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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 September 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CONTINGENCIES FUND ACCOUNT 2020-21

Resolved,

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2020-21, showing –

1. A Statement of Financial Position
2. A Statement of Cash Flows and
3. Notes to the Accounts; together with the Certificate and Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—(*Maria Caulfield.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Mr Speaker: Before we move on to questions, may I just say that I wish Oliver Dowden well? He worked well, but I know he has a very able replacement. I welcome the new Secretary of State, who I know must have the greatest interest in rugby league; I welcome her team—herself and the new Minister.

The Secretary of State was asked—

Football Governance

1. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What her Department's involvement is in the fan-led review of football governance. [903475]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that very warm welcome.

Football is central to our national life, which is why my predecessor announced this root-and-branch review of the game led by the fans. This might be a good point to mention my own interest in football, as well as in rugby league. My great grandfathers were founding members of Everton football club, although I am a Liverpool supporter, so I declare my interest on day one.

My Department has supported the chair and advisory panel to collect more than 100 hours of evidence and 20,000 responses from football fans. I look forward to receiving the final report of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and the recommendations later this autumn, and I am ready to take bold action whenever necessary to protect the identity of our national game.

Clive Efford: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer and I welcome her to her new post and congratulate her on the appointment. The interim report

from the chair of the panel makes it clear that the panel intends to introduce a golden share for fans to have a veto over certain reserved powers such as club names and colours and similar powers to those under assets of community value legislation to protect stadiums and training grounds. This is a welcome recognition of the power of football fans, but what discussions has the Department had in preparation for the final report with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and local government to make sure we can move quickly on the recommendations that we know are coming in the autumn?

Ms Dorries: I obviously do not want to predict the findings of the final report or predetermine the outcome, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, the interim report is available on the Government website. My predecessor saw at first hand at Brentford that a golden share can do what the hon. Gentleman outlines without undermining the ownership of clubs. The review has been extensive, involving over 150 clubs and 20,000 fans, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford has met numerous organisations and stakeholders throughout the industry. I look forward, as the hon. Gentleman does, to my hon. Friend's report later this year. I can promise from the Department's perspective that it will be extensive and will certainly have consulted many people.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment; she will do a sterling job, as she has done at the Department of Health and Social Care in extremely difficult circumstances over the past year and a half. The fan-led review is hugely important, especially given the recent European super league proposals. What discussions is she having with football clubs on the review and does she plan to meet any clubs in the near future?

Ms Dorries: The review is a root-and-branch examination of football in this country and looks at the financial sustainability of the football pyramid as well as governance, regulations, ownership and the merits of an independent regulator. There is much work to do; being just 35 minutes into the job I have not arranged a meeting yet, but I will be holding a roundtable this coming week with football industry representatives.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be fed up with congratulations soon, but let me add mine as well. She mentioned the question of ownership in football. She knows the north-west well enough where we have seen the collapse of Bury football club because of incompetence and malign owners, and very recently a hostile takeover bid for Rochdale football club in my constituency, which was resisted and, fortunately, defeated. There needs to be some review not only of a potential super league but of the capacity of owners to deliver to the communities that spawned their clubs in the first place. Will the Secretary of State make sure that that is taken properly on board following the review?

Ms Dorries: I absolutely will. Fans are the lifeblood of football and sport. The review is considering the issue of club ownership in light of the submissions and evidence from supporters representing more than 150 clubs, and I will certainly consider any proposals very seriously.

Gigabit Broadband

2. **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on the roll-out of gigabit broadband. [903477]

13. **Craig Williams** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on the roll-out of gigabit broadband. [903492]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): As the current broadband Minister I can say that, as Members will have seen, across the country gigabit broadband is now at 47%, up from just 10% in November 2019. This Government will leave no stone unturned to get that number as high as possible as quickly as possible.

Dr Wallis: May I, too, offer my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Secretary of State on her very recent promotion?

I thank the Minister for his response. Residents of the newly built Parc Derwen estate in my Bridgend constituency, and others across the UK, have found themselves tied to disagreeable fibre providers and unable to seek competitive quotes due to restrictions placed on them by developers as they are laying infrastructure. What will my hon. Friend do to ensure a competitive market as we roll out gigabit broadband?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is right that competition is a crucial part of a functioning broadband market. FibreNest, the company that he refers to, says that it is willing to let other providers use its networks, and it is a commercial decision for the company. It is important that all the right steps are taken to ensure that that promise becomes a reality, and the Government will work with him and the company to ensure that it does so.

Craig Williams: It is very good to see my hon. Friend in his place at the Dispatch Box. As a rural constituency, Montgomeryshire is very reliant on the roll-out of Project Gigabit, which I welcome very much. Not only is that integral to increased speeds, but the backbone of that fibre network is key to our levelling-up ambitions. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to deliver it at pace?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is very kind; I hope that is not the kiss of death. He is right that, in areas such as Wales in particular, the power of levelling up through digital infrastructure is key. We have recently made positive announcements with the Welsh Government. We look forward to making more, and I know that Montgomeryshire will be a key part of delivering that mission.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on retaining his position and welcome the new Secretary of State to hers. The Minister's is a wide-ranging and critical role, not least because we need our broadband. Parliament, our businesses, our students, our economy and our social lives depend on it—but it is another broken promise. Full fibre by 2025 was the Prime Minister's pledge, and the 2020 Budget set aside £5 billion to deliver it. Will the Minister confirm that only £1.2 billion of that £5 billion is

planned to be spent by 2025 and that, far from full fibre, we will not even get affordable broadband? According to Ofcom, more than 2 million households find it hard to afford broadband, yet the Government are slashing broadband price controls, slashing the broadband budget, slashing universal credit support, and slashing gigabit targets. When will we get the broadband we need?

Matt Warman: I enjoyed the hon. Lady's speech, Mr Speaker. The fact remains that this is a £5 billion commitment to—

Mr Speaker: Order. I just say gently to the Minister that I make the judgment call. He is very kind to offer his assistance, but I will let him know when I need it.

Matt Warman: Absolutely, Mr Speaker.

The fact remains that this is a £5 billion commitment to getting as close to 100% broadband across this country as fast as we possibly can. The only barrier to doing that is the speed with which we can dig up the roads and lay the cables. This Government will do every single thing we can to make sure that every single barrier is removed in order to spend every penny of that £5 billion as quickly as we possibly can.

Fraudulent Online Advertisements

3. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What plans she has to tackle fraudulent online advertisements. [903478]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government are committed to tackling online fraud. That is why, later this year, we will be consulting on the online advertising programme, which is considering all options, including legislation, to tackle paid-for advertising online. Meanwhile, the draft online safety Bill, which is currently in prelegislative scrutiny, will address fraudulent user-generated content.

Stephen Timms: Paid-for scam adverts are rife online, and it is not unusual for people to lose their entire life savings to them. The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee in July that

“one of the key objectives of the Online Safety Bill is to tackle online fraud,”

but the Bill as drafted does not cover paid-for scam adverts at all. I am pleased that the prelegislative scrutiny Committee is going to take a look at this, but will the Minister review the Department's currently indefensible position? We cannot wait years for the other process that he referred to to work its way through the system.

Matt Warman: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise a hugely important issue. I and this Government share his impatience to tackle it, but that is why we are talking, through the online advertising programme, about looking at every single option, whether it is to tackle user-generated content through one mechanism or, potentially, advertising through another. It is about getting that combination of measures right so that we can achieve the maximum possible effect.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I, through the Minister, pass on my congratulations to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), on her appointment?

In line with the whole issue of fraudulent adverts, there is also the big issue of the appalling behaviour of gambling companies and their advertising, which causes huge problems and addiction for many young people. May I, through the Minister, ask the new Secretary of State whether she would take a meeting with families bereaved as a result of gambling addiction?

Matt Warman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that terrible scourge. I am happy to tell him that my hon. Friend the Secretary of State would be delighted to take the meeting he suggests.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): May I, too, extend a warm welcome to the new Secretary of State and the new Minister? I hope that, as Digital Secretary, she has changed her parliamentary password.

Online fraud is a growing goldmine for fraudsters and online child abuse is a growing goldmine for paedophiles. Latest figures from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Internet Watch Foundation show a 70% increase in sexual communication offences with children, and a 77% increase in self-generated child sexual abuse material. Why are the Government still stubbornly and inexplicably refusing Labour's call and the NSPCC's call for the immediate implementation in the online safety Bill of personal criminal liability for senior tech executives whose actions consistently and significantly put children at risk? We already have such a legal regime that works in financial services and in health and safety. There must be a compelling reason why the Government refuse to do the same to protect our children online. Can the Minister tell us what it is?

Matt Warman: As the hon. Lady knows, the Bill is going through the pre-legislative scrutiny process. We are entirely aware of the issues she raises. The aim of the Bill and the aim of the Government's approach will always be to take the most effective attitude to tackling them. As the Bill goes through that process, we will of course continue to look at all the options, but our priority will be the effectiveness of the legislation. A mechanism may well work well in other industries, but that does not necessarily mean we should copy and paste it into another.

Youth Investment Fund

4. **Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):** When she plans to allocate funding under the £500 million youth investment fund. [903479]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): As I am sure the hon. Member would agree, youth services play a vital role in supporting young people, and the £500 million youth investment fund remains a manifesto commitment. It builds on more than £12 billion given this year to local authorities, who have the statutory duty to allocate funding to youth services in line with their local needs. Detailed plans for the fund are subject to the 2021 spending review, which, as she knows, will be coming later in October.

Cat Smith: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the innovation and expansion we have seen in the Scouts this week with the launch of the Squirrels, which will open up Scouting opportunities for four and five-year-olds?

The sector is hugely innovative, but it is also really struggling financially. It has been two years since the £500 million youth investment fund was announced, but not a penny has been spent. Can the Minister tell the sector when it can expect that money to come forward, or whether the Government have raided our children's piggy banks?

Matt Warman: We all, I am sure, have Scout troops in our constituencies to which we would pay tribute, and the expansion is hugely welcome. I am afraid, as I said in my answer, that the detailed plans for the fund are subject to the 2021 spending review. I look forward to being able to talk more about those plans after the spending review.

Musicians: Touring the EU

5. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** What progress the Government have made on supporting touring musicians to continue to work in Europe following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. [903480]

12. **Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** What support her Department is providing to help touring musicians to work in Europe following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. [903491]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): Ministers, officials and diplomats have been speaking to EU member states to establish arrangements for touring musicians and other artists. I can confirm that at least 19 out of 27 member states allow some visa and permit-free touring. We are continuing to engage with the remaining member states to encourage them to align requirements more closely with our own.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The reality is that there has been limited progress on this matter. South Shields is home to many independent musicians, who used to be able to showcase their talents right across Europe. The cost and bureaucracy involved now prohibits them from doing so. Carry on Touring has written to the Minister with a solution: a pan-European EU visa and work permit waiver. Will she please ask the new Secretary of State to use her first day to implement it?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her question; I had a wonderful break up in the north-east and enjoyed her constituency over the summer. I will be happy to ask the Secretary of State to look at that proposal, but we put forward, as part of the EU negotiations, a very fair proposal to our EU member state counterparts, which, unfortunately, they rejected. I know that my former Cabinet Office colleague, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) did a lot of work in this area as well. There has been a lot of engagement at ministerial level with our counterparts and we intend to continue that work, because we know that this is an important issue and a frustration not just for some of the major touring artists but, more importantly, for some of the smaller groups who may not have the financial funds to be able to negotiate some of the complexities in this area.

Wendy Chamberlain: North East Fife is home to, among others, StAnza festival and East Neuk festival, where local artists can share their work and experience with performers from Europe and beyond, but clearly—I

agree with the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck)—sufficient steps are not being taken. Bureaucracy is stifling this industry. What other steps can the Minister take to ensure that we get people out to Europe and performing?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I mentioned, there have been intensive negotiations at a ministerial level with our EU counterparts and a lot of progress has been made. As I mentioned in my opening reply, we now have agreements with 19 of the 27 members states that allow visa and permit-free touring, but we want to make more progress because we know this is a very important issue for musicians and artists across the country.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): We welcome all the new Ministers, but I want to be clear on this issue: the Minister said in response to those questions that extensive efforts are being made, yet on 4 August when the Department published a statement describing the situation, the industry was clear that nothing has changed. Will she refer to that 4 August statement on touring and tell me, since the original Brexit deal was signed, exactly what has changed?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her passion, and we share that intensity of desire to get this issue sorted for UK musicians. The challenge is our desire to secure the same freedoms for our musicians in the EU that EU musicians are allowed when they come over to the UK. It is a shame, because the quality of musicianship in our country is second to none, so in a sense EU member states are missing out if they continue not to provide the freedoms that we provide to their artists. We will continue our intensive negotiations, but we have to accept that this is not in our control. We put forward a very fair and sensible deal to our EU counterparts and it is for them to agree the same freedoms that we grant them.

Covid-19: Live Events Sector

6. **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help the live events sector to return and recover from the covid-19 outbreak. [903481]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): In July, we removed all restrictions, enabling audiences to return to live events. In August, the Government announced a live events reinsurance scheme worth £750 million, which will instil confidence and support events previously unable to obtain covid-19 cancellation insurance. DCMS has continued to support the events sector throughout the pandemic, including through the £2 billion culture recovery fund.

David Warburton: I warmly welcome the new Secretary of State. The live music sector has had an enormously challenging 18 months. Although I strongly welcome Government interventions such as the culture recovery fund and the live events reinsurance scheme, VAT on tickets for live events is set to double by the end of this month. As we all know, live music is not only essential to our economy, but plays a vital role in bringing us together after so many months of lockdown. As live events return, will the Government consider a permanent extension of VAT relief on music tickets to aid the sector's recovery and to ensure that the show can go on?

Ms Dorries: I assure my hon. Friend that I will be working closely with the Chancellor to discuss the support required for the live events sector. The 5% rate on VAT for event tickets has been extended until 30 September 2021, when the 12.5% reduced rate will be introduced until March 2022. We have already provided £21 million to festivals and £2.5 million to grassroots music venues through the culture recovery fund, and our reinsurance scheme is designed to support the continuation of live events.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State any information on the take-up of that reinsurance scheme? Some promoters have said it is so inadequate, and covers such specific circumstances, that there is almost no point in taking it out. Was it always the Government's intention to design a scheme in such a way that they could claim to be acting, while being safe in the knowledge that the scheme would not actually be used?

Ms Dorries: At this stage in my appointment, I am afraid I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an exact figure for the take-up, but I will write to him.

Tourism Industry

7. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the recovery of the tourism industry. [903484]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The Government have already provided more than £35 billion for the tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors in the form of grants, loans and tax breaks throughout the pandemic. When I last spoke to the House about this, the figure was £25 billion, so there has been a considerable increase since then. As our tourism recovery plan makes clear, we will continue to support the sector's return to pre-pandemic levels and beyond, hopefully well ahead of independent forecasts. For example, the £10 million national lottery days out campaign, to be launched next month, will stimulate demand for more off-season day trips to tourist sites across the UK this autumn and winter.

Sally-Ann Hart: Tourism and hospitality has often been viewed as a Cinderella industry, but we know, particularly after covid-19, how vital it is not only to local economies such as mine in Hastings and Rye—but of which it represents more than 30%—but to the UK economy, and also what a wide range of opportunities it offers globally. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to encourage people, particularly the young, to choose this industry as a fantastic career path?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this topic. I know that she is passionate about the sector, having visited her fantastic constituency on a beautiful sunny day in June this year.

We recognise the importance of recovering from the pandemic with a more resilient tourism industry that will offer exciting, good-quality, well-paid jobs to young people as well as long-term careers for everyone, throughout the country. We work closely with the Tourism Industry Council to ensure that the sector is signposted to key Government initiatives such as the £2.5 billion national skills fund and the UK-wide kickstart scheme.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for all the help that he has given us over the recent period. In my constituency, tourism is a key marker for economic growth, jobs, wages and so forth. May I ask the Minister what has been done in co-operation and partnership with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in particular, to ensure that we all benefit in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—always better together?

