults, we have to defend and make the protocol work.

The unique circumstances in Northern Ireland and the absolute necessity of protecting the Good Friday agreement demanded something special and deserved special attention on our withdrawal from the European Union. The reality of Brexit is that it was always going to mean changes—a border somewhere, new arrangements to deal with. What we have in the Northern Ireland protocol is an agreement that, as many Members have pointed out, is deeply flawed. Those on both sides involved in creating it must not only recognise their responsibility for it, but do what they can to mitigate and alleviate the issues that have been raised by hon. Members from Northern Ireland today.

While the Government might wish to, they cannot deny that having to deal with this is the inevitable outcome of the decision to leave the customs union. However, focusing now on blame and recriminations will help nobody. While we might all have doubts and complaints about the protocol, we have to recognise that it was, as other Members have said, the least worst option left on the table. Most significantly, the protocol protects the Good Friday agreement, which is paramount.

Within the protocol is a commitment that it should have as little impact as possible on the everyday lives of communities in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. We have already seen clearly demonstrated how difficult that is in the unique circumstances that I have spoken about for businesses and consumers. We have heard the frustration of farmers and food producers, but hon. Members have also mentioned that Ulster farmers say that there is a solution there and they want it to work. I believe it is up to us to support them in that and ensure that they get that solution, not just for the farmers but for all businesses and all the people of Northern Ireland.

It is also undeniable that there are issues for businesses in the rest of the UK in trading with Northern Ireland, and we have figures showing that trade has fallen. Some blame that on the resultant problems with the protocol. There is also the thorny issue of the veterinary agreement, which is one not just for the protocol or people in Northern Ireland, but one that must be addressed for the good of all UK agrifood producers.

We must do this in a positive way. We must do it in a way that supports the people of Northern Ireland and ensures that we move forward. We should focus on nothing else but finding workable, pragmatic solutions, not just for the sake of the people of Northern Ireland, but for the future of the United Kingdom. We as the Liberal Democrats hope that the UK Government will do everything they can to pragmatically reflect what we have heard today and the unique circumstances. Let us be clear: we do not believe that we should seek to renegotiate, but the UK Government and the European Union should be working to implement in good faith. We know that the EU needs to protect the integrity of its internal market and customs union, and Northern Ireland and its businesses too need clarity and, as I have said, pragmatic solutions, but most of all we need trust. We need everyone to agree as many flexibilities and mitigations as possible.

Northern Ireland and its people have faced and overcome many challenges in past decades. We must ensure that on this one we give them the utmost support and find the pragmatic way forward that addresses the issues in the way they wish to see them addressed.

2.15 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con) [V]: This debate is about the future and we should focus on that, not the past. Article 6 of the Northern Ireland protocol states that the Joint Committee of the EU and the UK shall adopt appropriate facilitations that will aid the functioning of the UK's internal market. The EU could agree to expand the trusted trader scheme. It could agree to use the simplifications that are available under its union customs code. It could agree that the performance of SPS checks and controls should in the main take place within firms' facilities. It could agree product-by-product agreements that could streamline the need for checks based on mutual recognition, such as the EU has with nations such as New Zealand. That is possible and can be made even more secure, as we have heard, by concepts such as mutual enforcement. There is no need for regulatory alignment by the UK and that will not be accepted in either the short or the long term.

Insisting on alignment unreasonably stops the reaching of agreement on facilitation, which is the EU's legal obligation. Diversion of trade, as we have heard, is contrary both to the terms of the Northern Ireland protocol and to the spirit of the Good Friday agreement, so is the now explicitly stated aim of the previous Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland to use the EU's diversion of trade in Northern Ireland as a means to achieve a united Ireland. Many in the world are aware of the EU's regular attempts at regulatory imperialism and do not find it reasonable. I ask: is this reasonable in the context of Northern Ireland and the sensitivity there of needing to respect all communities' desires?

Would it be reasonable for Canada to insist that the US aligned to Canada's regulations in order to enable Alaskan goods to move into the Yukon or British Columbia? Would it be reasonable to hope that such a policy would lead to Alaska being united with Canada? I would say no, as I hope most reasonable people in the world would.

I hope the EU will change its stance, be reasonable and make the Northern Ireland protocol work, while respecting the fact that the UK will, as a sovereign

[Mr Marcus Fysh]

nation, not take its regulation from the EU. If it will not do so, the UK would be within its rights and have no real world option other than, in good faith, to take realistic and reasonable unilateral action to implement facilitations, in the interests of all in the island of Ireland, which help the EU and the UK to preserve their internal markets.

2.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on setting the scene and on all right hon. and hon. Members on their incredibly important, vital and very detailed contributions.

Where do I start? How do I condense my thoughts into the short time that has been allotted to me? What fresh words do I use to elaborate on the terrible deal that has been made for Northern Ireland that I have not used on the 21 other times I have raised this issue in the House in the last number of months? What can I say to ensure that the intelligent and respected Members grasp what we as a party have warned about and argued against since the inception of the Northern Ireland protocol?

Because the title of the debate is “Northern Ireland Protocol”, I will give some examples of the issues that have affected my businesses. Small businesses have been unable to order stock from the mainland and unable to source pet supplies, and they are paying additional fees to the companies that will send the goods to Northern Ireland. A local discount shop owner told me that every order has an additional £30 administration cost. That does not sound like much, but, as his profit margin on a £1 good is 15p, he must sell an additional £200 of goods to pay for the Northern Ireland protocol fee.

Ask any importer and they will say that the increase in container costs from China, which range from \$2,800 to \$14,700, has seen prices increase to cover the difference to ship goods from 55p to 75p. That is difficult for businesses as it is. They try to absorb costs if possible, but Northern Ireland businesses are under additional pressure due to the insidious protocol. While big stores such as Tesco and Asda have used their exemption to continue to supply pet food and treats, smaller high street businesses have lost another income stream.

Does that feel like the best of both worlds? It does not to Cotters in Newtownards and so many other decent businessmen that have survived covid, only to fall victim possibly to the outworkings of what was proposed to be a paper exercise only. That is what we were told. Seven months in, businesses are in a worse position, not a better one. So, too, is the constituent who went to order a knee support on Amazon Prime day, only to be told that, as they live outside the recognised zone, the supplier would not send it to them. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) gave an example of that earlier. My constituent must therefore purchase knee supports that cost an extra £9 due to their postcode. It does not feel like a better position for them, does it?

We think next of those who want to enjoy a staycation on the beautiful shores of Strangford, or of course anywhere in Northern Ireland. This guy is from across

the water. He would come to my constituency regularly with his dog. His words sum up perfectly what the Northern Ireland protocol has done. He says:

“I write to you as a UK citizen who enjoys holidaying in Northern Ireland with my pet dog. This year, despite moves by the Northern Ireland Minister Edwin Poots to withhold checks at ferry ports until October, it would seem that I still must be in possession of certificates for rabies and tapeworm, which haven’t been recorded in the United Kingdom since 1922 at a total cost in excess of £200. Therefore I am not prepared to obtain these and I am unable to get a definitive answer to my question, namely, ‘Can I travel with my dog without the said certificates?’...This really will do much harm to Northern Ireland tourism.”

It does not feel better to him. Nor, indeed, does it feel better to my local economy, where he would have come on holiday. It would have benefited from his bed nights and spend in local shops and restaurants.

It does not feel better to the Unionist who has felt the abandonment—I say that respectfully—of the Government like at no other time in living memory. It is a harder pill to swallow when we have a Government who proudly state their belief in this United Kingdom. That is not a reflection on those who have spoken, because they are committed to the Union. Unfortunately, it has to start at a higher level.

I have not got time to give all the examples, but there are many others from businesses in clothes, food, farm machinery, cars, steel and engineering as well as nurseries and farmers. There are even individuals who used to order products but now cannot, or find the cost to be prohibitive. It is a difficult position for people when their own Government are a party to severing ties that affect not simply their business and income but their constitutional position. That causes those loyal to the Queen and Crown to ask why they cling to that when their loyalty is not reciprocated. The sacrifice of Ulster to the slavish demands of Europe engaged in petty warfare is clearly an acceptable sacrifice to make.

This is absolutely not the best of both worlds—unless that world is the eradication of the Union. For those who cherish the Union and honour the blood shed to stand against terrorism, and for the democratic right of the people of Ulster to determine their nationality, this is not the best of any world whatsoever. I have deliberately not referenced bangers from Bangor, although I could, because people in my constituency work for the company in Bangor that produces sausages. They are also on the frontline. I stand by the phrase “we are better off out”, but the preface of this is that we are better out together, and that is what I want to see—we are a package deal.

I am asking Government once more to put into action their phrase, “stronger together” and, for that to happen, to trigger article 16. Save the day in this Chamber and they will have the support of the Unionist community. Stop the European nonsense, allow Northern Ireland her rightful standing as an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland once more, and give us the same rights in Northern Ireland as the rest of the United Kingdom—parity and equal rights for all.

2.24 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for choosing this debate. Something I have learned in my time in this House is that the importance of the Back Benches—and the voices on them—is not as well appreciated outside the House as it

is within. Of course, I pay my compliments to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this debate, which is of great importance. Of course it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

For hon. and right hon. Members' interest, I am the chairman of the Conservative Union Research Unit. We are a Back-Bench group and we were formed for one simple purpose: to strengthen the Union. I speak here in my capacity as the Member for Aberconwy, but I think that is an important interest to declare. We are of course delighted that the Government share our interest in strengthening the Union.

Our interest then, to be clear, is in the Union. I differentiate that from the protocol, important though that is—and, indeed, it brings us here today—and from the Belfast agreement, again, important though that is. My comments, therefore, will focus on the Union and the impact of the protocol on the Union. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) referred earlier to the Good Friday agreement as the bedrock. I suggest that the bedrock is the Act of Union of 1800, which has been an enduring cornerstone of this United Kingdom. Indeed, we stand here in this Parliament—the Parliament of this United Kingdom—today.

Interest in the Union of course extends beyond any party; it is not the possession of any one party. I note the contributions from many different parts of the House to the debate today and I am encouraged by that. But on this side of the House we are of course the Conservative and Unionist party. If we are not concerned with the Union, then what are we?

The group I chair has over 80 Back-Bench Members, each of us active on account of the Union to promote it in this House and among our constituents. So when we heard Mr Justice Colton agree with Government counsel that article VI of the Act of Union had been impliedly repealed by the protocol, Members can imagine our concern. It is, as Madam Deputy Speaker said earlier, a matter of national concern and a matter for the whole of the UK to take note of.

I acknowledge the complexity of this situation and these circumstances. I also acknowledge the mechanisms wisely placed within the protocol for remedying its shortcomings and the considerable efforts of Lord Frost and others in Government to do so. But in the light of Mr Justice Colton's remarks, I am bound by duty and urged by many to ask: what is the Government's plan for remedying that change to our Union? If not in this House, where are we to consider this, and if not at this time, in the light of his remarks, then when? I would be grateful if the Minister gave us some direction in her response to this.

2.28 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Can I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this debate, otherwise we would not be here, and to the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time for us to have this debate on the Floor of the House, so that we can debate these important issues and of course listen to the Minister's response on behalf of the Government?

Having listened to the debate, I think the points I would want to make are these. The first point, which has been made by others, but I think was not really debated in an even way during the Brexit debate, is that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has to be supported by both communities in Northern Ireland. I had a sense during the debate that, certainly from the EU's perspective, an enormous amount of weight was perfectly understandably put on the border, or rather the lack of a physical border, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and on the views of the nationalist community, but there was not an enormous amount of focus from the EU on the views of the Unionist community and the border, or the lack of one, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In this debate, we are trying to redress that balance and reinforce the fact that for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement to be maintained—it is my strong view that it should be, and I know that is the Government's view—it has to command the support of both communities in Northern Ireland.

The danger with the Northern Ireland protocol is that it potentially puts at risk the support of one community, which could fatally undermine the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and that is in the interests of nobody except the men of violence. That is why it is really important that we address this issue. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said, the warnings that Lord Trimble set out should be taken very seriously. He is a man who put not just his reputation but his life at risk to deliver that agreement, so we should listen to his words. He knows the power of words and will have chosen them with care. That is the importance of that.

I do take seriously the EU's concerns about its single market, but we need to focus on what is the actual risk to the single market, not the theoretical risk. It seems to me that the EU is concerned largely about a theoretical risk that does not actually exist, partly because of the geography. It is not reasonable to assume that physical products would move from Great Britain or Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and then be re-exported from the Republic of Ireland into the rest of the European Union in volumes that would significantly damage the single market. The key word here is "proportionate". It is about ensuring that any measures that the EU wants in place to protect its single market are proportionate not to the theoretical risk to the single market but to the actual risk. Several of my hon. Friends, on both sides of the House, have set out clearly that the checks and controls in place between Great Britain and Northern Ireland are simply not proportionate to the actual risk involved. That is something that the Government need to address with the European Union.

I note that in the justifications for using article 16 that, although serious economic, societal and environmental difficulties have to be liable to persist to allow the Government to use that article, diversion of trade simply has to exist at any point. I certainly think the Government should not take that option off the table in order to secure agreement from the European Union. I would prefer us to reach agreement. It is much better if we can reach agreement and have something that both sides wish to enforce, but in order to get a better outcome we must not take the unilateral option off the table.

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend kindly referred to me earlier and, far more importantly, to Lord Trimble. Does he agree that, although there are often risks in doing something, in this situation there are also risks in not doing something? If we do not address the serious discontent in one community in Northern Ireland, there is a real risk, as he hinted, that people with a dark past will seek to exploit this for their own ends and use violence rather than democratic debate to advance their objectives, which are not in the interests of the Good Friday agreement.

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend puts it very well. There are serious risks here, which is why we need to address the perfectly reasonable concerns that many people have in Northern Ireland.

It would be helpful if the Minister indicated when the Government will set out their thinking—obviously, there is not long to go before the recess—and whether that will be announced in such a way as to give us the chance to question Ministers. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), who leads the Democratic Unionist party, set out its checklist for how it is going to test any proposals that the Governments bring forward. It would be helpful to know—I do not expect the Minister and the United Kingdom Government to completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman—

Jim Shannon: Why not?

Mr Harper: Well, they may. My request was going to be for the Minister to set out which of the tests that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley set out the Government agree with and which they perhaps do not. Listening to his objectives, I do not think that that list can have come as an enormous surprise, so it would be helpful to get a bit of a steer about the extent to which there is some commonality.

My final point is that, very clearly, as several of my hon. and right hon. Friends have said, there was envisaged in the protocol and the political declaration the idea that the protocol was not a permanent solution but a temporary solution. Certainly, both sides—the British Government and the EU—said that they would take seriously alternative arrangements that could be put in place to enable businesses in Northern Ireland to have unfettered access to the Great Britain market, but just as importantly, to enable businesses in Great Britain to trade freely with Northern Ireland, for the benefit of both Northern Ireland businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland.

Even if one accepts—and I am not sure that I do—that those arrangements could not have been put in place several years ago when we left the European Union, saying that they can never be put in place and that, as technology and business procedures develop, we cannot develop our arrangements, seems unreasonable. Both the EU and the British Government should, working together, be able to take those forward. I look forward very much to listening, in the not-too-distant future, to the Minister's response to what has been an excellent debate on both sides of the House.

2.36 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for this timely debate.

It is probably fair to say that we urgently need a fresh protocol that meets the needs of all the parties in a sensible and practical fashion. Tinkering with the text or seeking to apply it pragmatically will not do the trick. Shakespeare staged the scenario 416 years ago. From Shylock's—sorry, the EU's—point of view, a contract is a contract and must be implemented to the letter. Alternatives were of no interest. It may be possible legally to avoid the protocol, just as Portia avoided Shylock's contract as it did not allow a drop of blood to be lost, but that is not the issue. If we do not want this protocol, then we need a sensible and practical replacement that delivers what all the parties require. The question now is: how can we bring that about?

The Irish protocol was devised to avoid customs posts on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. It may be a small island, but the border is longer than that between France and Germany and more difficult to police. Although customs border posts worked perfectly well for 70 years from 1923, the idea that reinstating them would infringe the Belfast agreement is worthy of debate in itself, but that will have to wait for another day.

A protocol that would allow free trade between the north and the south of the island makes sense, especially as the master trade agreement stipulates tariff-free trade between the EU and the UK. Unfortunately, tariffs are not the issue; non-tariff barriers are. I will come to that at the end.

The EU refused to understand how Northern Ireland could simultaneously be part of the EU and UK regulatory regimes, especially as the UK was promoting divergence. Note that no Northern Ireland politicians were involved in the original protocol negotiations, nor the renegotiations since. The UK Government think that it is purely a matter for London and Brussels, but excluding Ulster politicians, sensible as it seems from the London side, almost ensures that any protocol will receive a negative response in Belfast. It is a bit like going to the pub on a Sunday to find that the menu has been devised by the landlord and the owner, but no one has involved the chef. The relationship these days between Dublin and Belfast is good, and it is far more likely that they could find a solution, or at least a proposal that could be put to London and Brussels, and believe that they own it. At present, the DUP is focusing on the removal of the protocol, but I think it should be thinking about a replacement. If Dublin is going to buy it, the DUP needs to work it up with Dublin and possibly with other Ulster politicians, too.

For Northern Ireland to be in two competing regulatory regimes at the same time would be feasible if UK regulations applied to goods supplied from Britain for consumption only in Northern Ireland, whereas EU regulations applied to goods created in Northern Ireland for consumption in Northern Ireland or the EU. The contentious issue has been goods supplied from Britain to Northern Ireland that are intended for the Republic or are at risk of being consumed there.

The problem could be largely solved by shipping goods intended for the Republic directly to the Republic and labelling goods intended for Northern Ireland in ways that would make them unsaleable in the Republic, such as pricing in sterling, not euros, or marking as for sale in Northern Ireland only. Pricing is a factor: it is only when goods imported from Britain are much cheaper

in Ulster than the equivalent goods in the Republic that any incentive to smuggle them south across the border exists.

EU trading officials, not UK officials, should deal with offenders within the EU—that is key. Each country should only police its own laws in its own country. If French brandy were illegal in the UK, the importer, not the French exporter, would be the lawbreaker. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs insists on the ludicrous VI-1 forms—I should know, because I used to fill them in—to prevent perfectly good EU wine from entering Britain, penalising British wine merchants, not the EU. The existing protocol, however, seeks to make British officials enforce EU law within British territory. We left the EU to escape that.

No doubt Portia could make a better job of unravelling the matter than I have, but what should be obvious to negotiators, but seems not to be, is that the protocol is fundamentally unfair. It will cause serious troubles until negotiators stop tinkering with it and replace it with something more sensible and practical.

2.42 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure indeed to speak in this debate. I begin, as other speakers have done, by congratulating the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing it, although I am bound to point out that it is no surprise that we are here debating the subject—in many ways it was an inevitability. The hon. Member said that he wants us to look forward rather than back; I can certainly understand that sentiment, but I hope he will forgive me if I take an inevitable look backwards as well, to get the waypoints and to get some bearing on how we go forward.

We are here because of the way Brexit was won in the referendum and then negotiated—if that is the word—in the years that followed. Perhaps through necessity, it had to be all things to all people; that was the only way that it could secure the narrow margin it secured. Since then, whether they are in favour or, like myself, very strongly against it, people have had to watch as one by one the promises made to secure it turned to dust—promises to the fishing industry, promises to the farming sector, promises to maintain freedom of movement and even a promise that we would maintain our membership of the single market once we were out of the European Union, as I believe the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster once claimed.

We are here today to discuss the impact of Brexit in Northern Ireland. All of it was predicted and predictable, foreseen and foreseeable. What makes it so disappointing that we have reached this juncture is that those in the UK Government who have taken us to this point have twisted, obfuscated and misrepresented at every stage to persuade the population to believe that the consequences that we now face would simply not arise.

Throughout that period a profound British exceptionalism has been on display, with the UK Government and their supporters noisily asserting their own sovereignty and expressing a wounded surprise that any other EU state that also still had sovereignty should not only have that sovereignty but have a willingness to use it to defend their own interests, including the integrity of the single market. Part of the problem was

that the UK Government spent considerably more time negotiating among themselves than they did with European partners, and that allowed a fundamental set of questions to go unanswered for political convenience for too long. Those questions were: what kind of Brexit exactly, specifically, is it that we want? How are we going to get it? What implications will arise from that once we get it?

It was quite possible to leave the European Union and remain in the single market and the customs union. We would have become a coastal state with control over our fisheries, and we could have withdrawn from the political project of ever closer union that seems to cause such existential angst on the Conservative Benches. We could have left in a way that would have not created the present issues in Northern Ireland. Any form of Brexit that went beyond that made the risk of creating trade and regulatory borders a very live one indeed, with any such border having to fall either in the Irish sea or across the island of Ireland itself. After the unceremonious defenestration of the backstop and its political architect, the cry of the current Prime Minister to “get Brexit done” and the ensuing undignified stagger towards an agreement have left us with the protocol in its current form.

Part of the problem we have with that results from the philosophy that the Prime Minister and his advisers at the time had, which was to move fast and break things. There can be no doubt that the protocol was agreed simply to get the Government out of a big political hole at the time, and to allow them to say in Great Britain that they had got Brexit done and worry about the consequences for Northern Ireland after the event. This demonstrated cynicism and short-sightedness in equal measure. Nevertheless, it is an agreement that resulted from the negotiating objectives that Her Majesty's Government held at the time. It was entered into freely, and if it is not to be implemented fully in its current form, it has to be renegotiated in good faith and in the proper way. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex observed in his contribution that the world was watching. I agree: the world was watching during the G7 conference and the world will still be watching to see how the protocol is implemented, whether in its present form or in an amended and agreed form.

The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) pointed out that Northern Ireland did not vote for Brexit, and it would be remiss of me not to point out that Scotland also did not vote for Brexit. Allow me to be the one to point out—I hope other Members will appreciate this—the great irony in the fact that if Scotland were to become independent and join the European Union, it would once again enjoy free unfettered trade with Northern Ireland. Our businesses would enjoy that in a way that they simply no longer have under the terms of the protocol.

Sammy Wilson: Scotland might have free unfettered trade with Northern Ireland, but does the hon. Gentleman not think it would be a far bigger problem that it would not have free unfettered trade with its biggest market, England?

Richard Thomson: I think there is a shared interest in making sure that there is as close to seamless trade as can possibly exist across these islands, within these islands and with the European Union. In that sense, the right hon. Gentleman and I are on the same page.

[Richard Thomson]

An agreement on animal welfare, sanitary and phytosanitary standards would eliminate the need for very many of the checks and reopen that trade. It is that sort of pragmatic renegotiation of the protocol, in the light of experience and of everything that has come from the nature of Brexit, that would be desirable in order to remove not just the barriers but the symbolism that the frictions that are being felt so keenly in Northern Ireland represent.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: May I just point out that if there was an independent Scotland inside the European Union, it would not be that independent, because it would be bound by all the rules of the European Union and the European Union customs code? Scotland would be obliged to have a hard border with the rest of England—not being independent from the European Union, it would have no choice in that matter whatsoever. It was a spokesman for the Scottish nationalist party who said that that would be good for Scotland because a border would create jobs. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that that was actually said?

Richard Thomson: I knew that mentioning Scottish independence in this context would wake up hon. Members on the Government Benches. Nobody in the Scottish National party wants to set up hard borders with anywhere. It is simply because we are having to live with the consequences of this English nationalist dream and misguided venture that the question arises.

While it is fine and necessary to set an objective of restoring that frictionless trade, it must be done in the correct way. [Interruption.] Being mindful of your strictures, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will draw my remarks to a close. We need to identify practical ways in which that can happen. Above all, the UK Government must stop the empty sabre-rattling. They must stop blaming their predecessors for the misfortunes that they have created for themselves. They must stop blaming everybody else for the misfortunes that they have landed themselves in and for the outcomes of their own choices—[Interruption.] A little bit of self-reflection and self-awareness on the Government Benches would not go amiss at this juncture.

More to the point, the Government need to work to rebuild trust and to secure a durable solution that works in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland and across these islands.

2.50 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson). I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) and the Backbench Business Committee for securing this debate. It has been an important debate to air the issues with the Prime Minister's Brexit deal and the subsequent Northern Ireland protocol. It is clear that there is agreement across this House on the text of the motion in front of us today and the need for flexibility, for the checks to be proportionate, and for solutions to be found through agreement and compromise with the European Union. It has been helpful for that to be made clear today.

The issues are clear. As the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex laid out very clearly in his opening speech, there has been a strain on power sharing and

increasing tensions. Brexit has always had the potential to unsettle the delicate balance of identities across these islands. It was helpful for the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) to put on record her acknowledgement that there are parity of esteem issues at play here. It has been important for us all to acknowledge the real hurt and pain that was expressed by our DUP colleagues on behalf of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. This has caused real pain and hurt in Northern Ireland, and it is important that we all acknowledge that.

The Prime Minister made promises to the people of Northern Ireland that there would be no border with Great Britain, knowing full well that his Brexit deal would introduce barriers across the Irish sea. He made promises to the Unionist community, because he knew that economic separation would be unacceptable, and the political instability that we have seen over recent months has its roots in the profound loss of trust that that has caused.

As the leader of the Labour party and I heard loud and clear in Northern Ireland last week from Unionist leaders, trust is at rock bottom. The language that has been repeatedly used is one of betrayal that they and the economic integrity of the United Kingdom have been sacrificed to narrow party interests.

Trust is absolutely essential in Northern Ireland; it is what has secured and has always sustained the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. In moments of instability, what Sir John Major, Tony Blair, Mo Mowlam and the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith)—Labour and Conservative—all understood was that trust, leadership and partnership are paramount to finding a way forward in Northern Ireland.

As a co-guarantor of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, the Prime Minister owes it to the people of Northern Ireland to restore the trust that he has squandered, but his custody of that precious agreement has been designed to shore up his own party advantage, and nowhere can we see that more clearly than on the Northern Ireland protocol. It is reckless and foolish that, after insisting that he would never place barriers down the Irish sea, he negotiated just that, and after denying that he had done it for an entire year has now started to renege on his own deal.

The strategy of brinkmanship and picking fights using Northern Ireland as a political football is not the work of a serious politician, and led to diplomatic rebuke from one of our closest allies, the United States. Communities are sick and tired of this in Northern Ireland. They just want to see serious solutions, and as we have heard today, solutions are available. We have heard plenty of suggestions, and I would welcome the Minister's response and her assessment of how feasible many of those suggestions are.

Several political parties in Northern Ireland, the CBI, farmers and businesses right across the UK have all advocated for the Government to negotiate a veterinary agreement with the EU. Just this morning, Aodhán Connolly told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that the solution is a veterinary agreement with a guillotine clause. That would bring assurance to Northern Ireland and benefit food exporters right across the UK. The Prime Minister promised an agreement of this kind, drawing up trade negotiations with the EU, but has failed to deliver, when countries such as New Zealand

and Switzerland have succeeded. More than a quarter of all trade to Northern Ireland is subject to onerous SPS checks, largely on food and agricultural products. Such an agreement would lower the overwhelming number of checks across the Irish sea.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady has, interestingly, reopened the issue of mutual enforcement and recognition. She referred to the New Zealand agreement on SPS foods and so on. That agreement is clear: it recognises the authority of New Zealand veterinary organisations to approve their products with the regulations in force in the European Union and the single market. That is exactly what we have been proposing today with mutual enforcement, and I am glad the hon. Lady is on side with that.

Louise Haigh: Of course we have studied the suggestions made by Lord Trimble, who we all thoroughly respect as a co-author of the Good Friday agreement. I would welcome the Minister's comments and remarks on the Government's strategy to propose and negotiate such an agreement with the European Union. Mutual enforcement relies on trust, and we need a veterinary agreement that respects the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland. Although we can look to New Zealand and Switzerland as potential models, we need a new model that recognises this unique circumstance, with its own regulatory mechanism to enforce it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thought the hon. Lady started her speech extremely well. We have had a few party political points, but I understand what it is to be in Opposition. She is making an interesting contribution about a proposal for a veterinary agreement. Of course, the EU is demanding not a veterinary agreement based on mutual enforcement; it wants a veterinary agreement based on alignment, which is just taking back control. That would prevent us from making any free trade agreements with other countries on any of those matters. Is it now Labour party policy to support a veterinary agreement based on mutual enforcement? That would be a very positive step.

Louise Haigh: We are very happy to see such proposals negotiated. I suggest that the EU is highly unlikely to accept such an agreement, given the profound loss of trust that has resulted from the way this Government, Lord Frost and the Prime Minister have approached negotiations. We want to commit to good food standards—indeed, world-leading food standards, as we were promised in the Conservative party manifesto in 2019. In objecting to alignment, which food or animal welfare standards does the hon. Gentleman wish to lower? What food standards is he prioritising over the protection of the economic integrity of the Union?

The agreement must be based on a commitment to high standards. As I said, the Government made that commitment in their manifesto, and it remains hugely popular in the United Kingdom. No one wants our food or animal welfare standards to be undermined. As the CBI has said,

“a dramatic increase in paperwork, compliance costs and delays for firms”

is coming, even while we maintain the same animal welfare standards as the EU.

Sammy Wilson: When she talks about food standards, does the hon. Lady find it odd that the EU is now proposing to reintroduce the offal that gave us mad cow disease for feed for animals in the EU, and for export to this country? The EU is reducing food standards while the UK Government have animal welfare proposals such as banning the export of live animals. We are the ones upholding food and animal welfare standards, not the EU.

Louise Haigh: For us to have higher food and animal welfare standards than the European Union would not be a barrier to a veterinary agreement. The EU has a long precedent for making such arrangements with other countries. Under the New Zealand veterinary agreement, just 1% to 2% of its goods are subject to physical checks on arrival, as opposed to the current rate of around 30% for UK agrifood products entering the EU. The United States has made clear that such issues are not a fundamental barrier to a free trade agreement.

I know that the governance of such an agreement is contentious, but it would not be necessary for the European Court of Justice to get involved. A regulatory mechanism could be agreed that would not limit the UK's ability to make future free trade agreements. A modern mechanism, designed for GB-EU and NI-GB agrifood trade flows, could be designed to meet the circumstances of Northern Ireland. Such an agreement would also unlock a permanent trusted trader scheme, which would resolve the significant issue of export health certificate requirements, which will come into full force in October when the grace periods expire. I urge the Minister to set out exactly the strategy to find such solutions in the long term. Inflammatory op-eds and contradictory remarks from Lord Frost are not getting us any closer to agreement with the EU, and it is imperative that the mechanisms of the protocol are used to find such an agreement. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road by extending grace periods. This needs to be future-proofed, and Northern Ireland needs to be reassured that as we negotiate more free trade agreements we will not diverge still further.

I also press the Minister again on how the Government are intending to bring Northern Ireland's political representatives into the discussions and negotiations with the EU. A huge part of the problem is that people feel that this has been imposed on them without proper engagement or consent. That is totally unsustainable. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) made suggestions around the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and those should be considered carefully.

Fundamentally, peace in Northern Ireland is still fragile. These issues require careful, responsible leadership and for the Government to be honest with the people of Northern Ireland about the choices they are making and what they are prioritising. We can protect Northern Ireland, but it requires a drastic change in strategy from this Government.

3 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I thank all Members who have spoken in this debate from all parts of the UK, from Essex to Edinburgh, from Lagan Valley to Clwyd West, and from Sheffield to Stone.