Nigel Huddleston: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. I had the privilege of visiting Northern Ireland this summer, and saw many tourist attractions there. We work very co-operatively with our colleagues in Northern Ireland, including, obviously, Members in this House, who I know talk passionately—as the hon. Gentleman does—about tourism and the value of tourism. Obviously, the tourism recovery plan has implications for the whole United Kingdom, although some elements are devolved, but we work closely with our Northern Ireland colleagues, and there is Northern Ireland representation on the Tourism Industry Council. They contribute significantly, and I hope that positive relationship continues.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Minister for all he has been doing over the last 18 months to support the sector, and for meeting hoteliers in my constituency this week. He will recall that, despite Cornwall's having the busiest summer it has ever had, many hotels were operating at less than capacity because of the lack of availability of staff. As he will understand, one of the issues is accommodation, and the current limit of £58 that staff are allowed to offset on accommodation provided by their employer. Will he commit to work with me to get that figure reviewed, so that we can have a more workable solution for the future?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued passion and support for the sector throughout the country, let alone in his own fantastic constituency, which I have also had the pleasure of visiting. Perhaps I have travelled a bit too much, although I am sure there is no such thing.

This issue was indeed raised by my hon. Friend's constituents during the conversation that we had earlier this week, and they provided some compelling information. I make the commitment to him and his constituents that we will look very carefully at the issues raised, and that I will work across Departments to see what solutions can be found.

Public Service Broadcasting

8. **John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to strengthen and promote public service broadcasting. [903487]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): Public service broadcasting remains critical to the UK's media landscape, and the Government are committed to ensuring that it continues to thrive. We will present proposals in the form of a broadcasting White Paper to update the existing public service broadcasting framework later this year.

John McDonnell: I admit I was hoping that the Secretary of State would answer this question so that I could say “from one red to another”, although maybe not in the full range of meaning of that term. I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group. NUJ members are concerned about the future of public broadcasting, because of the sale of Channel 4, because of the 25% cut that has already been incurred at the BBC and because of reports that the Government are considering refusing even an inflation-rate increase in the BBC licence fee. Will the Minister meet a delegation from the NUJ parliamentary group to discuss these concerns?

Matt Warman: As a former member of the NUJ myself, it would be churlish to refuse.

Topical Questions

T1. [903467] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): I want to start by saying how delighted I am to have been appointed Secretary of State at DCMS. This is one of the most important Departments in Government, economically, socially and culturally, and I am determined to ensure that our sectors bounce back stronger than ever from covid. We continue to support them through this stage of the recovery, particularly through our £750 million events insurance scheme. London Fashion Week and London Tech Week are back with a bang. The creative and tech industries are British powerhouses, and I am committed to driving them to even greater heights. In the meantime, we have all enjoyed a fabulous summer of sport. It started with the Euros final, followed by incredible success at the Olympics and the Paralympics, and it was topped off by Emma Raducanu's wonderful victory on Saturday—the best tennis match I have ever watched. I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating our fantastic athletes.

Mr Davis: Can I express my delight at the arrival of my hon. Friend in Cabinet? She demonstrates that you do not need to be a boring conformist to get on in this world. Returning to the boring conformity, however, I shall put my substantive question to her. What assessment has she made of delegating the decision on what is harmful and what is not harmful to the online platform providers?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The fact is that the Online Safety Bill does not delegate that decision to online platforms. What it does is define the harmful content that companies must address. The Government will set out the categories for those harmful contents later. Companies will need to ensure that children are protected from any content that meets this definition, and that will clearly be directed by Government; it will not be delegated to them.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We know that the new Secretary of State has set out her own views and interpretation of racism online, because she has written about it, so I am sure she will remember what the

Prime Minister said about the torrent of online racist abuse against England footballers on 14 July. This is what he said:

“Today we are taking practical steps to ensure that the football banning order regime is changed, so that if a person is guilty of racist online abuse of footballers, they will not be going to the match—no ifs, no buts, no exemptions and no excuses.”—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 362.]

I am really pleased that the Prime Minister heeded my call to extend banning orders to online racism. Can the Secretary of State tell us exactly what practical steps have been taken to change the football banning order regime since 14 July?

Ms Dorries: I am afraid that I am going to have to write to the hon. Lady, being new to the job as I am. I will do that immediately.

T3. [903469] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): May I also offer my congratulations to the new Secretary of State? In Eastbourne, the ambition for a mixed augmented reality studio is beginning to take shape. What would this mean? Skilled jobs, an injection into the hospitality sector and keeping us at the forefront of film-making. What support can the sector and MediaBite, the project lead, anticipate from the Government, and will the Minister join me in wishing them well in their endeavour and in their bid to Innovate UK?

Matt Warman: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in endorsing that bid. It is a key ambition of this Government to ensure that augmented reality and all those future technologies are made a reality not just in London and the big cities but across the whole country, so Eastbourne is a real opportunity. I would be happy, for instance, to facilitate a meeting with the BFI or something of that nature in order for her to help to pursue this endeavour.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I would also like to welcome the Secretary of State to her place. I have been glancing at her oeuvre, and now is perhaps not the time to discuss the alarming dumbing down she once identified in the once highbrow artform of panto or, indeed, to ponder her long anti-gay rights voting record. Just as well there are no homosexuals in the arts sector.

Instead, let us continue to focus on Afghanistan. We know the Taliban respect only violent power. They care nothing for culture or heritage. UNESCO is monitoring the evolving situation, focusing on the universal rights to education, freedom of expression and heritage. Does the Secretary of State agree that the women standing up for their rights and national culture in street protests are extraordinarily brave? Will she outline what the UK Government will be doing to protect all those who feel abandoned in Afghanistan, whether they are women, LGBT people or minorities who fear for their lives and futures?

Mr Speaker: Order. Topical questions are meant to be short and punchy, not big, long questions. If you want to ask a long question, come in earlier, please. We have a very short time.

Ms Dorries: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for his warm and kind words of welcome.

Of course, we all stand with the women of Afghanistan. I know the hon. Gentleman has been looking through my long tweet history of 20 years, or whenever I first went on Twitter, and he will therefore know that I have repeatedly supported the women of Afghanistan and will continue to do so.

T5. [903472] **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): Last year there was full gigabit-capable broadband in just 13% of households in my Eddisbury constituency. Thanks to UK Government initiatives such as the rural voucher scheme, the figure now stands at 47%, but we still have a long way to go, which is why I am launching a survey of the broadband and mobile coverage of my local residents to find out where the notspots are. Will the Minister agree to meet me to assess that survey and to discuss what more can be done to ensure that we get full coverage right across the constituency?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the world-leading pace of this country's broadband roll-out, but we know there is more to do. I would encourage everybody in his constituency to fill in his broadband survey, and I would be very happy to meet him.

T2. [903468] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): The lockdowns during the pandemic have brought into sharp focus the stark digital divide in our country. Despite Government promises, 1.9 million households still do not have internet access, and many more, including in my Slough constituency, rely on expensive pay-as-you-go services. Is it not about time that the Government finally bridged this divide?

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the need for affordable broadband and mobile access, which is why this Government have worked with the companies during the pandemic and since to make sure there are social tariffs so that cheaper products are available. Such tariffs are a crucial part of making sure everyone has the access we all need in the 21st century.

T6. [903473] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): D. H. Lawrence is Ashfield's most famous son, and I thank the Government for the extra funding they supplied last year for the D. H. Lawrence Centre in Eastwood. Will the Secretary of State now back my bid to get a D. H. Lawrence statue in Eastwood to celebrate his life and works?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): That sounds like a very good idea, and I know there are many D. H. Lawrence fans in this House, including my hon. Friend. I should explain that it is not normal practice—in fact, it is very rare—for central Government to fund or get particularly involved in new memorials and statues. Of course, organisations often propose, fund, develop and deliver memorials commemorating a huge variety of events and people at local and sometimes national level. These groups should work with the relevant planning authority and other organisations to identify a suitable site and obtain the necessary planning permissions. I hope his proposal is treated sympathetically.

T4. [903470] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): When last in power, the Taliban destroyed 70% of the artifacts in the National Museum of Afghanistan, including many significant works of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic history. With academics now facing persecution and libraries and museums under threat of destruction and looting, what steps can the Government take with their international allies to prevent a further cultural genocide?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and we are all alarmed about the situation. We are closely monitoring the situation in Afghanistan and stand ready to provide whatever support we can to help to protect Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage for future generations. We urge all parties in Afghanistan to protect the cultural heritage of their country, including the museums and cultural institutions.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Warm congratulations to the Secretary of State. It was a big relief to everyone that the Government withdrew their vaccine passport plan but, if we do see the return of vaccine passport ideas or other covid restrictions, please can the Government distinguish between events and conferences, where covid-secure measures and tracing are highly developed, and nightclubs and mass gatherings, where more precautions may be needed? They are very different sorts of venues, and they require different sorts of precautions.

Nigel Huddleston: I know that conference venues and organisers have put a huge amount of work into reopening safely, with many already using voluntary certification. I appreciate my right hon. Friend's huge support in this area. I take her point about the nature of business events; they are more organised and structured than some other events. The Prime Minister announced a range of plan B measures. Further details will be coming out, but I should emphasise that they are plan B. I would be happy to talk further with her.

T7. [903474] **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): I join the new Secretary of State in congratulating Emma Raducanu on her historic victory this week; we are at a pivotal moment for women's sport. I also commend BBC Wales on committing to show Wales's 2023 FIFA women's World cup qualifiers on mainstream TV because, as the saying goes, if you can't see it, you can't be it—visibility matters. So what commitments can the Secretary of State give to encourage women to participate in all sports, especially at grassroots level?

Nigel Huddleston: I know the hon. Lady's passion for all things sport. We should probably take the opportunity also to congratulate Alfie Hewett, Gordon Reid and Joe Salisbury on their success last Saturday in the United States. On the point the hon. Lady is raising on women's sport, I can tell her that that is absolutely a priority of mine and of the Department. We have a women in sport working group, which is very effectively looking at what further actions we can take to promote and support women's sport. I would be happy to continue talking to her about this and other issues.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Before we begin questions to the Attorney General, may I take a moment to welcome back the Attorney General from maternity leave? May I also thank the stand-in Attorney General, Sir Michael Ellis, for his service while she was away?

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Financial Crime: Prosecution Rates

1. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help improve prosecution rates for financial crime. [903456]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I take this opportunity to place on the record my gratitude to you, to the Prime Minister and the Government, to Opposition parties, to the whole of Parliament and to the brilliant team at the Attorney General's office for all of their work, which enabled me to take that precious time with my baby? On behalf of my family, may I say that we are incredibly grateful?

The Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office both play a crucial role in tackling financial crime. In 2020-21, the CPS prosecuted more than 6,500 defendants for fraud and forgery, with a conviction rate of 85.6%, and the SFO secured successful judicial outcomes in 84% of cases over the past four financial years.

Felicity Buchan: It is now estimated that 86% of reported fraud is cyber-related. I am concerned that the CPS, the SFO and Action Fraud need the right skills and sense of urgency to deal with this rising crime, which has devastating effects on people's lives. Can my right hon. and learned Friend update the House on that?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the significant increase in cyber-crime. I am particularly interested in the issue, and last year I addressed the Cambridge International Symposium on Economic Crime and outlined that cyber-crime is a key priority for this Government. That is why in March this year the CPS launched its first ever economic crime strategy, to ensure that it remains ahead of the changing nature of this complex crime.

Mobile Phone Data: Criminal Trials

2. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve the disclosure of mobile phone data in criminal trials. [903457]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): Effective handling of digital information is crucial to ensuring robust disclosure practices and effective trials. Alongside the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor, I will be co-hosting a tech event later this year with industry experts to investigate novel approaches to managing mobile device data throughout the criminal justice process. The revised disclosure guidelines that I published earlier this year specifically address technological issues, to assist practitioners in this ever-complex field.

Lee Anderson: Could my right hon. and learned Friend please explain how mobile phone data is being used to track and capture people smugglers who are sending illegal immigrants over the channel?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend raises an important and concerning issue. People smuggling is a terrible crime that blights the lives of vulnerable people and I welcome all the efforts the Government are making to combat it. The Crown Prosecution Service regularly uses mobile phone data when prosecuting offences under the Immigration Act 2016. Phone metadata can identify the location at which the phone was used, while the information content can identify details of the offence, or even wider offences. The CPS is highly cognisant of the effective use of mobile data, where available, to pursue effective prosecutions.

Effective and Accountable Justice

3. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Justice to ensure an effective and accountable criminal justice system. [903458]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): Together with colleagues in the Home Office, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Ministry of Justice, we have developed a criminal justice action plan to drive system recovery as we rebuild after the pandemic. Progress against the action plan will be measured by a set of criminal justice scorecards, which will be published quarterly from this autumn. This approach will enable a cross-system response to dips in performance and hold each part of the system accountable for improvement.

Kenny MacAskill: As a former Scottish Justice Secretary, I am well aware of Scotland's distinct legal jurisdiction, but broadcasting and human rights are reserved responsibilities. Craig Murray, a Scottish journalist, has been jailed for eight months without appeal. Is the Attorney General able to make any representations to ensure that the European convention on human rights and other protocols are followed when they apply to such rights and powers?

The Attorney General: We must ensure that all journalists have the right to express themselves and work in a free society. We are incredibly proud of that tradition in this country and our human rights regime rightly protects freedom of expression. I am happy to discuss this vital matter further with the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the Attorney General back to her place. I am sure she will agree that it is also right to pay particular tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) for the way in which he discharged his duties as the Attorney General to the very high standards and with the impartiality of that office—it could not have been done better.

Does the Attorney General agree that for an effective system it is important that we have not only a fully joined-up plan but effective funding for all parts of the justice system? What steps is she taking to ensure a joint approach to getting the best possible outcome for the Law Officers' Department, the CPS and the Ministry of Justice in the coming spending review?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for resources as we rebuild after the pandemic. We need to ensure that the court backlog, which we all accept exists, is dealt with. That is why we have been working across Government, with the sector and with local bodies to ensure that comprehensive support is available for victims and witnesses. After all, it is victims for whom we are here and for whom we need to fight.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the Attorney General back to her place—it is good to see her—and thank the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) for all his work during her maternity leave.

The court backlog is at a record high, with victims waiting years for their day in court. The latest Government data reveals that in the year ending March 2021, a staggering 1 million victims of crime abandoned their case because they lost faith in the justice system. The CPS budget has been cut by 33% in real terms over the past decade. Ahead of the comprehensive spending review, what specifically will the Attorney General say to the Treasury? What does she say specifically to the millions of victims who have lost faith in the system?

The Attorney General: As I say, we accept that there is a court backlog, and it is a priority for this Government as we build back from the pandemic. The CPS has implemented a number of changes, with cross-system partners, to assist the criminal justice system in its response to covid. I was pleased that the independent inspectorate praised the CPS response to the pandemic. The CPS has recently introduced specific measures to accelerate its management of cases in the context of the pandemic.

The Chancellor has been clear that there will need to be tough choices as we come out of the pandemic. The public expect us to deliver the highest-quality services at the best value, ensuring that every pound is well spent. The CPS has received funding uplifts in the past three spending rounds, including £85 million to allow it to recruit more than 350 new prosecutors to boost capacity and support court recovery.