[Penny Mordaunt]

As Members of this House, we represent more than a geography; we represent the ambitions of our constituents—ambitions for themselves and their families and businesses, and their ambitions for our country. All of us in this place are ambitious on behalf of those who placed us here. It is those ambitions that the past few years have been about. Echoing what my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said when he opened this debate, there are some who still have not come to terms with the fact that we have left the EU and wish to relive the past. They did not understand those ambitions of the British people and it baffles them still. The decision our country took showed faith in democracy and a trust in all of us here to deliver. When people trust us in this way, we cannot let them down.

That is why many Members have been right to focus on the future. That is why we have stayed the course as a country and why we will continue to do so. It took principle, courage and determination, and it took us making an exceptional compromise. We agreed to apply EU law and to control the movement of goods within our own country without any democratic say beyond a vote in four years' time—all in the interests of peace. No other country has agreed to such a thing. It was a hard thing to do. Brexit was an ambitious decision by an ambitious country. We believe, however, that we share many ambitions with our EU friends. My hon. Friend pointed out why that ought to be the case. We have ambitions to maximise peace, prosperity and security for us all as we emerge from a turbulent few years and from this terrible pandemic.

The protocol specifically states that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement should be

“protected in all its parts”

and that

“the application of this Protocol should impact as little as possible on the everyday life of communities in both Ireland and Northern Ireland”. If the situation in Northern Ireland is to be sustainable, it must be compatible with those principles, and in theory there is no good reason why that should not be the case. Look at how other trade boundaries operate. Look at how trade can be facilitated through a risk-based approach and through the use of technology. Look at the exceptional case that the UK is, having traded as part of the EU bloc for decades. Look at the obligations and commitments from all parties concerned—the commitments they made to protect “the essential State functions and territorial integrity of the United Kingdom”,

as stated in article 1 and repeated in article 6, which underlined

“the importance of maintaining the integral place of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom's internal market”,

and said that the UK and the EU

“shall use their best endeavours to facilitate the trade between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom...with a view to avoiding controls at the ports and airports of Northern Ireland to the extent possible.”

The trade and co-operation agreement said that any measures to protect the integrity of the EU's single market should be pragmatic and risk-based.

Those principles and provisions are not being reflected in practice. Members have raised the issues this afternoon: Northern Ireland officials processing 20% of the EU's total checks and controls on consignments from third

countries of products of animal origin for a population of 0.5% of the EU's; critical medicines at risk of being discontinued; companies who have given up delivering; unique disadvantages for Northern Ireland in facing little access to UK or EU tariff rate quotas for certain important products; long-standing trade flows being disrupted and firms struggling to cope with increased bureaucracy and costs, despite facilitations and grace periods; and the absurd prospect of a ban on chilled meats moving within the UK.

How is that situation compatible with those shared principles of ambition and pragmatism to promote prosperity and peace? How were the commitments that the EU made in 2017 and 2019 to specific solutions and alternative arrangements, and that the protocol could be superseded, compatible with the refusal to replace the Northern Ireland protocol or engage on alternative arrangements? How is this compatible with those principles in granting extension periods only the day before, or not extending the trusted trader scheme, or not focusing on goods at risk, or insisting that the only way to reduce burdens on the movement of food products is for us to accept EU law outright on SPS despite, as my hon. Friend has said, our putting an ambitious veterinary agreement on the table based on our respective high standards? I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for her support for the Government's proposals on that measure.

How is it compatible with, perhaps worst of all, triggering article 16 with no notice to create a hard border on the island of Ireland for the most sensitive of products—vaccines—feeding the perception that the EU's years of claims to be prioritising the delicate balance in Northern Ireland were little more than lip service, and fundamentally undermining the confidence of many in Northern Ireland that the protocol could be made to work, or threatening legal action at the first sign of any disagreement instead of seeking to resolve problems consensually, or saying that Northern Ireland must be the price of Brexit? Never, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In contrast, we have worked hard to support those ambitions on prosperity and peace. For our part, we have honoured our commitments, with new IT systems as part of a world-leading customs system; £500 million for a range of support schemes—the trader support service, the movement assistance scheme, the digital assistance scheme—new facilitations by 1 January, such as the UK trader scheme, even though they were only agreed in December last year; temporary facilities for agrifood goods entering Northern Ireland and £60 million for the Northern Ireland Executive to administer them; and access to several UK customs databases, despite the technical challenges associated with data protection. The UK Government are working hard and in good faith to find solutions to the problems that many have mentioned. Those problems, as the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) said, cannot stand.

We have provided over a dozen papers with detailed proposals on how these problems can be addressed. In addition to that, we have made numerous proposals in other areas, including on tariff rate quotas and customs, and we have had a very limited reaction from the EU to these proposals. We have done all this because we know that we need to show that politics works. We must respond to people's concerns and that means the EU working with us to ease the burdens on Northern Ireland, not prioritising the single market.

Mr Harper: On the point about prioritising the single market, it is less about that and more about the proportionality point that I mentioned. Is there either any agreement between the British Government and the EU or at least some move to some shared understanding of what the actual risks are to the single market, as opposed to the theoretical ones, so that we can move to a much more proportionate balance of checks and controls on both sides?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is right that a seriously unbalanced situation is developing in the way that the protocol is operating. The protocol can be sustained only as long as it retains support in Northern Ireland; therefore, making it work is, you would think, in everyone's interest. We need to focus on those shared and stated principles and common ambitions for prosperity and peace. It was ambition for our country that brought us to this point, and ambition is the parent of courage and determination. As we now need to think creatively, we have to find a new balance.

We need an approach to implementation that respects the delicate balance between the interests of all communities in Northern Ireland, and the economic and cultural links, east and west, as well as north and south. That is the thrust of the motion that we have been debating. The Government are ready to do that, and colleagues will not have long to wait. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex, who opened the debate, and all Members who have spoken, have done a service by demonstrating that support for such an ambition is the overwhelming mood of this House.

3.10 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank my right hon. Friend for her strong speech. This has been a thoughtful and meaningful debate. I am particularly pleased that the Opposition Front Bench has given its support to the motion that has been tabled. That will strengthen the Government's negotiating position considerably.

I will pick up one or two points. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) talked about the need for flexibility, but then seemed to say that that could be achieved without any change to the protocol. That is just not realistic. The idea that the President of the Commission cannot change his mind because member states would have to agree may be a problem for the European Union, but it cannot be a problem for the paralysis of the British Government—the British Government will have to take action.

I invite all those who have almost signed up to what I call the Macron doctrine, after he said at the G7 summit that nothing was negotiable and everything was applicable—this attitude of “You've signed it, so you're stuck with it,” whether or not that is good for the British

people or the Northern Ireland peace process—to consider that that is a kind of blindness that we really have to drop. What we are looking for is flexibility, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, asked for—real flexibility. The EU will not win respect around the world for adopting a head in the sand approach to this, and we will not shoehorn the whole of the United Kingdom back into the single market to resolve these problems, because that is not what the British people voted for.

I leave my right hon. Friend the Minister with this fundamental thought. She talked about working hard and in good faith, and courage and determination, but I am afraid that we are reaching the point very quickly where the Government will have to take action, and it will be a question of letting the European Union know that its failure to respond in reasonable good faith to the entreaties with which the Government have been presenting it will lead to consequences. That needs to happen soon, because the longer this situation persists, the more economic disruption is caused in Northern Ireland and the more the faith and trust in the Good Friday agreement are ebbing away. Everyone has to accept that the protocol is bad for the peace process in Northern Ireland, and it must change or be changed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

This House supports the primary aims of the Northern Ireland Protocol of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, which are to uphold the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in all its dimensions and to respect the integrity of the EU and UK internal markets; recognises that new infrastructure and controls at the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic must be avoided to maintain the peace in Northern Ireland and to encourage stability and trade; notes that the volume of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland far exceeds the trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; further notes that significant provisions of the Protocol remain subject to grace periods and have not yet been applied to trade from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and that there is no evidence that this has presented any significant risk to the EU internal market; regards flexibility in the application of the Protocol as being in the mutual interests of the EU and UK, given the unique constitutional and political circumstances of Northern Ireland; regrets EU threats of legal action; notes the EU and UK have made a mutual commitment to adopt measures with a view to avoiding controls at the ports and airports of Northern Ireland to the extent possible; is conscious of the need to avoid separating the Unionist community from the rest of the UK, consistent with the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement; and also recognises that Article 13(8) of the Protocol provides for potentially superior arrangements to those currently in place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am suspending the House for a few minutes to make the necessary arrangements for the next business.

3.13 pm

Sitting suspended.

Beijing Winter Olympics and Chinese Government Sanctions

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I intend to impose a time limit of seven minutes to start with and see how we go on. It may have to be reduced, but we will try that to start with.

3.16 pm

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

That this House believes that the 2022 Winter Olympic games should not be hosted in a country whose Government is credibly accused of mass atrocity crimes; and calls on the UK Government to decline invitations for its representatives to attend the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games unless the Government of the People's Republic of China ends the atrocities taking place in the Xinjiang region and lifts the sanctions imposed on UK Parliamentarians, citizens and entities.

I presume the time limit does not apply to me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I must first declare an interest, as one of the sanctioned—I wear my badge of honour today—although any financial interest that I would have to declare would no doubt have been frozen by the Chinese Government. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time for this very important subject.

As a spotty school student back in 1980, I proposed a motion at a local school debating competition that the UK Government should not boycott the Moscow summer Olympics, following the invasion of Afghanistan over the previous Christmas, and that politics should be kept out of sport. As it turned out, Mrs Thatcher, the Prime Minister at the time, recommended a boycott, but it was left up to the individual sporting bodies whether they sent athletes from their sports to the games. Those who competed did so under the Olympic flag, and the few gold medals that we won were collected to the strains of the choral cantata that is the Olympic anthem. My overriding memory of those Olympic games was the image of Daley Thompson emotionally collecting his decathlon gold medal and belting out “God Save the Queen” to the tune of the rather dreary Olympic hymn. Sixty-five countries carried out a full boycott of the 1980 Olympics, including such strange bedfellows as the US and Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and China. China condemned the Russians, sent no athletes and subsequently did not appear on the medal table, so China really does not have a leg to stand on when it finds itself on the end of the same treatment that it meted out to its neighbour back in 1980.

My view on sporting boycotts and keeping politics out of sport has not changed, which is why this motion does not call for a full sporting boycott, which victimises most the elite athletes who dedicate so much to compete every four years, however niche the UK's medal prospects might be at the winter Olympics compared with the summer version. But the simple reality is that in this day and age sport is inextricably linked with, and often tainted by, politics whether we like it or not, and that taint sometimes can be no greater than when the event is hosted under the Olympic banner.

Most countries will bid for the honour of hosting the Olympics so that they can showcase their nation to the world as an impressive player on the world stage—a land of progress and plenty, where everything is just rosy and all the criticisms that we hear about them are

baseless propaganda. I am sure we were guilty of some of that when London hosted the 2012 Olympics, especially in the visually and financially extravagant opening and closing ceremonies, which reminded the world why the United Kingdom is the top nation. The difference was that our people were free to criticise that extravaganza if they disapproved. Our press was free to caricature or lampoon it, as some did, especially Paul McCartney's singing, and we in this place were free to tackle Ministers about whether it was money well spent and whether we actually wanted it.

In the same way, hon. and right hon. Members in this House are free to speak out against abuses at home or abroad, human rights or otherwise, as freely happened, including with the recent reports by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee on the Uyghur situation. In the same way, the House has spoken out about the grotesque oppression, torture and murder of more than a million peace-loving Tibetans at the hands of the Chinese Communist party since the occupation of 1959. In the same way, too, we have called out the industrial-scale human rights abuses against the Uyghur people—the slave labour camps in Xinjiang, the forced sterilisation of Uyghur woman—all leading to a motion unanimously passed in this House on 22 April, thanks to the good services of my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), which called out those inhuman acts for what they are, namely, genocide, committed by the hand of the Chinese Communist Government, who in just 200 days' time will be welcoming the world to the temporary mirage that is a free Beijing, as the goose-stepping battalions of the People's Liberation Army take ownership of the Olympic rings and run the Olympic flag up their flagpole.

Any dissent, any protest and any adverse publicity will be cancelled, crushed and disappeared, just as the Chinese Government tried to suppress the free speech that is the hallmark of parliamentary democracy and to bully five Members of this House, including me, and two noble Lords, by responding to our exposé of their abuses by sanctioning us in the misguided belief that we would shut up and go away. Now we are apparently to be subject to China's new counter-foreign sanctions law, too.

Of course, the opposite was true; we have been louder than ever. The crimes of the Chinese Government have been under more scrutiny in this place and beyond, as China's counterproductive miscalculation of what democracy counts for in the west has instead acted as a recruiting sergeant for decent people across the globe determined to call the Chinese Government out as the murderous bully they are.

We should be in no doubt about the real agenda behind China's enthusiasm to host the Olympics for the second time. The Chinese propaganda machine is being ratcheted up for this historic event, which will make the Chinese capital the first city to host both a summer and winter Olympic games. The spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang Wenbin, has been boasting that “the majority of countries and people in the world recognise the fact that China's human rights conditions are constantly improving and China has achieved notable progress in its human rights cause”—

a claim that would embarrass even the Iraqi spokesman Comical Ali, of Gulf war notoriety.

We know what the Chinese Government will use the Winter Olympics for, as they showed quite clearly at the summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008. They proudly boasted that with 105 Heads of State and Government there, it was the largest gathering of world leaders for a sporting event in world history—until 2012, that is. The People's Liberation Army Navy Band performed the nationalistic “Welcome March” and goose-stepped across the arena. Some 56 Chinese children, representing supposedly the 56 ethnic groups of ethnic China in their respective costumes, danced across the arena to the strains of “Ode to the Motherland”, lip-synced by a nine-year-old to the pre-recorded voice of another girl who had been told that she was not pretty enough to appear on the stage. To add insult to injury, it later turned out that all 56 of those children claiming to be representatives of China's diversity were, in fact, all Han Chinese.

The spectacular \$100 million opening ceremony lasted four hours and nine minutes as the 91,000 audience enjoyed a panoply of everything Chinese. They saw everything the Chinese Communist party wanted them and the rest of the world to see. Indeed, that was made easier by the notorious use of weather modification technology to prevent clouds and rain—just one of the more extreme examples of the Chinese Communist party manipulating the environment.

It was fêted as a spectacular and unforgettable ceremony. It was

“the spectacular to end all spectaculars and probably can never be bettered”,

in the mesmerised words of one Tony Blair, but it was all a sham. The awarding of the 2008 Olympics to Beijing was accompanied by the International Olympic Committee promising that the games would act as a catalyst for human rights reform in China. One widely acknowledged genocide in Xinjiang later; thousands of Tibetans arrested, imprisoned, displaced, tortured and killed later; the snuffing out of free speech, the free press and political freedom and the trashing of the Sino-British joint declaration and imposition of the national security law later—that went well, didn't it?

To help win the 2008 Olympics, China promised to allow space for Chinese citizens to protest during the games. Spaces were indeed allocated, but those who applied for permission to protest were in fact arrested, making a mockery of the undertakings to the IOC, and no doubt the same will happen again next February, as China remains the world's largest jailer of journalists.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am delighted to be in the Chamber listening to this extremely important speech from my hon. Friend. Does he recall that we had our own contribution to the silencing of debate, sadly, at the time of the Olympics in London? Some of the so-called guards of the Olympic flame turned out to be operatives from the Ministry of State Security, and dealt with citizens and individuals in this country rather more brutally than we would ever tolerate of our own police.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Furthermore, I remember mentioning in this House the fate of Tibetans who had been protesting in the Mall and were arrested and stuck behind crowds and, in some cases, had their homes raided by the police, and

were arrested before they could go and protest. That is not the way we do things in this country, yet for some reason we kowtowed to the Chinese authorities at that stage. That must never be repeated, and we must not resile from calling out those sort of tactics, which the Chinese will use in their own country and wherever they can gain influence.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I was reflecting on my hon. Friend's earlier comments about the Olympics in Beijing. We were told in 2008, as I recall, that the awarding of the Olympics would be a key moment in the movement to get China to acknowledge and uphold human rights to a greater degree. That was in 2008. Does he think that it has made much progress?

Tim Loughton: That is exactly the point that I have been labouring to make. It was all a sham, and we all know how human rights in China have gone from bad to worse.

Back ahead of 2008, the Chinese authorities also had to clean up the environment around Beijing, as it looked at one stage as if everyone would have to compete in masks. Thirteen years on, China remains the world's largest polluter, responsible for some 26% of the planet's greenhouse gas emissions. It has burnt more coal over the past 11 years than the rest of the world put together and now imperils the world's third pole, the Tibetan plateau glaciers that service the water needs of billions of people. Of course, the energy needed to produce artificial snow in Beijing for the winter sports, as will be needed, will not exactly win any environmental awards.

Like it or not, China will make this global sporting event a global political spectacle. It is incredible, frankly, that the winter games were awarded to China in the first place, a sign of the much-too-cosy relationship between the Chinese Government, the IOC and its president, Thomas Bach, who during President Xi's visit to the IOC headquarters in Lausanne back in 2017 claimed that he wanted to give the Chinese President a set of medals because

“he is the true Olympic champion for the youth”.

Yuck.

On virtually every level, the awarding of the games to China should never have happened. It flies in the face of the Olympic principles as encoded in the Olympics by the IOC, which states that

“Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles... The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity... sports organisations within the Olympic Movement shall apply political neutrality. They have the rights and obligations of autonomy, which include freely establishing and controlling the rules of sport, determining the structure and governance of their organisations, enjoying the right of elections free from any outside influence.”

Finally, it states:

“The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

How on earth does a genocidal, industrial scale human rights abusing, free speech intolerant and planet vandalising regime square with those principles?

[Tim Loughton]

In 2017, Xi Jinping claimed the international Olympic movement, in its over 100 years, had played a positive role in enhancing all-round human development, deepening friendship between nations, and promoting peace, development and progress. Everything that China has done since then and is still doing makes a mockery of that claim if the Beijing Olympics are allowed to go ahead in the form that the Chinese Communist party wants, its behaviour is allowed to be normalised, and it is allowed to score the major soft power propaganda victory it craves.

That is why a motion passed by this House urging a diplomatic boycott is so important, emphasising again that we will not turn a blind eye to industrial scale human rights abuses, and hopefully impressing on the Government the need to enact such a boycott so that no Ministers, diplomats, royal family members and other VIPs dance to the tune of the Chinese Communist party. The loss of face it will suffer will show how serious the United Kingdom is.

To date, the Chinese Government have taken no notice. Just last week, the Chinese tech giant Tencent's WeChat social media platform deleted dozens of LGBT accounts, sparking fears of a crackdown on gay content online and gay rights generally, again in defiance of Olympic principles and echoing the actions of Russia suppressing LGBT organisations ahead of the 2014 Sochi winter Olympics.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I apologise for missing the first few seconds of what is a very powerful speech. I agree with every word the hon. Gentleman has said. He is completely right that the Chinese Government intend to use these winter Olympics as a propaganda exercise. Does he agree that it should be possible to turn this around if we—I just put this forward as an example—start referring to these winter Olympics as something like the “Genocide Games”?

Tim Loughton: If they are going to go ahead, that would be a very effective label to put on them to really force the point. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point.

To go back the LGBT point I was making, remember that homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder in China until 2001 and earlier this year a Chinese court upheld a university's description of homosexuality as a psychological disorder. How does that square with the principles I quoted in the Olympic charter?

There are also fears that Beijing merchandise will be made with Uyghur forced labour. I hope that the British sponsors of the games will have no truck with that if they continue to offer sponsorship and that some pressure may be applied there.

In bringing this motion before the House today, we are not alone. Through the good services of IPAC—the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China—and other like-minded organisations, motions are being put before the US House of Representatives, Parliaments in Germany, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Lithuania and others. On 8 June, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on member states and the Commission to decline invitations to the games in the absence of human rights improvement. For once, the EU did the right thing and voted for that unanimously. US Secretary

of State Blinken has already mooted a diplomatic boycott, which has incurred the wrath of China, while Congressman Tom Malinowski of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has said:

“The International Olympic Committee should not be validating the Chinese government's international standing while that government is committing genocide and crimes against humanity. This coordinated effort by legislators in multiple democratic countries sends a message the IOC cannot ignore: if it can discuss postponing the Tokyo Games over public health concerns, it can certainly move the China games over the mass incarceration of millions in concentration camps.”

In return, when celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist regime earlier this month, President Xi cheerily threatened that any foreigners attempting to influence China

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

President Xi can bash away all he likes, but this House must not and will not be bowed.

This House will soon be invited to vote on a motion calling for the UK Government to institute a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics. I hope that hon. and right hon. Members vote Aye and that the Government act on that strong hint. But it must mean something and it must lead to more action and consequences for China's behaviour beyond just a 16-day sporting event in February.

The Foreign Secretary has been robust in his condemnation of industrial scale human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The sanctions against a small number of officials and the restrictions on businesses dealing in Xinjiang are welcome, but they must be just a small start to a much broader programme of tangible action co-ordinated with our allies who champion democracy and human rights. Today, I re-tabled my Tibet (Reciprocal Access) Bill and extended it to apply to Xinjiang. The US Congress unanimously passed the Bill on which it is based—why can't we?

Earlier, we heard concerns about the proposed Chinese takeover of the UK's largest semiconductor producer, which must surely be blocked under the powers that the Government have under the National Security and Investment Act 2020.

I am coming to an end now, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I know you want me to. The latest move makes it even more imperative that we have a full, holistic audit of the throttling grip that the many tentacles of the Chinese state is taking in British boardrooms, on British research and infrastructure projects, on British university campuses and in British classrooms. When will the notorious Chen Quanguo, the architect of oppression in Tibet and genocide in Xinjiang, be added to the sanctions list, along with other Chinese Communist party officials and politicians?

Acting on the motion today is not a discretionary option. It is imperative, and we are duty bound legally. The UK is a party to the genocide convention. All state parties to the genocide convention are under an obligation to refrain from taking an active part in the crime of genocide and, additionally, to prevent the commission of genocide by others using all means reasonably available and within their power. That includes situations where one state alone would be unable to prevent genocide but where its actions in combination with the efforts of others may do so.

A diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics is a measure available to the UK that may contribute to preventing genocide from being committed in the Xinjiang

region. That is precisely because the Olympics has been identified as a key pressure point on China. China is seeking to use the Olympics to portray a positive image to the world and has already threatened a robust response to the suggestion that US diplomats may decline to attend. Such comments reveal its acute sensitivity to the spotlight that a diplomatic boycott would shine on its human rights abuses, and highlight the corresponding leverage that the international community has.

We are therefore under an obligation to prevent and punish the crime of genocide, as set down in the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. This House has already determined that a very credible case exists that atrocities have been carried out by the Chinese Government against the Uyghur people in Xinjiang, amounting to crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide. In passing the motion today, we will be therefore fulfilling our obligations and doing our job. I very much hope that the Minister will confirm that the Government will now take their obligations seriously and do their job by implementing the terms of the motion.

3.37 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate and for his excellent, powerful speech.

The repression of Uyghur Muslims by the Chinese Government has a long and dark history, but in the past few years the Chinese Government have ramped up their persecution of Uyghurs. It is estimated that more than 1 million people are being held in internment camps in Xinjiang, and the Chinese Government are showing no sign of pausing their haunting campaign. Yet despite condemnation from all sides of the House, including the Government, there is still a gaping chasm between rhetoric and action. We cannot on the one hand recognise genocide and on the other send dignitaries and diplomats to the Beijing Olympics. We must be robust in our condemnation and send a message to the Uyghur Muslims that we are on their side.

Calls for a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics are gaining momentum internationally. It is high time that the UK demonstrates leadership on the issue and follows in the footsteps of the EU and America to send a strong message to the international community that the UK condemns the shocking human rights abuses taking place in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong. We cannot let China divert attention away from international criticism of its human rights abuses and oppressive policies.

A diplomatic boycott is a basic ask. Frankly, we should not even be having a debate on this. Out of sheer principle, the UK Government must support a boycott and press China to allow the UN unfettered access to conduct an independent investigation.

There are many more much-needed practical steps that the Government could take. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking in response to those parliamentarians who have been sanctioned by the Chinese Government? Will he provide an update on further Magnitsky sanctions for those committing human rights abuses in Xinjiang? The Government should also be investigating claims that UK universities could be inadvertently supporting the development of facial

recognition and surveillance technologies that are then used by the Chinese Government in the oppression of Uyghur people. What representations has the Minister made to UK universities on that matter?

In conclusion, the point is not the UK's withdrawing support from a sporting event. It is about condemning the ongoing crimes against humanity taking place in Xinjiang. It is about ensuring that UK supply chains are not linked to forced Uyghur labour. It is about making sure that Chinese companies complicit in the surveillance of Uyghurs in Xinjiang are not sponsoring research in British universities. It is about taking a stand—a stand that I hope, after today's timely debate, will be taken.

3.41 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate. It echoes some of the comments that the Foreign Affairs Committee, which I am privileged to chair—one fellow member of the Committee, the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), is here with us today—was able to put into the report that we published only a few days ago, “Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond”.

In that report, we looked at the Olympics, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, because of course they ask some very specific questions of us. It is not just that they are a global event and therefore an opportunity for PR, for awareness, for broadcast, for propaganda even. The Olympics are much more than that. They were, of course, reinvented in the 19th century, but their origins go back to the idea of competition as an avoidance of war. Their origins go, indeed, to the origins of our own civilisations, emerging as they did from the great Greek city states.

The Olympics set, in a constructive and organised fashion, a set of rules—a set of structures—that allowed people to compete equally and fairly among one other. That is a huge achievement. It is a quite remarkable achievement when we think how early it happened. It took a long time before we saw that same peaceful competition in trade, ideas, innovation and technology in our world. In fact, that really only emerged after the last war—in the last 80 years—and it has only really come to fruition since the fall of the cold war and the end of the Soviet occupation of so much of the world. It is quite a remarkable achievement that in 30 years we have been competing on the basis of rules, not force.

So this event really does matter, because this event reinforces that point that the rules matter, fairness matters, equal opportunity matters, access matters, voice matters—and the truth matters. Sadly, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham has already cited so many areas where the truth points in a direction that Beijing wishes it did not.

That is a great shame. It is a great shame not just for the people of China, who are of course the first prisoners of the Chinese Communist party, and for the people of the region, who of course suffer from the numerous abuses and indignities that the Chinese state has been imposing upon them; it is actually a shame for the entire world. It is a shame for us in this country, despite the freedoms we enjoy and the luxuries we are blessed with, because we lose out.

[Tom Tugendhat]

We lose out on the ability to share equally and fairly with a people that has given the world so much: 5,000 years of amazing civilisation emerging from that extraordinary plateau around the Yangtze valley and from the emergence of ideas, people, culture and economics. What wealth came from those people, what ideas have the people of China given humanity, and what richness have we enjoyed from their imaginations, minds and freedoms. So we all lose when they lose. We all suffer when their ideals are stolen, we all suffer when their innovation is silenced and their culture is curtailed, and we all suffer when their voices are locked away, and that is what we are seeing today.

There are few ways in which the UK can respond directly. It would be wrong politically, militarily, economically, socially and culturally to threaten force. It would be wrong to seek to punish individuals whose crime is simply to be citizens of a dictatorial state—they are already punished enough—and that makes it very difficult to know how to respond. However, one way we can respond is by standing up and making it clear that we do not accept the legitimacy of the regime, and that we do not accept its right to so change the truth and so violate the reality of the world in which we live that it can use the ultimate evidence—the ultimate moment of propaganda—of the global success of rules, fairness and integrity, and twist, contort and divert it to its own nefarious ends.

So I think we should attend the games, but only as athletes, and at the moments when the games have a propaganda element—at the beginning or at the end—we only need a single athlete to hold a single flag to make clear the point that the team stand together against this tyranny. In seeing that single individual, it will be clear to the world that Britain's voice is there and present at the games, but not participating in the propaganda gains that go with them.

These are going to be difficult decisions for the Government, because they have to factor in many different areas. Sometimes people say that gesture politics is no politics. I would say no. I would say that this is a gesture that does make a difference. It is a gesture that defends the rules that keep us all safe, defends the cultures that keep us all free and defends our own ability to co-operate fairly and to avoid conflict. The rules matter: they make us richer, they make us safer, they protect Britain, they protect our friends and, if they are allowed to, they will once again protect the people of China.

3.48 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, want to congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and thank him for securing this debate. He knows how much I support him in his very active campaigning in calling out the human rights abuses of the Chinese Communist party against millions of its own people, and it is such a very important debate that we are having today. I do not want to repeat everything that has already been said, and indeed everything that has been said so far in this Chamber I fully support.

We have already heard in today's debate about the significant and substantial evidence of the terrible treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, with arbitrary detention, mass incarceration, forced political indoctrination,

re-education and Orwellian levels of surveillance. Most horrifying of all are the accounts of sexual abuse, torture and forcible sterilisation. It is a pervasive assault on human rights. It must be challenged; we cannot stay silent.

The UK has to do all it can, working with our international partners including the EU. I listened carefully to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), about the limitations on intervening as a foreign state—being strong without going as far as threatening force—but we do have an opportunity. It starts with calling out what we see as what it is: genocide. There is clear evidence that the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims meets the legal definition of the crime of genocide, as set out under article 2 of the genocide convention and article 6 of the Rome statute. Parliament has recognised that, and now the Government and we in this Chamber must follow suit.

We must continue our calls for investigation by the UN, the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, but we cannot afford to wait for that to happen. It is vital that we take other meaningful steps to stop these atrocities. We should work in lockstep with our European allies on sanctions and co-operate with them to expand the reach and scope of our Magnitsky sanctions regime.

That brings me to the topic of our debate: the role of the Beijing winter Olympics and human rights abuses by the CCP—to repeat what has been said many times, it is the Chinese Communist party that is committing these atrocities, not the people of China. I have already touched on the terrible crimes in Xinjiang, but we must remember the context of human rights abuse in places such as Tibet, the CCP's attempt to dismantle democracy and liberty in Hong Kong, the ever more dangerous rhetoric around Taiwan, and the CCP's ongoing activities in the South China sea in the face of UN rulings.

Western countries have to take a stance. We must be aware that the Olympics next year will be used to give credibility to the regime, as we have heard several times today. Whether we like it or not, they will serve as a propaganda tool. It would be absolutely unacceptable for the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary or senior diplomats and officials to give credibility to such an event.

If the games go ahead, it is vital that the International Olympic Committee adjust its own rules. Rule 50 of the Olympic charter prevents athletes from speaking out or making peaceful demonstrations or protests in the field of play or during medal ceremonies. It is totally unacceptable that competitors should be gagged in that way under the threat of sanctions from the IOC. The justification for the rule is to keep politics out of sport, but as we have heard, the event will be used politically by the Chinese communist party. The reality is that a protest-free games would be just as political as one in which athletes were allowed to express their opinions.

Finally, we must be realistic about whether it is at all appropriate for the games to go ahead in Beijing, given the ongoing human rights abuses. I want to go a little further: is it at all justifiable for the games to go ahead? In such grave circumstances, it is vital for the option of a full sporting boycott of the games at least to remain on the table. There is growing consensus about the diplomatic boycott of the Beijing winter Olympics, but I wonder whether we should dare to go further.

Across the House, we are outraged about the horrific human rights abuses by the CCP against millions of its own people. Critics are becoming more and more aware, but the Chinese communist party is becoming more and more emboldened the longer the rest of the world stands by. Let's get real—and let us start today by supporting the motion.