Ellie Reeves: I have listened to what the Attorney General has said, but say to her that the criminal justice system is on its knees. In rape cases, 44% of victims are pulling out before their case gets to court. The latest Crown Prosecution Service data shows that it would take the Government 22 years to reach their own target of returning to 2016 rape prosecution levels—22 years! It is absolutely not good enough, and we see this Government repeatedly fail rape victims. Will the Attorney General tell me what she plans to do to ensure that the Government meet their target, or will she sit on her hands and oversee the further decriminalisation of rape?

The Attorney General: The assertion that there has been a decriminalisation of rape is simply not backed up by the facts and is a very damaging narrative to proffer. It is very important that we recognise that, yes, there have been delays in the system, and I recognise how distressing those delays are. I want to reassure the hon. Lady that progress is being made to boost court capacity and to enable cases to continue to flow through the system. That includes harnessing technology, such as the cloud video platform, making use of the Nightingale

courts and exploring the use of extended operating hours in court. The special measure allowing vulnerable victims, including rape victims and those who are witnesses in those cases, to pre-record their cross-examination evidence to reduce waiting times, which is under section 28, has been rapidly rolled out to cover all 82 Crown courts as of 23 November last year, and the CPS was a key partner in ensuring that that roll-out went smoothly.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the Attorney General back to her place and wish her growing family all the very best.

Does the Attorney General agree that any effective criminal justice system must ensure that cases are brought in a timely manner? Will she join me in welcoming the £50 million announced by the Scottish Government to clear the court backlog, and outline any advice that she has given to her Cabinet colleagues to ensure that victims can access effective and prompt justice through the court system?

The Attorney General: There has been a real focus on dealing with the backlog and ensuring a better flow of cases right from reporting at the police station through to conviction. That was most pertinently highlighted in the recent rape review published by this Government with a particular focus on those victims. There have been a huge number of changes implemented by the CPS with cross-system partners to assist the criminal justice response to covid. As I have mentioned, it includes the interim charging protocol, which is designed to be clear that the high-harm crimes and covid-related crimes, such as spitting and assaults on essential workers, are prioritised. That will be and has been an effective step forward in dealing with the backlog.

Understanding of the Law

4. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase public understanding of the law among young people. [903460]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): It is vital that children of all ages learn about our famous legal system. My office works very closely with the Department for Education to ensure that the curriculum covers a full range of important legal concepts, including fundamental rights and criminal law. My office also works very closely with members of the pro bono and public legal education committees, who run programmes to engage and educate young people about the law outside the curriculum.

Antony Higginbotham: Our legal system is the cornerstone of our society, so does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we need to work with not just with schools but voluntary organisations to make sure that young people understand not just the law and our legal process, but Parliament's role in forming the law?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend has put it very well. Understanding the law is vital for young people. To that end, I wholeheartedly support pro bono work as part of education and a way in which students can support their communities to understand the law, their rights and what is required of them. When I was both training for and practising at the self-employed Bar, I

undertook pro bono work and also volunteered for the free representation unit. I encourage all practitioners, young and older, to maintain that very proud tradition of the Bar.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In 1975, a 17-year-old young man died while on Army training. He was a recent recruit. The family have never believed the account of his death given by the Ministry of Defence. In 1998, my predecessor wrote to the then Attorney General about the case. Now it appears that new evidence has come forward. Will the Attorney General meet me and some of the family members to discuss this, in their pursuit of the truth?

The Attorney General: I send my condolences to the family, and applaud the hon. Lady's campaigning and work on the issue. I do not know about the case other than what she has just told me, but I am very happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Covid-19: Criminal Justice System

5. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the recovery of the criminal justice system since the easing of covid-19 restrictions. [903462]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I frequently meet criminal justice partners to discuss the important issue of criminal justice capacity since the covid-19 restrictions have been eased. The covid outbreak has been felt keenly by the criminal justice system. I have been proud of the resilience that the criminal justice agencies have demonstrated. There is still more to do, but both the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office have been commended for their efforts during this difficult time, and I thank them for continuing to support the delivery of justice.

Selaine Saxby: I support the Government's efforts to address the recovery, and pay tribute to all those working hard across the country to make this happen, but can my right hon. and learned Friend tell me how victims are being supported so that they do not drop out of the criminal justice process due to the time lag?

The Attorney General: I regularly meet the Director of Public Prosecutions and CPS teams around the country. I was pleased to meet CPS South West last year to learn more about its case progression and response to the pandemic. In February this year, the Government announced an additional £40 million to support victims of crime during the pandemic and beyond. Throughout this period, almost £600,000 of funding has been made available to assist helpline services, and £3 million per annum until 2022 has been committed to independent sexual violence advisers. That is a reflection of the comprehensive package of support put forward by this Government to help to build back better after the pandemic.

Refugee Rights: International Law

8. **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the compatibility of the Government's proposals on asylum with (a) the UN's convention on the status of refugees and (b) the rule of law. [903466]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): Any request for my advice is subject to the Law Officers' convention, but I must make it clear that the UK prides itself on its leadership within the international system and discharges its international obligations in good faith. We have a proud history of providing protection to those who need it, in accordance with our international obligations. The Home Office's new plan for immigration is based on fairness, and the Government stand by our moral and legal obligations to help innocent civilians fleeing cruelty from all over the world.

Anne McLaughlin: Speaking in the House on Tuesday of the Home Secretary's plan literally to push back migrant children and their parents arriving by boats in the channel, the now former Justice Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), said that these actions would not even "come close to breaking international law"—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 799.]

Given the number of leading UK legal experts with no axe to grind who say the absolute opposite, can the Attorney General at least reassure the House that she has not advised the Home Secretary that pushback plans would be either legal or moral?

The Attorney General: The Government are committed to addressing the unacceptable rise in dangerous and unnecessary small boat crossings, and are continuing to explore all options available to bring the numbers down. Our primary focus is on preventing people from entering the channel, tackling the criminal gangs responsible and protecting lives. As part of the Home Office's ongoing operational response, it will continue to evaluate and test a range of safe and legal options for stopping small boats.

Unduly Lenient Sentences

7. **Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con):** What recent comparative assessment she has made of the annual performance of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [903464]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): In 2020 my office received, and as the Law Officers we reviewed, 552 referrals under the unduly lenient sentence scheme. Ninety-seven of those were referred to the Court of Appeal and 61 sentences were increased. In February, I was proud to present in the Court of Appeal a case in which the victim was raped while in a relationship, and I was successful in increasing the defendant's sentence. It is important that victims report these crimes and that justice is seen to be done.

Jacob Young: Last month Cleveland police's former head of corporate communications, Mr Green, pleaded guilty to making indecent images of children. The district judge gave Mr Green a sentence that involved no jail time and a community order lasting just 24 months. That strikes me as an unduly lenient sentence in any case, but given the position of trust he held in his senior role in Cleveland police, I believe that the case must be reviewed. Will the Attorney General review Mr Green's sentence and ensure that justice is heard for the victims of his crime?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for his tireless work on behalf of those who have been affected by cases of this nature. This case was brought to my attention by Steve Turner, the Cleveland police and crime commissioner. As my hon. Friend will be aware, I can only review sentences that fall within the unduly lenient sentence scheme, and as this case was heard at the magistrates court it is ineligible.

AUKUS

10.30 am

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about our friendship with Australia and the United States, and the security of the Indo-Pacific.

Yesterday I joined President Biden and Prime Minister Morrison to create a new trilateral defence partnership between our countries known as AUKUS. Australia has, for the first time, taken the momentous decision to acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, and it has asked for our help in achieving this ambition. I am delighted to tell the House that we have agreed to this request and we shall place the UK's expertise in this field, amassed over decades, at the assistance of our Australian friends. The first task of AUKUS will be an 18-month trilateral collaboration to determine the best way of delivering advanced nuclear submarines for Australia—emphasising, of course, that they will be powered by nuclear reactors, not armed with nuclear weapons, so the nuclear non-proliferation treaty places no prohibition on that work. The House will understand how Australia's future possession of that capability will help safeguard the peace and security of the Indo-Pacific.

Nuclear submarines are the capital ships of our age, propelled by an effectively inexhaustible source of energy, allowing them to circumnavigate the world without surfacing, deriving oxygen and fresh water from the sea around them. While on patrol, they keep silent watch over vast expanses of ocean, protecting shipping, gathering intelligence, deterring adversaries, and guarding the trade routes on which our livelihoods depend.

To design, build, operate and then safely decommission a nuclear submarine ranks among the most complex and technically demanding enterprises yet devised. Only six nations possess nuclear-powered submarines, and to help another country join this tiny circle is a decision of the utmost gravity, requiring perhaps the closest relationship of trust that can exist between sovereign states. I hope that I speak for the House when I say that I have no hesitation about trusting Australia, a fellow maritime democracy, joined to us by blood and history, which stood by Britain through two world wars at immense sacrifice.

Today, the UK and Australia defend the same interests, promote the same values and face the same threats: we are as closely aligned in international policy as any two countries in the world. One of the great prizes of this enterprise is that Australia, the UK and the US will become inseparable partners in a project that will last for decades, creating opportunities for still greater defence and industrial co-operation.

The integrated review of foreign and defence policy described Britain's renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific, a region that is fast becoming the geopolitical centre of the world, and ever more important for British trade and therefore British jobs and British livelihoods. If there were ever any question about what global Britain's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific would mean in reality, or what capabilities we might offer, this partnership with Australia and the US provides the answer. It amounts to a new pillar of our strategy, demonstrating Britain's generational commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific and showing exactly how we can help one of our oldest friends to preserve regional stability. It comes after the

UK's success in becoming a dialogue partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and our application to join the trans-Pacific free trade area.

At the same time, this project will create hundreds of highly skilled jobs across the UK, including in Scotland, the north of England and the midlands, reinforcing our industrial base and our national scientific expertise, exemplified by the British companies participating in this week's Defence and Security Equipment International event.

A nuclear submarine programme exists within a different realm of engineering from any other marine project, requiring a mastery of disciplines ranging from propulsion to acoustics. In these fields and many others, we will have a new opportunity to strengthen Britain's position as a science and technology superpower, and by generating economies of scale, this project could reduce the cost of the next generation of nuclear submarines for the Royal Navy, helping us to renew our own capabilities.

While our partnership will begin with nuclear-powered submarines, now that we have created AUKUS, we expect to accelerate the development of other advanced defence systems, including in cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and undersea capabilities. This partnership will open a new chapter in Britain's friendship with our closest allies, help to safeguard the security of the Indo-Pacific, create jobs at home and reinforce our country's place at the leading edge of technology. I commend this statement to the House.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of his statement. The recent events in Afghanistan show us how precarious international stability can be. New challenges can emerge and issues in faraway corners of the globe can quickly turn into threats at home, so Labour welcomes increased co-operation with our allies. Australia and America are two of our closest security partners. Sharing resources and intelligence with them and enhancing capabilities makes them safer, makes Britain safer, and makes the world safer.

The lesson of the past few weeks is that Britain must look after our most important relationships, or our influence and security quickly decline. Labour welcomes this announcement, but may I ask the Prime Minister to outline in a bit more detail what the agreement means in practice? The strategic review identified China as a "systemic competitor". China's assertiveness does pose risks to UK interests in a secure Pacific region, in stable trading environments and in democracy and human rights. We need to deal with those risks, defend our values and defend our interests, but the same review also rightly stated that the UK must maintain a commercial relationship with China, and we must work with them on the defining global issues of the day, such as climate change and pandemic preparedness. Without diplomatic strategy and skill, those goals will come into conflict. So what plan does the Prime Minister have to ensure that this new arrangement increases, rather than decreases our ability to influence China?

In order to protect our security and interests, we also need to look after our broader alliances. NATO remains our most important strategic alliance. It is also the most successful, having delivered peace and security in Europe for three quarters of a century. Whatever the merits of an Indo-Pacific tilt, maintaining security in Europe

[*Keir Starmer*]

must remain our primary objective. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that the arrangement will not see resources redirected from Europe and the high north to the Pacific? Will he also guarantee that the arrangement will strengthen rather than weaken the NATO alliance, including our indispensable bilateral relationship with France? We are also in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangements with Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the US, which is vital to our security. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that this new trilateral arrangement will not weaken our intelligence capabilities by producing a two-tier Five Eyes operation?

Finally, the arrangement clearly brings potential economic opportunities for Britain. We need the well-paid, high-skilled jobs that the defence industry provides in every corner of Britain. The Prime Minister said that the project will create hundreds of skilled jobs. Will he give more detail on what he has done to ensure that Britain gets its fair share of any contracts that come out of the arrangements? What will he do to ensure that no region or nation in Britain misses out on any job opportunities that the arrangement may bring?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for welcoming the statement and AUKUS. I will answer some of the detailed points that he made.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman began by asking whether AUKUS was in any sense adversarial to China and how we will manage the relationship with China. It is important for the House to understand that it is not intended to be adversarial towards any other power; it merely reflects how the close relationship that we have with the United States and Australia, the shared values that we have and the sheer level of trust between us enables us to go to the extraordinary extent of sharing nuclear technology in the way in which we propose. Obviously, we also have a shared interest in promoting democracy, human rights, freedom of navigation and freedom of trade around the world, which are values and perspectives that I hope the whole House will support.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about NATO, the House should be in no doubt that the Government's commitment to NATO is absolutely unshakeable and indeed has been strengthened by the massive commitments that we have made. With the biggest uplift in defence spending since the cold war—£24 billion—2.2% of our GDP now goes on defence spending. He rightly raises the question of our military relationship with France, which, again, is rock-solid. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the French, whether in the Sahel, where we are running a joint operation against terrorists in Mali, or in Estonia, where we have the largest NATO operation.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked reasonably about the jobs that this great project will unquestionably produce. What I can say is that there will be an 18-month scoping exercise to establish where the work should go between the three partners, but clearly there are deep pools of expertise throughout the United Kingdom, whether in Derby, Plymouth, Scotland or Barrow. I have no doubt whatever that it will bring hundreds of high-skilled, high-wage jobs of the kind that we want to see, and increasingly are seeing, in our country.

Finally, it is a pleasure to hear the right hon. and learned Gentleman's change of heart about NATO—I had to say this, Mr Speaker, pain me though it does—after he only recently campaigned to install a Prime Minister who wanted us to withdraw from NATO.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): We must work with but stand up to China. This is about a more co-ordinated, long-term strategy in challenging China's increasing, hostile dominance in the South China sea. But as the Prime Minister says, it is also a reminder of how we must work with alliances and rekindle an appetite to robustly defend international standards, so we cannot gloss over how bruised NATO now feels after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I hope the Prime Minister would agree that there is an opportunity for Britain to help shape western thinking and reinvigorate international resolve in what we stand for and are willing to defend. Would he agree today that this initiative is in response to the increasing, constant competition that we now face? I hope he now recognises that our peacetime defence budget is no longer adequate, and we will soon need to increase it to 3% of GDP if we are to contain the threats that now we face.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much. The increase that we have seen in our defence spending is unparalleled in modern times. It is the biggest uplift since the cold war—£24 billion. I think everybody can see the value of that and the importance of that, and, by the way, it is enabling us to take part in this historic partnership in the way that we are. On his point about our relationship with China, I just want to be clear with the House. Yes, it is true that this a huge increase in the levels of trust between the US, the UK and Australia—it is a fantastic defence technology partnership that we are building—but from the perspective of our friends and partners around the world, it is not actually revolutionary. We already have been co-operating over, for instance, the Collins class submarines in Australia.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Let me begin by thanking the Prime Minister for advance sight of the statement and for the briefing from the National Security Adviser that was arranged last night.

Over the course of the last number of weeks and months, we have all witnessed on the streets of Kabul the devastating consequences of failure when international co-operation falters. Deepening co-operation and advancing agreements with allies that seek to aid stability and security is an important step, especially if past mistakes are never to be repeated, and I welcome this announcement. In particular, the recognition of the growing cyber-threat in this agreement may be overdue but it is none the less welcome. I would hope that the extent of this co-operation on cyber-security can and will be extended to include our other key allies, especially in Europe.

There are a number of points and questions I would like to raise about how this agreement was reached and what has been agreed. First, can the Prime Minister inform us as to what discussions have been held with other NATO allies in advance of this announcement and what interaction there will be with this initiative? Were these allies informed that this agreement was being progressed at the recent G7 summit in Cornwall?

Secondly, on the nuclear agreements, I understand and welcome the fact that the Australian Prime Minister has firmly ruled out any development of any nuclear weaponry, but in terms of future obligations under nuclear non-proliferation treaties, can the Prime Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that this agreement can never be used as a stepping stone to nuclear weaponry if any future Australian Administration were to change this approach?

Finally, on the broader geopolitical positioning that this agreement signals, a number of military experts, including the US Defence Secretary, have previously stated that the resources of allies on the European continent would be better targeted regionally rather than risk being stretched thinly across the Pacific. With all the focus of this agreement on the Indo-Pacific, what risks are there that vigilant eyes are taken off the threats closer to home, specifically from the Putin regime in Moscow, or indeed matching up the UK and the EU strategic interest in shoring up stability and providing the humanitarian assistance that is needed in parts of Africa?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what I think was a broad welcome of this AUKUS agreement. It is historic and it is good for the whole of the United Kingdom. There is no conflict with NATO; NATO members are obviously fully up to speed with what is happening and this in no way affects the NATO relationships, which are absolutely fundamental for our security. There is also no prospect of its breaking the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, as I informed the House earlier, and no risk at all that it will mean that the United Kingdom or any of our allies take our eye off the ball on the threat from the Putin regime or Russia. The House should therefore understand that this is a defence technology agreement that is very sensible given the huge geopolitical weight now to be found in the Indo-Pacific region; the economic growth in that area is phenomenal and the security issues there are very important for our country—such as in the maintenance of trade flows—and that is why it is vital that we take part in this agreement.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): My right hon. Friend said yesterday that this partnership has “the aim of working hand in glove to preserve security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.”

What are the implications of this pact for the stance and response the United Kingdom would take should China attempt to invade Taiwan?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom remains determined to defend international law, and that is the strong advice we would give to our friends across the world and the strong advice we would give to the Government in Beijing.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I warmly welcome this agreement on nuclear technology co-operation with Australia, but what steps are being taken to develop defence partnership and technology agreements with other countries such as India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, who have a lot to offer in terms of technology that we could gain from for our own defence?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and we are currently developing partnerships around the world including in the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, we may wish to develop the future combat air system—FCAS—with our Japanese friends.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): This par is enormously welcome because it makes us safer in an area of the world where there are particular challenges to our ability to trade, secure our interests and protect our allies. Those who serve on our submarines do mission-critical work, but because they are our silent protectors they are often forgotten. So will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking them because they keep us safe every hour of every day, and will he confirm this is the first step towards further upgrading our presence in the Indo-Pacific?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to our submariners, who have had a particularly difficult time during covid, when the necessity of protecting submarines has been particularly acute. My hon. Friend makes a good point about the further steps we can take now within the context of AUKUS; this is just the beginning of collaboration on defence technology. I have mentioned some of the areas in which we now wish to go further such as cyber, AI and undersea defences; there are many areas now where countries with shared values and a shared belief in democracy will want to take collaboration much further.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): As consistent internationalists, Liberal Democrats welcome this enhanced co-operation with our Australian allies, especially because it is for our mutual security. Just because the Prime Minister has failed on past occasions to effectively co-operate internationally does not mean we will not give him credit on occasions like this. But further to his answer to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), in the context of standing up for our national interests against threats from China, Russia or elsewhere will the Prime Minister confirm that the UK is seeking to enhance co-operation with other allies in the Indo-Pacific region such as India, Japan and South Korea, and will he give more detail on that or at least commit to the House to come back with more detail?

The Prime Minister: What I can tell the House is that, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the carrier strike group is now in that region, and it has been doing exercises with a total of 40 other countries—friends and partners around the world—from India right the way through to Japan. I am not going to give much more detail now about FCAS, for reasons that I am sure the House will appreciate, but the UK will be developing friendships and partnerships throughout that region, for the very good political, security and economic reasons that I have given the House.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement. One of the reasons that some of us have opposed our foreign interventions since 2003 is that we felt they acted as a distraction from many greater dangers around the world, including in Indochina, so this agreement is very welcome. Will the Prime Minister confirm, though, the extent to which jobs and skills in this country will be

[Mr John Baron]

reinforced, if not enhanced? For example, are the 12 submarines that are presently within the French contract going to be re-bid for?

The Prime Minister: I do not want to go into the details of the contracts, but the House will understand that what we are doing is seeking, with our American friends and our Australian friends, to help the Royal Australian Navy to acquire the type of nuclear submarines that are appropriate for the current geopolitical situation they find themselves in. I have absolutely no doubt that the skills and expertise that are available in this country—across the whole UK—will be called upon extensively to fulfil that objective.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is important that we maintain a diplomatic dialogue with China. Without it, solving some of the world's greatest challenges, such as climate change, will not be achievable. Will the Prime Minister tell the House what is being done to increase our influence with China, and what impact this alliance might have on COP26 negotiations later in the year?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the hon. Lady that the President-designate of COP, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), was in Beijing recently and had very productive conversations with his Chinese counterparts. We are hopeful that China will be able to go even further than its current commitment to get to net zero by 2060. We are hoping that we will see a very productive commitment from China.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome the news of this partnership. Will the Prime Minister look at using it to drive forward closer working with our allies towards a more secure and resilient supply chain for digital technology so that we can be less reliant on countries such as China, which the Government have quite rightly identified as a competitor in this space?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and the opportunities are boundless. We are building on firm foundations. It is 50 years since the five power defence arrangements, the oldest defence agreement in the Pacific, which colleagues will know involves Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and the UK. There are already structures in that region. AUKUS adds a new structure and a deeply intensified level of co-operation, on a scale that has not been seen before.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I warmly welcome the deepening of our defence and security relationships with our long-standing friends and allies, Australia and the United States, and the bipartisan support for that, not only here but in Australia. At its base, must not this agreement ultimately also be part of the defence not only of our interests but of the rules-based international order, democracy and human rights, and an alliance of democracies? Does the Prime Minister accept that foreign aid soft power is an important component of that too?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it certainly is. That is why I think the UK can be very proud of the massive commitments that we make—£10 billion this year alone in official development assistance spending. The right

hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this enhanced defence agreement between the UK, Australia and the US is founded on shared values.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that this new partnership with Australia, which builds on the recently announced trade deal that will boost jobs and businesses across the country, including the east midlands, shows the huge opportunities available to global Britain as we look beyond our friends and allies in Europe to become a truly global power on the world stage?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think is the short answer to that superb question. [Laughter.] I really do not think I could have put it better myself.

Mr Speaker: I thought you'd already given it to him.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The recognition that cyber-warfare is as much a part of modern conflict as troops on the ground is reassuring, but the statement was a bit light on mentions of industrialised weaponised misinformation which has caused so much damage over recent years. What reassurance can the Prime Minister give that cyber-troops based here and in hostile states will be high on the AUKUS agenda?

The Prime Minister: The Five Eyes partnership is also of huge importance. We share intelligence on a very, very free basis with our Five Eyes friends, but cyber, AI and so on will now be progressed within the AUKUS context as well.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Will the Prime Minister accept the thanks of the House for deepening collaboration with some of our oldest allies and putting flesh on the bones of global Britain? In that vein, will he join me in welcoming to London Mohamed bin Zayed to not only deepen further links, but unleash economic benefits as well as tackling issues such as defence, climate change and regional instability?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I will indeed be seeing Mohamed bin Zayed very shortly—in fact, just after I leave the House today. I think I am right in saying—my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will correct me—that our relationship with the Gulf States is our single fastest growing market.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss) *indicated assent.*

The Prime Minister: It is. I am sure that that will be on the agenda.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Maintaining and strengthening our alliances is now more important than ever. I welcome today's announcement, but can the Prime Minister answer the question posed by the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), which was how this trilateral agreement sits with our Five Eyes relationships, and whether it will strengthen them and not weaken them?

The Prime Minister: It sits within the Five Eyes arrangement. The Five Eyes arrangement obviously comprises Canada and New Zealand as well. They, for various reasons, are not part of this very greatly intensified technological partnership. The Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partnership is of absolutely huge value to the security of the western world. It remains one of the pillars of our strategic defence.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): In welcoming AUKUS, which is a fantastic opportunity for new jobs and development to come to the north-west of England, does my right hon. Friend agree that it also dovetails nicely with our ambitions towards the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, and shows our intent towards a stronger presence in our tilt towards the Indo-Pacific?

The Prime Minister: Yes. The whole Indo-Pacific tilt, of which this is a part, is a recognition of the fact that the CPTPP area my hon. Friend talks about is a £9 trillion trade area in which the UK has an increasing diplomatic and commercial presence.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I welcome the statement. China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region can be destabilising, particularly in the South China sea. What support will be given to Taiwan at this difficult time?

The Prime Minister: We vindicate international law. One of the reasons we have sent the carrier strike group to that part of the world is to make that point.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that this new partnership is an absolutely golden opportunity for jobs across the country, including at home in the midlands? It not only gives people the opportunity to defend our shared interests and values across the world, but the opportunity of a high-skilled job and the security of a pay packet.

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is exactly right, and I thank my hon. Friend. The UK leads the world in some of these technologies. The factories, plants, ports and docks that make this stuff are distributed across the United Kingdom. There are opportunities for high-wage, high-skilled jobs that will last a generation and more.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The human rights atrocities against the Uyghur people in China have yet to abate. They continue with such brutality. While co-operation is welcome, how will this new strategy make protecting human rights more possible since escalation of operations can have a chilling impact on diplomacy?

The Prime Minister: I think it is very important that we continue to engage with our Chinese partners, but to engage very firmly on the points that we care about, whether it is human rights in Hong Kong, democracy in Hong Kong or the treatment of the Uyghurs. The UK, as the hon. Lady knows, has imposed sanctions on those who exploit forced labour in Xinjiang and taken many other steps besides.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): For 60 years, we have been manufacturing nuclear submarines and we are a world leader. I can confirm that this is a great Union story, with the supply chain even finding its way

to the landlocked Montgomeryshire in the middle of Wales. May I ask the Prime Minister to confirm that, while, of course, the security and the safety of the world is foremost, this will be great for jobs across the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that this will be great for jobs across the United Kingdom, but as I said, there is an 18-month scoping programme to work out exactly how the labour is going to be divvied up.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I have listened very carefully to the Prime Minister's statement. He mentioned the new well-paid jobs, which we all welcome, and all countries of the UK, but he did not mention Wales. Will he tell me why Wales has been left out of this jobs fest?

The Prime Minister: All parts of the United Kingdom, including the great Principality of Wales, will—I have no doubt—benefit from this agreement.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. It is right, in an ever-changing geopolitical landscape, that we review and, where possible, strengthen our links with like-minded countries around the world. Will he confirm that this new partnership will help us to continue to protect the rules-based international system in the region? I am thinking particularly of Hong Kong.

The Prime Minister: What this does is allow the three countries that share very close perspectives on human rights, the rule of law, free trade and international shipping to come together and, above all, to uphold our belief in democracy. We do not wish to be adversarial towards any other global power, but we wish to underscore that we work together to uphold those values, whether in our military co-operation or in technological transfer.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has said that Australia's new nuclear submarine would not be allowed in its waters due to a nuclear-free policy, yet under this great Union, Trident nuclear submarines are forced on Scotland. Indeed, we recently read that senior MOD officials have been looking at where to base its Trident fleet when Scotland becomes independent. Although France and the US were mentioned, will the Prime Minister confirm that they are not looking at the proposal of an "imperial days of empire" solution of creating a British overseas territory in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I think most commonsensical people will welcome the arrival of jobs across the whole of the United Kingdom, particularly in Scotland. By the way, the Type 26 frigate programme, which I have seen being built in Govan, is worth £19.5 billion to this country and, like the nuclear submarine programme, will generate jobs for decades and decades to come. It is a great thing for the whole of the UK.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The Prime Minister will know the glorious tourism, hospitality and history offered by Hastings and Rye, but he may not know that we have some fantastic defence manufacturing and vacuum engineering businesses—a sector that I would like to see growing in Hastings and

[*Sally-Ann Hart*]

Rye, because we really need to expand those well-paid jobs. Will he promise to consider those sorts of jobs in Hastings and Rye as we move forward under this amazing partnership?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. Of course, Hastings and Rye was the last place in which this island suffered a reversal at the hands of the French, but our relations with the French remain very good. My hon. Friend is certainly right about the benefits that this will bring throughout the UK, including, I hope, Hastings and Rye.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I welcome this development in the light of the strategic challenge posed by an increasingly assertive China, but the Prime Minister will be aware of the sensitivities in relation to the timing of the announcement, given the launch of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy today. What further reassurance can he provide that the new partnership will not come at the expense of defence co-operation with our European NATO allies?

The Prime Minister: This is not zero-sum. I have spoken to the House already about the depth of our co-operation with the French—which has a nuclear dimension as well—whether it is in Estonia or in Mali. One of the potential winners from this technological partnership is the French company Talis, which of course has many people working in this country.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I welcome the agreement, which shows the depth of our relationship with one of our oldest and closest allies, but can the Prime Minister confirm that it allows us to expand it into even more areas for the protection of our people and those of our allies?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. AUKUS is a big, big leap forward in terms of trust—agreeing to share nuclear propulsion systems is a giant step—but what this means now is that we will build on that platform to co-operate on cyber, artificial intelligence and all the other types of technology in respect of which it is vital that we stick together.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): We welcome co-operation with our allies for mutual security, and we welcome co-ordinated action in the Indo-Pacific, but today in relation to Hong Kong the Government have failed to uphold their duty under the joint declaration at a time when democratic values have effectively been snuffed out. Because of our special obligations to Hongkongers, if we lead the way by imposing Magnitsky sanctions on those involved in this crackdown, our allies will follow. Will the Prime Minister finally take meaningful action on Hong Kong?

The Prime Minister: I think most people in this country would consider that a bit bizarre. We have not only stood up for human rights in Hong Kong, but have taken the step of welcoming the British nationals (overseas), 30,000 of whom are coming to this country. We should be very proud of what we are doing to protect and help them, and we will continue to do so.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I warmly welcome this alliance. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it shows that we are successfully delivering the integrated review, and are deepening our foreign policy, defence and security relationships with our global allies?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I wish to repeat that this makes visible and incarnates the Indo-Pacific tilt that we have been talking about. It is an incredibly important development for our relations in the Indo-Pacific. However, it in no way detracts from our commitment to the north Atlantic area, to the European theatre and to our overall security.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Obviously we have an interest in maintaining a peaceful region in the Indo-Pacific, so I welcome this, but will the Prime Minister make something clear? He has described the agreement as being essentially about technological transfer, not about a major commitment of military assets. Can he guarantee that that is where we are going, and that no overstretch will be involved as a result of this agreement?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course, although I remind the House that the carrier strike group is out there expressing British influence—hard power and soft power—8,000 miles away, which is something that very few other countries can do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I note that our friends from New Zealand have already announced that the new submarines will be banned from their waters, but can I press my right hon. Friend on the opportunities to expand co-operation with India, which is a key strategic partner in the region?