3.53 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate; I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing it. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I had a discussion last year with the UK Olympic committee. I had been making a bit of a fuss about why we were holding the Olympics, so they asked to come and see me. They asked what my position was. I said, "Look, as far as I am concerned, it is up to individual athletes what they choose to do. I would like them to understand where they are going and what they will be involved in. I expect the Government to take a position, and I expect they will take the view that attending, giving the games diplomatic credibility and having UK officials, Ministers and so on at the games is no longer feasible given the nature of the Chinese Communist party regime." That was before a lot of the stuff that we now know came out. The committee's reaction was, "We could live with that. We can understand that. That's fair. We won't complain about that. We understand why you would do that and leave it to individual athletes."

My view is reinforced by what we know now. Since that conversation, Adrian Zenz laid bare the evidence of the abuses through the documentation he produced showing that the Uyghur atrocity is really a genocide. We eventually managed to publish that through the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China and other institutions. We also know much more about the forced labour camps in Tibet, where we think there are 1.5 million or even more than 2 million people. My hon. Friend deserves due credit for raising that long after anyone else cared again to raise it. The list goes on. The Chinese Government are aggressive abroad and aggressive at home. They have killed Indian soldiers as they seek to dispute the border with India, they have taken over the South China sea even though the UN has said they have no historical right over the area, and they have threatened and continue to threaten Taiwan.

My hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee was in his place for the urgent question earlier about the UK semiconductor company to be sold to a Chinese company. One thing I did not raise but we know is that China has strategically said that semiconductor production must come to China and that it must dominate globally. More importantly, it wants to use that production as a weapon against Taiwan, which is probably the biggest single producer of semiconductors. China wants to stop that cash flow to Taiwan, so one of China's reasons for taking over the UK company is to increase its own capability and stop Taiwan. Not a single thing that the Chinese Communist party does has not been thought through to the final degree. It knows where it is going, and it does not even hide it. It was said that the Chinese Government threaten that anybody who affronts them will have their head

bashed against a wall of steel. I do not think that when something like that is said, everybody laughs. Imagine if the British Government were to say that about anybody who disagreed with them. We would all be up in arms and everybody around the free world would be complaining.

Tom Tugendhat: I am delighted to support my right hon. Friend in his powerful speech. Does he remember the words of the Chinese ambassador to Stockholm, who said only a few months ago:

"We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns"?

Has he ever heard another diplomat use such language?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: No, I really have not. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. The funny thing about the Chinese Government is that President Xi says exactly what he is going to do and, intriguingly, he does it. Sadly, Governments such as my own to some degree and those around the western world think he does not really mean it, and they hope that, because he did not mean it, there will be a different outcome. They make stupid excuses such as to say, "Do you know what? If we give them these games, they will uphold human rights." That is what they did in 2018, and I do not recall much of that. Then they say, "Don't worry. If we trade more with China in a golden decade, they will liberalise their politics and head towards democracy." That is what was done in a Government of which I as a member.

I tell hon. Members who is naive in all of this: it is all of us. It is the western democracies who set policy for what they wish would happen. They do not remember the history of the 1930s. We have forgotten what happened when we appeased another ghastly dictatorship: 60 million people died as a result of our failure, and we are bound on the same course today.

This debate today about boycotting the Olympics is not just a token; we know that China is sensitive when it gets global criticism, when people shine a torch on what goes on there. We know that it reacts. Why do we know that? Because it sanctions people such as myself and many of my colleagues in this Chamber and in the European Parliament.

I applaud the Members of the European Parliament and the members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China who have been sanctioned, because they have stopped the European Union having a trade arrangement. What have we done? Our Government now talk about doing more trade arrangements, while we sit here as sanctioned individuals. I want the Government to act. It is simply not good enough for us, on the one hand, to say that we are horrified about what China does, and then, on the other, to make plans to seek more trade relationships with it and to say that we do not want to interfere with the Olympics.

Everything is political in a communist regime. Every single aspect of people's lives is governed by a communist political regime. Our Government must recognise that they are no longer dealing with a decent organisation that would uphold freedoms; they are dealing with a dictatorial, militaristic, intolerant and oppressive regime. Every time that we give China public demonstrations such as the Olympics, we do ourselves and, worse, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans and all those oppressed people a disservice. Let us stand up for freedom, democracy and human rights and not back these games.

4.1 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: I want to start by thanking the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this important debate. The work that he does, alongside the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), on the all-party group for Tibet is vital in raising awareness around the human rights abuses committed by the Chinese Government.

I am grateful that the debate has been called, but it is depressing that this matter even needs to be discussed at all. This Parliament has recognised that genocide is taking place against the Uyghurs in north-west China. The motion debated in April called on the Government “to act to fulfil its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and all relevant instruments of international law to bring it to an end.”—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2021; Vol. 692, c. 1211.]

Yet here we are discussing whether it is acceptable for this country’s athletes to participate in games held in a country committing those atrocities.

I would like to draw the House’s attention to the situation in Tibet. At the time of the last Olympics held in China, in 2008, thousands of Tibetans took to the streets to protest and were brutally suppressed, with hundreds killed. The full total of deaths remains unknown. Since then, we have seen the forced erosion of Tibetan culture, from the replacement of the Tibetan language with Mandarin in schools to the repeated use of arbitrary detention and widespread torture. In addition, large religious communities have seen thousands of residents forcefully removed and their homes demolished. The rich Tibetan culture, Buddhist religion and Tibetan language are being forcefully eroded, and freedom of thought, opinion, expression, religion and conscience is being not just undermined, but actively eradicated.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the organisation Free Tibet. The work that it does in raising awareness of the oppression of the Tibetan people, culture and language should be placed on record. None the less, it remains unacceptable that more has not been done by this Government to call out these hideous abuses that have been going on for decades. They have pursued a foreign policy of complacency that pans out as a foreign policy of complicity.

Following the vote in April, where were the Government sanctions against China? Why have the Government not made a commitment to boycott these Olympics? What measures are being put in place to support those fleeing the oppression of the Chinese state? These are not just rhetorical questions, but points that should have been considered right back when these issues started to raise their ugly heads.

These winter Olympics provide a choice for this country: to stand up for oppressed people and human rights or to turn a blind eye to atrocities. Shamefully, this Government’s continued silence speaks a thousand words. When the HSBC bank repeatedly refused to unfreeze the assets of Hong Kong activists, including one activist who fled to our country, after they had been crowdfunding for lawsuits against police brutality, did the Government speak out? I am sure we can all guess the answer. Now we have a chance to take an international stance determined by human rights and one that recognises people’s rights to practise their religion freely, to worship, to express

their views and to use their language. I would urge the Government to follow that path and call for a boycott of the winter Olympic games.

4.4 pm

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to follow a fellow Greater Manchester MP, the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra).

When people say “Olympics”, there’s me thinking about jumping hurdles, hitting archery targets, Usain Bolt breaking records and our wonderful Team GB cycling team, but then I realised it is not Tokyo that we are on about today, but rather the Beijing and Hubei 2022 winter Olympics. You know what? I know absolutely nothing about the winter Olympics, yet here I am today speaking in a debate about them, though I am confident in observing that the absence of a background in something does not necessarily deter anyone from waxing lyrical in the Chamber.

I have to declare an interest in China, and that is that I know a wee bit about the country. I worked and lived there for over a decade, and I spent around 14,000 hours learning Mandarin Chinese—Putonghua—along with the Shanghainese dialect. I also hold two master’s degrees on China, as well as currently reading for a PhD in China-related studies. Unfortunately, over the last year, nearly all the debate on China has been extremely one-sided. It is not multifaceted, it fails to see much of the nuance that exists, and ultimately it does not depict the country that I came to know, although it does have many problems.

I know even less about the Olympics. I worked at the embassy during the Beijing 2008 Olympic games as the Olympic and Paralympic attaché, and helped to promote our wonderful country to the Chinese during the London 2012 Olympiad, when I was based at the British consulate in Shanghai. From these experiences, my view is that we should not be boycotting the upcoming 2022 winter Olympics, because it is now more important than ever for us to push for as many people-to-people and governmental exchanges as we possibly can. I am a firm believer in the UK being open to the world, as that is the only true way to maintain influence and project the interests of our people. The alternative is an inverted stance in international politics that, quite frankly, reeks of a seeping of confidence in our ability to influence and attract on the ice rink of international affairs.

I saw this at first hand in 2012 when Mr Wu Chengzhang wrote to me when I was at the British consulate two months before the London 2012 games. He really wanted to go to London to see the Olympics, because he had been there for the 1948 Olympiad playing basketball for the Chinese team. He even played against the British team. Through working with different partners, we were able to get him on a plane—he was 88 years old at the time—to go to London, where he met the man who had been his arch-nemesis at the time, Mr Lionel Price from the British team, who has sadly subsequently passed away. They spent the day together in London, where they went to the London Eye, among other things. This created so much good will between the peoples of the UK and China, and it was widely hailed as a bilateral success.

A British Chambers of Commerce report presented this week to the all-party parliamentary China group made the point that—I paraphrase—the resumption of travel and openness can help to create opportunities to build common ground and enhance intercultural understanding. This is exactly why we should be in attendance, come February 2022.

Today's debates also makes me think about why, covid faff aside, there is no real opposition to Tokyo hosting the summer Olympics this month. When we think back, there was much anxiety in the 1980s about the economic rise of Japan, especially from the United States. Then we think of the last 30 years. Japan not only has maintained its position as one of the top three largest economies, but has a soft power capability that is truly astonishing. Along with the UK and the USA, it can boast one of the most influential youth cultures on the planet. I cannot help but feel that China can definitely take inspiration from its neighbour across the east China sea. It has done so before in its economic model, sometimes known as the developmental model for economics.

Certain developments obviously have not been helpful of late, including a tilt to a more aggressive tone in diplomatic engagement, sometimes referred to as wolf warrior diplomacy, and the sanctioning of my colleagues in the House. The sooner we can move away from such tools and tone of diplomacy the better. I welcome the arrival of Ambassador Zheng Zeguang to the UK, and hope that, if he happens to see today's debate, he can work with our Government to ensure an easing in tensions. There is a long way to go in how China presents and communicates itself with the rest of the world. We must, however, ask ourselves what a boycott would achieve. In the case of the 2022 Olympics, many experts say that a boycott likely will not work and could make it even harder to gain concessions from China.

Experts found that boycotting the 1936 Berlin summer games and the 1980 Moscow summer games did not change the direction of state policy. I do not believe that a boycott will lead to China changing its policy on ethnic relations, particularly with the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang autonomous region, or zizhiqū. If anything, the Government may dig in further. The only thing that it will achieve is potentially some loss of face on the organisers' behalf, and those boycotting may feel virtuous for a few moments.

The Olympics should not be politicised, but obviously they have always been a medium through which to see the ebbs and flows of international relations. However, if we cannot engage in healthy competition on the slalom or in the bobsleigh, then what—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, Mark, but we have to leave it there.

Mark Logan: Can I just say in closing—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): No, we have to move on. Sorry, Mark; you have had seven minutes.

We now go to Christine Jardine, by video link. We are having a bit of a glitch with the clock, as you may notice, so hopefully you have another device there. If not, just give your wonderful speech, and I will stop you after seven minutes or so.

4.12 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker; I will do my best.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this crucial debate, because it is about much more than it might appear at first sight. It is not about sport. It is not about the Olympic games. It is about human rights, and sending a clear message to the Government of China that we will not take part in what will be a celebration of their regime, which, as he so clearly demonstrated, is exactly what it will become.

We have already heard some amazingly erudite contributions, particularly from the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). Although I have not been sanctioned in the same way that he and many other hon. Members have, my constituency of Edinburgh West is home to the Chinese consulate in Scotland, and in the past it has been made clear to me that my comments and criticisms of the regime's actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong or Tibet were less than welcome. Nevertheless, I wish to make it clear that I do not support any indication of this country's approval of China's action that might be inferred from diplomatic support of the games.

I am someone who has always believed that politicians should not interfere in sport and doubted, like the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan), the value of sporting boycotts, but this summer, like so many others in these islands, I have been swept up in the amazing buzz and excitement that surrounded Wimbledon, Euro 2020, and the anticipation of the Open championship and the Tokyo Olympics—each of them a great celebration of sport, bringing so much happiness to so many young people in pursuit of the goals of sporting achievements, which have already been detailed. So it should be with the winter Olympics next year, but I fear that it will not be.

I am in agreement with those who believe that it is not appropriate for a sporting celebration, and the Olympics in particular, with their declared high ideals and spirit, to be taking place in a country against a background of widespread human rights abuses and undermining of democracy, which is why I am in complete agreement with today's motion. Indeed, I might be tempted to go even further.

Just a few days ago, the Foreign Affairs Committee released a report urging the UK Government to partially boycott the 2022 Beijing winter Olympics. Earlier, in February, our party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), announced that we would call for Britain to boycott the 2022 Beijing winter Olympics over alleged ethnic cleansing against Uyghur Muslims, who have been imprisoned and subject to political re-education in Xinjiang. Who could fail to be moved by the TV pictures last year of adults forced to kneel on railway platforms before being loaded on to trains to be taken to who-knows-where and with an intent that I do not even want to think about? At the same time, we see a threat to democracy in Hong Kong and the Chinese Government failing to respect the joint agreement, which was a precursor to the end of British involvement in the territory in 1997.

Against that background, for us to offer any official Government backing for the winter Olympics would be to send the wrong message to Beijing. It would be

[Christine Jardine]

telling it that we are fine with its behaviour—that we will turn a blind eye to the reports of a million Uyghur Muslims in detention camps and will not defend democracy in Hong Kong. I do not believe that is a message we want to send.

I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) speak about what might now be regarded as the sham of Beijing's opening ceremony—a dazzling, hypnotic sham. Do we want once again to provide such a promotional opportunity for a regime whose approach to human rights is the antithesis of everything we believe in in this country—human rights, democracy and respect—or a positive platform to show off and display the regime in a positive light? I do not believe so.

After my party leader made his call for a boycott, there were warnings that this might mean sanctions from the Chinese Government, but to give in to that threat would be to give way to bullying, which is why I back the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath to go further. We should go further than the growing consensus in support of a diplomatic boycott and boycott the winter Olympics in Beijing completely. We should not allow the Olympics to return to China until the regime begins to change and to respect human rights and democracy. There has been enough hand wringing and prevarication. We need to learn from the mistakes of the past. The treatment of Uyghur women and children forced to undergo procedures that they feel they have no choice in meets the criteria for genocide as set out in the genocide convention.

The Liberal Democrats want our Government to send a message that the UK will stand up against such crimes against humanity. We will not indulge the Chinese Government by offering diplomatic credibility to the games. We will not help them to promote the regime on world stage. We will not support the Olympics in Beijing. We do not believe that the Government should do so, and we support the motion before the House today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There is now a six-minute limit.

4.18 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for bringing this important debate to the House.

The Olympic games uses sport to bring nations together, guided by the core values of excellence, friendship and respect. The games and its core principles hold a special place in the heart of Rother Valley, as Lesley Ward, a resident of Brampton-en-le-Morthen, represented Great Britain on our diving team at the Olympic games in 1992, 1996 and 2000. Needless to say, everyone in Rother Valley is immensely proud of her. The Olympic charter's noble values are cherished in Rother Valley and across the world, which makes the International Olympic Committee's decision to award the games to Beijing incredibly odd indeed.

Outrage and horror in this place and around the world have rightly followed the reports of mass atrocity crimes in Xinjiang. The UK Government and this

Parliament cannot stand by and watch. The Foreign Secretary himself said of the Chinese Communist party's actions in Xinjiang:

“Internment camps, arbitrary detention, political re-education, forced labour, torture and forced sterilisation—all on an industrial scale. It is truly horrific...We have a moral duty to respond.”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

In April, this House voted to declare that China's actions amount to genocide and crimes against humanity, so why are we in this situation, even debating the Olympic games next year?

The People's Republic of China is a cause for concern beyond the Xinjiang crisis, too. Commercially, companies fear upsetting the Chinese government and Chinese consumers, so they will often bend to Chinese demands. It is simply not right that British and American companies, based in the UK and the US, accept the diktat of a foreign dictatorship.

The misuse of economic soft power is directed against sovereign states, too. Australia has had tariffs imposed because of its refusal to toe the line. African nations are the victims of coercive economic neo-colonisation. The belt and road initiative is a Trojan horse for debt-trap diplomacy. The distribution of the Chinese covid-19 vaccines is being used as diplomatic leverage, and the remaining allies of the Republic of China—Taiwan—are being financially induced to switch democratic recognition to the PRC.

Elsewhere in business, the Chinese run roughshod over rules of intellectual property, copying western technology and innovation. They manipulate the renminbi and provide unfettered state aid to their industries and companies to put western businesses at a disadvantage. The recent Chinese Government crackdown on Didi, Alibaba and Tencent demonstrates their intention to control all aspects of Chinese life, threatening our citizens' data security and the competitiveness of western companies.

It is clear that, on covid-19, the Chinese are not being fully open and co-operative with the international community. All this is without mentioning the PRC's disregard for the rules-based international order in its treatment of Tibet; its aggression on the Indian border; its persecution of Chinese Christians, Falun Gong and other minorities; its militarisation of the South China sea; its threats towards the Republic of China; its banning of pro-democracy candidates running in elections in Macau; and, of course, its outrageous and illegal national security law in Hong Kong, trampling on the rights of millions of British nationals. In the UK, we face constant threats to our national security from cyber-attacks, espionage, Chinese ownership of vital infrastructure and key companies, as well as infiltration of our universities and institutions. In the light of all this, why is the global community acquiescing in the 2022 winter Olympic games being hosted in Peking? And why are the UK Government even considering sending British representatives to attend the games?

The PRC uses international events such as the winter games to cultivate its image and bolster its legitimacy, both at home and abroad. We must not hand China a propaganda victory. Unless the PRC ends its oppression in Xinjiang and elsewhere and lifts sanctions on British companies and individuals, we must consider action in relation to the games. A possible option is one where Great Britain would still participate in Beijing and we would still cheer the team on to glory, but no state

officials would attend. Our stance would send a message to both Peking and the wider international community that the UK unequivocally stands against the horrendous crimes occurring in Xinjiang and elsewhere and would ensure that Beijing realises that it cannot commit these crimes with impunity.

As a result of the PRC's conduct towards the United Kingdom, its own people and the international community, we cannot and must not provide a veneer of diplomatic respectability to the Chinese regime. I call on the International Olympic Committee to look at moving the 2022 winter games from the PRC and I urge the UK Government to consider not sending official representation if the games do go ahead in Beijing. I shall always celebrate and support the Great Britain Olympic team, but we must not celebrate or support the Communist party of China, which is currently oppressing people both in China and abroad. We must look at all and any options to stop this awful regime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Nusrat Ghani—just take it to 4.30 pm.

4.23 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I must put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for cutting his speech short to allow me to speak this afternoon; I am incredibly grateful for his generosity. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—my good friend—for bringing this very important debate to the House. He has been a very passionate and powerful campaigner on Tibet, Hong Kong and the Uyghur, and his integrity on some of these key issues of the day continues to be a source of inspiration to all of us.

Before my words are misinterpreted, I want to make it absolutely clear that I am not generally for boycotts—that is not the kind of Conservative I am. I am rising to speak in favour of a diplomatic boycott, which is very different from a sporting boycott. A diplomatic boycott of the Olympic games is nothing new, as has been mentioned in many speeches today. I also put on record the fact that these Olympics will no doubt take place and that I will be supporting our British athletes and hoping that they win gold in every competition that takes place. But that is very different to supporting the CCP as it sportswashes what is happening in Xinjiang.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am one of the MPs sanctioned by the Chinese Communist party, and not for committing gross human rights abuses or being a terrorist or a warlord—unless my colleagues who have been sanctioned too have something that they wish to share about themselves—but speaking up against genocide. If my Government think they have any way of persuading the CCP to conduct itself any differently in the face of our values and norms, I am afraid they have lost the plot completely.

If there is any confusion on this House's views on genocide, let me say that just three months ago this Parliament took an unprecedented decision, based on the evidence, to unanimously declare that all five markers of genocide were being met at the hands of the CCP against the Uyghur in Xinjiang. Let me just remind people about this. Of course one of the markers is killing members of a group. Others are causing serious bodily or mental harm; inflicting conditions of life

calculated to bring about physical destruction, in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births—we know that is happening, with the forced sterilisation of Uyghur women; and the barbaric act that is taking place against Uyghur families, with Uyghur children in their hundreds of thousands being separated from their parents. That is what is taking place in China and this is what they do not want us to talk about as these games take place.

Of course we are signatories to the 1948 convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, which is why I would never use the word lightly. Before the Minister at the Dispatch Box has to hold the embarrassing position that only the UN can declare genocide, I must point out that we know the UN is broken when it comes to preventing or even researching genocide when it comes to China.

We should also reflect on what this House has said. We are not the only ones in the world who recognise that the evidence exists that genocide is taking place. The Netherlands, Slovakia, Canada and the Czech Republic have all debated their own motions, and Biden's Administration have continued to declare the situation in Xinjiang an ongoing, active genocide. More importantly, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wonder whether you could take a message back to Mr Speaker, reflecting on what the US Speaker Nancy Pelosi has said about the Olympic games. She is on the record as saying that she supports a “diplomatic boycott” on those grounds. Mr Speaker may have an opportune moment at some point to let us know what his position is, because somebody in this place has to reflect the view of this House; unfortunately, I am worried that the Government may not be bold enough to hold that line.

My anxiety is that if we have diplomats and politicians attending the Beijing Olympics—the genocide Olympics, as they have been referred to—it enables the CCP to sportswash what is happening in Xinjiang and it makes a mockery of everything we stand for. When the Foreign Secretary talks about:

“Internment camps, arbitrary detention, political re-education, forced labour, torture and forced sterilisation—all on an industrial scale”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

what does it mean if we then turn up to these genocide Olympics? I know it is difficult for the Government, but politics is about choices and at some point we have to defend our values and our British laws. A diplomatic boycott will have an impact and is a low-risk, high-reward way of establishing global Britain's values. As the Foreign Secretary has already been on record to say

“We have a moral duty to respond.”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

And we can, by making sure that we do not have a diplomatic presence at the Olympics.

Such a measure is nothing new. A former Prime Minister, David Cameron, did not attend the 2014 winter Olympics after the country in question passed anti-LGBT laws. Let us remind ourselves that the CCP believes that homosexuality is a mental illness and it is killing or destroying millions of Uyghur people. The situation is no better—I would argue it is much worse—so we should not be turning up diplomatically at the genocide Olympics.

There is some anxiety that we cannot take action unilaterally, but that is also nonsense. Many Parliaments around the world are currently debating, discussing or

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

putting motions in place to ensure that politicians and diplomats will not be turning up at these Olympics. It is also quite exciting to note how forceful and bold the Biden Administration are being on this. Just last night, a motion was moved in the Senate to declare that all goods coming in from Xinjiang are slave labour goods and will now be blacklisted and not allowed to be imported into America. These are the motions we should be moving in this House; our position should not be to say, on the one hand, that this is an industrial-scale version of human rights abuses and, on the other hand, that there is nothing we can do.

Politics is not for the fainthearted. Every decision has consequences, but a diplomatic boycott would enable us to stand by what this House and our allies believe—that a genocide is taking place in Xinjiang.

The games last 16 days, or about 1.3 million seconds. That is a second for every Uyghur imprisoned, abused or forced into labour under President Xi. We as global Britain have to make a stand. Do we stand by those oppressed, or do we stand by President Xi? A lifetime ago, the 1936 Olympics were not boycotted, and that did not stop the slaughter of millions of Jews. We cannot make the same mistake again. I urge this House to support this motion and push for a full diplomatic boycott of the genocide games.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Gavin, I do not know whether you got the message. You have up to eight minutes.

4.30 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on bringing this very important debate before us today, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. We have heard a lot of fantastic speeches with a lot of great points made, none more so than the closing remarks of the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). She was an extra speaker, and we were very grateful to hear from her because her closing remarks hit the nail on the head.

We have heard a lot recently from many about how sport and politics do not mix, but with all due respect, that is rubbish. The international community came together—well, in the most part—and isolated apartheid South Africa from international sport until it gave full human rights to all its citizens. I say “in the most part” because there were still those who regurgitated the phrase “sport and politics don’t mix”, even while the rest of the world stood against obvious injustice and repression in South Africa. Of course, sport should be free of state interference and political parties or figures meddling in its day-to-day organisation, but that does not mean that we cannot apply political ideals such as human rights and liberal democracy to the governance of sport and to where governing bodies choose to hold events.

Those ideals were thrown under a bus when the 2022 Winter Olympics were awarded to Beijing. We now know from leaked Chinese Communist party documents that, even before the games were awarded in 2015, the Uyghur people were the target of systematic and brutal repression. The party’s general secretary called for a period of painful interventional treatment, education and transformation.

That education and treatment has involved up to 2 million people being detained, used as slave labour and forcibly sterilised, and the Muslim population forced to drink alcohol and eat pork as part of their so-called education. That is undisguised, unmitigated barbarity at a scale we have not seen on this continent since the second world war. Those are crimes against humanity, which the rest of the world has a moral duty to stand up against. We must deny the Chinese Government’s attempts to bask in the warm glow of international sport.

The SNP supports the calls for the UK Government to withhold support for the event by not sending any Government officials, politicians or members of the royal family. Of course, it is always solely for the Olympic associations to take decisions about the attendance of athletes themselves. We encourage the UK Government and the international community to call out the egregious human rights abuses being committed against the Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. We note that the international community did that most recently at the UN Human Rights Council. The UN human rights commissioner or another independent fact-finding body must be given unfettered access to Xinjiang. The genocide in Xinjiang and the human rights abuses elsewhere must not escape an international response.

In a report published last week, as has been referenced, the Foreign Affairs Committee called for big boy politics on China. Boycotting the games was one of the manifold recommendations it made to the UK Government, who have so far dragged their feet on robust action on China. Last week, Members of the European Parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling on diplomatic officials to boycott the ’22 Winter Olympics in response to continuing human rights abuses by the Chinese Government. It was passed by 578 votes to 29 and was supported by all of Europe’s mainstream political groups, including the centre-right European People’s Party—the group of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel—and the centrists of France’s Emmanuel Macron. The resolution calls for EU officials and member states to decline all Government and diplomatic invitations to the Winter Olympics unless the Chinese Government demonstrate a verifiable improvement in the human rights situation in Hong Kong, the Xinjiang Uyghur region, Tibet, Inner Mongolia and elsewhere in China.

The Prime Minister, when asked about a boycott, recently said:

“I am instinctively, and always have been, against sporting boycotts.”—[*Official Report*, 7 July 2021; Vol. 698, c. 901.]

That is not the question that was asked of him or what the motion before us seeks.

As we saw during the back-and-forward with the genocide amendment to the Trade Act 2021, the Government cannot be trusted to stand up for human rights when push comes to shove. The global community has failed to stand up to human rights abuses in the past that have coincided in time and location with prominent sporting events, and that mistake should not and must not be repeated. The UK Government have a moral responsibility to diplomatically boycott the games, which in many ways will be used as a propaganda tool for a regime committing genocide. It must be remembered that the CCP is a master of propaganda.

It seems pretty clear, from the speeches today and various other remarks outside this Chamber, that the Government are somewhat isolated in their thinking.

That being said, we support the UK's action to sanction Chinese Government officials for crimes committed in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. The SNP welcomed the UK Government's decision to begin to impose Magnitsky-style sanctions, but there are few Chinese leaders involved in abuses on the current list.

A report by the Foreign Affairs Committee notes that the Government's

"current framework of UK policy towards China reflects an unwillingness to face this reality"

of widespread and merciless state-sanctioned abuse. Wider trade sanctions are necessary to avoid UK corporate and consumer complicity and to hit the Chinese economy.

As the US has done, the Government should ban the import of all cotton products known to be produced in whole or in part in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, in line with WTO rules. We also believe the ban should be extended to other industries where abuses are known to be taking place: namely in tomato, protective personal equipment and solar panel production. The Department for International Trade should publish an urgent review of the export controls that apply to Xinjiang, because currently we have no import controls whatever in place to prevent goods from Xinjiang arriving on our shelves, despite the Prime Minister's claim to the contrary.

It is sad in a debate about the winter Olympics not to be concentrating on the sport itself, the athletic endeavour and the sheer hard work that athletes have put in over the previous four years in preparation for the competition. Of course this country has not had the success in the winter version of the games that it has had in the summer games, but growing up I well remember the exploits of Rhona Martin and her team on the curling rink and their gold in Salt Lake City, of Torvill and Dean—well, their comeback, because I am too young to remember their initial "Bolero" dance in 1984—and of Eddie the Eagle and many others.

Sadly, because of the abhorrent situation in Xinjiang, alongside the Chinese Government's gradual erosion of civil liberties in Hong Kong and what we already know about the decades-long suppression of democracy and freedom of expression in China, and the incomprehensible decision by the IOC, we are talking about something far different and far darker. When the current IOC president says that his organisation must stay out of politics—an echo of his Francoist predecessor and all those who supported apartheid South Africa's sporting links with other countries—we can see the challenges that those who support human rights and dignity are up against.

The IOC website has the temerity to claim:

"At all times, the IOC recognises and upholds human rights, as enshrined in both the Fundamental Principles of the Olympic Charter and the IOC Code of Ethics."

Only an institutionally arrogant organisation can make those claims and yet award next year's games to China, but this is not just an issue for the IOC. Too many international governing bodies have been happy to turn a blind eye to repression and state-sponsored violence when choosing who to host their latest event. One only has to remember the uproar when FIFA awarded World cups to Russia and Qatar.

In conclusion, I fear that we or, rather, the IOC and sport's governing bodies are too far down the track for next year's winter Olympics to be moved, but that should

not stop future bids for Olympics and other major sporting events from being assessed not just on their stadia capacity or segregated car lanes for VIPs, but on their human rights record and their treatment of their own citizens. History shows that the IOC has not been fussy in the past about who leads them—installing a senior member of Franco's Falangists as their president should still be a source of shame—but it has a chance in future games to properly incorporate human rights into any assessment of candidate cities in future and to put humanity, rather than cold hard cash, at the heart of sport.

4.38 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): First, I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for putting forward his motion today and for securing this important debate. Today, I want to set out the Labour party's position on the genocide that is taking place in Xinjiang—according to all the available evidence we have, it is happening—and to also set out why we wholeheartedly support the motion before the House today.

In a little over six months, the global spotlight will fall on Beijing as the city plays host to the 2022 winter Olympics. The games should be a celebration of sporting achievement and a powerful symbol of our shared humanity, but next year's event will take place under a dark shadow. There is now an extensive and undeniable body of evidence pointing to the relentless state-sponsored persecution of the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang province, including the mass detention of more than a million people, first-hand accounts of forced labour camps, the enforced separation of children from parents and harrowing reports of forced sterilisation. We have heard first-hand testimonies from brave Uyghur women speaking out about their experiences, and we have seen the important in-depth research from academic Adrian Zenz that uses the Chinese Government's own publicly available data on Xinjiang's population change. Who can forget the film shown to the former Chinese ambassador on "The Andrew Marr Show" of shaven-headed, blindfolded Uyghur being hoarded on to trains by Chinese officials at gunpoint?

The evidence is both compelling and overwhelming, and until the Chinese Government allow UN investigators full and unfettered access to Xinjiang to carry out their investigations, this is the evidence that we in this House and this Government must use as the basis for our opinions and subsequent actions. In April, it was this evidence that led this House to determine that genocide was being committed against the Uyghur people, a matter on which Conservative Members were shamefully instructed to abstain by the Government.

Now we are approaching the point at which a decision must be made regarding the Beijing winter Olympics. There are some who would argue that politics and sport should not mix, but from National Football League star Colin Kaepernick taking the knee and Marcus Rashford shaming the Government into U-turning on free school meals to the England football team's united stance against divisive dog-whistle politics this week, we have seen that many issues do transcend the divide between sport and politics.

This is not a new phenomenon. We only need to look back to the 1980s, when the sporting world played an integral role in piling pressure on the South African

[Stephen Kinnock]

Government to end its racist apartheid agenda. I am not sure how Conservative Members feel about this given the position that the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, took on the matter, but as a huge British and Irish Lions rugby fan and as an internationalist, I still feel tremendously proud of the stance the Lions took. Their refusal to tour South Africa throughout the 1980s is irrefutable evidence of the power of sport to deliver progress and positive change.

Now is the moment to harness that Lions spirit and send a clear message to the Chinese Communist party that oppression and discrimination can never be tolerated. Today, Labour is calling for a political and diplomatic boycott of the Beijing games, as set out in a letter from my hon. Friends the shadow Foreign Secretary and the shadow Culture Secretary to their opposite numbers on 7 July.

The Olympic games have of course become a symbol of our global interconnectedness, bringing together athletes from across the world to compete under the Olympic values of excellence, respect and friendship. At their best, they are a testament to sport's ability to bridge divisions of culture, language, geography and race. Yet while many sportspeople have chosen to use their platform to show solidarity or to amplify the message of causes and movements, it would be wrong to expect them to sacrifice years of hard work and dedication to make up for the inaction and failings of their Government, nor would calling for a sporting boycott or for the cancellation of the 2022 games be fair on the Chinese people, who are not responsible for the atrocities being committed by their Government. We need to be absolutely clear that Britain stands in solidarity with the Chinese people against oppression, and that this solidarity can be strengthened by enhanced cultural understanding between western and Chinese people and communities. This is why a political and diplomatic boycott is without doubt the position the Government must adopt.

Over the past year, along with international allies, the UK Government have rightly supported calls from the United Nations for unfettered access to Xinjiang in order to conduct a full investigation into the treatment of the Uyghur, yet China has remained unmoved. That is not to say that the UK Government's demands have been particularly strong. As is so often the case with this Conservative Government, strong rhetoric is yet to be matched by meaningful action, and I will come back to that in my questions to the Minister shortly.

On the assumption that access to Xinjiang will not be granted by 14 September, the start of the next United Nations General Assembly, Labour has made it clear that no member of the royal family, UK politician or senior official should attend the games, as we cannot expect those individuals to be put in a position where they are serving to legitimise attempts by the Chinese Government to sportswash, to take the word of the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), the genocide that is being perpetrated against its own people. In short, sending royals or officials to Beijing in February would not be fair on those individuals, would not be right for our country and would be a betrayal of the Uyghur people.

Today's debate is an opportunity for this House and the Government to take a clear and unambiguous stance against the atrocities being committed by the Chinese

Government by supporting the motion. I urge all those on the Government Benches to support the motion and send a clear message about what kind of country we are—a nation that stands against genocide and for human rights.

It is clear that Conservative Members are divided on this issue. I commend any hon. Member on the Conservative Benches who takes a stand against the Government's weak approach on China, which is rooted in the type of naivety and complacency that have epitomised the approach of successive Conservative Governments over the past decade, from the so-called golden era to the present day.

With that in mind, I have the following questions for the Minister. Does he think it is right that the Prime Minister is set to put members of the royal family and, by association, Her Majesty the Queen in the awkward and uncomfortable position of appearing to endorse a regime that is responsible for genocide? Why are the Government doing all they can to avoid votes in Parliament on China? Is it because they recognise that they are on the wrong side of public opinion and on the wrong side of opinion in this House?

What recent pressure have the Government put on the Chinese Government to allow UN investigators to enter Xinjiang province? Where are the Magnitsky sanctions on Chen Quanguo? It has been a full six months since the Foreign Secretary announced a supposedly urgent review of export controls on UK products sold into Xinjiang. When will we see that report? When will the Government make genuine, substantive legislative changes to the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to toughen up supply chain due diligence?

Will the Minister send a clear message that, by the time of the next UN General Assembly meeting, China must have not only granted full and unfettered access for the UN to Xinjiang, but removed the entirely unjust sanctions that have been placed on Members of this House and of the other place by the Chinese Government? And will he take steps to ensure that China is not awarded the 2030 World cup, bidding for which begins in June 2022?

If global Britain is to mean anything, it should mean upholding our values and defending human rights, no matter where in the world they are under threat. For too long, the Government have been naive, complacent and inconsistent in their approach to China. Today's debate should be a turning point that leads to actions, not words. To do otherwise would be to hand the Chinese Government the propaganda coup that they crave, at the expense of our country's reputation and obligations.

A genocide is taking place in Xinjiang. This Government now have a choice. Are they going to look the other way and send senior representatives to Beijing in February, or are they going to take a stand and understand that sending those representatives would be a betrayal of our values? Enough is enough. It is time to draw a line in the sand. We on the Opposition Benches recognise that, and that is why we shall be supporting this motion today.

4.48 pm

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this debate? We have heard some passionate and well

thought-through speeches throughout the afternoon. I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions, and I will try to respond to as many of the points raised as possible before I hand back to my hon. Friend.

On the substantive issue of whether there should be a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 winter Olympic games, as I made clear at the Dispatch Box a couple of weeks ago at oral questions, and as the Prime Minister has previously made clear, no decisions have yet been made about UK Government attendance at the winter Olympics in Beijing.

One or two Members have mentioned that they would not like to see the games go ahead at all. Of course, the participation of Team GB at the Olympics and Paralympics is a matter for the British Olympic Association and the British Paralympic Association. They operate independently of Government, as is absolutely right, and as is also required by International Olympic Committee regulations.

The Government have consistently been clear about our serious concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang. In response, we have taken robust action, as has been pointed out by a number of hon. and right hon. Members. We have led international efforts to hold China to account for the gross human rights violations in Xinjiang. We have imposed sanctions on those responsible, and we have announced a package of robust domestic measures to help to ensure that no British organisations are complicit, including through their supply chains.

The Foreign Secretary has consistently raised our concerns directly with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, most recently at the end of May. He has also, on 22 March, announced asset freezes and travel bans under our global human rights sanctions regime against four Chinese Government officials and one entity, who we believe are responsible for the gross human rights violations in Xinjiang. Importantly, those measures were co-ordinated alongside sanctions from the United States, Canada and the European Union. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said that we should be working alongside the European Union. We have done, and that is why we have delivered those sanctions alongside the EU.

We believe that those actions send a clear message to the Chinese Government that the international community will not turn a blind eye to such serious and systematic violations of basic human rights. It speaks for itself that, while 30 countries were united in sanctioning those responsible for the violations, China's response was to retaliate against its critics, a number of whom are in the Chamber today.

As the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have made clear, China's attempts to silence those highlighting human rights violations at home and abroad, including its targeting of right hon. and hon. Friends and peers in the UK, are completely unwarranted and unacceptable. The freedom to speak out in opposition to human rights violations is fundamental, and the Government stand firm with all those who have been sanctioned, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham and other right hon. and hon. Members.

On that point, on 26 March, I summoned the Chinese representative in the UK to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, where I lodged a strong formal protest at the actions of China. The sanctions we imposed

in relation to Xinjiang followed the Foreign Secretary's announcement on 12 January of a series of measures on UK supply chains. Those measures, which included a review of export controls, the introduction of financial penalties for organisations that fail to comply with their obligations under the Modern Slavery Act and robust guidance to UK businesses on the risks faced by companies with links to Xinjiang, will help to ensure that no British organisation—Government or private sector, deliberately or inadvertently—profits from or contributes to human rights violations against the Uyghurs or other minorities.

We have also consistently taken a leading international role in holding China to account, and we have used our diplomatic influence to raise the issue up the international agenda. On 22 June, a global UK diplomatic effort helped to deliver the support of 44 countries for a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council. That underlined our shared concerns and called on China to grant unfettered access to the region for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The growing caucus of countries expressing concern about the situation in Xinjiang sends a powerful message about the breadth of international opinion. That caucus of international countries, which has called out China's actions, has grown from 23 countries to 44 in just over a year, which is a tribute to it. I pay tribute to the UK's diplomatic leadership, including our network across the globe, and the Foreign Secretary's influence with his counterparts. Under our G7 presidency, both G7 leaders and Foreign and Development Ministers registered strong concern about the situation in Xinjiang. We will continue to work with partners across the world to build an international caucus of those willing to speak out against China's human rights violations and to increase the pressure on China to change its behaviour.

I turn to some of the points raised by hon. and right hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, in his powerful and eloquent speech, made a very strong case. I thought he was a little unfair on one of my heroes, Sir Paul McCartney, when he sang at the opening of the London games, but he also raised the issue of sanctions, as did the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford). It speaks volumes that, while we join the international community in sanctioning those responsible for human rights abuses, the Chinese Government sanction their critics. If Beijing wants to credibly rebut claims of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, it should allow the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights full access to verify the truth, a point the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) agreed with.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I do not want to hold him up for very long because he is in the last part of this speech. With regard to slave labour chains and supply in Xinjiang, on two occasions in the last four weeks, the Prime Minister has, from the Dispatch Box, said that the UK Government have import controls on those who are suspected of being suppliers through that chain. I have asked a series of questions of both the Minister's Department and the Department for International Trade. The one answer that comes from the Department for International Trade is that it has no import controls and no plans to make any. Could the Minister tell me what Government policy is on import controls?

Nigel Adams: We are making good progress. Our guidance to businesses is being updated. We have launched a regular programme of ministerial engagement with businesses and trade bodies, but my right hon. Friend will understand that much of this work is incredibly complex and requires the introduction of new legislation and co-ordination with our international partners.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) raised the issue of Tibet. We are deeply concerned at reports of coercive control, restrictions on freedom of religion or belief and labour transfer schemes in Tibet. We have drawn attention to the human rights situation there, including most recently in a ministerial statement at the UN Human Rights Council.

I am going to be timed out, I am afraid, Mr Deputy Speaker. I had a number of points to respond to. I thank all hon. Members. If I could just raise the point made by the hon. Member for Bath, who wondered whether we should go further and have a full boycott of the games. We are clear that the participation of the national team is a matter for the British Olympic Association and the British Paralympic Association. She also mentioned amendments to IOC rule 50 forbidding athletes to protest. Again, that is a matter for the BOA and other national Olympic committees to agree.

Let me end by saying that no decisions have yet been made about ministerial travel to the Beijing winter Olympics. If there is a Division on the motion today, the Government will therefore abstain. However, our approach to China remains clear-eyed and rooted in our values and our interests.

4.58 pm

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to the Minister and to all hon. and right hon. Members who have made such impassioned speeches here today. I think we have spoken

virtually as one voice, although I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) would want to put it on record that he is a funding patron of the UK National Committee on China. We have heard great phrases: sportswashing; the genocide Olympics, which it will become known as; and the veneer of diplomatic respectability. Let us reinforce the point that our argument is not with the people of China, but with the murderous regime of the Chinese Communist party Government.

I am glad no decisions have been made so far. I hope the Minister will take very seriously the clear words he has heard here today. May I say gently to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), that the enemy is not other democrats in this House? He has had a pop at the Government on several occasions, but the enemy is the Government of China, who are abusing their own people.

I go back to the principles of Olympism:

“The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion.”

It is the people of China who are not allowed those privileges. It is for them that we are standing up. That is why we need a diplomatic and political boycott to make that point loud and clear. I hope that the House will pass the motion today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that the 2022 Winter Olympic games should not be hosted in a country whose Government is credibly accused of mass atrocity crimes; and calls on the UK Government to decline invitations for its representatives to attend the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games unless the Government of the People's Republic of China ends the atrocities taking place in the Xinjiang region and lifts the sanctions imposed on UK Parliamentarians, citizens and entities.

Alternative Student Finance

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David Duguid.)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): While we wait for Stephen Timms to come on the video link, the Dispatch Box will be sanitised. I know that the Minister will not touch it until that has happened.

5 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful to have been granted this Adjournment debate today. Eight years ago, the Government pledged to introduce alternative student finance. That promise has still not been delivered, which has prevented large numbers of Muslims from entering higher education. The problem became serious in 2012, when tuition fees were drastically raised and it became impossible for most students to take a university course without a student loan.

For a significant number of British Muslims, having to take an interest-bearing student loan meant that they could not go to university at all. Riba—interest—is prohibited in Islam, as it was in Christianity until the middle ages. Some Muslim young people defer university until they have saved to pay their fees outright; some, with a heavy heart, take out a loan and feel bad about it ever after; others do not attend at all. That is the reality for young British Muslims today.

As Prime Minister, David Cameron promised to change that. In a speech at the World Islamic Economic Forum in London in 2013, he proposed alternative student finance, saying:

“Never again should a Muslim in Britain feel unable to go to university because they cannot get a Student Loan—simply because of their religion.”

The promise was clear. Eight years later, there is still not even a timetable for keeping it. It looks to young Muslims as if Ministers simply cannot be bothered.

A year after David Cameron’s speech, a Government consultation attracted 20,000 responses, a record number at the time. It showed that the loan system was deterring many Muslim students; 94% of the respondents believed that there would be demand for a sharia-compliant loan and 81% believed that the model proposed was acceptable. That model was a *takaful* system in which students would pay into the system to guarantee each other against loss, in a co-operative structure generally recognised as sharia-compliant. Repayments, debt levels and the cost to the Government would be the same as for conventional student loans.

The Government’s response to the consultation said that because of technicalities, the solution would take at least two years to deliver. Unfortunately, progress over the seven years since then has been glacial. In November 2015, a Green Paper said that

“we are looking to develop the ‘Takaful’ product more fully.”

A White Paper the following year said that there was a

“real need for a new option for students who feel unable to use interest-bearing loans...we will introduce an alternative student finance product for the first time. This will...avoid the payment of interest”.

That was six years ago.

The Higher Education and Research Act received Royal Assent in 2017, which campaigners hoped would allow implementation of the *takaful* loan model. Then Ministers said that the May 2019 Augar review would cover it. It did not; it just restated that

“students should be able to access finance support that is compatible with their religious beliefs. The government will need to consider carefully how the changes we are proposing...affect plans to introduce a system of alternative student finance for students who feel unable to access interest-bearing student loans for reasons of faith.”

Despite not addressing it, Ministers ever since have used the forthcoming response to the report as a justification for still not doing anything.

My constituent Fatima Khan contacted me. She wrote:

“The current pandemic only serves to intensify these challenges for Muslim students; with part-time jobs being lost and the economic decline affecting the livelihood of many of our families.” Fatima did attend university, but has friends and family who were unable to do so.

I have been speaking to the campaigner, Asha Hassan, who is in the final year of her medical studies at the University of Exeter. She told the BBC in January that many Muslim students take out a student loan, but

“with a very heavy heart, and that also affects their studies as well.”

She managed to turn her A-level grades round at college in order to go to university, but then felt that she could not apply because of the interest problem. Fortunately, she had heard of the Government’s consultation in her first year after leaving college; she applied, and then deferred her entry in the hope that something would be available by 2016-17. It was only the promise of alternative student finance that meant that she managed to get that far. She kept going for years with the hope that, if she could just get through this year, alternative student finance would be available next year. She says now:

“Many miracles later, I’m going into my final year studying medicine, but it shouldn’t take miracles for a student to want to progress and use their lives to contribute to society.”

And she is right.

Her oldest sister, Zainab, finished college in the first year of the tuition-fee hike. She wanted to go to university. When it became so costly, and taking out an interest-bearing loan was the only way to pay for it, she decided that she could not and took a job instead. Asha’s other older sister, Sumaya, wanted to study education and become a primary school teacher. She wrestled with whether to take out a loan. She applied, and was offered a place. Her friends persuaded her instead to study nursing as it was funded, and so she signed up through clearing at the last minute. Asha’s younger sister, Amina, wanted to study physiotherapy. She was unconcerned because the course was Government funded. She took a year out for volunteering. Unfortunately, the following year’s intake was no longer funded, so she was forced to give up. She would have loved to have become a physiotherapist, but she has not done so.

Asha has assembled on social media this week responses from others. The comments she has received include these:

“I regret taking an interest-based loan, and wish I had chosen other options.”

“Interest loans are forbidden in my religion (Islam). I do not have any alternative as I am not wealthy enough to pay the fees without taking out a loan.”

[Stephen Timms]

"I am always thinking about how to pay back quickly to get rid of the interest."

"I'm going to have to work quite a lot to keep up with payments and living costs which may have an effect on my university experience."

Asha is organising a demonstration, led by school children and students, outside the Department tomorrow to highlight this long-standing injustice of Muslim students being unable to attend university, or suffering anguish if they do so. I hope the Minister will be able to get a message to those who join that demonstration.

British Muslims make up nearly 5% of the UK population. In the borough that I represent, it is about a third of our population. It is very hurtful that the Government simply cannot be bothered to keep the promise they made eight years ago to so many people in that community. Muslims make up around 10% of students. The number could and should be higher. Young people want to take part in higher education, and the prospects for our economy demand that they should be able to do so as well.

In 2018, the Sutton Trust's "Home and Away" report recommended what they called a "halal student loan" to give more Muslim students the chance of higher education, and to give those who do more choices by allowing them to choose to live away from home—to make that affordable for them without taking an interest-bearing loan. It argued for Muslim young people to have the same social mobility chances as non-Muslims, and surely we should all agree with that.

David Cameron made his promise in 2013 and young Muslims have waited patiently. How much longer must they wait? Many have given up. Some think that the Government will never deliver what has been promised.

The "Alternative Student Finance" report, commissioned by the Department and published in 2019, set out the key attraction factors of alternative student finance as follows:

"a ring-fenced pot where contributions fund the education of others and so benefits future students rather than go to a profit-making organisation; does not accrue interest but instead involves a fee or contribution; available to everyone regardless of background or religion; is straightforward...permissible under Islamic law and would be approved by a council of scholars; fair, as it neither advantages nor disadvantages individuals in comparison to the mainstream student loan."

It concluded that the takaful model would be a "positive move on the part of Government."

The report included pen portraits of some of those affected. One was a young woman who went straight from her A-levels to university and studied a subject she had not considered before because the course was funded by the Government, so she would not need an interest-bearing student loan. It was a demanding course and she was insufficiently interested in the career that it was leading to, so after six months she dropped out. She said:

"I ended up doing a course that I didn't want to do, at a university that I didn't want to be at, I inevitably didn't enjoy it and that's why I dropped out".

She still hopes that she might get to university one day.

Last month, I tabled early-day motion 227, which calls on the Government to introduce alternative student finance in time for the 2022-23 academic year. The Minister

will tell us that the Government remain committed to solving the problem at some unspecified future date, but I want her to be clearer about the timetable. Will students who want to start university in 2022-23 have access to alternative student finance?

I commend the efforts of Lord Sharkey and Lord Sheikh in the other place on this issue. Lord Sharkey tabled an amendment to the Financial Services Bill that would have given the Government six months to introduce a sharia-compliant finance product for tuition fees. In moving it, he noted the repeated failure to take the issue seriously, citing Ministers' "absurdly unfriendly and unfeeling" responses that make

"no attempt to reassure or comfort the Muslim community."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 April 2021; Vol. 811, c. 1329.]

In response to the debate, the Minister, Lord True, said that, before that could happen,

"complex policy, legal and systemic issues need to be resolved".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 April 2021; Vol. 811, c. 1332.]

However, Governments have repeatedly promised to sort it out and it is more than eight years since David Cameron made the first promise. I hope that the Minister will not simply read out a list of departmental excuses that boil down to: we cannot be bothered.

The all-party parliamentary group on Islamic finance recently wrote to the Prime Minister. I was one of the 50 signatories along with other parliamentarians, Muslim organisations and student groups from across the country, and we are awaiting his response. I hope he recognises, as his predecessor did, the need for and benefits of alternative student finance. For eight years, British Muslims have been given hope that such interest-free loans will be provided. David Cameron's promise gave rise to optimism and confidence that the Government would remove financial barriers for those wanting to attend university, but, time after time, those hopes have been dashed.

Muslims are missing out on university and Muslim young people are left to struggle and wrestle over the conflict between what they believe in and their hopes for university study. As the Government recognised eight years ago, our system should not be doing that to people. Will the Minister commit not just to the principle of alternative student finance but to a clear timetable for delivering it in time—I hope—for the 2022-23 academic year?

5.14 pm

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this important debate on sharia-compliant student finance. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for being present today.

I assure the House that I understand the issue and the concerns held by some in the Muslim community about student finance, which were carefully and articulately delivered by the right hon. Member for East Ham. Islamic finance is well established in the UK. Financial institutions have been providing sharia-compliant financial services for nearly 40 years, and the UK is the leading western centre for Islamic finance. This Government continue to promote the growth of the Islamic finance sector, supporting domestic financial inclusion and our connections with key markets abroad.

As the right hon. Gentleman stated, in 2013 the Government announced their intention to introduce a form of student finance compatible with Islamic finance principles. That was followed by a consultation and a Government response in 2014, which confirmed the chosen model for sharia-compliant product. As he outlined, the Government took new powers in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 to enable the Secretary of State for Education to provide alternative payments in addition to grants and loans, and appointed specialist advisers in October 2017 to design the product.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for bringing this debate forward. I believe there should be no financial discrimination for our students; they should all be able to avail themselves of equal opportunity, regardless of religion. Does the Minister agree that ensuring that all students have the means to afford further education is one thing, but that because of their religion they may have difficulty doing so? Does she feel there is a clear equality issue to be addressed here, so that nobody is directly discriminated against?

Michelle Donelan: Of course this Government want our education system to be open and accessible to all, no matter what their religion, race or background. This Government have been considering the alternative student finance product very carefully, alongside their other priorities, as they conclude the post-18 review of education and funding and respond to the detailed recommendations of the independent panel chaired by Sir Philip Augar. We had intended to respond to the Augar review in full, along with addressing ASF, but the last spending review was only a year's spending review and we intend to respond in full in due course. We decided to align a decision on the implementation of ASF with the outcome of the post-18 review, to ensure that the terms of any eventual package under ASF are the same as those for mainstream student support. We will provide an update on sharia-compliant student finance products when we conclude the post-18 review of education and funding.

Looking more broadly, I can assure hon. Members that this Government are committed to ensuring that higher education is accessible to all—everyone can then benefit, no matter where they come from, their religion or their race. That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford.

In 2020, the proportion of English 18-year-olds entering higher education had increased to a record entry rate of 37.9%. Even more encouragingly, the proportion of English 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education had more than doubled, increasing from 11.3% in 2006 to 24% in 2020. In 2020, 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds were proportionally 80% more likely to enter full-time higher education than in 2009.

Looking at Muslim students in particular, we know from the latest published Higher Education Statistics Agency data that about 11% of the student population were known to identify as Muslim, with more than 62,000 first-year undergraduates in England doing so in 2019-20. There were also a further 28,000 Muslim first-year postgraduates in this academic year. In total, looking across all years, levels and modes of study, there were more than 200,000 students identifying as Muslim in

the same academic year. Although these figures are encouraging, there is clearly so much more to be done, as the right hon. Member for East Ham has pointed out.

Participation in higher education is, of course, not the outcome in itself. We need to do much more to ensure that the whole system focuses on outcomes that students achieve so that we can put students, their needs and their careers ambitions first, be that in higher education, further education or apprenticeships. I want the whole of our post-education and education system to help people to fulfil their potential by equipping them with the skills and the knowledge to pursue their careers, be it as a teacher, electrician, lawyer, entrepreneur or nurse. That is at the heart of our reform agenda.

Last year, the Prime Minister announced the lifelong loan entitlement, which recognises the realities of a fast-moving economy and the changing world of work. People need and want to be able to study and train in different ways and at different times of their lives under a flexible system. That will make it easier for students to access courses much more flexibly throughout their life. It will be available for both modules and full years of study, at higher, technical and degree levels—levels 4 to 6. It will also enable people to fit study around work, family and personal commitments or, equally, to retrain and upskill as their circumstances and the economy change.

Turning to the existing student finance offer, I would like to take this opportunity to explain the existing loan offer and the other forms of financial support available. The current student finance system is not profit-making. Unlike commercial alternatives, student loans are available to all eligible students regardless of background or financial history. Loan repayments are linked to income, not the rate of interest or the amount borrowed. For undergraduate loans, repayments are calculated at a fixed rate of 9% of earnings above the payment threshold, or the weekly or monthly equivalent. Borrowers are protected. No repayments are required when borrowers' earnings drop below the threshold, and any outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is written off after 30 years, with no detriment to the borrower.

No commercial loans offer that level of support and protection to the borrower, with income-contingent repayments and outstanding debt written off after the loan term ends. However, I reiterate that I understand and recognise the concerns of the Muslim community and those echoed by the right hon. Member for East Ham about these loans. That is very much why we have looked into this issue, and we pledge to report back.

Looking beyond student loans, the Government provide a range of non-repayable grants to assist students with particular needs. Grants are available to support childcare, where a student has an adult dependant or where a student is disabled. Universities also provide students with a range of support under their access and participation plans, which are designed to encourage participation from under-represented groups. Higher education providers wishing to charge tuition fees above the basic fee level of £6,000 must agree a plan with the Office for Students that sets out their targets and planned expenditure to improve access and participation. Through these plans, higher education providers deliver a range of support, including bursaries and grants to assist with fees and living costs, as well as activities such as school outreach,

[Michelle Donelan]

attainment-raising activities, summer schools and support targeted at key groups such as care leavers. These plans are designed to deliver greater and faster progress in accessing participation in higher education.

Looking at the financial system as a whole, a key aim for the Government is to ensure a sustainable balance of contributions towards the cost of the system between the student and the taxpayer, and to ensure that support is targeted most at those who need it. The Government's contributions towards the cost of higher education are significant. More than half of the value of higher education undergraduate loans is forecast to be written off. This subsidy is a conscious investment in the long-term skills capacity of the people and the economy of this country.

As I mentioned earlier, the Government are still carefully considering our response to the post-18 review. I assure the right hon. Member and the House that alternative student finance is an important part of those considerations. I thank him for his passionate speech today and the individual stories that he shared. I would like to assure him and members of his community that, as we have previously committed to, we will provide an update on alternative student finance as we conclude the post-18 review of education and funding, and I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss this further.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 July 2021

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Planning

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

1.30 pm

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the 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. They are expected to remain for the entire debate. I remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on at all times during the debate. They will be visible at all times during the debate both to each other and to us here in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks email address, westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk.

Members attending physically should clean their spaces before using them and before leaving the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

1.31 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the planning system and the upcoming Planning Bill.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummings.

I thank the Minister for being present and Members for taking part in the debate. I am very respectful of the Minister and I do not underestimate the challenges that he faces in changing a complex system. We need sensible reform, but we need to get it right, and it is in that positive spirit that I intend to speak. I will speak for no more than 10 minutes, because I want to get as many people in as possible.

I will reiterate some concerns and, significantly, suggest as many solutions as I can; some have been made by me and some by near 100 Members on the WhatsApp group. I sent those ideas to the Prime Minister and to the Housing Department a few weeks ago for thought, and I look forward to a response. I put forward an approach to planning based on three principles: that it should be community led, levelling-up led and environment led. I commend those to Ministers. First, however, I will outline some concerns.

Reform, I believe, is better than scrapping and starting again. Scrapping threatens to misdiagnose the problem. Nine in 10 planning applications are approved, but only 60% of permissions are built, so there are more than 1 million unbuilt permissions in a decade. The basic fact

is that we have a flawed market. The building cartels, which build the majority of homes, restrict supply. That is not a secret; it is in their building model. They act to prevent prices falling. That is why using housebuilding alone, or predominantly, to lower prices will not work.

Furthermore, the standard method damages the levelling-up agenda. That is critical, especially given the Prime Minister's excellent speech today. Levelling up is a moral and economic imperative. It is also a political imperative for the Government. However, a flawed planning Bill will undermine that levelling-up process. Some red wall colleagues are now beginning to see that.

Knight Frank reported that the current methodology, the standard method,

"systematically disadvantages poorer parts of the country, particularly in the North and Midlands".

The north has 23% of the nation's population, but its housing need is estimated at not even 16% of the total, and its share of public expenditure on housing is barely 18% of the total. The housing infrastructure fund spends £115 per head in the east of England and an astonishingly low £4 per head in Yorkshire.

The standard method directs investment away from levelling up communities. It heats up the already hot and it cools down those people who need to be cooking on gas—pardon the analogy. Other people will talk about the potential loss of democracy and other concerns, so I will not dwell too much on them, because I want to focus on one or two specific issues, but it is clear from talking to colleagues that there is much variation in people's concerns. For some it is green fields and damage to tourism or quality of life, and for others it is suburban density, building height or the absolute absurdity of building on floodplains. For others, it is a system that is simply not delivering affordable homes.

I will say that there is a slight frustration. Opponents of reform—well, opponents of scrapping the system rather than reforming it—are sometimes portrayed as nimbys. On the Island, on the Isle of Wight, we have been yimbys for 50 years—we have been in our backyard. We have increased our population by 50% in 50 years. In that time, the cities of Newcastle, Sunderland, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Blackpool, Birmingham and Stoke have all declined—not relatively declined but declined in absolute percentage and numbers. So when people say that opponents of a developer-led system in the south are nimbys, I respectfully argue that they should acquaint themselves with some basic facts about the history of development that has taken place in this country since world war two. We have barely no new infrastructure on the Isle of Wight, and our key gas supplies, water and electricity interconnectors are already operating at near capacity.

So what are the solutions? I want most of this speech to be positive. I will look at our three principles and suggest perhaps a dozen or 15 ideas in the time I have available. Some of them are community led, some environmentally led and some levelling-up led, but they all gel together to look at ways we can support the Minister in the important work that he is doing, which we want to support.

Our reforms are: first, enshrine the ability to object to individual planning applications; secondly, give greater weight to reforming neighbourhood plans; thirdly, outlaw gazumping. We know that communities with

[Bob Seely]

neighbourhood plans accept higher housing allocations because they see what is in it for them. We know that gazumping slows down the market and imposes costs. Good democracy and good law help good development.

On levelling up, there are many things one could say, but I will stick to one. We need to fundamentally reform the standard model and redirect infrastructure funding and housebuilding jobs to levelling-up areas as a deliberate act of policy. Without that, we will have to explain to our voters in a few years' time why all that infrastructure funding, or so much of it, is going down south, and it will not be a pretty conversation with southern colleagues and voters or red wall and levelling-up communities.

Finally, a series of ideas linked to the environment. We need to end the use of lazy greenfield development. I know Ministers want that, but it would be great if they could want it more. We need a recycling culture in land use. I am aware that some good ideas in the White Paper are about infrastructure levies, but it needs to price in the true cost of using up very valuable rare greenfield land. For many areas I fear that will be a markedly higher price than will be factored into the Bill. We need, in short, to change the economics of land use.

We need a greenfield tax so that money goes into brownfield clean-up in a dedicated way. If we are using, especially in a place such as the Isle of Wight, rare greenfield land, we need to get a greater good out of it than Persimmon's bottom line. We need to zero-rate brownfield development, encourage it and build in financial incentives, especially for small-scale brownfield in small towns and communities, to make it work.