The Prime Minister: I should stress to the House that what New Zealand has said is its historic position; it has been in that place for 30 years or more. What my hon. Friend says about India is absolutely right. Again, there is a great deal of community of interest and values, and we should pursue that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government recognise the importance of protecting and growing sovereign and allied strategic capability, especially given their recent attempt to hand over domestic nuclear power capability to the Chinese. During the passage of the National Security and Investment Bill and the Telecoms (Security) Bill, Labour called for just such partnerships with countries that share our values to develop key technologies such as 6G. Can the Prime Minister set out how he plans to develop further partnerships, and whether European countries might be included?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we will continue to pursue that type of partnership with every other country where we think that it can be done without any threat to our critical national infrastructure. I think that is what the House would support.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Prime Minister's commitment to Welsh workers and that they will be eligible for these opportunities, because workers in Pontypridd have already lost their jobs at BA in Llantrisant and GE in Nantgarw. I urge

the Prime Minister to meet the leaders of the devolved nations, because he clearly needs a constitutional lesson. Wales is not a principality; it is a country—a country that has been forgotten by this Westminster Government. Will he commit to meeting them to look at contract opportunities for Welsh workers?

The Prime Minister: There will be jobs and growth across the whole of the UK as a result of this partnership, but above all as a result of the policies that this Government have been pursuing, which are leading to higher wages and higher skills—a policy that I am afraid the Labour party continually opposes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. He will know that Northern Ireland plays an integral part in the procurement and manufacture of defence products; we have the highest technical and scientific manufacturers. We wish to be part of this move, and I know the Prime Minister wishes Northern Ireland to be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, better together, but we need to be assured. Will he tell us today in the Chamber that Northern Ireland will play its part?

The Prime Minister: Of course Northern Ireland will play its part, not least in the shipbuilding strategy that will follow after the spending review. I should have made more of that. I am delighted to say that Harland and Wolff has, as I understand it, just taken on another 1,000 apprentices for the first time in a very long time to get ready for exactly that strategy.

Business of the House

11.17 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing Monday 20 September include:

MONDAY 20 SEPTEMBER—Consideration of a Business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill, followed by a motion to approve an instruction relating to the Elections Bill.

TUESDAY 21 SEPTEMBER—Opposition day (6th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Compensation (London Capital & Finance Plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Bill, followed by Second Reading of the Subsidy Control Bill, followed by a motion to appoint an external member of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body.

THURSDAY 23 SEPTEMBER—General debate on baby loss awareness week, followed by a motion on human rights in Kashmir. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

At the conclusion of business on Thursday 23 September, the House will rise for the conference recess and return on Monday 18 October.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 October will include:

MONDAY 18 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Judicial Review and Courts Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I am glad to see him still in his place. There were rumours that it might have been the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) opposite me. He has been told to “shut up and go away,” and I am therefore relieved that I do not have to spend time today explaining that I am the Member for Bristol West and not the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). Perhaps I will not throw away my flashcards just yet; you never know.

This week inflation has leaped to 3.2%, the highest jump since records began in 1997. This comes in the same week as the Government rammed through their Tory tax rise, hitting hard-working families. Yesterday, they did not even bother to turn up to vote on their cruel and callous cut to universal credit, the biggest ever overnight cut to social security.

The Prime Minister seems to have deliberately used his reshuffle to distract from the fact that he will be taking more than £1,000 from 6 million households. Meanwhile, his sacked Ministers take home nearly £20,000 in severance pay. Nearly half of all people receiving universal credit are in work. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions thinks that people should just work harder to make up the difference, but from April the Government will be taking away more than 75p of every £1 that a full-time worker on universal credit earns.

One in six families cannot make ends meet already, and now key workers are facing a pay freeze, a personal allowance freeze, rising council tax and an unfair national

[Thangam Debbonaire]

insurance rise, and the price of bread and all the basics is going up. This Tory tax rise was not a plan last week to tackle social care or the NHS waiting list, and it is still not a plan this week. Working people know the Government are not on their side. They know the Government prioritise their friends over the British people. Could the Leader of the House please explain why the Government are pressing ahead with this?

Then there is the astronomical cost of childcare hitting working families. That is yet another broken promise from this Government, failing parents and children. A staggering third of all parents pay more for childcare than for their rent or mortgage. Just to let the Government know, as they often seem completely ignorant of the actual cost of living, a full-time childcare place costs £14,000 a year. The Government say they want to help people into work, but even before the pandemic nearly 1 million mothers wanted to work but could not afford to do so.

It is not just parents being squeezed but childminders, nursery workers and all the people working in childcare, 93% of whom are women. They are suffering on poverty pay after years of real-terms pay cuts under successive Tory Governments. The average wage in this sector is £7.42 an hour and, shamefully, one in 10 staff earns less than £5 an hour. The Government are not on the side of parents, they are not on the side of childcare workers and now they want to take even more money from them. This makes no sense educationally, socially or economically. We debated a petition on this crucial issue on Monday, but will the Leader of the House make Government time available for a full debate on the childcare sector?

The pandemic is still raging, and bereaved families are still waiting for a public inquiry so that lessons can be learned now to help now. I ask the Leader of the House again, when will the Government's covid inquiry start?

The hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) has had his Conservative party membership suspended, although for only 12 weeks. I wonder if this says something about the seriousness, or lack thereof, with which some people treat sexual harassment. Will the Leader of the House finally find time for this House to debate Labour's motion, which we first tabled back in July, to close the recall loophole and to allow the people of Delyn to decide for themselves whether that Member should continue to represent them?

Finally, last week I took a tour of the basement and some of the most damaged parts of the Palace. I understand that the Leader of the House also recently took the tour so, like me, he must have seen the high-voltage electricity lines next to the gas pipes and the wiring that goes nobody knows where. Has he now revised his previous view that restoration and renewal of this place is just

“a little bit of banging and noise”?—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2021; Vol. 690, c. 1018.]

Does he now agree that we must press ahead with a full decant, which we have voted for, so that we can get on with protecting this magnificent symbol of British democracy that we are so proud of, not for us but for the British people we serve?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the hon. Lady was ungallant in relation to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), who has been a very hard-working and diligent public servant over many years. It is inelegant not to thank people after a reshuffle for the service they have provided and to gloat instead; I am rather surprised at the hon. Lady behaving in that way.

The hon. Lady made some important points about inflation, but she will of course remember that monetary policy is run independently by the Bank of England, as a result of a decision taken by Gordon Brown when he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1997. The main control of inflation therefore rests with an independent body, but Her Majesty's Government are doing their side of the bargain, although opposed by the Opposition, in ensuring that fiscal policy is responsible.

The two causes of inflation are widely believed to be the connection between monetary policy and fiscal policy. One of them is independently determined, but Her Majesty's Government have taken steps to shore up the finances of this country. That must be correct, and the sensible and right thing to do, and universal credit is part of that; £9 billion of additional support has been provided to people on UC during the pandemic as exceptional support because of the circumstances that arose during the pandemic. As the pandemic is ending and as the furlough scheme is ending, it is right that we return to normal. What my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions so rightly pointed out was that those on UC who have children or limited capability to work, for example, through a disability, are able to earn up to £293 per month before the taper rate kicks in, rising to £515 for those who do not receive housing support. What she said is absolutely right and reasonable.

The hon. Lady then moved on to the issue of children in poverty, so I can point out to her that since 2010, a period of majority Conservative government, 100,000 fewer children are living in absolute poverty. That is one of the successes of which those on this side of the House are rightly proud. There is up to £2,000 per year per child of tax-free childcare, which was introduced by the Conservatives. We have given her an Opposition day next week if she wants a debate on that. She may have been listening when I read that out, but in case she was not, let me read it out again: the subject is to be announced. Perhaps she is hinting at what the subject may be, but it seems to me that when time is provided for an Opposition day and the hon. Lady raises pressing issues, one can fit a round peg in a round hole, and she can answer her own question.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that the covid inquiry will begin before the end of this parliamentary Session. This Session will run, as usual—since the reforms in 2010—until around May, so the date has already been set out.

The right hon. Lady—the hon. Lady; I am sorry to have promoted her inadvertently, though no doubt the Privy Council for her is merely a matter of time—raised the question of suspension from this House and recall. The Government did bring forward a motion, one that was agreed by the Commission and supported by the chairman of the independent expert panel, and it was a pity that the hon. Lady blocked it. If she decides not to block it, it will be back on the Order Paper straightaway. [Interruption.] She chunters, “Amended it.” She is an

experienced parliamentarian and knows full well that amendments block when there is not time set aside for debate: so she blocked it.

As regards restoration and renewal, the hon. Lady's oratory on my views was fundamentally inaccurate. It is well recognised that work needs to be carried out and that we need to re-plumb and re-wire. We have already done a huge amount of work ensuring that the fire safety systems are improved, and we had a successful fire safety test earlier this week to ensure that the structure of the building and the lives within the building are safe. The work is planned and I am supporting it enthusiastically.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab) Asbestos.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a very helpful heckle. The right hon. Gentleman is a great expert on this issue and asbestos is one of the key parts of it.

What I have always been opposed to is spending very large amounts of taxpayers' money. We had forecasts of £10 billion to £20 billion for trying to turn this place into Disneyland. That I am opposed to; that I will continue to be opposed to. We want rewiring, replumbing and the removal of asbestos, but we do not want Disneyland.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his reappointment. However, we have seen some Cabinet changes. One of the most important, for me, is the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Could we now have an early debate on the proposed planning Bill so that we can have our input, rather than having a Bill thrust upon us without pre-legislative scrutiny? That would allow Members across the House to give their views to the new Secretary of State.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's kind words. On the point he makes, I think he proves that that actually already happens, because nobody would ever dare stop him expressing his views on planning reform to everybody in the Government. The Government are, of course, listening to what people have to say, but the process that has been followed is the proper constitutional one. There has been a White Paper, which is a discussion document setting out the intentions of policy, to and about which there have been many responses and thoughts. That will lead to a Bill that will go through the House in the normal process. I think that I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Bill will be thoroughly discussed and that his views will be extremely welcome, particularly to my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove).

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What happened to the right hon. Gentleman yesterday? All afternoon, the nation was at one: "What about the Mogg? Surely a big office of state awaits—a promotion is more than due." Well, maybe he should not have said "No more taxes" in the week that his Prime Minister hiked them through the roof. Anyway, we are glad that he is back with us, doing what he does best: announcing the business of the week.

This is now getting beyond a joke. The scenes from a packed Prime Minister's questions yesterday were simply a disgrace, with barely a face mask on a Tory mush. The House staff are now getting increasingly nervous and

anxious about what they are observing, and it seems as if the Tories have absolutely no regard whatever for the safety of their colleagues and the staff who are here to support and help us.

The Government's own advice states:

"Wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed settings where you come into contact with people you do not normally meet."

Now, I do not normally meet any of you lot—I am quite happy with that situation; I have no desire to meet you on a regular basis—and yesterday at PMQs this place must have been about the most crowded enclosed space in the whole UK. The Health Secretary even excused the Tory "no face mask" policy, suggesting that people cannot catch covid from friends. Is this House not sending the worst possible message to the country and contributing to all sorts of confusion? Will the Leader of the House now be a leader? For goodness' sake, put a face mask on!

We know that the Leader of the House likes his obscure historical battle references—he will probably quote one to me again, as if I am in any way interested in what he has to say—but there is a battle for Scotland going on just now and it is being fought with ideas, with democracy at its core and with a vision for what a nation can be, free from this place. So he can stuff his battles of Flodden and Falkirk where his top hat don't shine, because this battle of Scotland will be won by its people.

Mr Rees-Mogg: In the cheerfulness and bonhomie that the hon. Gentleman brings to this House, he is competing with Countess Mona Lott herself. If that is the battle for ideas, they are ideas of gloom, doom and lugubriousness that I think are not particularly welcome in this House.

As regards face masks, the policy is extremely straightforward: face coverings are not mandatory for Members in the House of Commons Chamber, voting Lobbies, the Members' Lobby and Westminster Hall. The advice of Her Majesty's Government on face coverings is that they are not required by law in the workplace. The Government removed the legal requirement to wear face coverings in public places in indoor spaces. If someone is in a crowded indoor space where they come into contact with people they do not normally meet, wearing a face covering can help to reduce the spread of covid.

Is it not interesting that the hon. Gentleman—and perhaps this applies to the nationalists generally—does not normally meet other MPs? Perhaps that is because they are not very assiduous in their attendance in the House of Commons, but Members on my side of the House, who are rigorous and regular attendants, meet one another regularly and therefore are completely in accordance with the guidance of Her Majesty's Government. Is it not a pity that some people do not like to come to Parliament? If they came a bit more, worked a bit harder and put their elbow to the grindstone, or wherever one puts one's elbow—if they put their elbow to the wheel—they might not need to wear face coverings either, because they would meet Members of Parliament more regularly.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): First, in Hitchin and Harpenden, we are fortunate to benefit from beautiful countryside, including parts of the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty. Will the Leader of

[*Bim Afolami*]

the House confirm what mechanisms are in place to enable me to secure the extension of the area of outstanding natural beauty towards Hitchin?

Secondly, there are many good house builders in this country, but there are some poor ones. Will the Leader of the House consider providing time for a debate on how to deal with poor house builders—such as Crest Nicholson, which is badly mistreating leaseholders at Allwoods Place in Hitchin in my constituency—that mistreat leaseholders?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to say that legislation is coming forward that will deal with the issue of poor house builders and set up an ombudsman who will have the ability to ensure that house builders are held to account. People have the right to expect that a new build house is built to a proper standard. As constituency MPs, we have all dealt with house builders that have let constituents down and been relatively unaccountable and unhelpful in their approach to residents with genuine complaints.

As regards the natural beauty of my hon. Friend's constituency, part of North East Somerset is in an area of outstanding natural beauty; I do not really mind about these bureaucratic definitions because the truth is that the whole of North East Somerset is stunningly beautiful. It is one of the most beautiful parts of not only our great country but anywhere in the world. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is sitting in her usual place, and I include Bath in that description—the whole of Bath and North East Somerset. We can view our areas as being of the greatest natural beauty without necessarily having a bureaucrat telling us so.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and particularly for the Backbench Business on Thursday when, as Members will have noted from the business statement, there will be a debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week. Of course, Baby Loss Awareness Week actually takes place during the conference recess, so we cannot have it in the week when it should be heard. With that in mind, if Members throughout the House intend to make an application for a debate on a specific date or commemorative event, will they please make their applications to the Backbench Business Committee as early as possible? We cannot always guarantee that debates will occur exactly when Members want, as we depend on the Executive to allow us the time and on the parliamentary calendar, but the sooner we know, the sooner we can put the wheels in motion to facilitate Members' requests.

I have dozens, if not hundreds, of constituents who are refugees and asylum seekers in a state of limbo, if not purgatory, plaintively waiting in vain for the Home Office to determine their status. May we have a debate in Government time on the Home Office's handling of such cases and how refugees and asylum seekers are left in this awful state, not knowing their future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the business next week. He asked for that debate last week and I am glad we have been able to facilitate it. His point about early application is one well made, and I hope that Members were listening.

As regards a debate in Government time in relation to questions on asylum and Afghanistan, there are Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on Tuesday 26 September—actually, I think that is a misprint and it should be October. There will be opportunities to raise those issues with Ministers in the normal way, but I suggest it would also be suitable for the hon. Gentleman's Committee to provide time.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Parents who have prematurely born children who require time in neonatal intensive care can go through a whole range of different emotions, from worry to pride to guilt, and they require all different types of support, from practical to financial and emotional as well. Can we have a debate in Government time about what support the Government provide to parents with children in neonatal intensive care?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I thank my hon. Friend for his public service as a Minister of the Crown, which he carried out with great distinction and for which his constituents and the country can be very grateful?