There are many loopholes that I could suggest closing, but I will not, given the time. I will just say that we need greater powers of compulsory purchase to force people to act more quickly. There are 600 unused and derelict properties on the Isle of Wight. If the Minister wants to get 600 extra properties on the Isle of Wight, he should give the Isle of Wight Council more power. Make it easier for us to enforce action on derelict and unused properties in order to force sale or to force use. Introduce a character test to screen out dodgy developers. If he wants to clean up the system, let him be the sheriff who gets rid of cowboy developers.

Buyers who turn homes—I think this was suggested by a colleague who will be speaking shortly—into Airbnb or holiday homes should be required to apply to councils for change of use. Councils should be allowed to frame localised plans to reverse and lower the percentage of long-term holiday and commercial holiday rentals in specific communities.

We help first-time buyers, so why not last-time sellers with stamp duty exemption? It will cost money. One in five over-65s would be, according to facts and figures, more likely to move. That could affect 2 million people—£900 billion-worth of property. That would free up the market and allow market-driven solutions where there is not market failure. Clearly, there is an element here.

Finally, land banking. If we want to boost supply, we need to create a use-it-or-lose-it rule for permissions within a realistic time bracket. That means more than starting a development by digging a trench six foot by six. Agreeing a start date means agreeing just that and making council tax payable on all plots after a given

date, regardless of whether they are built. If the purpose of the Minister's planning Bill is to help developers, these ideas will not be attractive to many of them, but if its purpose is to get people into homes and to help first-time buyers—I am sure it is—these ideas, and many others suggested by colleagues, will help him produce a markedly better planning Bill, or a planning Bill that is as good and as attractive as we all want it to be.

We need solid principles behind the planning Bill. It should be community led, levelling-up led, and environment led. We need to be sensitive to local democracy. We need a levelling-up agenda that spreads prosperity and hope around our country. To make it environment led, we have to move away from unsustainable, lazy, car-dependent and carbon-inefficient greenfield development, and we need to build for communities and in communities.

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I ask hon. Members to limit their contributions to around three to four minutes, because I plan to start calling the Front Benchers at 2.38 pm.

1.41 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins, and I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing the debate.

I wanted to speak in this debate because I want the Minister to succeed and I want my community to succeed. I am here to offer support and help where we can get the solutions right. There are four key elements that I want to address: how we maximise economic opportunity, how we meet housing need, how we have transport integration and sustainability, and how we engage the community. Those are all equal partners and are all needed in how we take developments forward.

Looking at this issue, I think about our 45-hectare brownfield site in the middle of York. It is adjacent to the railway station and it is publicly owned land, so we can really do something innovative there for the future of our city, in order to address the huge inequality in our economy and to ensure that we get the investment right. Tragically, whereas 36,000 jobs are being created at Curzon Street and 37,000 jobs at Crewe, York Central will have just 6,500 jobs. That is only two and half times the number of houses being built; in Birmingham, nine times as many jobs are being created than there are houses being built. That says to me that we need to understand how we can use such sites for economic growth, and that we need consistency.

What is not happening? Housing is not talking to the economy, to transport or to the environment, and it is certainly not talking to our communities. That is what matters to take us forward, which is what I want to do. People in my city are being priced out of it, which is skewing the local economy. We cannot get the care workers we need and people to work in our hospitality sector and tourism, which is a major economic driver, so we have a negative cycle. Unfortunately, building luxury apartments, which clearly provide a quick receipt from public land sales, pushes up the rest of the market and drives people further away from our city, meaning that people cannot have the amenities and services that they need. We are moving into the wrong spaces, and it

just does not work. It is a broken system, which is why I am looking for reparation, so that we actually use such sites to drive economic opportunity.

Given its connections to the east coast mainline, the trans-Pennine route, Northern Powerhouse Rail and High Speed 2, we are told that York will be one of the best-connected sites in the country, and we need to take advantage of that. On housing, we need to ensure that we have a real match between the need in a local community and what is built. We are seeing luxury apartments that no one can afford, when we have a real housing crisis. We need to get the balance right. There is a requirement for 80% of developments to be family homes, yet they are not being built. Instead, we will see luxury homes, which will be moved on for holiday lets and Airbnb. Our city really does not want more Airbnb.

On transport, we need to ensure that the site in the middle of York is sustainable, yet 2,697 new car parking spaces are being placed in the heart of the city, which is sucking in traffic, making our air quality worse and jamming up our city. We cannot have that. All the people on the strategic board are not from York, and they do not understand our community. We need community voices right at the heart of planning decisions, to ensure that they can talk about their aspirations and their future. That is what levelling up has to be about, and that is what the planning Bill has to be about. I trust that this is what the Minister will enable to happen in the future.

1.45 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this debate. He has already highlighted many of the points that I intend to raise. Like him, I am keen to work with the Minister to ensure that we have a solution that works for local communities.

Planning is broken in North Devon. We can illustrate why we need reform quite dramatically. We have a local plan, yet our local community does not believe in it; our local council votes against developments in the local plan, even though it is on brownfield sites. We have exceeded the number of houses that are built in the community, yet we have nowhere for local people to live. For over four years we have built more than we required, yet we still do not have places local people can live in. We have a conservation office and a planning department from which most developments take up to a decade to emerge.

We have always been a community that welcomes tourists and second home owners, but unfortunately that dynamic is now slightly tilted in the wrong direction. New builds are snapped up as second homes or holiday lets, sometimes by locals because they can make so much money. Why would they rent out a property for a few hundred pounds a month when you can make several thousand a week up here in North Devon?

Post pandemic, North Devon is one of the top 10 places in the country to move to, and I agree that it is a fantastic place to live. However, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, we need people to move here, to get jobs, to stay here and to build communities here with their families. Building homes is not about houses; it is about communities. It is not about a winter ghost town. Croyde, which boasts one of the best surf

beaches in the country, is currently 64% second home-owned. During the pandemic, in the village where I live—where I am speaking from this afternoon—mine was one of just six houses out of the 30 in my close that was occupied. We also have derelict homes, as well as second homes and Airbnbs.

We really need the council to have more teeth to stop new developments going to more second homes or additional Airbnbs and put in place covenants to ensure that local communities can build more family homes here in North Devon. We need them to be affordable so people can live here. Developing in North Devon is difficult; we are remote, we are rural, we do not have a big work force and it is hard to transport materials here. Overlay that with the time it takes to get things out of planning, and actually it is quite a hostile environment for developers. That is not to mention the opposition from many locals, who see that we do not need additional homes; we need the ones we have here already to be available to local people. We have developers facing death threats here in North Devon. We really do need some interventions to enable communities to reform.

The market is broken. In the village where I am this afternoon, a two-bedroom apartment in need of renovation is currently on the market at £750,000—with a communal garden. Something is not working here in North Devon. The final point I will make is that we need to find a way to ensure that councils can raise revenue when people wish to convert a property into a holiday let, and that there are more protections in the market. The private rental sector is now non-existent here; we need to find a way to ensure that there are more privately rented properties, as well as homes that are affordable for local families to buy. There is no point in coming on holiday to North Devon if we have nobody working in our bars and restaurants and nobody able to service visitors when they get here. Communities should not be full of empty houses for half of the year, they should be full of family homes.

1.48 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Mrs Cummins, to serve with you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate. I agree with his opening comments on the broken housing system and the stranglehold of the volume house buildings.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). It was east Devon where Labour secured a memorable by-election win last week. I congratulate Councillor Jake Bonetta and the Labour team. It is, perhaps, wins such as these that are sending a shudder through the Government at the moment. Perhaps this is why the Prime Minister today ignored the unveiling of the hugely important national food strategy, in favour of trying to reassure Conservative MPs in the south that planning changes are not the political dynamite they fear. However, he has a job on, because if the mantra is “build, build, build”, and one characterises those who care about our countryside as newt counters, then one can hardly be surprised when they turn away to people who take a more considered view. It is not only in Devon: many newspaper columns have been written about the battle going on in Horsham, where the legendary Knepp estate fears that Horsham District

[Daniel Zeichner]

Council will approve thousands of homes, while the council says that central Government have put it in this position.

We all agree that there is a problem with the current system, but many of us are deeply suspicious of the suggestions put forward in the planning White Paper last year, not least when one sees the level of donations made by developers to the Conservative party. According to *The Times*, the developer behind the plan at Knepp, Thakeham, has donated more than £600,000 to the Conservatives since 2017. “Build, build, build”—it is not hard to see why. Be in no doubt that I want people housed, I want affordable homes, I want council homes and I want homes of high environmental quality, none of which has been achieved by this Government.

There is much more to be said about planning and housing than can be said in three minutes, but I will highlight one glaring contradiction in Government policy that remains unresolved. I have challenged Ministers on this repeatedly and will try again today. In the Government’s much-delayed but initially worthy Environment Act 2020, there are good proposals to secure biodiversity net gain. They may not be as ambitious as some of us would like, and we have raised some practical concerns, but the principle is right and we support it. However, no one on the Government side has been able to explain how to get biodiversity net gain in a zonal planning system. When challenged, they evade the question. I do not blame them, because there is no obvious answer.

That is not me saying that; it is the planning experts. I refer to an excellent piece in *The Planner* last summer by Huw Morris, who asked how individual schemes will be environmentally assessed to provide the mitigation. They will not, will they, Minister? That is one reason why Conservative MPs are right to be worried. People in England want homes, and homes for their children, but they want our precious land protected too. I just say: beware the Prime Minister’s bulldozer—it is out of control and it is coming for some green space near you.

1.51 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate.

Before I consider the future planning system, perhaps hon. Members will allow me a minute or two of nostalgia. When I was first elected as a councillor to Great Grimsby Borough Council in 1980, just about every planning application went before the planning sub-committee, which met every two weeks and decided whether plans—large or small; a conservatory or a large-scale industrial development—should go ahead or be refused. During the intervening years, more and more decisions have been delegated to planning officers. One thing that people expect from those they elect to represent them is that they actually participate in those decisions and have a vote. Democracy has suffered and voters feel more and more that those they elect to use their judgment have been sidelined, and confidence in the system has waned. There is no going back to what may or may not have been the halcyon days of the Grimsby planning sub-committee, but what of the future? Communities feel that they need to be involved, but they recognise

that their influence is limited. If they feel that the proposals that may come forward will further limit that influence, they will be apprehensive and oppose those changes. This is a massive challenge.

Thanks to the Government’s levelling-up agenda, areas such as mine are becoming more and more attractive to businesses. New jobs are created regularly; we have record funding through the Greater Grimsby town deal, tipping over the £100 million mark since the last election; we have gained freeport status for the Humber ports; and the Budget this year announced tens of millions of pounds for a new marine energy park. The end result will be more highly skilled, well-paid, sustainable jobs, which will create greater investment in the area, improving living conditions and requiring more housing.

Like previous Governments, this one is faced with the demand for more housing and the resistance of local people to excessive development. I use the word “excessive” deliberately, as on the whole most people recognise the need for more housing. I also appreciate that, in rural communities, limited growth is required to support local services and facilities such as schools, post offices, pubs and churches. However, they also know that excessive development will overload local services, such as GP practices. It was good to hear the Prime Minister acknowledge that in his speech this morning.

I will give a current example from my constituency of how essential community involvement is to the whole process. North Lincolnshire Council has applied for levelling-up funding to deliver one of the council’s main projects—the western relief road, which is crucial to the continued expansion of the local economy. That road was included in the council’s local plan, but that local plan is unknown to most people: the whole process is a mystery, and they have more important things to do, getting on with their lives. Only last Saturday, I visited two constituents whose property could be severely affected by the road. I spent an hour with them, explaining the local plan and how it had been advertised and they would have been able to submit objections, but of course, like most people, it had passed them by.

I could take the Minister to the village of Wootton in my constituency, where he will see that every other house has an estate agent-style board in its front garden, objecting to another local application. If we are to involve communities, they must be part of the local plan process. Of course, we have to recognise the need for more housing, particularly for our younger people, but on balance I must urge the Government towards caution on this issue. They have the best intentions, and I will gladly work with them to achieve their aims, but caution is the watchword.

1.56 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair for this important debate, Mrs Cummins, and I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing it. As other hon. Members present will know, planning is an issue that really impacts our local communities and attracts a great deal of attention when contentious applications are made. However, the Government’s proposals limit accountability and local input in the planning system. The proposed changes will lead to local people no longer having the ability to formally object to inappropriate developments in their own street or neighbourhood, with participation limited

to consultation on the area's local plan every few years. They would remove the public's right to comment on those individual applications, cutting opportunities for public engagement by half. That does not seem fair.

I will give the example of Ryton ward in my constituency, where we have a local plan for Gateshead, and where there is a very contentious housing development. It has been through the local plan, with land allocated for housing, so that was one leg of the argument gone at the application stage, but there is lots of detailed engagement on very specific proposals and conditions. I know, for example, that the people of Stargate—a small mining village—who are most affected, are seeing huge changes. Those changes are not to their direct benefit, but are having a huge impact on their lives. We need to ensure that people have the right to participate in those local decisions, not just at the principle level but at the detailed level, when something happening next door affects an individual's life.

With nine in 10 planning applications approved by councils and—according to the Local Government Association—more than 1 million homes given planning permission but not yet built, it is clear that it is the housing delivery system that is broken, not the planning system. Raising the number of homes required without incentivising or compelling developers to actually build them will not lead to the provision of more homes, which brings me to an important point: a number of parties have identified that we really need to be funding our planning system effectively, so that the planners can deal with the applications. They are being held back by a lack of staff on some occasions, and I believe the Royal Town Planning Institute has made that very point and believes that zoning is not the answer.

I want to speak specifically—the Minister would be surprised if I did not—about accessible housing, and the need for planning reform to promote accessibility. We must do much more to ensure that older and disabled people can live in homes suitable for their needs: that is essential for people's independence and quality of life. Over the past year and more we have all spent a lot more time at home, especially vulnerable people, both older people and those with disabilities. However, sadly, new Government data published just last week—on 8 July—as part of the English housing survey revealed that a growing proportion of older and disabled people are forced to live in homes unsuitable for their needs. The Government launched a consultation on accessible homes almost a year ago, in September 2020, but we are yet to hear the outcome.

I will touch very briefly on the environment and the climate emergency. The planning system has a central, vital role in both addressing climate change and facilitating nature's recovery, but the Government's proposed changes do not properly address the needs of the natural environment. I fully support the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in calling for the Government to strengthen protection for sites already designated for nature, giving local nature recovery strategies material weight in the planning system and ensuring robust and fit for purpose environmental regulations.

2 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: It is a huge privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I thank the hon. Member for Isle of

Wight (Bob Seely) for raising some massively important issues for all our constituents. I am speaking from just outside the Lake District in Westmorland, where we have always had a huge problem of excessive second home ownership and, indeed, the pressure that too many holiday lets can put on a local community. However, over the past 12 months that problem has become catastrophic.

We have been deeply concerned that Governments over the years have failed to acknowledge this problem, but surely now it is unmissable. To give an idea of the problem, over the past 12 months, estate agents I have spoken to say that up to 80% of all house sales have been into the second-home market. There are communities in my constituency where 90% of the homes are not lived in. We do not need to think too hard to work out what the consequences of even 30% of a community not being lived in all year round will be: they lose the local school because nobody is going to that school from the homes within that community, and they lose the local bus service, pub, post office and all the other facilities as well. These beautiful places can become ghost towns, but the problem has got so much worse in these last 12 months.

We have also seen the massive growth in the number of holiday lets. Here in the south lakes, we have one of the highest proportions of holiday lets anywhere in the country. That huge number has gone up by 32% in a year. As hon. Members have said, that has come about due to a variety of different sources, but in particular the Airbnb market.

Anecdotally, what does that mean? Constituents that I have spoken to in Ambleside, Kirkby Lonsdale, Grange-over-Sands and other places who had a private rented property costing maybe £600 to £700 a month find they are being kicked out, now that the evictions ban has ended, and they discover that the property is on the market for £1,000 a week on Airbnb. That is outrageous, and it is something that Government have the power to do something about through planning reforms that would actually make a difference.

What I am asking the Government to do—the hon. Member for Isle of Wight alluded to this earlier and I completely agree with him—is to change planning law. The Government should change planning law so that holiday lets and second homes are separate categories of planning use, and they should give the Lake District national park, the Yorkshire Dales national park, South Lakeland District Council and all planning authorities the power and the resource to police that, so that the leakage of those homes out of the family home market is prevented.

It seems outrageous that these beautiful places that we are so proud of, in our rural parts of the United Kingdom, can end up bleeding local talent and families and becoming places where only the wealthy can stay or visit. We wanted these radical interventions to happen years ago, but surely now these extreme circumstances mean that extreme and radical action is necessary. I add that the Government could copy what the Welsh Government have done—give local authorities the power to increase council tax on second homes to well above 100% and up to 200%, and use that revenue first to dissuade people from having second homes in certain areas, but also to invest in the schools, post offices and bus services that would otherwise close, so that we do not, by letting the market let rip, see communities like mine in Cumbria die through the lack of intervention.

2.3 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate. Generally speaking, I find the proposals outlined in the White Paper to be positive, but there is much to be done to refine our approach to make it a solid foundation for a 21st-century planning system.

First, as a local councillor for 15 years, I want to emphasise the importance of engaging local communities to get it right from the very start of any planning system. Of course there is a practical side, in terms of context, utilities and amenities, as well as the need to protect well-loved conservation areas, particularly in a constituency like mine.

In my personal experience as a councillor, local people are not nimbys, but want and deserve quality homes that are appropriate to where they live. I know from speaking to constituents in the Cities of London and Westminster that the vast majority of people who live there are keen for their children and grandchildren to be able to remain in the area, but sadly, at the moment that is not always the case. I recognise that the Government are paving the way on bricks and mortar, but there is still a long way to go to reach the Government target of 300,000 homes a year.

It is not just about the numbers. My constituents want homes that they can grow up in and remain in when they have families. We want our children to know a range of people from all walks of life. In the Cities of London and Westminster there is a perception that the housing market is polarised between the multimillion-pound properties for oligarchs and very wealthy people, and council-run estates and housing association homes. What we need, and what local people want, is affordable and appropriate homes in the middle ground that keep neighbourhoods as thriving, friendly communities.

I urge the Minister to ensure not only that local residents are sufficiently consulted, but that there is a concerted effort to increase local democracy when it comes to the final planning reforms, which we will see when the legislation comes forward. On a practical level, one way of doing so is to address the issues of change in use class between residential and different types of commercial activity. There have been recent changes in planning legislation that are already having a major effect on constituencies like mine and not giving local authorities the flexibility that they need. For example, the introduction of the commercial, business and service use of class E, as well as permitted development rights, makes it now significantly more difficult for local authorities to influence the way in which areas develop.

These changes have also removed the funding that used to be provided through section 106 and the strategic industrial locations process. If every commercial use is considered to be the same use class, then any change of use requires little or no approval and provides no funding, even for the infrastructure that is so badly needed to make all of this work.

The same goes for the permitted development rights process. We have an increasing number of class E premises that are changing from shops to restaurants, without any requirement for planning permission to manage issues such as servicing and hours of use. That means

that licensing has to take up the slack. Planning is pushing the problem over to local authority licensing committees, and that is not on. It is important that the planning process should listen to residents. It should take into account their views and the appropriateness of changes in residential and commercial uses for communities and local authorities.

A second way to bolster local democracy, which the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should consider, is improvements to the appeals process for planning applications. That is much in the spirit of the Prime Minister's stated ambition to give constituents "a greater say over what gets built"

in their community, but allow me to quote the Covent Garden Community Association, which wrote that we need

"to rebalance the appeals process in the current planning system. The fact that applicants can appeal to the Planning Inspector but local communities can only appeal to the High Court sets up an imbalance of risk".

There is much to welcome in the planning reforms, but local democracy still needs to be at their very heart.

2.9 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate and thank him for his valued contribution to the all-party parliamentary group for council housing, which I have the privilege to chair.

We could do much to address the considerable inequality in our society by tackling the housing crisis. Many of us across the House understand that housing is vital to enabling a decent quality of life. In turn, we appreciate that it hinges on a planning system that is fair. I take that fairness to comprise wide-scale access to affordable housing, strong local democratic controls on housing developers and the prioritisation of local communities. Sadly, that is distinctly absent from the Government's proposed reforms to the planning system.

Although I accept that there is a severe need for housing in this country, a planning system that does not take into account those markers of fairness will do nothing for local people up and down the country, including those in my constituency. The issue is about what housing is required and where. I have more faith in the old system, which had greater powers for authorities and local development corporations, but the Localism Act 2011 greatly denuded the powers of local authorities and, in particular, muzzled the voices of our communities.

Let me give one example that is going through the system and relates to Warwick District Council's local plan, which runs to 2029. The application for what is labelled the East Whitnash housing development is currently being considered by the planning inspector. The proposed housing development has no regard for local traffic issues or the wishes of residents. It is far from being a sustainable development; it has everything to do with over-development. Our local plan estimates that 20,000 new homes will be delivered, representing an over-development of 3,500 dwellings.

Forgive me, but the common theme throughout the debate has been over-development coupled with overestimation. The challenge has been great enough

under the existing planning legislation, which already stifles local voices. The Government's plans to stop local opponents blocking developments in designated growth zones mean that the concerns raised by the local community in Whitnash and elsewhere will hold no sway—so much for local accountability.

More specifically, I am deeply concerned by the advent of a new planning system in which affordable housing will be increasingly out of reach. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) stated, there is real unaffordability in many areas across the country. With an increasing amount of power centralised in the hands of housing developers, I struggle to see how the Government's proposals will turn the tide of the declining number of affordable houses.

I suggest some improvements to the Bill: keep prioritising local government so that local officials will not be stripped of their power to assess building applications; establish regional development corporations led by local authorities, as well as community-led proposals; on community-led housing, ensure that senior Government figures actually take on board that, as we have heard, most communities welcome housing provided that it is truly affordable for young people; and prioritise local, affordable homes—for too many areas, the cost of housing as a ratio of local incomes is way too high. We must also ensure that there are enhanced powers for local authorities. We need to proscribe land banking and provide greater powers to local authorities to buy sites at existing land prices. All too often, developers control land, making millions on land options, while landowners ride off into the sunset, pocketing tens of millions of pounds.

The planning Bill needs to ensure that we build communities, not houses. All too often, there are no shops, pubs or community centres, as has been demonstrated south of Warwick and Leamington. Infrastructure needs to be built in advance, and all that is possible. I urge the Government to listen to us and the public, and to stop listening to the developer-donors who are destroying our countryside, denying communities the right housing and leaving generations impoverished as a result.

2.13 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins, as I join the debate from here in West Sussex. I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate.

I welcome that, as much as some may try to make it so, this is not a party political matter. We know that the Lib Dems' housing policy is for an identical 300,000 homes, while the Green party plans 500,000 homes a year—that is before factoring in the extra building from their open-door policy on settlement.

The Minister is well aware of my opposition to the large-scale and inappropriate development proposals on greenfield land across my constituency, in Adversane, Ashington, Buck Barn, Barnham, Eastergate, Mayfield, Kirdford, Rustington, Westergate and Wisborough Green.

I draw the Minister's attention to the 556 local residents who, over just the last few weeks, have signed a petition against a development on Rock Road in Storrington. The development is opposed by the parish, the district council and, of course, by me, the Member of Parliament. As a site, it is a spectacular example of the wrong homes

in the wrong places. It would put unsustainable strain on infrastructure, such as medical services, GPs, schools and transport. None of that is a surprise, given the very rural setting of Heath Common. The developer Clarion Homes masquerades as a provider of social housing, but so far it appears to be anything but.

Today is about how we move forward. I offer the Minister a five-point plan out of this crisis—one that will give the nation the homes it needs, while protecting the environment we love. First, we need to level up. The economic activity of development has to be spread more evenly across the whole United Kingdom. I know algorithms are not his Department's strong point, so let me use some basic percentages. Before the second world war, only a fifth of the population lived in the south of England outside of London, while twice as many lived in the north and Scotland. Now, equal numbers live in both.

By piling on even more growth in the south-east, the algorithm is locking the north and midlands into permanent economic disadvantage. That was something the Prime Minister talked about earlier today. He said,

“By turbocharging those areas, especially in London and south-east, you drive prices even higher and you force more and more people to move to the same expensive area. The result is that their commutes are longer, their trains are more crowded, they have less time with their kids.”

I agree.

Secondly, we need to turn consents into homes. We need a time-based levy between consent and completion with real bite to deliver those 1 million new homes before we have to give planning permission on a single extra green field. Third, we need a truly muscular approach to brownfield first—actions, not words, and a real distinction in the planning system to tilt the playing field brownfield. Fourth, we need to go up, not out. As the Minister knows, we have some of the lowest density urban areas in Europe, yet the London Mayor clearly suffers from acrophobia. The construction rates of tall buildings under his tenure have more than halved. He is a mouse, not an eagle. The failure of leadership is so significant that I am afraid the moment is coming when the London Mayor will need to be stripped of any say on planning.

Fifth, we need a tax system that helps, not hinders, the problem—a stamp duty break for downsizers, which will help free up the market. There is much to commend in the planning White Paper, but there is very much more to fix in today's planning system. On behalf of all my concerned constituents in Arundel and South Downs, I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply—not just today, but as he thinks about bringing forward a planning Bill in the autumn.

2.17 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate.

After 10 years of devastating austerity, the infrastructure and housing of communities up and down the country are in a perilous state. I am concerned that the Government's planning Bill prioritises wealthy landlords and developers over working people. The Government's plan for a new developers' charter will remove powers from elected local representatives, thus silencing the voices of local people and communities and tipping the balance of power further in favour of profit-seeking developers.

[Claudia Webbe]

The Government's plan to scrap section 106 agreements and the community infrastructure levy, which currently results in 49% of all affordable homes, will sell our communities short. In 2018-19, 10 times as many social homes were delivered through section 106 agreements, compared to homes delivered with grants from Homes England. We must improve section 106 to make it more transparent, consistent and certain, and to get a larger share for social housing. Scrapping it altogether risks abandoning one of the chief drivers of affordable living, community empowerment and engagement. Rather than making it harder to build homes that are fit for the many, the Government must rapidly increase the construction of council housing, family homes and genuinely affordable properties to urgently address the housing crisis.

There are insufficient sustainability measures in the proposals; this was an opportunity to focus on sustainability, but the proposals fall way short of that. There is no mention of climate or the ecological emergency—not one—and there is nothing to support biodiversity.

The Government's plans refer to good design and appearance, but they fail to address the need to make homes safe after the Grenfell Tower fire, with a properly funded fire safety fund and a legal requirement to enforce the replacement of dangerous Grenfell-style cladding on all high-rise and high-risk homes.

There is nothing in the planning reforms agenda to protect renters. Renters must be supported with new indefinite tenancies, an extended eviction ban, rent controls and strong enforcement of decent property standards.

The eradication of rough sleeping and homelessness must also be enshrined at the heart of the Government's planning system. Rough sleeping in England increased by 141% between 2010 and 2019, while deaths of rough sleepers more than doubled in the most recent five-year period.

The Government must realise that they do not exist only to govern in the interests of landlords and property developers, but to ensure that everyone in the country is able to access secure, affordable and decent homes.

2.21 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this debate.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I will start on a more positive note—I welcome the reforms in the planning system, particularly those for more local engagement with communities. Only 1% to 3% of the public engage with the current system. It had to change; something had to give. I will now explain why it had to change.

We face a monolithic urban extension of 6,000 dwellings on green belt in the west midlands—the plan started in 2012 and was adopted in 2017. In total, 6,000 comments were made, but not one single comment was listened to, and they were all constructive comments. Residents have been left with a plan that fails to address the real housing need and a plan widely known for the political opportunism of Birmingham City Council. The last remaining green lungs will be ripped out of the city.

The relevance of my mentioning this controversial development today is that it has been delayed and downsized—if only the city council had listened to those 6,000 comments. It really is shocking. It is now anticipated that only 2,000 dwellings will be delivered by 2031, which is the end of the plan, and I suspect that, in fact, the number will end up being only 1,000. Some 6,000 residents said this site was not suitable; 6,000 voices were not listened to. But those voices were right. This was, unfortunately, a lamentable failure of planning. We need planning reform to ensure that it never happens again, so I welcome the reforms on consultation.

My own metropolitan borough council is about to start consultation on the Black Country plan. I hope that it listens to the voices of residents and the comments they make, and I also hope that residents come forward and have their say. After all, this process is about them and their future homes; it is about young adults and their futures. Local authorities seem to forget this, but I am sure my local authority will be listening.

Finally, we must stop building monolithic estates that do not reflect the land they take up. I am passionate about this, as are my constituents. We need to rewrite how we build, and move away from urban sprawl, sprawling concrete suburbs and crammed cities. We must build better; local authorities must plan better. We need renewed vigour in how we build our villages and towns of the future. For many years, urbanism has been turbo-charged with a mandate for place-making on the edge of our cities. We must let the environment be the turbo-charge for future place-making and build homes for the future that are truly environmentally led and that reflect both the surrounding community and the land that is actually used. Communities must be a huge part of that process.

2.24 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure, Mrs Cummins, to serve under your chairmanship, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing such an important debate.

In the short amount of time available to me, I will talk about two issues: first, the green belt; and, secondly, the standard method for calculating housing need. I will speak in support of the Government position, in many ways. I think the Government are being unfairly blamed by many local authorities who use the blame game to get away from their individual responsibility to set housing need in their own areas. My constituency in Bury North is very different from those of other hon. Members. We have different needs and priorities. We are not an area with many second homes. The best place for decision making lies in a localised planning system that responds to local needs. Our local politicians have to step up to the mark to decide what housing is required, where it should be built, and the type of housing that we need. That is why we elect local politicians.

In the planning White Paper, three categories of land type are identified: growth areas, renewal areas and protected areas. Green belt is part of a protected area. "Planning for the Future" states that the standard method will determine housing requirement, but the green belt will be a constraint on that. In discussing the standard method, the White Paper goes on to say,

"The standard method would make it the responsibility of individual authorities to allocate land suitable for housing to meet the requirement".

However, the existing policy on green belt will remain in place.

That is taken even further in the Government's response to the consultation on local housing need proposals, which was updated on 1 April this year, and which makes it clear that

"meeting housing need is never a reason to cause unacceptable harm"

to the green belt. I think all hon. Members would agree with that. It is further made clear that the standard method—the use of 2014 figures—

"does not present a 'target' in plan-making, but instead provides a starting point for determining the level of need for the area, and it is only after consideration of this, alongside...constraints...such as the Green Belt, and the land that is actually available for development, that the decision on how many homes should be planned for is made."

So the position is crystal clear. It is for local authorities to determine precisely how many homes to plan for and where those homes are most appropriately located, taking into account the local circumstances and constraints.

Too often we see local authorities, as I said at the start of my speech, avoiding responsibility. In Bury we have not had a local plan since 1997. Not one elected ruling body at Bury Council has been able to come up with a thoughtful, ambitious plan for jobs, growth or infrastructure for the housing that we need—we need affordable housing—and that is an indictment of local democracy rather than an indictment of the Government, who are handing the decisions for building, the green belt, and how a local area wishes to view itself to local councils and officers who are actually employed to do that.