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for coming straight to this House to raise an important issue for his own constituents and for others. I know that he has had personal experience of how difficult it can be for parents in this situation. It is important to make it clear what support is available and what can be done. I will make sure that his comments are passed on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, but I also suggest that a Westminster Hall debate would be a very good starting point on this crucial subject.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My young constituent Sara Walbyoff from Calidcot lives with a rare form of spina bifida and this week has been meeting with Olympians and Paralympians at Great Ormond Street Hospital to talk about her experience of living with the condition. Sara's family supports the campaign of Shine, the spina bifida charity, to fortify flour products with folic acid, which the Government have been consulting on now for two years. So please can the Government announce that they will do it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this important issue and I wish Sara well. The campaign is an important one. I will pass on the hon. Lady's comments to the Health Secretary. The question of compulsory medication is always a difficult and sensitive one, so it is not an issue that is easy to answer straightforwardly.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Britain's greatest king is spinning in his grave at the moment due to the appalling abuse of democracy when the unitary announcement came. It has been an absolute bombshell in Somerset, as my right hon. Friend knows. Paul Rowsell, the civil servant, has now agreed that we will get only about 80 councillors. Apparently, part of the reason, according to people, is that the leader of the council wishes to be paid the same as a Member of Parliament and he wants the councillors to be paid between £55,000 and £60,000 a year. Can we please have a debate in this place on local government? I know that there are changes in the Cabinet. It is a good time to do that and it is right that we should do so.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We do have regular debates on local authorities and matters relating to them. I am a great advocate of economy within the public service and of ensuring that the expenses paid to councillors are reasonable and proportionate. Essentially, it is a voluntary job where people should not be out of pocket, rather than a professional career where people should be getting the sort of salaries that they might get if they were employed by the state, rather than having put themselves forward.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that our hospitality industry has suffered primarily as a result of the pandemic, so will he join me in congratulating Janet's Authentic Northern Chinese Kitchen, based in Pontypridd market, on its recent success at the British Street Food Awards? Will he commit to a debate in Government time to support our fantastic hospitality industry throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I heartily congratulate Janet in Pontypridd market on winning the award. I might even volunteer to come and visit her. I recently had the great pleasure of having one of the vanilla slices made by Margaret in Stoke-on-Trent, who was also mentioned in this House. I may be able to go round the whole country visiting the sellers of delicious food. Absolutely, the hospitality industry has suffered. It is getting back on its feet. People are working stunningly hard, and it is really encouraging to hear of the entrepreneurial attitude being taken by the hon. Lady's own constituents.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): While trying to mask my disappointment at not being made Minister with responsibility for granting city status to Southend, but being put in charge of paperclips instead, may I ask my right hon. Friend to find time for a debate on discretionary increases in pensions for Ford employees pre-1997? These women and men gave a great deal of their time to the company and they deserve better treatment than they seem to be afforded at the moment.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the whole country shares my hon. Friend's disappointment that he has not been put in charge of making Southend a city; his campaign for that is boundless in its energy.

Let me turn to my hon. Friend's actual question. This is a difficult matter, because whether or not discretionary increases are applied to pre-1997 pensions is a matter for the scheme, the sponsoring employer and the scheme members, as they are not required by law and they potentially have a large impact on the financing of the scheme. It would not therefore be right for a Minister to intervene in the running of an individual pension scheme, as the Government cannot force pension scheme trustees or sponsoring companies to exercise their discretion in a particular way. Keeping pensions affordable is very important and increases do, as I say, have a long-term consequence and very high costs. It is therefore right that it is left to the sponsors to see what they can afford.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): In a written parliamentary question to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 3 September, I asked whether she would meet me to discuss the impact of the cruel cuts to universal credit on the people of Newport West. The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions,

the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), replied to me on 8 September, but ignored my request. On Monday in Work and Pensions oral questions, I again asked whether the Secretary of State would meet me, and again I was ignored. Will the Leader of the House advise me how best I can go about getting a meeting with a Minister, or is it now the policy of the Government to ignore Members of this House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would be very concerned if anyone thought that it were the policy of the Government to ignore Members. We are held to account by Members and, in the normal course of events, Ministers do make themselves available for meetings when they are specifically requested by individual MPs or, indeed, often by individual groups of MPs. I will therefore pass on the request to the Secretary of State and see what can be done. If the worst comes to the worst, the hon. Lady can come to see me.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Members across the House will be familiar with road safety issues around school entrances, which cause considerable risk to children going to and from school. A recent incident in North East Lincolnshire has brought this subject to the headlines again. Could we have a debate in which we can explore whether councils have sufficient powers to deal with these road safety issues?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend, as always, raises an issue that is important not only in his constituency, but in many of our constituencies. Everybody wants to see improved road safety around schools. I have always thought that 20 mph limits that apply around schools at opening and closing times are much more effective for road safety than blanket 20 mph signs, which are not always taken as seriously by motorists as they ought to be. When such limits serve the specific purpose of applying near a school at specific times of days, I think they are much better respected.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate my constituency neighbour on his reappointment as Leader of the House; I would not want to miss our robust exchanges on a Thursday morning.

When I asked the Prime Minister yesterday whether he believed that burning fossil fuels would not be a source of energy in the future, he said yes. However, he then went on to talk only about coal. The Leader of the House will know that oil and natural gas need to be phased out, but there is no plan from the Government on the detail of how this will be done. For example, when will the national grid cease to use natural gas? Can we have a debate on this vital subject so that Parliament can fully scrutinise the Government's plans? The climate emergency is not going to wait. Time is running out.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her kind words. I, too, enjoy our exchanges very much.

Since 1990, we have driven down emissions by 44%—the fastest reduction in a G7 country—and grown the economy by 78%. This is always going to be the key: we have to ensure that there is economic growth, but that it is cleaner growth. Therefore, things have to be done in a phased and affordable way. As the hon. Lady will know, gas prices have been going up, which is a burden on households and hard-pressed constituents in all of our

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

constituencies. It is therefore important to get a balance. Since 1990, we have got the balance about right and we still have the economic growth, and it is that economic growth that will allow us to pay to green the economy.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The fire at the Bilsdale mast has left thousands people across Harrogate, and more broadly across North Yorkshire and beyond, without a TV and radio signal for some weeks now. The industry is working to recover services and it has made progress this week. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is no longer in post, has been very helpful with this matter. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport updates the House on progress, perhaps via a written ministerial statement? The people who are most seriously affected by the lack of TV and radio are the more vulnerable and elderly, so I want services to be restored as quickly as possible.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it will be the elderly who are less likely to have satellite channels and other means of accessing television entertainment, and they will therefore be the ones who most miss having the ordinary television signal that is not coming because of the damage done to the transmitter. I am grateful for his kind comments about our right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is a very distinguished Member of this House and a very effective individual, and I will pass on his concerns to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I am looking for some advice from the Leader of the House. A number of Members have been diligently submitting questions for departmental answer in oral questions sessions, only to find that as a result of yesterday's reshuffle a number of questions have now been deemed out of scope. What advice can he give to Members who have so rightly put questions in, only to suddenly find that it is now not possible to ask them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Members have a right to hold the Government to account and to ask written questions and oral questions. I would suggest that hon. Members who find that this is happening resubmit the questions. The Table Office is always extremely helpful in ensuring that questions go to the right Department. But Departments, as a rule, should not simply say that a question is out of scope; they should pass it on to the Department that has the responsibility for answering it. If there are specific problems with this, I would be grateful if they were taken up directly with my office and with the Procedure Committee.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): My constituent's son Dylan has an incurable and progressive disease that causes his blood to attack his kidneys. To counter this, every week Dylan travels with his mum Rachel to London for a particular type of dialysis treatment called Liposorber. Yet Dylan's mother has told me that complications relating to medical imports from Germany have meant that the hospital can no longer import the amount of fluid that is needed to conduct Liposorber. The issue can be resolved if the Medicines and Healthcare

products Regulatory Agency nominates a UK company to handle Liposorber so that it does not need to be imported from Germany, yet the agency has yet to respond to my office on whether it will look at this case and nominate a UK-based company. Will the Leader of the House therefore raise this issue with Health Ministers so that Dylan can continue to have access to this life-saving treatment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this question. I am very sorry to hear about Dylan and his incurable condition, and I feel very greatly for him and his family. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue of this kind on the Floor of this House, as that that sometimes helps to force bureaucracies to work faster than they otherwise might be willing to do. I will therefore take this up with the relevant Ministers immediately after this session of business questions.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Over the summer I conducted a poll of my constituents about crime and antisocial behaviour, and the number of responses I received to that survey was the largest I have ever had in 16 years as an MP. Ninety-five per cent. of people who responded said they had been subject to antisocial behaviour, and 90% said things had got worse over the past few years. This is affecting so many people. Might the Leader of the House arrange for the House to have a debate to look at issues around policing, treatment services for people with drug and alcohol problems, and the siting of supported housing in communities, because all these factors play a part in why we have seen this spike in antisocial behaviour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are doing a great deal to tackle crime. The right hon. Lady will be aware that we are recruiting 20,000 additional police officers, and 9,800 additional officers have been recruited as of June 2021. A lot is being done to tackle violent crime as well: £105.5 million has been spent to develop 18 violence reduction units and £136.5 million to support and enhance police response. It is a question of dealing with this with the extra police resources. I have noted in my own constituency that when antisocial behaviour arises, if there is a targeted police response it is very effective in dealing with it. So I would urge her, in the first instance, to speak to her local chief constable to see what can be done to focus the police resources in the right way, because certainly Avon and Somerset has been very successful at dealing with these problems at an early stage.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It was a pleasure at the beginning of this month to welcome my right hon. Friend and take him on a tour of Stoke-on-Trent's rich history and heritage, from the pits of Chatterley Whitfield to the pots of Middleport Pottery, where we enjoyed learning what a saggar maker's bottom knocker does. But Stoke-on-Trent's history does not end there. Yesterday was Battle of Britain Day, which is important to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, because we remember the man who invented the Spitfire, Reginald J. Mitchell, a Butt Lane lad. Yesterday, Stoke-on-Trent City Council unveiled a restored Spitfire in the new designer glass gallery of the Potteries Museum, which was opened by veteran

Norman Lewis, who is 102 years old. Will my right hon. Friend use this opportunity to talk about how fantastic the history of Stoke-on-Trent is from his personal experience? Can we make time to have an opportunity to celebrate the history and heritage of our entire United Kingdom?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I had an absolutely fantastic visit to Stoke-on-Trent, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we were shown a saggar maker's bottom knocker's work, which is essential to the manufacture of pottery. It was very impressive to see that history. I also agree that the development of the Spitfire is one of the most crucial events in our modern history, ensuring that the battle of Britain went the right way. Celebrating the glories of our nation is something that I think we can try to shoehorn into every comment we ever make in this House. I will not promise him a specific debate, but an Adjournment debate on the virtues of Stoke-on-Trent would be time very well spent.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We have had the priority lane, which is a list of companies bidding for billions of pounds-worth of covid contracts. We know not how they get on that list, although being a Tory donor or a friend of a Minister seems to assist. I have raised previously with the Leader of the House the matter of the Health Minister, Lord Bethell, who had 27 meetings in one week with companies wanting to bid for more than a billion pounds-worth of contracts, but sadly his office failed to record those meetings in his diary for that week. He seems a very unlucky chap, because he has conducted a negotiation for an £87 million contract over his personal mobile phone. When asked to produce it, he said he had lost it, then he said it was broken, and now he has said he has given it to one of his family members. This behaviour by Ministers is a disgrace, so can we have a statement in the House on the ministerial code as we go through this reshuffle, so that we can ask questions from the Opposition Benches of the Government and ensure that people behave better in future and abide by that code?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a particularly silly line of questioning. In the midst of a pandemic, it was fundamental that the Government acted with speed. Personal protective equipment was needed, vaccines were needed and we thought ventilators were needed. The hon. Gentleman would have sat on his hands and thought that we must go through some bureaucratic procedure and tick some boxes. Perhaps we should have gone off to the European Union and asked for its permission. This is typical of the socialist. The socialist always puts the process over the result. What my noble Friend Lord Bethell did was ensure results and save lives. I think these cheap accusations degrade Parliament.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): This House has not yet been given the opportunity to debate the UK Government's disability strategy. I have been talking to disability groups, and they have said the strategy is underwhelming and falls well short of what was expected. Given that the UK Government think it a revolutionary strategy, can we have a debate in Government time to put forward the views of people with disabilities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The disability strategy was published in July, as the Government had promised to do. It is very important in showing how seriously the Government

take matters of disability and how they are being considered across all that the Government do. Obviously the Backbench Business Committee will have time available, and I think if the hon. Lady wishes to have a specific debate on the strategy, that would be a very good place to go, but the Government are very proud of the disability strategy and the continuing work we are doing to help disabled people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind the shortage of hauliers—a 30% shortfall in Northern Ireland—will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on a special method to accelerate massively the turnaround on training and testing applications for new heavy goods vehicle drivers, and on the Chancellor offering incentives to attract more drivers for the long haul?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is saying what the Government are doing. A number of steps have been taken to speed up tests and to increase by 50% the amount of testing that there was pre-covid. Car drivers will no longer need to take another test to tow a trailer or caravan—those of us who passed our test before 1997 can tow a caravan but those who did afterwards had to take a special test; that is going. Tests will be made shorter by removing the reversing exercise element and, for vehicles with trailers, the uncoupling and recoupling exercise can be tested separately by a third party. We will also make it quicker to get a licence to drive an articulated vehicle—without first having to get a licence for a smaller vehicle—making about 20,000 HGV driving tests available every year. The Government are well aware of the problem and steps are being taken.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Our planet is in crisis, COP26 commences in just 46 days, and yet the Climate Change Committee has highlighted how far we are from not just our sixth but our fifth carbon budget. I have raised many times in the House the opportunity that BioYorkshire will bring to cut our carbon emissions as well as create 4,000 jobs, upskill 25,000 people and create new businesses. The Government have committed to that but have not provided funding. Can we have a debate about BioYorkshire and the opportunity it provides not only for our planet but to produce £5 billion in revenue for the Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I point out what I said earlier: we have been able to get the economy to grow and emissions down. That is at the heart of what is being done. COP26 is a matter of building out from the G7 presidency, using international moments to encourage other countries to join in the efforts that we have been making. The Government are doing well in this regard, and COP26 will be an opportunity to encourage others in the same direction. I am encouraged that the hon. Lady is looking for developments and forms of investment, because that is the way in which we manage the balancing act of cutting emissions and growing the economy.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My constituents living in Austen Apartments face bills for tens of thousands of pounds to remove dangerous cladding and pay for a waking watch. The building is less than 18 metres high, so they do not qualify for the building safety fund, and we still do not know the details of the loan scheme. Will it apply to all buildings

[Ellie Reeves]

of less than 18 metres? Will it cover the waking watch? Will it cover remedial work beyond cladding? My constituents are unsurprisingly anxious. Please can we urgently have a statement from the new Housing Secretary setting out exactly what he will do to fix this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I reiterate what the Government are doing. For lower-risk buildings that are up to 59 feet high, we are bringing in a new finance scheme to pay for remediation with a cap of £50 on monthly payments. That is the policy, and a scheme will be introduced to ensure that the policy is operational. On higher buildings, £5.1 billion has already been spent to fund the cost of remediating unsafe cladding for leaseholders, so the taxpayer's contribution has already been significant. I also remind the hon. Lady of what the Prime Minister said yesterday: not all cladding is dangerous. It is therefore important that we focus on what is dangerous rather than all cladding.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The post office in Treharris in my constituency has been closed for 2.5 years, depriving the local community of a much-needed service. There is interest from a number of people who would like to take over the business, but I understand that all applications are currently on hold and there is no idea when they will be looked at. Can we have a debate or a statement from the Government on what the Post Office will do to support our communities as they adjust to a post-covid world?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, because I was unaware that post office reopenings were on hold. The post office network is recognised to be extremely important, and it is encouraging to report that 99% of the UK population are within three miles of their nearest post office branch. At the 2020 spending review, the Government announced that they would commit £227 million of taxpayers' money to the Post Office in 2021-22. There is that Government commitment, but, if the Post Office is not making decisions, I will take up his point with it after this session.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Two young children in Rutherglen in my constituency were hospitalised recently after finding and eating a packet of sweets laced with strong psychoactive cannabis. The sweets had been packaged to look like the popular American kids' sweets Nerds. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this, and will he schedule a debate in Government time on the dangers of these drug-laced sweets being packaged misleadingly and made attractive to children?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady brings to the attention of the House something of great importance. It is really outrageous behaviour by drug people, who need to have the full force of the law bear down upon them. To try to trick children into eating cannabis sweets seems to me despicable, and I am glad the hon. Lady has brought it to wider attention. I would encourage the police to act forcefully with anybody who is behaving in this way.