The standard method is from 2014. There is an argument that the figures are out of date, and I would prefer the 2018 Office for National Statistics figures to be used. We cannot ignore the fact that the Government are giving each local authority in this country the legal tools to protect the green belt and to ensure that the housing that is required for our areas meets local need. If local authorities are incapable of meeting that responsibility, that is not the Government's fault.

2.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins.

Far from tackling the housing crisis, the Government's planning reforms will end up delivering fewer homes, and more of the homes that very few people can afford. The reforms mean less local decision making, and they are less strategic and less democratic. We Liberal Democrats believe in community empowerment. It is incomprehensible that the Government propose to remove local input into development applications. My constituents and their local representatives understand the needs of our community far better than Ministers in Whitehall or developers whose main interest is to make a profit.

My Bath constituency is a UNESCO world heritage site. A key part of that listing is not just the architecture of our buildings but the beautiful natural setting that reaches right into the city with its steep, undulating hills. How can a centralised housing algorithm ever reflect the local context of Bath?

Local authorities approve about nine in 10 planning applications. There are more than 1 million homes with planning permission in England that have not been built.

The real reason for delay in housing delivery is land banking by housing developers, who make a significant proportion of their profit when land is allocated and then all too often wait for an increase in land value.

The Government's proposals for a zoning system will in one stroke allow a great deal of land to be released for development without any obvious mechanism to ensure that increases in land values benefit the local community. How will that help us reach our house building targets, and how will it ensure that we build 100,000 much-needed homes for social rent each year? The private sector has completely failed to build the homes for social rent that we need. We need a Government committed to the building of council housing, as progressive Governments did in the past. Only that will address a housing crisis that has created deeper and deeper inequalities. If the Government were truly committed to levelling up, they would start by building social homes, and they would make that a public sector infrastructure programme, instead of building more roads or expanding airports.

However, any review of our planning system should go beyond the delivery of housing alone. Planning authorities play a huge role in creating places for their communities, from connectivity and accessibility to local infrastructure and affordability. The Government should concentrate on such measures, for instance adopting the 20-minute neighbourhood concept or updating guidance to create active neighbourhoods that prioritise walking, cycling and public transport. Domestic heating accounts for about 14% of our emissions—the Minister is not listening—so we must have a proper plan to decarbonise heating. The future homes standard is still not fit for purpose. It is a system for building regulation, not for place-making, and it goes nowhere near the challenges of addressing sustainable location and layout. Will the Government commit to binding the Planning Act 2008 and the Climate Change Act 2008 together?

Instead of undermining local authorities and local communities, the Government should direct their energy towards building greener, more resilient, more sustainable homes. Communities must have the right to shape places for themselves. That right must be protected.

2.32 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate and on his work with colleagues to make positive suggestions, as he outlined at the start. I thank the Minister for the efforts he has made to listen to colleagues. I welcome the proposals to make changes to the planning system, with the emphasis on a national building design code and locally produced building guidelines. I also support the Government in making building rules clearer and getting local and neighbourhood plans in place everywhere. I understand and support the drive to get more people on to the housing ladder, but we need to do it in the right way. I will make three main points.

First, people tell me time and again that they are not opposed to development but they want the public services and infrastructure to match. For all the new developments we have had in Crewe and Nantwich, how many new GPs and hospital doctors do we have? How many traffic congestion points have been tackled or new roads built?

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

The population rapidly increases, but the services do not increase as quickly to match, if they ever do at all. There is not enough in the White Paper to address that. Simplifying the system may help, but it will not magically recruit new GPs overnight. Secondly, it is crucial that we encourage developers to build on land they already have permission to develop, rather than land banking to maximise prices in what is essentially a broken market. The Government need to focus on the 1 million homes that have been granted permission but have not been built. I put on the record again my desire for the Minister to introduce measures to tackle this. Thirdly, I emphasise the importance of local knowledge and input into planning decisions. I worry that the changes being made may limit the input that councillors and residents have into individual planning decisions. I do not see how loading all the decision making up front and taking away input into individual decisions will secure community support.

We all know that, too often, residents and even local authorities end up locked in legal battles with developers that want to go ahead with something and are often equipped with deep pockets and big legal teams to match. I can see it now: the full weight of their resources will be piled into securing the most aggressive developer-biased decisions on zoning, which will not be in the best interests of our communities. Well-developed neighbourhood plans, and the individual decisions within them, should remain the bedrock of how we approach this issue. I understand the importance of continuing to build more homes, but we need to do it in the right way and in the right places so that it does not negatively impact on our local communities.

2.34 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship again, Mrs Cummins, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), both on securing this debate and on the many constructive and positive suggestions he made about how the planning system could be reformed, in contrast to the way it is going to be done by this Government. Like many of the Members who have spoken today, I am extremely concerned that the Government are intent on replacing with a developers' charter a planning system that, although not perfect, has served this country well. In fact, the process of reform is well under way; regular additions to the permitted development rights, making it easier to change use without scrutiny, have been going on for most of the past 10 years.

The hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) described an example of what she sees as a failure in what is effectively developer-led planning under the current system. This trend has been going on for much of the past 10 years, and unfortunately, the Government seem to want to complete that process. They seek to silence residents and stifle the voice of communities up and down the country, as many Members have said today. Under the proposed plan for growth and renewal zones, residents, local community groups, civic groups and parish councils will lose their right to object to new planning developments. The power of local people's involvement has been so well described by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith),

as well as by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken)—I should declare an interest in her speech, as my first proper job was with the Covent Garden Community Association. The very people who know their local area—who know what their neighbourhood, village or town needs, and what needs to be protected—will be silenced. We are not saying that people should have a veto, but that they should have a voice.

What can they do once they have been gagged? Well, they could try writing to and meeting their local elected councillors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said, applications are very often approved by councils—nine out of 10 applications are approved—but the Government have already started to gag local councils as well through the changes to permitted development rights, and will do so further. Democratically elected councillors who understand their communities and the complex and, yes, hard decisions behind planning applications will be denied the chance to stand up and fight for their residents in the way that they have been doing for many years, both with planning applications and through the local plan process, as the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) described.

People and their representatives are being sold down the river to enable a new developers' charter. In his response to the Opposition day debate last month, the Secretary of State said that the Opposition wanted to “do absolutely nothing”. That could not be further from the truth: just yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) presented a ten-minute rule Bill to the House—the Planning and Local Representation Bill—that would guarantee the right of local residents to have a say over new developments in their community. It tackles the long-running issue of land banking and addresses the blight of permitted development reforms so that local councils can at least set local design standards on permitted development changes and avoid the cramped, poorly lit, rabbit-hutch housing that we have seen spring up. The Government's own adviser labelled this process as building

“the slums of the future”,

which is why my hon. Friend's Bill sought to address it.

The ongoing and proposed planning reforms also make it harder to tackle the challenges facing society now and in the future, whether that is the climate crisis, sustainability—as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe)—or the future of high streets. Surely with the challenges we face, Government should want to work together with local authorities, civic groups, and many other highly skilled groups in the community, locally and nationally, to address those challenges in the planning system. That system grew out of a need over 100 years ago to address public health concerns in the expanding industrial towns and cities, and the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 was introduced to ensure that public good was at the centre of all development. No one would argue that the planning system is perfect, or that it needs to remain frozen in stone. There are many things that can and do improve the system, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight said, and would enable the high-quality, truly affordable homes that we need to be built, but the Government reforms are wrong and they are the wrong answer to the question of how we build more homes.

I will pause to describe what colleagues have told me about some new housing developments in their patches: housing estates with no other facilities that are a car drive away from buying a pint of milk or taking the children to school; estates with roads with no pavements and massive traffic congestion in the area, no broadband and inadequate water, sewerage and even electricity. What is going to happen when the target number of people in this country own electric vehicles and need to charge them overnight? Will our electricity system be able to cope?

It is not the planning system that is preventing 1.1 million homes that already have planning permission from being built, so why not address that challenge? We know that local councils up and down the country are already taking bold steps to tackle the affordability crisis in housing. My local authority is doing that with new council homes that are built with air source heat pumps and good insulation.

My hon. Friends the Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the need for planning to deliver affordable housing, but also jobs, transport and schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon talked about accessible housing and housing for people in our communities with different needs.

The hon. Members for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and for Cities of London and Westminster mentioned the need to ensure that the new homes built are not just flats or houses but affordable homes for local people who are not crowded out by the holiday business. Let the planning process decide that determination, not the free-for-all that the market provides.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about the loss of basic rural services such as buses and post offices, which need to be protected and enhanced. The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) reminded us of the importance of the green belt and the need to protect that.

We need not just bricks and mortar but homes, including affordable homes. We need not just housing estates but communities. The planning system is there to address that and it needs to be protected and enhanced, not decimated, to address not just the numbers game on houses but the climate crisis, the north-south imbalance in this country, traffic congestion and much more.

In fact, the Minister appears to have united many of his Back Benchers against the Government plans and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, many voters in a growing number of areas are punishing the Government for this very programme, as described in the White Paper. Surely the Government should listen to the universal condemnation of their proposed planning reforms, drop their developer's charter and listen to the constructive voices about what needs to be done, not only about planning or in the Minister's Department.

This cannot be done in isolation. We need to consider development in the context of other issues such as transport, including providing pavements to new stations; the local economy and jobs; affordable housing of decent quality and designed for the different needs of different people; climate change and biodiversity; community services, including schools, doctors, parks and post offices; and basic infrastructure, as I have mentioned, including power, sewerage, broadband and so on. We need to positively change the planning system, not rip it apart.

2.43 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate. He is a doughty campaigner for his constituents in the Isle of Wight, and I know that he thinks deeply and for a considerable length of time on these important, and sometimes intricate, planning matters.

I am very happy to look at the proposals that he has written to us about, because we all agree that we want to get our planning reforms right. We also all agree, including representatives from Shelter and KPMG, that we need more homes in our country. Both organisations will say that we need to build north of 250,000 new homes a year in our country to address our housing challenges. However, the present planning system, with all the plans calculated as a total, represents less than 180,000 new homes planned each year, so we do need to build more homes in the right places, and of the right quality, to serve our constituents. That is why we launched two consultations last year; that is sometimes, I think, forgotten. We launched the consultation on planning reform, because yes, we do want there to be more homes, but we also want a planning system that is more transparent, more predictable, easier to navigate and more speedy and that delivers good-quality, well designed homes. That is what we intend to achieve through our planning White Paper and the reforms that we will introduce later this year, and also a White Paper on local housing need in order to ensure that local authorities are planning for 300,000 homes each year. But the LHN—local housing need—number is not binding and is not an end to the process; it is a beginning point from which local authorities can then identify constraints, if they have them, or opportunities, if they want them, to build fewer or more homes than their target local housing need. The green belt is one example that local authorities can use as a constraint on building.

What is important is that local authorities keep their local plans up to date, because if they do not, they expose their constituents—all our constituents—to speculative development from applications that come forward, which the Planning Inspectorate will give great weight to if the local authorities do not have a plan, and do not have control of their local housing supply. I have to tell you, Mrs Cummins, that the local authorities in York, Gateshead, South Lakeland, and Bath and North East Somerset have plans that are out of date. They need to get them “in date” in order to protect their constituents from speculative developments. I say gently to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) that it is little use lecturing me about planning; what she should be doing is encouraging her local authority to get its plan in place and protect her constituents from speculative development.

We are keen to build a planning system that works for the 21st century and that moves faster than the present glacial pace of planning. It takes local plans seven years in many cases—on average—to be instituted. It then takes five years for many planning applications to see a spade in the ground. It is taking far too long. The process needs to be speeded up. But crucially, it needs to engage more people. That is a point that I know my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight has mentioned and that my hon. Friends for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) have also raised

[Christopher Pincher]

as an issue. Right now, sometimes as little as 1% of the local population in a planning authority area gets engaged in plan making. That rises to a whopping 2% or 3% when it comes to individual applications. And as we have heard, nine out of 10 planning applications—90%—are passed anyway. That is not particularly empowering; it is not particularly engaging. We want to do better.

Bob Seely: Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I will give way in a moment to my hon. Friend, but I am conscious, if I may say so, that I have a lot of questions to answer that he and others have asked and he does get a second bite of the cherry later.

We do need to ensure that more people are engaged, and we believe that by digitising the planning process, by creating map-based plans of local areas, we can engage many more people in the planning process, and they can get more engaged up front, making real decisions about the sorts of buildings that they want in their local geographies—the densities and the designs—and about the infrastructure to support those homes. That is real power, given to people much earlier in the process, so that they can become much more engaged.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment, but I will make a little more progress first.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight suggested that we are scrapping the planning system. We are not; we are proposing to reform it—and I will give him an example of what I mean by reform, rather than scrapping. These are our proposals. In areas that we have designated as growth sites, a local plan can set design and density standards, and describe the infrastructure expected from developers in those areas.

If the developers tick all the up-front boxes agreed in the plan and consulted on with local people, they will get their outline planning permission to begin their building process. They will still need to keep coming back to the local authority for consents, but they will get their outline planning permission. However, if they do not put forward an application that conforms with the local plan, they will have to put forward an application in the normal way under the present rules.

If developers bring forward an application in what we have described in the White Paper as the protected areas, they will have to bring it forward under the present system. The present system will remain, but we want an accelerated process to identify places where local authorities want to see development taking place, and to bring forward in those places designs and infrastructure requirements that the local communities want, need and have bought into.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is he open to considering a process of deliberative democracy around planning, which really involves engaging with all parts of the community to work through the very difficult challenges in planning and come up with solutions that work for everyone?

Christopher Pincher: I think that I am describing exactly that process. We want more people to be involved and we want them to have a say earlier on about specific matters that should concern them, including what areas may be sites for accelerated development in their areas and what the designs, the design codes and the infrastructure should be. I think that is deliberative democracy.

Bob Seely: I am not for one second trying to catch the Minister out, but at the beginning of the White Paper the Prime Minister said that he wanted to tear the system down and rebuild it. We are now evolving into a reform process rather than a scrapping process, as part of the very sensible evolution and listening process. Is that correct?

Christopher Pincher: As I said, we want to reform the system. If my hon. Friend listens to what I have said and to what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, he will know that we are keen to make sure that we have a process that reforms our planning system, which is outdated and needs change. However, we are not proposing to scrap it, to use the term that he used.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I will not give way, because I am conscious that I do not have long left—

Wera Hobhouse: Can I raise a point of order?

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): Please sit down. That is not a point of order.

Christopher Pincher: I am grateful, Mrs Cummins, for that ruling. I am conscious that I probably have only about six minutes left in which to conclude my remarks, to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight time to sum up the debate.

A number of Members have raised the issue of infrastructure. We all know that when we build homes, those homes need the requisite infrastructure to support them: the GP clinics, the parks, the schools, the roads and the roundabouts. We want to make sure that we have a system that provides those things when they are needed and not way down the line. We do not believe that the present system—a mixture of section 106 agreements and community infrastructure levy payments—meets that requirement.

Indeed, 80% of local authorities tell us that section 106 does not work for them. It is loaded in favour of developers, especially the bigger guns, and often means that infrastructure comes late or not at all. If it does appear to be coming, it is often negotiated away in a manner that local authorities and local communities do not want. That is why we have proposed an infrastructure levy, which will provide up front the infrastructure that local communities want and need. We will make sure that, in doing so, we deliver just as much affordable housing as is delivered in the present system.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) made the very important point about the challenge that some rural communities face. I am open to considering ways in which we can help local people to remain living close to where they come from or where they work. One of the initiatives that we have

announced is the first homes initiative, paid for through developer contributions, which will ensure that local people will be able to buy, at a discount of at least 30%, a home in their local community. Those homes will be covenanted, in perpetuity, to ensure that when or if they are sold on, the buyers, who will be local people—they could be key workers—will also buy at 30% at least below the then local market rate. However, I am open to hearing from colleagues about what other opportunities there may be to encourage local people to stay close to their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight also raised the issue of neighbourhood plans. I am very keen that we build, and bake, neighbourhood plans into the new planning system. They can be very effective and engaging. The trouble is that there are fewer of them the further north—or further into urban areas—we go, so in our planning reforms we are looking at ways to ensure that more neighbourhood plans are produced across the country so that additional housing is identified, with good designs and local infrastructure, to support those communities.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the importance of recycling. We have already made it very clear—in our national planning policy statements, and in the national planning policy framework—that brownfield ought to come first. We have backed that up with fiscal spending to ensure that we are paying for remediation in and around our country. Some £400 million was made available last year for the remediation of brownfield sites in mayoral combined authorities, with a further £100 million made available by the Chancellor in the latest Budget. We are determined to put brownfield first.

In our permitted development rights reforms—I know some colleagues are not so very keen on those—we also encourage the development of redundant sites, or shops that are no longer viable, in towns and city centres. That means we are building homes in the places where people need them, which takes the weight off the transport infrastructure as they are close to GP clinics and other services that people want and need. We are addressing that issue of recycling, too.

In the short time that I have left, I will speak about build-out. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), talked about a ten-minute rule Bill. I would suggest that it is a “ten-minute thought” Bill, because we do not really know from their proposals how the Opposition would deal with issues like gaming or whether they would help and support small and medium-sized enterprises, rather

than making the system more difficult for them. We do not know whether they are proposing that the timetable system should relate to the permissions granted or the building commencement date.

However, we are keen to ensure that we find sensible mechanisms to encourage the build-out of permissions where they exist. We have heard what people have said, both across this Chamber and in response to the consultation, and we are determined to ensure that, where appropriate, permissions are built out rapidly.

Wera Hobhouse: On a point of order, Mrs Cummins. I want to put on the record the fact that the Minister gave this Chamber incorrect information. Bath and North East Somerset Council has a fully updated local plan in place. It is going through a partial revision and is halfway through the terms of its current plan. But while the partial revision is taking place, the local plan is fully updated.

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): The Minister is here and your point of order is now on the record.

Christopher Pincher: I am grateful, Mrs Cummins. I can tell you that the information I have is that the plan was last updated in 2014—some seven years ago.

We are determined to ensure that our reforms meet the tests that my hon. Friend, and others, have set—to speed up the planning system to make it more effective, engaging and transparent. I look forward to the support of all colleagues across the House when we bring our proposals forward later this year.

2.59 pm

Bob Seely: I thank you very much, Mrs Cummins, for your contribution and for keeping order. I thank everyone for taking part in this debate, and I thank the Minister. I am sorry that he does not have a copy of my letter; I will send it immediately. I just highlight the greenfield tax, the windfall taxes and the many other great ideas from myself and other colleagues in it. Finally, I am glad to see that we are moving from scrapping the system to reforming it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the planning system and the upcoming Planning Bill.

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Colombia

[MRS MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practices to support the hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate, and there will also be suspensions between each debate. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of the debates in Westminster Hall, although I am aware that two Members have been detained in another debate. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate.

I remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their cameras 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. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room.

I remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall unless you are speaking. Members attending physically who are in the later stages of the call list should use seats in the Public Gallery at the end of the room and move into the horseshoe when seats become available.

Members can speak only from where there are microphones. Members who are not on the call list but who wish to intervene can only do so from the horseshoe, and I remind Members that those on the call list have priority for spaces on the horseshoe. Those who wish to intervene should not prevent a Member on the call list from speaking.

3.16 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered peace and human rights in Colombia.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller, and to lead this important debate.

The human rights situation in Colombia is out of control; state violence in Colombia is out of control. The 2016 peace agreement has mechanisms to address those issues, but it has not been implemented anywhere close to the levels that it should have been. The Colombian Government are refusing to recognise the scale of the problem; instead, they are seeking to present a squeaky clean image internationally while innocent civilians are being murdered.

Let us be clear: recent events in Colombia have been condemned internationally by Governments, the UN, the Organisation of American States, and politicians from Parliaments across the world. It is essential that our own Government do everything that they can to hold the Colombian Government to account. We cannot support trade deals and training programmes for the Colombian police without also condemning the state violence. We need to increase our practical support for the peace process.

I have visited Colombia on two occasions—in 2013 and more recently in 2018—on delegations to review the human rights situation and the implementation of the peace agreement. On those visits, I met a wide range of stakeholders. What I heard then and what I see now is incredibly worrying. I know that many in this House follow closely the situation in Colombia, and we need to keep doing all that we can to improve the human rights situation and to ensure that the hope given to so many by the peace agreement is not destroyed.

The timing of the debate is pertinent in the light of the recent protests and horrifying police repression of the protesters. Earlier this year, millions of Colombians took to the streets. The response of the Colombian police was to treat the protesters, who were from all sectors of Colombian society, as if they were an enemy to be defeated. The police responded to the protests as if they were at war. The images and videos have been horrifying.

Between 28 April and 26 June, Colombian human rights organisations documented that between 26 and 44 protesters were likely to have been killed by the police. Twenty-eight cases of sexual assault were reported. There were 257 cases of violence against journalists who were covering the protests, including more than 100 physical assaults. The UN documented that 56 people were killed during the protests, including 54 civilians and two members of the police.

There were numerous incidents and videos showing the close collaboration of armed civilians—or para-state actors—and the Colombian police. That has been highlighted for decades but repeatedly denied by supporters and defenders of the Colombian political elites. In Cali on 10 May and 28 May, armed civilians came on to the street to shoot at protesters while standing alongside members of the police. The response of the Colombian President was to tell the protesters to go home, while remaining silent about the fact that apparent paramilitaries and the police were operating side by side. I hope the Minister can tell me what steps the Government are taking to review their training of Colombian police, to ensure they are not supporting units or personnel who have been involved in cases of human rights abuses during the protests.

The response of the Colombian Government to the protests and violence of the police only highlighted further that they are more determined to stigmatise protesters than ensure their protection. As protesters were being killed, the Defence Minister and the Vice-President made statements trying to link protesters to criminal organisations, while the Justice Minister—unbelievably—tried to claim that the protests formed part of an international criminal conspiracy to tarnish the image of Colombia.

These slurs are unacceptable and we must unreservedly condemn them. I give my full support to all those protesting peacefully in Colombia, and I will do whatever I can to defend their right to protest. I hope everyone in this debate will give their full support to that sentiment.

I welcome the investigations opened into the abuses committed by state agents over recent months, but they are not enough. The police are alleged to have killed 13 people during protests in 2020 and to have violently attacked protesters in 2019, but in almost all those cases there has been no justice for victims and their families. Will the Minister join me in fully condemning the violence

against protesters and in calling for judicial and disciplinary processes for abuses during these protests and in previous years?

Colombia has long been one of the world's most dangerous countries in which to be a human rights activist; according to the UN, 133 people were killed in 2020. It is still the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists, with 22 killed last year. Colombia was also the most dangerous country in the world for environmental defenders in 2019, with 64 killed and a further 44 killed between 20 July 2020 and 30 April 2021. The British Government have been signing environmental agreements with their Colombian counterparts, but we must ask what is being done to ensure there is protection for those on the frontline.

Now I turn to the cause for hope in Colombia. The 2016 peace agreement was a historic moment that brought genuine optimism to many, particularly in the most impoverished regions of the country. Although overall implementation has been slow, and in some areas non-existent, there have been important advances. I congratulate everyone, on all sides, who has played a role.

The advancement of the transitional justice system should be particularly celebrated, and I congratulate FARC on its unwavering commitment to the peace process. The former combatants are trying to create new lives under enormous difficulty, and the former commanders are fully engaged in the peace process by accepting responsibility for their roles in crimes committed during the war.

Just last week, the transitional justice court issued its first accusations against a former general and nine other members of the military for their role in the murder of civilians. It is essential that there is full engagement with this process from state actors who stand accused, and international support from the UK Government for the transitional justice system is also essential.

I hope that the Colombian Government will honour their numerous declarations of commitment to the peace process during their final 12 months in office. I hope that the Minister will reiterate the Government's support for the transitional justice court and its recent steps to investigate crimes committed by FARC and the Colombian state.

It is extremely worrying that former FARC combatants continue to be targeted. Over 270 have been killed since the deal was signed. In April of this year, eight former combatants who were inside the peace process were killed in just nine days. Their protection is an absolute priority, as is the advancement in the many areas of the agreement that have seemingly stalled, particularly the implementation of the rural development programmes and the illicit crops substitution programmes.

The cocaine economy is often pointed to as the cause of the insecurity and violence in the countryside, yet of the 99,000 families signed up to the mutually agreed crop substitution programme, only 7% have actually received support for alternative crops. Without an alternative economic option, the coca growers have no way of surviving.

The peace agreement is comprehensive, and we must do all we can to ensure all its chapters are fully implemented. I welcome the UK Government's repeated statements of support for the peace process over recent years, but I am sure we all agree that that must be backed up with

maximum presence and pressure wherever, and whenever, necessary. As we approach five years of the peace agreement, I will finish by calling on the Minister to ensure we honour our role as penholder, taking a lead in international efforts to support a full implementation of the Colombian peace agreement, which is undoubtedly the best hope we have to bring an end to the human rights crisis and see Colombia truly in peace.

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. I intend to move to the Front-Bench speeches at 4.13 pm, so the maths dictate around four minutes each if everybody is going to get to speak. Perhaps, hon. Members could bear that in mind and show courtesy to others.

3.27 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mrs Miller, for your guidance on the four-minute limit, which I will try my very best to adhere to. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this debate, and thank the House authorities for allowing it to take place.

Colombians are a good-natured and democratic people, who love liberty and life. However, they are experiencing a prolonged crisis, the roots of which lie deep, both in Colombian society, but, above all, in the current failing economic model. The economy is in freefall, and the Government wanted to raise taxes on the hardest hit, so social cohesion is breaking down as inequality accelerates in this wonderful country.

Almost half of all Colombians now live in poverty—15% in the most extreme conditions. Meanwhile, the richest 10% in Colombia earn two fifths of all the country's income. Many Colombians will speak of endemic elite corruption, and of the power of the cartels in the economy. There is little surprise that throughout the country, civilians, in very large numbers, have become increasingly active in fighting for justice. I am sure that all parts of this House express our solidarity with all those citizens fighting for a just settlement in Colombia, or anywhere else in the world.

Undoubtedly, wealthier Colombians, and the international corporations that have become implanted there, have felt threatened by this citizen activity. Therefore, this very right-wing Colombian Government have done what such Governments always do, everywhere, which is to defend extreme privilege, wealth and power, even at the expense of their own people's freedoms and, sadly, at the expense of some people's lives.

The Colombian criminal justice system has, too often, been used as a Government tool to attack human rights in an attempt to suppress this insipient citizen movement. We have heard the figures given by my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow about the number of deaths: 5,000 cases of police violence; 44 police killings; 2,000 arbitrary arrests; 77 protesters who have been disappeared—and that is only in the last three or four months. The ITUC—International Trade Union Confederation—and Amnesty have declared that Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist fighting back or an environmentalist. They might have added being an indigenous activist or an LGBTQ rights activist.

Let me turn to the involvement of the British Government. The UK's College of Policing has been training Colombian police officers. Our very own Crown

[Jon Trickett]

Prosecution Service provided so-called criminal justice advisers. The British Government spent £2.3 million training specialised cadres of police in Colombia. There are other programmes as well, too lengthy to mention. British policing, however, is meant to be based on the principle of consent, so what on earth have we, the British, been doing, apparently in cahoots with a Government that seems to remove civil liberties and human rights from what ought to be a central role in their criminal justice system in Colombia?

Finally, I turn to the Minister. The British Government need to come off the fence and to do so clearly. There is no evidence that the situation in Colombia is improving—in fact, it is deteriorating—so there can be no justification in offering words of good will, in effect, to a President who is a human rights abuser on the grandest scale. Minister, please condemn the abuse of civil rights in Colombia and ensure that all UK programmes either comply totally with democratic values henceforth or cease immediately.

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. I should have pointed out for the benefit of Members that a stopwatch has been put on the screen, in case that is of assistance.

3.32 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: I am genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing the debate and for introducing it so skilfully. What she outlined matters; it matters to anyone who respects things such as the right to peaceful protest or even the most basic human rights. What has been going wrong in Colombia in recent months is shocking, even for a country that is used to shock.

The demonstrations against Government policies have, in sheer scale, been unprecedented over the many years that I have known Colombia, and yet those demonstrations have been overwhelmingly peaceful. That has been acknowledged by the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the European Union. Even the Colombian Government have accepted that they were, overwhelmingly, peaceful demonstrations.

As my hon. Friend said, however, that was met by the Defence Minister calling the demonstrations a “terrorist threat” by “criminal organisations”. That is not simply ludicrous, but dangerous, because that has led to the death toll following the protests, which my hon. Friends talked about, and to the arbitrary arrests and use of massive levels of violence by the Colombian police who, frankly, have been out of control. That included 28 sexual assaults on people held in custody, as my hon. Friend pointed out, including the sad case of 17-year-old Alison Melendez who was raped by the police and then went home to commit suicide. Nothing can bring back Alison or undo that damage to her family. It matters, and it matters to those of us who care about Colombia, as we should.

The peace accords in Colombia were a wonderful step forward, but as we have seen in the use of violence by police against the demonstrations, we have seen in effect a denial for those who gave up guerrilla warfare: 278 members of FARC have been murdered since the peace accord was signed and there has been a lack of progress on land reform and on things such as funding

those who give up the growing up of coca leaf for manufacture into cocaine. Those are deliberate policies of the Colombian Government and, being deliberate, they are sabotaging the peace effort.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), I must say to the Minister, I have seen condemnation from different sources—the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has condemned such levels of violence recently and even in the United States, there have been calls for restraint—but few words from Ministers in the British Government. The Minister must stand up and make it clear that we denounce the kind of violence we are seeing from the Colombian police and military.

We need to look at our relationship in terms of police reform. Yes, it is right and proper that we push for police reform and, as penholder at the UN, the British Government have a unique role in bringing forward verification missions to see that that takes place. However, the big prize has got to be that we look at the capacity under the democratic clause in the UK-Andean pact, which makes it clear that human rights violations trigger certain consequences. It is about time that our Government looked at that human rights clause and considered whether now we have got to trigger it.

3.35 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing the debate. It is the first we have had on Colombia since 2019 in Westminster Hall, and timely to have it before the recess and while the situation in Colombia is deteriorating so seriously. It is unfortunate that the Minister is all by herself on the Conservative Benches. It would be nice to see some Government Back Benchers show an interest in this, and perhaps they might reflect on whether they have any activists or, indeed, expat Colombians in their constituencies whose voices should be heard.

Some of those voices are communicated to us through organisations such as Justice for Colombia, and ABColombia and its partner organisations, Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Christian Aid and others. I thank them for their support in helping us prepare. For many years, I heard about Colombia and met people from Colombia through SCIAF, and in 2018 I finally had the privilege of visiting the country. Such a lush, beautiful country, rich in its diversity of peoples as well as natural resources and rich in the potential to be a model of sustainable development and conflict resolution. However, it is also at risk of the exact opposite: backsliding from the progress that has been made and falling into the hands of those who would exploit and strip the country of its bounty, oppress its people and destroy their cultures. We are hearing about that in the debate today.

The context caused by the pandemic and the tax rises to pay for economic support are leading to dreadful outbreaks of violence, and we have heard some of the statistics. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reckons that at least 56 people—54 civilians and two police officers—were killed up to 16 June. In recent meetings by the all-party parliamentary group for Colombia and Justice for Colombia, we have heard

first-hand testimony from people caught up in that violence in the country. That simply demonstrates what we have heard already: that it is one of the most dangerous country in which to be a trade unionist or any kind of human rights actor or defender.

As the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) said, some of the ongoing frustrations among the population, particularly among younger generations, are very deep rooted. When constitutional rights and processes exist on paper but are not followed in practice, it is perhaps not surprising that this leads to increased frustration, which ultimately expresses itself in violence. That sense of powerlessness when communities see the land that their ancestors have worked for generations given over to mining or monocropping, and especially for indigenous communities, for whom the land has important religious or spiritual significance. We can understand how a sense of desperation leads to the lure of the quick buck that can come from coca production, and the country is now sadly producing more cocaine than it did in the 1990s—a very serious challenge for all of us.

The country is moving into the ranks of developed countries, yet there is massive inequalities. There is lively downtown Bogotá, all built up, and then there is the Chocó region, which is one of the poorest in the world, let alone in Latin America. That tension becomes palpable, but where there is risk, there can also be reward. That is why there is a need for action and support for all sides of the disputes.

I support the proposals that have been put forward by CAFOD, ABColombia and others that the UK should be looking to activate the democratic clause in the UK-Andean free trade agreement, that it should be pushing for civil society participation in the implementation of the peace accord, and the points about police reform, which have already been made.

This is the opportunity to prove what a soft power superpower is like. This is the opportunity to prove the worth of the merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that so many of us were concerned about. Yes, step up diplomatic efforts, but also support crop diversification, supporting education, and tax and regulate multilaterals and hold them to account, especially if they are based in the UK or listed on our stock exchanges. Peace is possible and the rewards could be great, but equally, if the scales tip the other way, the results would be devastating. As others have said, the UK has a special responsibility as the UN penholder on Colombia. It should live up to that responsibility.

3.40 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this timely debate. I will continue on the theme of the recent abuses committed by the Colombian police against protesters, which are absolutely appalling. Millions of Colombians—mostly young people—came on to the streets during April and May this year to call for an end to the growing poverty and state violence and for a full implementation of the peace agreement. The response from the Colombian police was violence.

As has already been said, up to 44 protesters were killed, according to human rights organisations. There were also reports of sexual violence, and thousands of

arbitrary arrests. As young people are beaten, killed and sexually abused on the streets of Colombia, we need the UK Government to step up to the plate and send a clear message that such blatant human rights abuses will not be tolerated or accepted. We must immediately review our training programme with the Colombian police and suspend it immediately if it is going to units involved in the repression of peaceful protests.

The Colombian Government have continually failed to accept responsibility for the violence carried out by the police. Instead, they have tried to hoodwink the international community. Just yesterday, during a session at the UN Security Council, the Colombian Foreign Minister and Vice-President, Marta Lucía Ramírez, bizarrely blamed the killing of protesters on people who infiltrated the marches and committed vandalism. We should not be fooled: we have witnessed the Colombian police attack peaceful protesters over the last few years, not just the last couple of months. We cannot stay silent in our calls for justice as the Colombian Government try to deflect our attention. I hope that the Minister might make representations to the Colombian authorities to ensure full investigations of all alleged killings by the Colombian police during recent protests.

I was in Colombia in 2014. I visited the city of Buenaventura. I was there with a local human rights organisation, a church organisation, and I went into a neighbourhood where paramilitaries were using local houses to chop people into pieces while they were still alive. I met the communities—predominantly Afro-Colombian—whose children had to listen to the screams of the victims, and who had then organised to remove the paramilitaries from the streets. It was horrifying, but it was inspirational in equal measure.

Even though that was seven years ago, sadly we know that violence against activists from these communities continues. The facts and the figures have been recited by colleagues already. We really need an immediate implementation of public policy to dismantle paramilitary successor groups, as stipulated in the peace agreement. If there is true commitment to bringing an end to the killings of human rights defenders, why after their three years in government have we still not seen a plan of action to dismantle these illegal armed groups that have such deep, historic links to the Colombian state?

Will the Minister reiterate our Government's commitment to ensure the full implementation of the peace agreement and explain what steps they have taken as the penholder at the UN Security Council, as described earlier? I also call on the Colombian Government to use their last year in office to do everything they can to advance as much of the implementation as they possibly can. I know that many of my colleagues will continue to monitor the situation closely.

3.44 pm

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller, and I will try my best to speak as fast as I can in my thick Scottish accent. I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important debate.

We have seen poverty increase around the world as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. In Colombia, however, the resulting economic suffering has proved all too much to bear in a country that has pre-existing social

[Anum Qaisar-Javed]

and political discontent. Since protests began this year, the demands of the Colombian people have increased beyond economic reform. Protesters have been calling for the dismantling of the riot police, the creation of a universal basic income programme and free university tuition. Those demands have grown out of increasing inequality, lack of social mobility and what many deem to be the oppression of marginalised groups by police forces and the Government.

As the hon. Member for Jarrow mentioned in her opening remarks, there have been a number of deaths in Colombia. It has been reported that more than 220 social and community leaders were killed in 2020 alone, with claims that the majority were killed at the hands of the Colombian state security forces. At least 18 trade unionists have also been killed. According to the UN verification mission, a total of 133 human rights defenders were murdered. The deaths have led to the condemnation of the country by rights groups such as Amnesty International, which has stated that Colombia is widely recognised as the most dangerous country in the world for people who defend human rights. Military intelligence has also been found to be spying on human rights defenders, journalists, High Court magistrates and members of the opposition. In fact, information has been sold to neo-paramilitaries.

The response of Colombia's riot police to the ongoing protests exemplifies the country's failure to protect and uphold the human rights of its people. The police have responded to overwhelmingly peaceful social protests with excessive force and violence, as confirmed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. It has been confirmed that at least 30 protesters have been killed, and over 100 people are reported to have disappeared. Hundreds have suffered serious injury, and over 800 arbitrary arrests have taken place. As many Members have spoken about, there have been reports of cases of sexual violence at the protests.

It is evident that the Colombian people's cry for the dismantling of the riot police is not unfounded, and comprehensive police reform is urgently needed to prevent significant violations in the future. We must urge the Colombian Government to take urgent measures to protect the human rights of their citizens and to initiate a comprehensive police and security reform effort, to ensure that officers respect the right to peaceful assembly and bring those responsible for abuse to justice.

In the midst of the horror and unrest taking place in Colombia, it was heart-warming to note that members of Edinburgh and Glasgow's growing Colombian community have taken to the streets of Scotland in solidarity with those in Colombia. This act of international solidarity is representative of the people of Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Scottish National party's care and commitment to social justice around the world.

3.48 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) [V]: It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Miller, and I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this important debate, and for her powerful contribution. I also thank

my constituents in Liverpool, West Derby who have been in touch with me regularly and have asked me to raise their concerns about human rights violations in Colombia directly with the Minister.

I previously raised my concerns in the House on 20 April, both about the alleged involvement of Colombia's security forces in the deaths of at least 30 protesters last year, and about worrying reports of an increased number of protesters losing their sight after being hit with projectiles fired by police, including 19-year-old Yuri Camargo and 22-year-old Miguel Angel Linares in 2019. I asked the Secretary of State whether he would raise the importance of full legal and disciplinary investigations of those cases with his Colombian counterpart, but no firm commitment was given. So will the Minister today confirm whether those cases have been raised and will she update us on their progress?

Since late April the situation has become worse. There has been a violent police response to mass protests organised to object to the proposed tax reform and in response to longer-running demands about growing poverty, the murder of social activists and the failed implementation of the peace agreement. Between 28 April and 26 June, Temblores—a Colombian human rights non-governmental organisation—has registered 4,687 cases of police violence and 73 killings, at least 44 of which appear to have been carried out by the police; more than 2,000 arbitrary arrests; 82 victims of eye injuries, principally caused by police projectiles; and 28 victims of sexual assault.

There has been international condemnation of the Colombian Government's response to the mass mobilisation and protests. The UN has condemned the use of excessive force, and the EU has called for the disproportionate use of force by the security forces to stop. Will the Minister today join those calls and issue a full condemnation of the violence of the Colombian police and of the Government's comments undermining the right to protest?

I visited Colombia with JFC—Justice for Colombia—in 2018, and I met some of the most inspiring people I have ever met: trade unionists, mainly mothers, who put their lives in danger every single day to fight for a more equal society. The sight of them getting into vehicles with armed guards is something that will not leave me when I think back. I left with the impression of a beautiful country and a proud nation who had seen the glimpse of a chance of peace, but who distrust that the Government would honour their side of the agreement. The past two years have proved them heartbreakingly correct. Overwhelmingly all parties in 2018 said that international pressure would be needed to eventually achieve the peace that they all sought. Will the Minister work with her Colombian counterpart to bring about the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement that gives hope and a real chance to end the human rights violations taking place now?

3.52 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Miller. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important debate, particularly because recently I spoke to students at Saint Gabriel's College in Camberwell, where I am proud to be a governor.

South London, where my constituency of Streatham is, is home to one of the largest Colombian communities in the UK, and many will have attended the solidarity

protests that we saw recently in London. I was so proud of the students and their lobby, and I want them to know that, as young as they are, they have power as citizens and their words can make it directly to Parliament, so I will use mostly their words today.

Gabriel explained to me how Colombians feel the Government are not listening to them. He talked about the sheer force and unity of the protests recently organised by the country's largest trade union, joined by teachers, university students, trade unions, Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups; about a united demand to withdraw the proposal that originally levelled a sales tax on public services and some food; and how years of inequality and injustice, combined with covid lockdowns with no support, had thrown even more people out of work and left many Colombians destitute.

Juan-Pablo was born in Cali, at the epicentre of the violence. He explained how important the place is for the whole country because of agriculture, and that that is why the paro nacional started, and that the Government were using it to make food more expensive. The students had done their research, and Juan David explained how the UK's College of Policing has been training Colombian police over the past three years. They questioned how the UK, the country that some of their families had come to after fleeing human rights abuses, could be so openly complicit in the human rights abuses committed in Colombia.

Yeray, Sara and Alexia, some of the youngest in the group—11, 12 and 13—along with Manuel, explained how worried they are about family members in Colombia. Students at Saint Gabriel's College are particularly affected. Many have family members who have been shot or injured, and some have even gone missing—one young man's father has been missing since March. Lucas, Manuel and Alejandro spoke to me about human rights abuses and inequality, and about the widespread police brutality, sexual assault and murders. They were particularly concerned about the ongoing violence against the LGBT community, and said that even though Colombia appears on paper to have strong rights for LGBT people, those rights are not put into practice there. Women in particular are disadvantaged, with 12 in every 1,000 babies dying before their first birthday, and almost 39% of the country's Afro-Colombian population live in extreme poverty.

Valentina was particularly concerned about not just the mental health of Colombians there, but that of Colombians in the UK who are watching their families go through many of these things and are helpless to change it. Elisa spoke with pride about Colombia, as did all the students—how they felt about the country in which some of them were born and some of their parents were born. Some, like Santiago, spoke about people their age in Colombia who did not have the same opportunities that he now has, because of the economic situation and because of how exacerbated the violence has become.

Colombians in the UK are calling on the UK Government to promote reform of the Colombian security services and full implementation of the peace accord, and to review the UK's training of the Colombian police and suspend the selling of riot control equipment and arms exports to Colombia. That is a simple demand.

I will end by paraphrasing the words of Nicolas. He said, "As young Colombians in the UK, we are asking the UK Government to not forget Colombia; to open their eyes to the violence and injustice; and, last but not

least, to remember that the United Kingdom acts as the penholder for the Colombian peace process, and to live up to what it has promised." I ask the Minister to please live up to what the UK has promised, on behalf of those young students who lobbied me so well earlier this year.

3.58 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Miller, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this hugely important debate.

Since April, Colombia has been experiencing huge, popular citizen mobilisation against unfair tax reform, poverty, corruption, the murder of social justice activists and the failed implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. These mass protests have included many young people, people from poor urban neighbourhoods and other marginalised groups, and of course the organisation of civil society through the national strike committee.

These demonstrations have been met with unacceptable state violence. According to Colombia's Foundation for Press Freedom, there were 257 cases of aggression towards journalists covering the protests, with the majority committed by state agents. Since protests began, we across the world have witnessed images and videos of police shooting live ammunition at crowds, firing gas canisters at people's faces and beating isolated protesters, as well as arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate use of high-grade weaponry, and the launching of tear gas into enclosed spaces. Several videos have shown people in civilian clothing shooting protesters, often while standing alongside police, including an incident that left 10 indigenous protesters injured.

Colombia remains, as others have said, the world's most dangerous country for environmental defenders: in 2019, 64 environmental activists were murdered. Colombia has also once again been confirmed as the world's most dangerous country for trade unionists, with 22 killed so far in 2021, according to the International Trade Union Confederation. Community activists also continue to face extremely high levels of violence.

The attempts by the Colombian Government to engage with protesters have been criticised for being so cosmetic, unsubstantial and, in some cases, dishonest. There has been widespread international condemnation of the Colombian Government's response to the protests, from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Union, the American embassy and others. It is therefore shameful that the UK Government have not condemned the unacceptable violence perpetrated by the Colombian police and Government.

The UK embassy in Colombia and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office have said that they are "saddened" by the violence. That neutral, passive language does very little justice to the suffering of the Colombian people at the hands of their own Government. I urge the Minister to rectify that by unequivocally condemning the Colombian state for its deadly and violent treatment of peaceful protesters. I encourage the Foreign Secretary to call on the Colombian Government to engage properly with the proposals of the national strike committee.

It is also essential that the UK uses its diplomatic strength to encourage the Colombian Government to uphold the 2016 peace agreement. It is vital that the UK Government immediately review any aid or training

[Claudia Webbe]

support to the Colombian police and suspend any element linked to human rights abuses. We must immediately cease the sale of weapons, including water cannon, tear gas and batons, that could be used against protesters in Colombia. Just as it was morally reprehensible for the UK and other countries to export to America riot equipment that was used against Black Lives Matter protesters following the murder of George Floyd, it is wrong for peaceful Colombian protesters to be brutalised by equipment sold by Britain.

Ultimately, the UK must use its diplomatic might to protect Colombian protesters, who are exercising their democratic rights and making their voices heard.

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): Before I call Mary Kelly Foy, I point out that we have three more speakers before the Front-Bench speeches start at 4.13 pm. I suggest three minutes each so that everybody can get in.

4.2 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mrs Miller. I am glad to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this important debate.

The right to protest is a fundamental right that must always be respected. It is therefore extremely alarming that Colombian security forces continue to use lethal force against unarmed protesters. Although we have witnessed widespread human rights violations since April this year, violent repression of public protest has been a constant theme under the Government of Iván Duque. Security forces have regularly attacked and killed protesters, but there have been few visible attempts to curtail their actions, and most abuses remain unpunished.

Last week's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report found that there was disproportionate use of force by the public security forces. The commission had warned in 2019 that the use of force must be guided by "legality, strict necessity and proportionality."

Yet just four days later, ESMAD riot police killed 16-year-old Dilan Cruz as he ran from their attacks.

It is so worrying that the Colombian Government have already said that they will not implement the latest recommendations from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on how to improve the policing of protests. Will the Minister tell us what assessment the British Government have made of that report and of the disproportionate force used during the recent protests?

In September last year, police killed up to 13 unarmed people during protests following the killing of a man in police custody. Shortly afterwards, the Colombian Supreme Court referenced those killings and others when it was declared that the ESMAD riot police systematically violate citizens' democratic right to peaceful protest, due process and freedom of expression.

The army has also been responsible for the deaths of unarmed civilians in protests. In March 2020, 20-year-old peasant farmer Alejandro Carvajal was killed during protests over the army forcibly removing coca crops in operations that appear to contravene the 2016 peace agreement's prioritisation of mutually agreed substitution. Several other peasant farmers have been killed in recent years while protesting against military operations in their communities.

In 2019, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Colombian state to stop using the military in situations of public protest, while recommending an in-depth transformation of the *Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios* riot police and independent investigations into its conduct towards public protest. Sadly, these recommendations are far from being met.

Instead, Colombia's inspector general recently opened investigations against Opposition Congress Members over their attempts to protect citizens from police violence, after they had criticised the Duque Government's response to the protest. Last year, Transparency International warned of a concentration of power across Colombian institutions that blurred the separation of powers and threatened the democratic process. Can the Minister say what the British Government will do to promote greater respect for the rights of people to protest in Colombia?

Finally, I am concerned about the continuing targeting of trade unionists and environmental defenders. Historically, Colombia has been the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists, with 3,200 killed since the 1970s. Since the peace deal was signed, 35 members of FENSUAGRO—the Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria—the agricultural workers' union, have been killed. We must start to see justice for those crimes. Rather than seeking to crush protests, silence the demands around human rights and peace, and target critical politicians, the Colombian Government should respect their citizens' rights to mobilise and protest peacefully.

4.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on setting the scene and giving us all the chance to participate in this debate.

Recent protests have brought international attention once again on the human rights situation in Colombia. There is considerable concern internationally about the response of the police to protesters and reports of several protesters being killed. The actions of the riot police are particularly alarming—I want to put that on record. I send my condolences to all the victims and their families. I hope that there will be a full and exhaustive investigation, and that those responsible will be held accountable.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has a particular interest in Colombia, and so have I. Over many years, I have had a number of invitations to visit Colombia, but I have never had the chance to go due to other commitments. I hope someday that I will have the opportunity to get there.

After a visit to Colombia, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, part of the Organization of American States, said that the Colombian police had used "disproportionate" force, that there was gender-based and racial violence and that there were reports of people being disappeared. Concerns were also expressed about the use of the military during the protests.

One of the commission's recommendations was to echo the demands of Colombian human rights organisations to move the jurisdiction of the police away from the Ministry of National Defence into a civilian department, such as the Ministry of the Interior. Does the Minister think that can be pursued? I believe it is a necessary step in the context of the ongoing peace process.

I want to speak about the situation for human rights defenders in Colombia. I congratulate them on the great work they have been doing to defend human rights. It is essential that they do not have to put their lives at risk to carry out their work. According to Colombian organisation Somos Defensores, 2020 was the most dangerous year to be a human rights defender in Colombia for more than a decade, with 199 people murdered. According to the organisation Indepaz, over 300 social activists were killed. What can this Government—my Government—do to ensure human rights defenders are more protected in Colombia? We must not drop our focus and commitment to international support to ensure that the Colombian peace agreement is fully implemented.

The recent advances in the transitional justice system are welcome and must be supported, as are the reports of almost 50% of former FARC combatants who have been able to initiate economic projects. However, it is concerning that so many former FARC combatants are still waiting to initiate projects. What has been done to help them? I understand that there needs to be rapid action to ensure they access land to accelerate the process. I have always been supportive of making land available so let us make sure that happens.

Equally, the distribution of land to small-scale farmers, as stipulated in the agreement, has so far unfortunately not advanced fast enough. All advances in the peace process will benefit the work to improve the human rights situation and, conversely, all the work focused on improving the human rights situation and tackling the illegal armed groups that still exist will massively assist efforts to implement the peace agreement.

Coming from Northern Ireland, as I do, let me say that if anyone knows how important peace talks are, it is us in Northern Ireland. I urge the Minister to grasp the opportunity for peace on behalf of those in Colombia, and I sincerely hope we can do something for them.

4.10 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, and I want to raise again, as I have done in previous debates on Colombia, the plight of journalists—the abuse of their human rights and the violations of press freedom. The International Federation of Journalists has recently published another report highlighting the targeting of journalists by the Colombian authorities, in particular the killings, physical attacks and obstruction of their work, as well as the undermining of basic press freedoms. This is coming from the national police, public officials and reactionary elements associated with the current Government.

I want to leave the debate with at least some of the words of practitioners in the field in Colombia. Adriana Hurtado Cortés is the president the Colombian Federation of Journalists. Let me quote her directly and briefly:

“There’s an evident regression in the causes of violence against journalists; they are spied on in the traditional way and they’re harassed on social media.”

She says that politicians stigmatise them through messages on social media and accuse journalists of

“spreading misinformation, damaging democracy and polarizing society.”

Aggression against journalists has again increased. There are threats, physical attacks, killings, smear campaigns, legal actions aimed at censoring their work, illegal

espionage, and many journalists forced into exile. There is a lack of labour protection for journalists. As a result of the pandemic, they are in a particularly weak economic situation, but their main concern is the loss of the rule of law, the Government acting with impunity and the slowness of justice when crimes against journalists are investigated.

I repeat what others have said: we now need an extremely strong statement from the Government, which links up with European and other international parties, to condemn the human rights abuses of the Colombian Government. I would like inserted in those condemnations the demand for a free press and the protection of journalists, which is essential for any democratic society.

In the past, we have not had the use of other powers in this country. I would therefore like the Government to start mentioning to Colombian Government officials that we now have the Magnitsky clause and, if necessary, we will use that to target human rights abusers through our own legislative system.

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): We now move to Front-Bench speeches. I ask everybody to keep to about 10 minutes to allow the proposer of the motion a couple of minutes to wind up.

4.13 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I always make my speeches short. Nobody ever criticises a speech for being too brief, so I always try to be succinct. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller, and to wind up for the SNP in a very constructive and consensual debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on bringing the matter forward, on her contribution and on the timing of this debate. It is a very opportune moment to consider the situation in Colombia. I was also struck by the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed).

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North stressed what is at stake if we get this right: the sustainable development potential for Colombia to be a world leader in all sorts of positive societal changes. He also noted, of course, that coca production is now greater than it was in the 1990s. That has immediate consequences domestically for Colombia, but also for us here and in the wider world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts stressed, very correctly, how dangerous Colombia is for journalists and activists and the deterioration in their lives in recent months and years.

The SNP stands four-square with the people of Colombia. We are not pro-Government or pro-protester; we want a durable peace for everybody. We acknowledge that we do not have all the answers from this part of the world, but this is an important moment. We need to recognise that the already fragile peace process has been almost overwhelmed by covid. Of course, covid has brought concomitant disasters in the form of health and economic consequences, exacerbating an already very fragile domestic situation.

We are glad that the—to my mind—rather cack-handed tax reform proposals that were the trigger for the recent protests have been shelved for the moment, but we also acknowledge that there remains a financial crisis within

[Alyn Smith]

Colombian public finances that risks chaos and further deteriorations. We acknowledge the problems facing the Colombian Government, but we firmly state that the response of the Colombian Government to the protests must be condemned and the right to protest must be defended. That is a crucial point to make, because the figures are very stark. In 2020 alone, as we have heard, 220 community and social leaders were killed. Twenty-two trade unionists were killed, and according to the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, at least 133 human rights defenders were killed. Thousands more are currently in jail or suffering harassment.

The UK is in a position to do more on this. As we have heard, the UK is the penholder in the UN on the Colombian peace process, and there are more things that we can do. I hope that today we can make some concrete suggestions to spur more activity. There have been several concrete suggestions, and I have much respect for the Minister; I hope she engages with the constructive nature of this debate. There are a lot of good ideas from all points of the political compass in the House.

In terms of the macroeconomic crisis that Colombia is suffering, if there is not direct assistance, what capacity do we have to offer advice to stabilise the current economic crisis and to help its people through that process? There is also the issue of support in dealing with the covid disaster. It is one that we are all suffering, but perhaps we can assist with theirs. We have heard concerns about the training of the security services and the policing of public order. What consideration have we given to whether that has been misused or abused? With regard to Magnitsky sanctions—we really should have called that something easier—what consideration has been given to targeting individuals within the Colombian regime or elsewhere who have acted poorly? We would like to see greater financial and practical assistance for human rights defender organisations. They are doing a power of work and need more support. We want to see more facilitation of dialogue with FARC and pressure to implement the 2016 peace agreement more actively from the Government. Of course, there is more than one party to that discussion, but the UK could play a greater role.

There are no easy answers to or quick fixes for Colombia's problems, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North said, this is a test for the UK's new and, we are told, improved—merged—foreign and development policy at a crucial time for Colombia and for a number of other partners in the region as well. The progress made in 2016 could be lost, and that would be a disaster not just for the people of Colombia but elsewhere. If the Minister and the Government are serious about protecting that, I will just say that there have been a number of constructive suggestions this afternoon. If the Minister is serious about taking those forward, she will continue to have SNP support.

4.18 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on bringing this debate to Parliament today. In a very powerful opening speech, she told us that the peace agreement in Colombia was not working. I am sure that

every hon. Member present would certainly agree with that. She also said that recent events have been condemned across the world. That is absolutely true. Every day, I receive emails and messages from other countries and from other activists, saying that the peace agreement is not working and that the violence must be condemned. My hon. Friend made a very important point that this Government—the Government of our country—cannot support trade deals with Colombia without condemning the appalling violence that we have all seen on our television screens. The police response, she said, was as if there was a war between the police and their own population—the human rights activists and the people demonstrating against the breakdown of the peace deal and the murder and violence. It was a very powerful opening speech, and I thank her for this debate.

My close friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), who is not in his place at the moment, then made his contribution, talking about the prolonged crisis in Colombia, with the economy in freefall and the Government wanting to raise taxes from the poorest members of the population. He gave us a startling statistic: the richest 10% of Colombians own 40% of the economy, which is quite extraordinary. He said that citizen activity was seen by the state as a threat to the Government, and that the Colombian criminal justice system, which should be there to defend those who are innocent, is actually used as a weapon against the demonstrators.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), with whom I work closely on Colombian issues. He said that demonstrations have been peaceful, yet the Defence Minister was calling them dangerous. He said that the Colombian police have engaged in a great deal of violence against their own population, and that 278 members of FARC have been murdered since the peace accord was signed. That is a startling figure, yet FARC is still committed to the peace accord.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made a powerful contribution, which the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) mentioned several times. The hon. Member for Glasgow North visited Colombia in 2018, and he mentioned that tax rises were one of the factors leading to street demonstrations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) talked about the Colombian Government repeatedly failing to condemn police violence. He said we must ensure that the paramilitaries are dismantled immediately, and he is absolutely right about that.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed), who is new to the House. She made a powerful contribution and talked about increasing inequality in Colombia. She said that 220 social and community leaders were killed in 2020, as were 133 human rights defenders. Those are statistics that any Government or nation should be deeply ashamed of.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) talked about individual cases that he wanted the Minister to respond to. He reeled off some horrifying facts about the assault and killing of those individuals, and he asked whether the Minister would condemn the violence. I will obviously let her speak for herself shortly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) talked about her experience with young Colombians living in her constituency. She spoke about the police

brutality and the assaults on women and LGBT activists, and the effect that this has on the mental health not only of victims and their families, but of people living safely in the United Kingdom, which is something that we often forget.

The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) talked about the failure of the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, the unacceptable state violence—a theme that ran through the debate—and the aggression towards journalists. She talked about gas canisters being fired in people's faces. Can you imagine that, Mrs Miller? It is absolutely horrifying.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) talked about the right to protest being a basic human right, and she mentioned the role of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its guidelines, which are clearly being breached.

We also heard from one of my old friends, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In his typically generous fashion, he sent his condolences to all the victims of violence in Colombia and their families. Pertinently, he asked what the United Kingdom can do to help defend human rights in Colombia.

We also heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who was previously one of our most senior Front Benchers and who has a long and proud record of protecting and defending journalists all over the world. Again, he talked about the targeting of journalists and the undermining of press freedom. A basic tenet of democracy is press freedom, yet the politicians and leaders of the current Colombian Government are stigmatising journalists and undermining the press freedom that is so important to guaranteeing democracy.

The violence that we have seen across Colombia over the past few months has run completely out of control. The country's police and security forces have used unnecessary violence to contain widespread protests, which has put the historic 2016 peace agreement at severe risk.

Between 28 April and the end of June, at least 73 civilians, including many trade unionists, human rights activists and indigenous people, have been killed in the protests, with hundreds more injured. Colombian human rights NGO Temblores says that 44 of those killings were allegedly carried out by the police, which is extremely disturbing, and many hon. Members have mentioned that this afternoon. Alongside the killings Temblores registered 4,687 cases of police violence, 2,005 arbitrary arrests and 82 victims of eye injuries principally caused by police projectiles.

Since the protests began, videos posted to social media have shown police shooting live ammunition at crowds, firing gas canisters into people's faces, beating isolated protesters, making arbitrary arrests, indiscriminately using high-grade weaponry, and launching tear gas into enclosed spaces. Such behaviour, we all agree, is entirely and completely unacceptable. We must be clear. The protests were largely peaceful; the violence was by the Colombian police and security forces.

So far, all that the British Government have done is to sign a trade deal with Colombia in which both parties guarantee to respect democracy and human rights. Worryingly, despite that, two years on from signing the deal, the UK Government have not directly criticised

the violence committed by the Colombian police. I urge the Minister to take this chance to condemn it fully today.

Not to embrace our role as the penholder and not to use our considerable influence could lead to further violence and further needless loss of life in Colombia. I urge the Minister, therefore, alongside condemning the violence, to commit to starting a review of any training support given to the Colombian police, and to call on the Colombian Government to ensure full disciplinary and legal investigations against all perpetrators of violence, especially considering the lack of advancement in cases from 2019 to 2020, when 2020 was the bloodiest year on record since the peace agreement was signed.

I also urge the Minister to call on the Colombian Government to listen to the proposals set out by the national strike committee. Finally, will she tell us what representations she or the United Kingdom Government have made, if any, to the Colombian ambassador to London and her counterparts in the Colombian Government, in particular with regard to increasing the Colombian Government's efforts to implement the 2016 peace agreement?

4.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Miller.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this debate. Peace and human rights in Colombia is an issue that means a great deal to her, as it does to me, and judging by this afternoon's debate and the correspondence that I receive as a Minister, it means a great deal to hon. Members throughout the House. I am grateful for the contributions of all Members today. I will do my best to respond to as many of the points as I can.

Let me start by saying that the UK is a key supporter of Colombia's historic 2016 peace agreement. We are proud to lead on the issue at the United Nations Security Council. Colombia is also a human rights priority country for this Government and an important partner to the UK in Latin America. Members may read our assessment of the current state of human rights in Colombia in the annual human rights report that was published by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office last week, on 8 July.

This debate is set against a backdrop of worrying protest, which has spread across Colombia. Starting on 28 April a national strike, accompanied by widespread demonstrations, was carried out with the support of a broad range of civil society actors. The strike was mostly characterised by peaceful protests, with demands revolving around a range of issues. However, the protests also led to violent clashes between the public security forces and protesters, the deliberate destruction of public infrastructure, lengthy road blockades and alleged abuses by public security forces.

From 28 April to 16 June, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights registered allegations of 56 deaths—54 civilians and two police officers—in the context of the protests, and hundreds were injured. The British Government understand the deep concern about the reports of human rights violations in relation to the protests, and we engaged with the Colombian

[Wendy Morton]

Government at an early stage of the protests to raise our concerns. On 14 May I spoke to the then acting Foreign Minister, Adriana Mejía, to express our concerns and to welcome Colombia's commitment to transparent investigations into allegations of excessive use of force by the police.

On Monday this week, I spoke to the Colombian ambassador to the UK for an update on the investigations and was pleased to learn that more than 200 investigations into alleged misconduct by police are now open. We have made it clear that we look to the Colombian authorities to fully investigate any reports of excessive use of force, and to take appropriate action against those responsible. We firmly support the right of all Colombians to protest peacefully, and the Colombian Government know that we look to them to guarantee respect for the rights to peaceful assembly and association. I reiterated that message publicly on 6 May, and in doing so mirrored the messaging from our embassy in Bogotá on 4, 5 and 7 May.