Owen Thompson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Following on from my question to the Leader of the House, I seek your guidance on, and wonder if

you have been made aware of, changes to ministerial responsibilities. This morning, the amazing team at the Table Office informed me that the Cabinet Office has shifted questions related to the Union, elections and levelling up to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which significantly impacts a number of Members in trying to submit questions by the deadline. The shift was blamed on the reshuffle, but I am at a loss to understand why the Cabinet Office is ill prepared to deal with questions on the Elections Bill, which started in July, but was fine with responding to questions about business. May I seek your guidance on how I can ask for a Minister to come to the House to clarify the Cabinet Office's ministerial responsibilities?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. It is up to the Government rather than the Chair to determine ministerial responsibilities, thank goodness. However, it is extremely important that the House is made aware of those responsibilities in a timely manner, not least so that right hon. and hon. Members may table questions to the appropriate Departments. Ministers will have heard what I have said, and I hope they will very soon set out the new departmental responsibilities following the ongoing reshuffle. In any event, given that Members have had to table questions for the Cabinet Office by the deadline of 12.30 pm today with a lack of clarity about new responsibilities, I hope that the Government will do all they can to answer those questions next week wherever possible, rather than just seek to transfer them.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on a very serious matter. On Tuesday, the Health Secretary, in a response to my question about the cancellation of the vaccine contract with Valneva in my constituency, stated:

"There are commercial reasons why we have cancelled the contract, but I can tell her that it was also clear to us that the vaccine in question that the company was developing would not get approval by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency here in the UK".—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 820.]

However, yesterday, Adam Finn, chief investigator of Valneva's phase 3 trial, said:

"The Valneva COVID19 vaccine research programme towards MHRA authorisation is on track and moving forwards. The key results from phase 3 expected early Q4 and no one...has yet seen them. Study subjects and investigators should be reassured."

Today, Clive Dix, the former chair of the UK Government's vaccine taskforce has said:

"Since when did a politician assume the role of the independent regulator"—

I could not agree more—

"The phase 3 data is not yet available and the MHRA haven't carried out their assessment. In my opinion Sajid Javid should resign for such a statement."

Given this revelation, what can I do to get the Health Secretary to set the record straight and retract his misleading comments, which are causing serious confusion and worry to those taking part in the trial, as well as huge commercial damage to Valneva and, as others have said, undermining the independence of the regulator? I seek your guidance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice in advance of what she was going to raise in it, which is clearly a very serious matter for a lot of people involved. I also know that she has given notice of the point of order to the Secretary of State for Health. The contents of an answer to questions are not, as she knows, a matter for the Chair, but she has put her points on the record. I note that the Government's own ministerial code requires Ministers to correct any inadvertent errors at the earliest opportunity, and I hope that that will be followed. We will leave it there for now.

Brexit: Opportunities

12.9 pm

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement, which is also being made in the other place, on the opportunities the country has now that we have left the European Union.

While we were a member of the EU some of the most difficult issues that Governments of both main parties faced were to do with regulations, such as services directives, REACH—the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—reforms of agricultural policy, and very many pieces of financial services legislation. Often such laws reflected unsatisfactory compromises with the other EU members. We knew that if we did not rescue something from the legislative sausage machine, as it were, we would be voted down and get nothing. These laws were designed to lock every country, no matter its strengths or weaknesses, into the same uniform structures, and they were often overly detailed and prescriptive. Moreover, the results usually either had direct legal effect in the United Kingdom or were passed into our law through secondary legislation; either way, that involves very limited genuine democratic scrutiny. This Government were elected to get Brexit done and to change this situation, and that is exactly what we will do.

Much has already been changed of course but, given the extent of EU influence over nearly half a century, the task is a mammoth one. To begin it, we asked my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) to lead a team to examine our existing laws and future opportunities. They reported back earlier this year and since then my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and my noble Friend Lord Frost have been considering that taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform—TIGRR—report in some depth. Lord Frost is today writing to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green with our formal response to his report and, more importantly, our plans to act on the basis of his report. Lord Frost is sharing the Government's formal response with Committee Chairs and will deposit it in the Libraries of both Houses; it will also be available shortly on gov.uk. I will now highlight some of the most important elements of our plans.

First, we will conduct a review of so-called retained EU law; by this, I mean the many pieces of legislation that we took on to our own statute book through the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. We must now revisit this huge but anomalous category of law, and we have two purposes in mind. First, we intend to remove the special status of retained EU law so that it is no longer a distinct category of UK domestic law but is normalised within our law with a clear legislative status. Unless we do that, we risk giving undue precedence to laws derived from EU legislation over laws made properly by this Parliament. The review also involves ensuring that all courts in this country have the full ability to depart from EU case law according to the normal rules. In so doing, we will continue restoring this sovereign Parliament and our courts to their proper constitutional positions, and indeed finalise that process.

Our second goal is to review comprehensively the substantive content of retained EU law. Some of that is already under way—for example, our plans to reform

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inherited procurement rules and the plan announced last autumn by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to review much financial services legislation. But we will make this a comprehensive exercise, and I want to make it clear that our intention is eventually to amend, replace or repeal all retained EU law that is not right for the UK. That is a legislative problem, and accordingly the solution is also likely to be legislative. We will consider all the options for taking this forward, and in particular look at developing a tailored mechanism for accelerating the repeal or amendment of retained EU law in a way that reflects the fact that laws agreed elsewhere have intrinsically less democratic legitimacy than laws initiated by the Government of this country.

We also intend to begin a new series of reforms of the legislation we have inherited on EU exit, in many cases as recommended by the TIGRR report. Let me give some examples. We intend to create a pro-growth trusted data rights regime that is more proportionate and less burdensome than the EU's GDPR—general data protection regulation—and the previous Culture Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmer (Oliver Dowden), on 10 September announced a consultation that is the first stage in putting new rules in place.

We intend to review the inherited approach to genetically modified organisms—GMOs—which is too restrictive and not based on sound science. My right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary will also shortly set out plans to reform the regulation of gene-edited organisms. We will use the provisions of the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021 to overhaul our clinical trial frameworks, which are based on outdated EU legislation, giving a major boost to the UK's world-class research and development sector and getting patients access to new life-saving medicines more quickly. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency is already reforming the medical devices regulations to create a world-leading regime in this area.

We will also unleash Britain's potential as a world leader in the future of transport. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will next week set out ambitious plans including modernising outdated EU vehicle standards and unlocking the full range of new transport technologies. We also intend to repeal the EU's court services regulations, a good example of a regulation that was geared heavily towards EU interests and frankly never worked for the UK. We will drive forward our work on artificial intelligence, where the UK is already at the forefront of driving global progress. We will shortly publish the UK's first national AI strategy, setting out our plans to supercharge the UK's AI ecosystem and set standards which will be world leading.

As recommended by TIGRR and the Penrose review and promised in the current consultation on reforming the better regulation framework, we will put in place much more rigorous tests within Government before taking the decision to regulate. Now that we have control over all our laws, not just a subset of them, we will consider the reintroduction of a one in, two out system, which has been shown internationally to make a significant difference.

Finally, Brexit was about once again giving everyone in this country a say in how it is run, and that is true in this area, too; we aim to tap into everyone's ideas.

Accordingly, we will create a new standing commission under visible and energetic leadership to receive ideas from any British citizen on how to repeal or improve regulations. The commission's job will be to consider such ideas and make recommendations for change, but it will only be able to make recommendations to us in one way: in the direction of reducing or eliminating burdens. I hope in this way we will tap into the collective wisdom of the British people and begin to remove the dominance of the arbitrary rule of unknown origin over people's day-to-day lives.

Let me finish by being clear that this is just the beginning of our ambitious plans. I will return to this House regularly to update Members on our progress and, more importantly, to set out further intentions. Brexit was about taking back control: the ability to remove the distortions created by EU membership and to do things differently in ways that work better for this country and promote growth, productivity and prosperity. That is what we intend to do.

I recognise Brexit was not a choice originally supported by all in this country, or even by some in this House, but Brexit is now a fact. This country has now embarked upon a great voyage. We each have the opportunity to make this new journey a success—to make us more contented, more prosperous and more united—and I hope everyone will join us in achieving that. I commend this statement to the House.

12.19 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me begin by welcoming the Paymaster General to his new role. I thank him for advance sight of his statement. In fact, I imagine he had about as much advance sight of it as I did—11.40? However, I sympathise with him, not just for being thrown into this particular deep end, but for the title that was given to him for today's statement.

Before I go into that, let me say that the proposals that the Paymaster General has mentioned will demand careful consideration once we have been able to examine the detail. For example, he mentioned the recent Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport proposals for reform of the data regime. If they are anything to go by, every measure in that package will need to be carefully considered, not just on its own merits but for the implications for our trading relationship with Europe. There was also reference in the statement to GMOs, research and development, vehicle standards and artificial intelligence, and all kinds of other things may be hidden in the huge category of law that has yet to be reviewed. We will come back to this, I have no doubt.

Let me return to the title of the statement: "Brexit: Opportunities". That is the title, yet the country faces continuing shortages of staff and supplies, exacerbated by the Government's Brexit deal, while businesses across the country face mounting losses in trade with Europe directly caused by the Government's Brexit deal, and the people of Northern Ireland remain stuck in limbo as the Government refuse to implement the Brexit deal that they negotiated. Into all that, along comes the new Paymaster General to talk about all the wonderful opportunities that await us because of the marvellous Brexit deal, which is working so well at present. If he will excuse the unkind metaphor on the first day of his

new job, it is a bit like the Pudding Lane baker strolling around the great fire of London asking people running for their lives if they have any orders for Christmas.

On the issue of opportunities, I will happily have a debate with the Paymaster General, whenever he wants to have one, about how the Government are wasting the opportunities of Brexit when it comes to the lack of ambition and innovation in both the roll-over trade deals they agreed last year and the new negotiations that they have begun since. I will happily have a debate, too, whenever he wants to have one, on the merits of the Government's strategy to downgrade trade with Europe in favour of trade with Asia, on the fantastical basis that we can make up all the losses our exporters are facing in their trade with the EU through the gains that we will make through trade with the Asia-Pacific. The flagship policy of that strategy is the UK's accession to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which, according to the Government's own figures, will produce a £1.7 billion increase in UK exports to those Asia-Pacific countries over a 15-year period. That is roughly a third of what we exported to Luxembourg last year alone—the covid-affected year.

I will happily debate that strategy with the Paymaster General on another day, but what I want to focus on today, and what I urge him to focus on in the new role he has been given, is not the imagined opportunities of Brexit that might happen in the next year, two years or five years, but the real practicalities that need sorting out today—the holes that need fixing in our deal with Europe to support British businesses through this period of economic recovery and resolve the impasse in Northern Ireland.

Can the Paymaster General tell us where we stand on the Government's efforts to secure mutual recognition of professional qualifications and regulatory equivalence for financial services, so that our key growth industries in the professional and financial sectors can get back to doing business in Europe with the speed and simplicity that they enjoyed before Brexit? Can he tell us where the Government stand in their efforts to seek mutual recognition of conformity assessments to remove the double testing of products that is costing our key industries both time and money? Can he tell us not just what the latest plan is to kick the can down the road in Northern Ireland, but how we are going to reach a sustainable and permanent solution?

On that note, may I ask the Paymaster General to clear up one specific mystery, which relates to the Cabinet Office? In March last year, without publicity and without an open consultation, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs paid McKinsey consultants £1 million for eight weeks' work to provide

“the most effective solutions to ensure food security and choice is maintained for consumers in Northern Ireland”

after checks on GB-NI goods were introduced. My question to the Paymaster General is this: if the best brains at McKinsey were given two months and £1 million by the Government to examine that problem and come up with a solution, what is the answer that they provided? Is the reality that they, like the Government, have no better alternative solution than a veterinary agreement—the solution that businesses want, the solution that the EU says would work, the solution that every Opposition party in this House supports, but the solution that Ministers are refusing to consider?

That brings me to my final question—the great unanswered question when it comes to Brexit practicalities, which I hope the Paymaster General will not try to evade as so many of his predecessors have. When Lord Frost was asked on 24 June why he would not pursue the option, even in the short term, of a veterinary agreement with the European Union to resolve many of the problems at the border, he said:

“We're very ambitious about TPP membership, so...it might turn out to be quite short term. That's the problem.”

Can the Paymaster General answer two questions? First, why do the Government believe—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Just before the right hon. Lady asks any more questions, let me say that she has significantly exceeded her time. I know that we are in a bit of flux, so I will allow her to finish, but I hope that she and others will note that keeping to time is important as a courtesy to others.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The questions I want to ask are these. First, why do the Government believe that signing a veterinary agreement with the EU is incompatible with their ambitions to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership? Secondly, if the answer is that joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership requires them to diverge from EU standards in relation to food safety, which is the only logical explanation for the comments that Lord Frost has made, can the Paymaster General tell us which specific standards they plan to diverge from?

I urge the Paymaster General, in his first appearance in his new position, to come out of the fantasy world that his predecessors have been living in together with Lord Frost and join us in the real world, together with Britain's business community—the world of delays and shortages, red tape and bureaucracy, lost business and lost trade. It is a world that demands sensible answers and practical action from the Cabinet Office, not just another Minister addicted to dogma and wishful thinking.

Michael Ellis: I thank the right hon. Lady for her welcome and her kind words. I have now been Attorney General, Solicitor General and Paymaster General in the last seven days, so I think I ought to have a uniform. Her opening remarks were very welcome.

The right hon. Lady is quite right, of course, that everything will be considered carefully, and that is why we are asking the British people to assist us in this regard, but she should welcome the opportunities that Brexit has afforded this country. The Labour party's relentless—may I say poisonous?—negativity about the opportunities of Brexit really is a sight to behold. What about the wonderful positions of this country now that we are free from the shackles of the regulation and bureaucracy, and the burdensome arrangements, that were applied *carte blanche* to all member states of the European Union?

I urge the right hon. Lady to look at the positives—the fact, for example, that this country is now the No. 1 country in the G7 for economic growth on the GDP front, and that we have a million job opportunities for our constituents and the people of this country. Those are positives. Those are things that have been delivered post Brexit, and work is in progress—negotiations and

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discussions. She knows well that the matters that she raises are at the forefront of the priorities of this Government and are being worked on keenly.

The right hon. Lady spoke of Lord Frost and his comments about ambition. Of course, Lord Frost and I share—as do the whole Government—the ambition of this country. If only the Labour party shared that ambition, I think that she would find greater support.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's statement. Our report was put together independently, taking full evidence from various areas of industry, services and so on. It represents their views about how best to resolve this issue. They include many who were strong remainers at the time of the debate, as well as those who voted for Brexit. There was no delineation. They all recognise where we are now and how we take advantage of it. I refer my right hon. and learned Friend to that and I thank my noble Friend Lord Frost for being so serious about implementation. One recommendation that I think is vital, and which the Bank of England was very clear it would like to see to help it in its heavy lifting, is to have a committee in the House that reports back on regulation/deregulation to follow up on all this. It should have the powers that, say, the Treasury Committee has, to dig into where the regulators go and whether they are getting the balance of economic advantage right in those regulations. May I ask him and the Government to think again? They have got rid of one regulatory committee, but there is definitely the need for another here to provide trust in the way we regulate.