Some hon. Members asked about police training. The UK's engagement goes beyond ministerial and official discussions. We work closely with the UN verification mission and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, as well as the wider international community, in support of their efforts to reduce tensions and to promote dialogue. We are firmly committed to our programmes to help implement the peace agreement, to support peace, stability and security and to build a more prosperous Colombian society. President Duque's promise of police reform, including increased oversight of officers, is an important step in response to the protests. One of our programmes supports the modernisation of the Colombian national police and is being implemented through the International Organisation for Migration, with strategic support and advice from Police Scotland. Like all our training of overseas law enforcement officers, the project is supported by the cross-governmental International Police Assistance Board and received an overseas security and justice assistance assessment to gauge and mitigate any human rights risks that arise from providing training to specific forces. We are not aware of any police units in Colombia that had received UK training support being involved in human rights violations.

One of our top priorities for Colombia is to support the Government to implement the 2016 peace accords. Since 2015, the UK has spent more than £63 million in support of peace, stability and security in Colombia. As hon. Members have highlighted, we lead on the issue at the UN Security Council, and we are the largest donor to the UN trust fund supporting the implementation of the peace agreement.

We recognise the important progress that has been achieved so far. Security conditions in much of the country are considerably better than over the past five years, and strides have been made towards the reintegration of former combatants. Our work at the United Nations in New York as penholder on Colombia's peace process is making a real difference. In May, the Security Council unanimously adopted a UK-drafted resolution to expand the mandate of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia. This is a significant step, tasking the mission with verifying compliance with the transitional justice sentences of the special jurisdiction for peace.

On transitional justice specifically, which was raised by the hon. Member for Jarrow and others, the UK has always supported the vital work of the transitional justice elements of the peace accords, and we are extremely pleased that those institutions have been able to continue their work despite the challenges posed by covid-19. The UK Government have contributed over £26 million towards transitional justice mechanisms and victims of the conflict in Colombia since 2016, which includes supporting the truth commission's work to gather testimony from Colombians—both in Colombia and abroad, including here in the UK—as well as working to enhance the investigatory capacity of the special jurisdiction for peace, Colombia's post-conflict special court.

The transitional justice institutions established by the peace agreement are now reaching a critical phase in their work, with the special jurisdiction for peace due to hand down its first sentences, and the truth commission due to issue its final report, later this year.

Colleagues have also raised the issue of human rights defenders, so let me just say a few words on that issue, because despite what I have said and despite the fantastic progress that has been made, the situation in Colombia remains challenging and fragile. The country is in the grip of a prolonged third wave of covid-19. During 2020, Colombia saw a 6.8 percentage point increase in poverty levels and 7.4 million people, which is 15% of the population, now live in extreme poverty.

The continued presence of illegal armed groups in Colombia, and the impact that their violence and intimidation have on the vulnerable population, is a serious concern. In 2020, the UN confirmed that 133 human rights defenders had been killed. Since the signing of the peace deal with FARC in 2016, over 275 community leaders and former FARC members have been killed.

The UK has funded programmes to help Colombia tackle the conditions that make people susceptible to recruitment by armed groups, and that foster the persistent level of violence towards human rights defenders, social leaders, former FARC-EP combatants, trade unionists and others.

Jim Shannon: I will not delay the Minister for too long. I asked about the transfer of land, because I believe that if we tackle the real bread-and-butter issues, such as giving the land to the people who should be getting it through the agreement and the peace accords, that would also help to take away some of the sting.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, and I was just about to come on to the issues of sustainable recovery, trade and economic opportunities, all of which are important.

As for raising our concerns, I can assure Members that we regularly raise specific cases of concern with the Colombian authorities. In February, the UK ambassador for human rights, Rita French, conducted a virtual visit to Colombia to discuss human rights issues. That followed on from Lord Ahmad's human rights-focused virtual visit to Colombia in October 2020.

As Colombia begins its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the UK is committed to supporting the promotion of sustainable economic opportunities that will help tackle some of the root causes of the ongoing violence there. Our international climate finance

commitments play a vital role in addressing that challenge. Since 2011, we have provided over £237 million in Colombia to help halt deforestation, improve land use and create profitable, sustainable supply chains that protect the environment. Last year, we announced a £64 million programme to support the Colombian Government in reducing deforestation, specifically in conflict-affected areas.

I am also pleased to say that this year marks the second anniversary of the signing of the UK-Colombia partnership for sustainable growth. As we look forward to COP26 later this year, that partnership is a concrete example of how a bilateral commitment for nature and sustainable growth can foster climate ambition globally.

Let me assure Members of our continued commitment to prioritising human rights in our relationship with Colombia, and I thank colleagues from across the House today for their interest, concern and activism, as well as for sharing their many ideas with me today. We welcome your perspectives, all of which help us to build a productive dialogue with the Colombian authorities and civil society groups to address the ongoing challenges in the implementation of the peace accord and to shore up the gains made since 2016.

4.39 pm

Kate Osborne: I thank hon. Members for all their powerful contributions. I take the opportunity to thank Justice for Colombia and Grow Colombia for everything they do to help bring peace to the Colombian people.

Anyone who has been to Colombia—I know that a lot of us here today have had at least one opportunity to visit the country—will know that it is truly a beautiful country, with warm and welcoming people. So it is an absolute tragedy that it has been, and continues to be, the site of so much violence. It is a tragedy that all those who stand up to ask for an end to the huge disparity in wealth, for an end to the human rights abuses, for justice for crimes committed against their loved ones, for the protection of the environment, for their right to remain on ancestral lands and for the right to live in peace must risk their lives to do so.

However, there is hope: there is hope still in the peace process and in the advances that have already been made; and there is hope in seeing so many people in Colombia continuing to stand up in the belief that they can build a better future, in spite of all the risks that they face. So we must continue to do all that we can, as MPs and as a Government, to support everyone in Colombia who is working to improve the human rights situation and to make peace a reality for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered peace and human rights in Colombia.

4.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 15 July 2021

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018: Report on Regulations Made

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): My hon. Friend the Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following written ministerial statement:

I am today laying before Parliament a report, "Report under section 32 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 on the exercise of power to make Regulations under section 1 of the Act".

The report details the regulations made under section 1 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 during the reporting period from 23 May 2020 to 22 May 2021, with a focus on those regulations which are aimed at dealing with gross violations of human rights.

We have also included information on additional actions the Government have taken related to human rights sanctions, including information on certain designations made in relation to serious human rights abuses or violations.

[HCWS184]

Government Hospitality Wine Cellar Biannual Report 2018 - 2020

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I have today placed a copy of the Government hospitality wine cellar biannual report for the financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20 in the Libraries of both Houses.

Following the outcome of the review of the Government hospitality wine cellar in 2011, this biannual report continues our commitment to reporting to Parliament on the use of the wine cellar, covering consumption, stock purchases, costs, and value for money. The wine cellar has been self-funding since 2011-12, through the sale of some high-value stock and payments made by other Government Departments for events organised by Government hospitality.

The report notes that in 2018-19:

The highest consumption level by volume was again of English and Welsh wine, at 53% of the total (cf. 57% in 17-18);

Purchases amounted to £46,906 (ex-VAT), a decrease of nearly 18% by value cf. £56,976 in 17-18;

The highest volume of purchases was of English and Welsh wines at 49% of the total;

Consumption by volume increased by some 2.8% in FY 2018-19;

Sales of stock amounted to £44,200 (cf. £50,600 in FY 17-18);

Further funds from other Government Departments added £16,985 to the overall receipts (cf. £26,494 in 17-18).

The report notes that in 2019-20:

The highest consumption level by volume was again of English wines, at 56% of the total;

Consumption by volume fell overall by 17.5% in FY 2019-20;

The highest volume of purchases was of English or Welsh wines at 73% of the total;

No sales were achieved due to the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, but funds recovered from other Government Departments added £23,220 to the overall receipts;

Purchases amounted to £73,091, due to major purchases of English still and sparkling wines.

[HCWS179]

CABINET OFFICE

Government Transparency and Accountability

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Since 2010, the Government have been at the forefront of opening up data to allow Parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account.

Despite the need to reprioritise resources to respond to the covid-19 pandemic, central Government Departments continue to publish core transparency data. Such online transparency is crucial to delivering value for money, cutting waste and inefficiency, and ensuring every pound of taxpayers' money is spent in the best possible way.

Following the recent declaration on Government reform, the Government will continue to look at how the range of information published by Government can be improved and made as useful as possible to the public, press and Parliament.

The following subject areas include documents and information that the Government is due to publish. This statement also includes updates on cross-Government work on outcome delivery plans, business appointment rules, information management guidance for public authorities and policy work on ministerial absences.

Outcome delivery plans

The Government are today publishing outcome delivery plans for the financial year 2021-22. Outcome delivery plans form the basis of the revised Government planning and performance framework, building and improving on the previous single departmental plan framework.

Outcome delivery plans set out how each UK Government Department is working towards the delivery of its priority outcomes, which were first and provisionally published at spending review 2020. Priority outcomes capture the Government's most important long-term policy objectives, from maximising employment and improving skills to achieving net zero by 2050.

In areas where closer working between Departments would achieve better results, 16 outcomes were agreed on a cross-cutting basis between Departments, reflecting the Government's commitment to breaking down silos and enabling stronger collaboration between Departments. Outcome delivery plans place a greater emphasis on joint working between Departments, enabling Departments to plan together to deliver shared outcomes. The Government have also identified provisional metrics for each outcome at spending review 2020, against which progress towards delivering these outcomes will be measured.

Since the spending review 2020, these priority outcomes and metrics have been further refined and revisions to those are reflected in outcome delivery plans. Priority outcomes and metrics will be reviewed again where appropriate at the next spending review later this year.

In addition to setting out the strategy for achieving priority outcomes, Departments also identify plans for delivering critical enabling activities, which are crucial to the successful delivery of outcomes. These enabling activities include: attracting and investing in skilled people; embracing innovation; and strengthening functional expertise to support the delivery of outcomes. To ensure

we deliver on our sustainability commitments and make the civil service the UK's most inclusive employer, the plans set out how Departments are driving sustainability, how their work contributes to the delivery of the United Nations sustainable development goals and the Government's equality objectives.

The new plans also place greater emphasis on high-quality evaluation, which is critical to understanding what works. This builds on the detailed overviews of evidence bases and valuation plans that Departments provided to inform decisions at spending review 2020.

The Government use regular reporting to monitor progress against outcome delivery plans. Parliament and the public will be able to review how each Department is performing against its priority outcomes in its annual report and accounts, which Departments publish annually after the end of each financial year. More regular performance information for many of the metrics agreed for priority outcomes can be found in official statistics and other public datasets.

Hyperlinks to these datasets have been included in outcome delivery plans to make this data more accessible to the public.

Transparency in delivery of major projects

The Cabinet Office is publishing the "Annual Report on Major Projects 2020-21" (and accompanying quarterly Government Major Projects Portfolio data taken as a snapshot at 31 March 2021). The annual publication on the Government's major projects raises awareness of how Government is improving public services, providing value for money and benefits for citizens through its major projects. The report and accompanying spreadsheets detail the 183 projects on the Government's major project portfolio.

Ministerial transparency

Departments will be today publishing the routine quarterly ministerial data on external meetings, gifts, hospitality and overseas travel.

Transparency on special advisers and senior officials

Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent civil service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support.

In line with legislation, each year the Cabinet Office publishes a list of special advisers and their costs. Today, the Cabinet Office will be publishing the list of special advisers in post along with the cost of special advisers from the previous financial year (April 2020 to March 2021).

The Cabinet Office will also be publishing quarterly data on gifts and hospitality received by special advisers, as well as information on special adviser meetings with senior media figures and business appointment rules advice.

Departments will also be publishing routine quarterly data on the travel, expenses and meetings of senior officials and on business appointment rules advice.

Transparency in the civil service

Alongside routine workforce management information and sickness data, Departments will shortly be publishing updated organograms.

Transparency on correspondence

The Cabinet Office is publishing correspondence data on the performance of departments and agencies in responding to correspondence from Members of Parliament and Members of the House of Lords during the calendar years 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Transparency in public bodies and public appointments

The Cabinet Office will today be publishing "Public Bodies 2020". Public bodies play a vital role in the delivery of public services for all our citizens, covering wide-ranging functions. Well-governed, effective and efficient public bodies enable the Government to deliver its priorities. "Public Bodies 2020" is an annual directory that provides a single transparent source of top-level financial and non-financial data on all Executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and non-ministerial departments across Government.

The Cabinet Office will also be publishing public appointments data. The public appointments data report provides a breakdown of the diversity of public appointees who were in roles covered by the governance code on public appointments on 31 March 2020 and those appointed to such roles between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020. The latter data is a subset of the information published in the Commissioner for Public Appointments' annual report.

Management of public authority records and information

The Government are publishing a revised code of practice on records management. Under Section 46(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport has a duty to publish, and a right to revise, a code of practice providing guidance to relevant authorities on the management of their records. The code is a technical document aimed at supporting information management professionals in public authorities to discharge their duties under the Act.

In 2018, the National Archives was commissioned to undertake a routine review of the code. The code has since been revised and updated on a principles-based, format-neutral basis, bringing the existing 2009 code up to date with contemporary information management practice and the modern digital working environment. The revised code places information management in the context of broad principles, providing a more accessible framework which outlines how authorities should best manage their information to support appropriate public access under the Act. The code also clarifies the basis on which the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives operates.

Ministerial absences—further work

Following the passing of the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act in March of this year, the Government have continued work considering the practical and policy considerations surrounding other forms of ministerial absence. We are specifically considering whether provision can be extended in circumstances of paternity leave, adoption leave, shared parental leave and sickness leave. These are complex issues which require careful consideration, taking into account modern working practices and the wider constitutional context. The Government have continued to make progress in its consideration of these issues as they relate to Ministers but is mindful of related work in other areas looking at the wider workforce and provisions for MPs, led by the

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. The Government will present a report focused on ministerial leave provision to Parliament in the autumn, setting out considerations and proposals.

Improving the business appointment rules

As the Government have previously set out, the Cabinet Office is working with the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments to improve the operation and efficacy of the business appointment rules. The work will consider and implement improvements to the scope and clarity of the rules, including the enforcement of the rules with an update to the rules later this year. The Cabinet Office is also working closely with Departments to improve the consistency and proportionality of the implementation of the rules, including improving training on and communication of the rules.

Copies of associated documents are being placed in the Library of the House and will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS185]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Government Chemist Review 2020

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): The 24th annual review of the Government Chemist has been received. The review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses plus those of the devolved Administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland. The review will also be laid before the Scottish Parliament.

The Government Chemist is the referee analyst named in Acts of Parliament. The Government Chemist's team carry out analysis in high profile or legally disputed cases. A range of referee analysis work was carried out during 2020, which included the evaluation of genetically modified organisms in rice products, honey authenticity and the labelling of a novel food supplement. The Government Chemist continues to work closely with Government Departments, their governance group, devolved Administrations, non-governmental organisations and industry, to address strategic cross-Department issues such as cannabidiol (CBD) and SARS-CoV-2 viral detection.

[HCWS182]

TREASURY

European Union Finances: Annual Statement

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): I have today laid before Parliament the "European Union Finances 2020: statement on the 2020 EU Budget and measures to counter fraud and financial mismanagement" (CP472). This is an annual publication and is the 40th in the series. This edition of the statement is the last in this publication series that will cover the period of the UK's membership of the EU (which lasted until 31 January 2020) and also covers the 11-month transition period that ended on 31 December 2020.

This year, annex E of the statement provides additional detail on the assurance arrangements that HM Treasury has introduced in relation to the financial settlement

under the withdrawal agreement, and which were reflected in domestic law in the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020. HM Treasury has worked with the European Commission and its implementing partners to ensure their systems and controls over financial reporting are suitable for the specific requirements of the withdrawal agreement.

The first invoice under the financial settlement was received in April 2021 in relation to payments to be made in the period June to September 2021. The net UK liability under the first invoice was €3.74 billion and the first of four equal monthly instalments was paid at the end of June. A second invoice, covering payments due in the period from October 2021 to April 2022, is due in September.

The document also provides an updated HM Treasury estimate of the total value of the financial settlement. HM Treasury estimate that the current value of the financial settlement is £37.3 billion. This remains within the Government's previously published reasonable central range, adjusted to take into account the UK's 31 January 2020 exit date. In annex E, HM Treasury provides an updated summary of the financial settlement, other costs set out in the withdrawal agreement and short-term public expenditure costs.

The 2020 statement also includes a new annex F on UK participation in EU programmes under the trade and co-operation agreement. This sets out an update on the EU programmes the UK is set to associate with later this year.

[HCWS181]

DEFENCE

UK Carrier Strike Group: Phase 1 Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): On 23 May the UK Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) set sail on her maiden operational deployment and has now completed the first phase. The strike group's route has taken them through the eastern Atlantic, the Mediterranean and in the final weeks of June, they were operating in the Black sea and delivering combat missions from the eastern Mediterranean concurrently.

During the first phase CSG21 has undertaken an impressive array of exercises working with NATO allies and key international partners. Exercise Steadfast Defender was the principal NATO exercise during this period, but we also participated in dual-carrier operations with our French allies, with HMS Queen Elizabeth sailing in company with the FS Charles de Gaulle.

The carrier air wing has undertaken a range of air exercises including Atlantic Trident and Gallic Strike with the US and France; Falcon Strike with Italy, the US and Israel; and Tri-Lightning with the US and Israel.

This was also a period of concentrated operational activity and development of the carrier strike capability. We provided support to ongoing NATO operations in the Black sea and NATO's maritime security operation—Sea Guardian—in the Mediterranean. For around two weeks, CSG21 provided support to Operation Shader, the UK contribution to the coalition effort to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria. While in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean we had to deal with persistent and often irresponsible harassment by Russian forces. This unfortunate continuation of Russian aggression

was dealt with exceptionally by our forces, demonstrating not only the capabilities of the CSG, but also the professionalism and restraint of our service personnel.

Ships from the strike group have conducted port visits to Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Georgia, Israel, Italy, Montenegro, Romania, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine. The programmes and ministerial attendance around those visits helped enhance security, diplomatic and trade relationships that will make the world safer, and will protect and promote prosperity and the rule of law.

We extend our enormous thanks and our great respect to all those nations and armed forces with whom we have engaged and worked alongside. This deployment is the integrated review in action and demonstrates the friendships and alliances that we have in place across the globe. Together with our allies we are developing a joint capability that is cutting-edge.

Phase 2 of the of the deployment, began on 7 July, and will involve transiting the Suez canal into the Red sea ahead of the group crossing the Indian Ocean and on to the Indo-Pacific.

Whilst operating in the eastern Mediterranean HMS Diamond experienced some technical issues and has detached from the task group for maintenance, inspection and defect rectification. She is expected to rejoin the task group during the Indo-Pacific phase of the deployment.

During phase 1, as part of routine testing, covid-19 cases were detected on four vessels within the strike group. All deployed personnel on CSG21 are fully vaccinated and tested regularly and appropriate protocols were put in place to isolate the cases where possible.

All personnel who are symptomatic are experiencing mild symptoms only and to date there has not been a single covid-19 admission to sickbay. The strike group is currently at sea, has only contactless activity planned for the coming weeks, and will have had at least two weeks at sea before its next planned visits. We take nothing for granted in that regard and are working closely with partners to understand how we can balance engagement and interaction with safety for all concerned.

It is also with deep regret that the Ministry of Defence can confirm that a Royal Navy sailor from HMS Kent died on 10 July 2021. The individual's next of kin have been informed and have requested privacy at this difficult time. The Ministry of Defence offers its profound condolences to the individual's family and friends. The ship's company of HMS Kent are in our thoughts during this difficult time.

[HCWS188]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery Products: Consultation on Sales by 16 and 17-year-olds

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The national lottery has made a huge contribution to life in the UK since it was launched in 1994, raising over £43 billion for arts, sports, heritage and community projects. More recently, it has contributed over £1.2 billion to those affected by the coronavirus pandemic, supporting

everything from our outdoor spaces to our museums, theatres and sports clubs, helping to keep us active, entertained and safe.

Following a consultation, the Government announced last year that they was raising the age at which national lottery tickets can be bought and sold from 16 to 18, protecting young people from the possible risk of gambling harm. The legislation comes into force on October 1 and the operator and retailers have already stopped selling tickets to anyone aged below 18.

Since then, it has emerged that the increase to 18 for the minimum age to sell in particular may lead to operational difficulties for some retailers who employ young people aged 16 and 17.

In order to balance the need for a smooth transition for retailers with the intent of the original policy, this consultation published today seeks views on a minor technical easement which would introduce an approved sales mechanism for national lottery products. This will be based on the systems already in place for alcohol sales in England, Wales and Scotland, and sales of tobacco and nicotine vaping products in Scotland, through which a designated person aged 18 or over can approve a sale by someone under 18 years old. This approach therefore builds on an existing framework and maintains the intent of the original policy.

I look forward to hearing views of interested parties during the consultation.

[HCWS180]

EDUCATION

Skills for Jobs

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Today, as the Government continue to build back better from the pandemic and begin the critical work of levelling up our country, the Department for Education is announcing the next steps towards delivering the ambitious reforms set out in the skills for jobs White Paper.

This includes announcing the skills accelerator trailblazer areas, a further expansion of skills bootcamps, publishing the national skills fund consultation, and launching a consultation seeking views on simplifying funding for adult skills and strengthening the accountability of colleges.

These reforms will help to put employers at the heart of the system, making sure people have the skills they need to get good jobs in the areas our economy needs. They will also ensure people have the opportunity to train, retrain and upskill at any stage, while empowering and enabling providers to deliver these reforms.

Skills accelerator

The skills accelerator programme will give employers a central role working with colleges, other providers, and local stakeholders to shape technical skills provision so that it meets labour market needs. It establishes partnerships led by employer representative bodies, developing local skills improvement plans that will drive investment in the skills sector.

We are now taking the next step towards delivering the skills accelerator, by announcing 18 development fund pilot areas, of which eight will also be local skills

improvement plan trailblazer areas. Details can be accessed here at Skills Accelerator, trailblazers and pilots - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

The new employer-led plans will ensure that technical education and training is well-aligned to what employers need. Ultimately, this will support learners to develop the skills that will enable them to get a well-paid and secure job, no matter where they live, and in the sectors that are critical to our future economic success.

Members of the pilot development fund collaborations will deliver their proposals, which will enable and enhance strategic partnerships between employers and post-16 providers, and test how these alliances will help shape future technical skills provision.

Skills bootcamps expansion

Since the Prime Minister set out his vision for the lifetime skills guarantee last year, the free courses for jobs and skills bootcamps have been helping adults to gain valuable skills that employers need. Both these adult skills offers are funded through the national skills fund, a long term, substantial investment of £2.5 billion to drive adult retraining at the advanced and higher technical skills levels the nation needs.

The national skills fund has successfully delivered the first wave of skills bootcamps and we are pleased to announce the next wave of this exciting, transformational programme, this expansion will roll out more in-demand skills to approximately 16,000 adults by the end of March 2022.

These innovative, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks will continue to give adults aged 19 and over the opportunity to build up sector-specific skills and fast-track to an interview with a local employer. These skills bootcamps cover a wide range of digital, technical and construction skills, including software development, data analytics, construction site management and retrofitting.

We are expanding the skills bootcamps so they are available to adults across the country and registration for the first of these is open now, with more becoming available over the coming weeks. Details are available here at Free courses for jobs - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

National skills fund consultation

Through the national skills fund, we are already delivering the free courses for jobs offer which provides adults across England with the opportunity to achieve their first full level 3 qualification by giving access to around 400 fully funded courses. While free courses for jobs and skills bootcamps are already enabling thousands of adults to gain valuable skills, we know there is much more to do and the potential for what we could do through the fund is great.

That is why today we are launching a national consultation to help us ensure that we use national skills fund investment effectively to meet the skills needs of adults and employers to the end of this Parliament.

We are keen to hear from a wide range of stakeholders in response to the consultation, as it presents stakeholders with an excellent opportunity to feed back on the free courses for jobs and skills bootcamps which are already being funded through national skills fund investment. The consultation also requests views on meeting critical skills needs to help us ensure we deliver valued skills that will help us build back better.

The consultation closes on the 17 September and can be accessed via National Skills Fund - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

Funding and accountability consultation

Today we are also launching a consultation seeking views on simplifying funding for adult skills and strengthening the accountability of colleges. This consultation delivers a key commitment of the skills for jobs White Paper. The proposed changes aim to:

- make sure colleges and other providers are better supported to focus on helping their students into good jobs employers are recruiting for, now and in the future;

- reduce the complexity of adult funding through the skills fund;

- define clearer roles and responsibilities for Ofsted and the Further Education Commissioner. The consultation closes on 7 October and can be accessed via Reforms to further education (FE) funding and accountability - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Conclusion

Today's announcements are key milestones in the delivery of our ambitious skills for jobs reform programme which will transform the whole skills system so that we can train the dynamic and flexible workforce needed to rebuild our economy, build back greener, and compete globally.

[HCWS186]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Health Act Reform: Consultation Response

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): The Government have today published the joint Department of Health and Social Care and Ministry of Justice consultation response to the White Paper Reforming the Mental Health Act, published in January this year.

The publication of this report represents a significant milestone on the road to reform of the Mental Health Act, a once-in-a-generation reform programme. It summarises the invaluable and constructive responses that we have heard from the public and stakeholders, and takes us a step closer towards the fulfilment of two manifesto commitments:

- That we “will legislate so that patients suffering from mental health conditions...have greater control over their treatment and receive the dignity and respect they deserve”.

- That we “will make it easier for people with learning disabilities and autism to be discharged from hospital and improve how they are treated in law”.

In January we published a Mental Health Act White Paper, responding to the independent review of the Mental Health Act which was conducted by Sir Simon Wessely and published in 2018.

This White Paper set out that we will be accepting the vast majority of the recommendations and asked a series of consultation questions on the detail and implementation of the proposals.

Since the consultation closed in April, we have analysed more than 1,700 responses. In parallel to the consultation, our Departments have held policy development workshops

to get richer insights from service users, clinicians, and those with lived experience of detention under the Act, on the details of the proposals.

The consultation response, published today, includes no new policy announcements, and instead reports on the feedback from clinicians, service users, those with lived experience of detention, and other key stakeholders on the 35 questions posed in the White Paper to gather views on the best way to implement the reforms and ensure they achieve their aims, and inform further policy development as we progress towards a Bill to reform the Act, which we will bring forward when parliamentary time allows.

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with general support for the proposals and direction of travel set out in the White Paper. The responses have provided valuable insights on the practicalities of implementation, which our Departments will work through, and continue to engage as we do so. We are committed to continue the open policy making approach, in order to bring forward a Bill which will improve how the Act works for everyone. There are a small number of areas where the consultation response did not support the direction of travel set out in the White Paper, or there were mixed views on the proposals. We will reflect on the feedback received, and continue to engage with key stakeholders, prior to taking final policy decisions to inform the Bill.

[HCWS189]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Delivery of Food and Essential Goods

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I wish to update the House on the measures the Government are taking to ensure the availability of food, sanitary and other essential goods.

The food sector is facing a new, exceptional challenge resulting from the acute shortage of HGV drivers across the distribution network. This is resulting in missed deliveries of food and other essential goods and has the potential to lead to significant shortages. The Government want to respond to this proactively by ensuring the industry has the tools available to effectively respond to these pressures to minimise any disruption to the public.

My colleague the Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), introduced measures on 12 July 2021 aimed at proactively addressing this issue, through the temporary relaxation of HGV driving time regulations. I wish to complement these measures by making this written ministerial statement about the enforcement of planning conditions relating to delivery hours to retailers of food, sanitary and other essential goods. This will allow for both measures to work in tandem, providing the industry with much-needed logistical flexibility. We believe these measures will provide supermarkets, other retailers of food and essential goods and their suppliers with increased flexibility over deliveries to ensure a consistent supply of essential goods.

Many supermarkets, food retailers and distribution centres in England are subject to controls which restrict the time and number of deliveries from lorries and other delivery vehicles, particularly at night. These include planning conditions, which are necessary to make the

development acceptable to local residents who might otherwise suffer from traffic, noise and other local amenity issues as a result of these deliveries.

The national planning policy framework already emphasises that planning enforcement is a discretionary activity, and local planning authorities should act proportionately in responding to suspected breaches of planning control.

The purpose of this written ministerial statement, which comes into effect immediately, is to make clear that local planning authorities should take a positive approach to their engagement with food retailers and distributors, as well as the freight industry, to ensure planning controls are not a barrier to deliveries of food, sanitary and other essential goods.

Local planning authorities should not seek to undertake planning enforcement action which would result in unnecessarily restricting deliveries of food, sanitary and other essential goods during this period, having regard to their legal obligations. The Government recognise that it may be necessary for action to be taken in relation to the impacts on neighbours of sustained disturbance due to deliveries outside of conditioned hours, particularly where this affects sleep. In this case a local planning authority should consider any efforts made by retailers to manage and mitigate such disturbance, taking into account the degree and longevity of amenity impacts.

On 13 March 2020, I made a similar statement to the house in response to the covid-19 pandemic. We kept this under review and extended the provisions with additional statements as necessary. This statement will replace all my previous statements on the matter.

This written ministerial statement only covers England and will expire on 31 January 2022, giving direction to the industry and local planning authorities over the next six months. We will keep the need for this statement under review.

[HCWS187]

TRANSPORT

Traffic Light System Update: Foreign Travel

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): From 04:00 BST 19 July, the following countries will be added to the Government's green list:

Bulgaria

Croatia

Hong Kong

Taiwan

Croatia and Taiwan will also be added to the green watchlist, signalling to passengers that these countries are potentially at risk of moving from green to amber at short notice, should swift action be required in order to protect public health in England. Passengers arriving from green list destinations need to provide evidence of a negative covid-19 test result prior to travel and take a further test on day 2 of their arrival in the UK.

The following countries are being added to the amber list:

Balearic Islands

British Virgin Islands

As announced on 8 July, arrivals from amber list countries who have been fully vaccinated under the UK vaccination programme (plus 14 days), will no longer need to quarantine or take a day 8 test if they can provide

proof of their vaccination status to carriers in advance of travel to England. This policy will also apply to those on a formally approved UK covid-19 vaccine clinical trial, and children under the age of 18. These changes will also take effect from 04:00 BST Monday 19 July.

Non-vaccinated passengers arriving from amber countries need to provide evidence of a negative test result prior to travel, self-isolate at home for 10 days, and take a test on day 2 and day 8 after arrival. As before, these passengers will have the option to take a further test on day 5 and end their 10-day self-isolation early, upon receipt of a negative test result.

The following countries are being added to the red list as they present a high public health risk to the UK from known variants of concern, known high-risk variants under investigation or as a result of very high in-country or territory prevalence of covid-19:

Cuba

Indonesia

Myanmar

Sierra Leone

Passengers arriving from these destinations, irrespective of vaccination status, will be required to self-isolate in a managed quarantine hotel, provide a valid notification of a negative test result prior to travel and take a test on day 2 and 8 after their arrival.

All arrivals into the UK must continue to complete a passenger locator form.

As health matters are devolved, the devolved Administrations will confirm their respective positions in due course.

[HCWS178]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Bereavement Benefits Remedial Order

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): My hon. Friend the Under Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions (The Baroness Stedman-Scott) has made the following written statement:

We have today laid the draft proposal for a Bereavement Benefits (2021) Remedial Order. Copies of the draft proposed remedial order and explanatory memorandum are available in the Journal Office and the Vote Office (Commons) and the Printed Paper Office (Lords).

[HCWS183]

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**not later than
Thursday 22 July 2021**

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