Michael Ellis: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for the very able work he and his team did in this regard. I have taken note of his point about the Bank of England and a committee. I can say that, even though I have only been in office for a few hours, I have already touched on that with Lord Frost. Further discussions will ensue.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Paymaster General for his just-in-time approach to giving me foresight of his statement. Will he confirm he recognises that Scots law and the Scots legal framework is protected by the Act of Union, and that they should be treated appropriately during this exercise? I have to say that I very much doubt the majority of Scots will be rushing to do away with new protections enshrined in Scots law and protected by the Scottish Parliament. I am very concerned that this statement comes out at a time when we were expecting some real progress on helping our exporters get through the continuing muddle of exporting to the EU. National Farmers Union Scotland and Scotland Food and Drink are in bits trying to sort out what is happening, so can we have further explanation of what is actually being done in that regard?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I can, of course, confirm that. I know about Scots law, having held the Law Officer roles in this country. We have the greatest respect for Scots law. She is quite right that since 1707 the Act of Union has respected that position and will continue to do so. That is without

question. On the point she makes about exports, she knows that these issues are occurring around the world at the moment for myriad reasons. We are working in that regard to improve the situation.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the generalissimo to his place on the Front Bench. May I say what a pleasure it is to have been part of this project and to put on record our thanks to the civil servants in the Cabinet Office, led magnificently by Will Hayter? The team did a huge amount of work for us. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that there are three big messages from this? First, those who have insisted that there is not regulatory dividend from Brexit, other than rushing to the bottom and slashing standards, could not be more wrong. The approach we have set out here is that, liberated from an inevitably bureaucratic and slow-moving European framework, Britain can lead in setting the standards in clinical trials, AI and other fast-emerging sectors. I say that as a former Minister with responsibility for life sciences and the future of transport, and a former remainder. If we are going to go through this, as we are, let us make it an opportunity where we liberate our entrepreneurs and our innovators.

Secondly, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, crucially, there is a big message for levelling up? If we unlock those new sectors, it is not all about growth in Cambridge and Oxford. In nutraceuticals, functional foods, satellites, robotics and AI there are clusters around the country, including in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. That strengthens the United Kingdom as a centre of innovation.

Thirdly, does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, crucially, we need to make sure that this links to international trade; Britain putting in variable tariffs around our standards so that we use our aid, trade and security to fly the flag for the best food, AI and technology, and to make Britain a global hub of innovation?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend could not be more right, if I can put it that way. Those who were naysayers and gainsayers, those who were so relentlessly negative, are clearly wrong. They now know they are in the wrong. They were saying that nothing could be done to improve this country's position post Brexit. That is clearly wrong. Britain can lead the world. It is leading the world in many areas and will continue to do so under this Government. We are liberated and we are continuing to liberate our industries, trade and services from the shackles of bureaucracy. We will continue to do that, while at the same time, as he ably says, levelling up the whole of this country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I listened carefully to the Paymaster General's statement. A significant amount of legislation has come from Europe to protect workers, whether it is health and safety, workers' rights or equalities legislation. Will he guarantee that under this new bonfire of regulation he will not diminish any of those workers' rights, which have been hard-fought for by working people across Europe?

Michael Ellis: Of course, this is not about negatively affecting health and safety. This is about supporting workers. This is about supporting business. It is about making life easier for people and building the economy of this country. That is what it will do.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The huge success of the recovery trial for covid treatments and the development, authorisation and delivery of the covid vaccination programme show just some of what we can achieve in Brexit Britain. Will my right hon. and learned Friend give priority to repealing and replacing the clinical trials directive, and replace it with a modern regulatory framework that can lead the world in this important area of health and the economy?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point and we will certainly be looking at that as a priority.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): “Brexit: Opportunities” seems to me very much a contradiction in terms, but I have listened carefully to the exchanges this afternoon. People recognise that we have now left the European Union. Whether we were a leaver or a remainer, that is the reality. I welcome that pragmatism. I urge the Government also to be pragmatic about what happens on the ground. Not everything is as well as it has sometimes been painted. My constituency of Bath is a global tourist destination. Several businesses are now operating shortened hours because of severe staff shortages caused by Brexit and the new immigration system. What are the Government doing in the next 12 months to address these lost economic opportunities in the hospitality sector?

Michael Ellis: I know the hon. Lady’s constituency well enough to know how beautiful it is. She talks, quite rightly, about its tourism value. The fact of the matter is that tourism has been very negatively affected, tragically, because of the covid-19 pandemic. It is nothing to do with Brexit. The reality is that, of course, we are pragmatic. We will be pragmatic and we listen to all. That is why we want to listen to the British people about how to reduce regulations.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I welcome the scale, scope and ambition of the impressive list of intentions that began the Minister’s statement. May I press him on one point, which he mentioned later on? It is a shared point between my report on competition policy, which he kindly mentioned, and the TIGRR report, which is about process ongoing to ensure that we do not return to a pro-regulatory ratchet. The difficulty we all face here is that the entire culture of this place and Whitehall more generally is to invent more rules. That is how we make our bones in this place. We need to have a really robust process that prevents that and puts it into reverse. The one in, two out—with no exceptions and no exemptions—is absolutely essential. I hope he will be able to firm that up and commit to it irrevocably as soon as possible.

Michael Ellis: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this area. I agree about the almost inevitable direction of travel, unless there is an intercession, which is what the Government wish and intend to do with my statement today and the announcement that we are going forward with. I repeat my thanks for his work and assure him of our best intentions in regard to fulfilling his wishes.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Paymaster General is right—Brexit is now a fact—but clearly, the Government see advantage in keeping the grievance

going. The EU remains our most important trading partner. It is hugely significant for businesses up and down the country, so instead of turning up the Brexit rhetoric, does he not think that the Government’s priority should be to listen to the problems raised by British business? Will he commit to looking at the recommendations highlighted in relation to those problems in the UK Trade and Business Commission’s report to be published on Monday?

Michael Ellis: I am happy to confirm that my party is the party of business. We do listen to business, and business prospers in this country under Conservative Governments and will continue to do so. Of course, our ears are open and always will be to views from all sides. That includes and, in fact, specifically in relation to regulations, will include businesses.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend my right hon. and learned Friend and his team on their excellent TIGRR report and on his very welcome statement. If he needs a uniform, I am sure Gieves & Hawkes will be happy to oblige him, for a reasonable fee. He said in his statement that we will establish a commission “to receive ideas from any British citizen on how to repeal or improve regulations”. I urge him to go further and include EU citizens—in particular, Michel Barnier, the former chief negotiator, who is now running to be President of France and has developed very strong views about repealing EU legislation that affects France. If he does not want to live under its laws any more, can we ask him to suggest which of its heritage laws we should junk as well? And as the Government will want to get on with it, can we remind Mr Barnier that the clock is now ticking?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good, apposite point. We will certainly take that back.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): As the Government look to consult on reform to personal data protection policy, concerns have been raised about the potential removal of article 22, which guarantees that people can seek a human review of an artificial intelligence-made decision, creating cause for concern for data protection campaigners. Will the Paymaster General confirm whether the Government have assessed the impact of this potential removal in relation to negotiating trade deals with other countries?

Michael Ellis: Of course, the whole area of AI will open up myriad issues such as the one that the hon. Lady referred to. The Government are alive to those points and will take all those issues into careful consideration.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend to his place and, as Chair of the Justice Committee, thank him for and pay tribute to the admirable way in which he exercised his duties as a Law Officer of the Crown, which he did impeccably. He will know from those previous posts, better than most, the level of complexity that surrounds retained EU law and that removing it will be no less complex. We need to ensure that we do so in a way that does not create legal uncertainty or disadvantage the United Kingdom financial markets, for example, in relation to ongoing, long-term contractual

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

arrangements or financial instruments. Will he make sure that we do this with great care, perhaps working with experts such as TheCityUK and the Financial Markets Law Committee, and that we structure that in such a way that enables financial and legal services to benefit from access to new markets that we may be able to open up as a result of free trade agreements?

Michael Ellis: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for his kind remarks earlier in the House. He is right about legal—as well as financial—services, and this is an opportunity. The legal community that I and he both know in this country is a world leader. We have first-class people who support our legal prowess around the world based right here. We want to do everything we can to further build on that and he is absolutely right to emphasise the importance of that sector. It is important economically, morally and in our leadership around the world, and we will continue to work to support it.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I am glad to hear that the Paymaster General is looking at new export markets and opportunities, but the problem here and now, and what businesses in my constituency are concerned about, is the increased barriers that have occurred with our biggest trading partner across Europe. Will he undertake to listen to and address those concerns and perhaps outline what impact the changes that he has made today will have in supporting businesses to resolve this situation? Ultimately, it is costing more money for those businesses and costing jobs.

Michael Ellis: Of course, we are always listening to business. The point that the hon. Gentleman makes is one that we are focusing on. He will also recognise that there are issues around Europe and, indeed, in countries around the world of a similar nature. We are all faced with issues following the pandemic and other circumstances that have arisen and we will continue to support business in all the areas we can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I welcome the Paymaster General to his position and wish him well. I remind him of his comments when he referred to eliminating the Brexit burden for the United Kingdom, especially for Northern Ireland. Can he outline what steps are being taken to address the disgraceful Northern Ireland protocol regulations, which see empty shelves, increased cost for every Northern Ireland citizen and disregard for the constitutional position of Northern Ireland? I remind him of the petition with 100,000-plus names that came to this House. Will he take the readily available opportunity to resolve this issue and trigger article 16?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. If I may make a personal remark, my mother was born in Northern Ireland and I understand the issues that he refers to. His support for his constituents and the people of Northern Ireland is something that everyone in this House recognises. The Government recognise the importance of our Union and of Northern Ireland and everything will be done that needs to be done to continue to support Northern Ireland.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. and learned Friend to his new role and thank him for his statement. It is absolutely right that we review retained EU law and do what is right, in the interests of this country, but does he share my concern that there will be some, I suspect even in this House—I know that will shock you, Madam Deputy Speaker—who will see this review as an opportunity to continue the referendum debate and to continue the divisions? Does he share my view that we should now accept that we have left the EU and unite together to not only face some of the challenges that we inevitably face, but grasp the opportunities for the benefit of our whole country?

Michael Ellis: I agree completely.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): Northern Ireland did not seek Brexit and it has been very destabilising for the region, but from the Social Democratic and Labour party's pragmatic perspective, we are trying to make lemonade out of the lemons that we have been handed. It is disappointing that Northern Ireland's unique dual market access is not among the opportunities that the Paymaster General has identified. The fact is that, under the protocol, being at the hinge of the UK and EU single markets is the first unique economic selling point that Northern Ireland has had after decades of sluggishness and low productivity. Will he commit his Government to working with all parties and with the business community in Northern Ireland to allow Northern Ireland to try to make the best of the hand that we have been dealt, in the interests of people and businesses of all communities, by promoting that unique dual market access to businesses in the UK and overseas?

Michael Ellis: I disagree with the hon. Lady on one thing: I do not think that Northern Ireland has only one unique selling point. I think it has multiple selling points and the people of Northern Ireland are an integral part of this kingdom. Of course, tourism is one element of Northern Ireland that is also a substantial prowess. She does recognise, I know, that in this House, this party and this Government have always focused on supporting the people throughout the United Kingdom, which is why we are pushing the levelling-up agenda that she has been hearing so much about. She will find that that will continue to support her constituents and the people of the whole Province of Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I warmly welcome the Paymaster General to his place, and, obviously, I warmly welcome the statement.

One of the many reasons the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kids Grove and Talke—over 70%—voted to leave the European Union was their wish to see us take back control of our borders. As we are being asked to feed in some ideas, may I feed one idea to the Paymaster General? Let us get out of the European convention on human rights, and then let us scrap the Human Rights Act in this country, so that foreign criminals who are taking advantage of the current system, and economic migrants who are crossing the English channel and entering this country illegally, can be deported very much more quickly than they are now.

Michael Ellis: I hear my hon. Friend's points and of course he knows that we are now taking back control of our borders.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome the announcement from the new Paymaster General. It means that laws in this country will be made here in this Parliament, which is something that residents throughout Burnley and Padiham very much want to see. Will the Paymaster General confirm that this new approach will go hand in hand with our new free trade agreement policy, ensuring that our absolute focus is on supporting the small and medium-sized enterprises that are the backbone of this country?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend is, of course, quite right. With the establishment of the points-based immigration system that I have just mentioned, and the bilateral trade agreements that my hon. Friend has just mentioned—agreements with over 60 countries in addition to the EU, accounting for £889 billion of UK bilateral trade in 2019—things are looking up, and will continue to do so.

COP26: Devolved Administrations

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And so we move on, and come to the debate on the role and response of the devolved Administrations to COP26, an event that will take place in the wonderful city of Glasgow. I call Brendan O’Hara to move the motion.

12.51 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role and response of the devolved Administrations to COP26.

It is a pleasure to open the debate. May I put on record my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for it?

Before I begin, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I seek your indulgence to mention, as a curtain raiser to COP26, that we are in the middle of Oxfam’s Second Hand September campaign? It encourages people to think about the 13 million items of clothing—95% of which are perfectly good, and could and should be reused and recycled—that we send to landfill every year. It will come as no surprise to my colleagues sitting behind me that today I am kitted out head-to-toe in clothes sourced from the wonderful charity shops across Argyll and Bute.

We are just 47 days away from the start of COP26, which will probably be the most important gathering of world leaders ever to take place. They will come to Glasgow with one job: to keep their promise to cut global emissions and limit global warming to 1.5°, and thus to give the world a fighting chance in the war against climate change. It will take courage, it will take determination, and it will take sacrifice. It will require all the developed countries to make good their promise to help others to move away from producing planet-warming emissions. They have no option: it has to be done, and it has to be done now.

Just last month, a report co-authored by 200 climate scientists and described as a “code red for humanity” was published by the United Nations. It makes harrowing reading. Those scientists were unequivocal in saying that global climate change is accelerating, and that human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are the overwhelming cause of that change. The UN Secretary-General said:

“This report must sound a death knell for coal and fossil fuels, before they destroy our planet.”

According to the report, global surface temperatures are reaching levels not seen in the past 100,000 years, and each of the last four decades has been the warmest on record.

Those scientists were simply confirming what we have all seen or experienced ourselves. We know that our summers are becoming hotter and drier, and our winters warmer and wetter. Flooding is increasing, as I know from my own constituency, where unprecedented levels of rainfall are causing the already unstable hillside which towers over the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful to crumble on to the road with alarming regularity. This summer saw the highest recorded temperature ever on the planet: 54.4° in Death Valley, California. We also witnessed wildfires raging out of control across Europe, Canada and the United States, and down into Central

[Brendan O'Hara]

and South America. It was the same in Africa, Australia, and Russia, where fires were raging out of control and more intense than ever before. Now, human habitation is no longer possible across great swathes of the world, because we in the developed world have created a climate emergency—one in which, as always, those who are least responsible for creating the problem are having to bear the biggest burden of sorting it out

The world's largest economies all signed up to the 2015 Paris climate agreement, but most of them are set to miss those targets because of our continued over-reliance on fossil fuels. Although it makes grim reading, the UN report does provide a glimmer of hope, saying that it is still possible to avoid catastrophic levels of warming—but only if we dramatically and permanently cut our emissions now, and that will require unprecedented and transformational change. We have a very small and fast-diminishing window of opportunity in which to act, but act we must. This COP26 meeting is the most important meeting that any city has ever hosted, because the world has one last chance to deliver on what was signed up to in Paris, and we have to get it right.

Although it is the UK Government who will be officially hosting COP26, it is hugely important, given that it is the Governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast who are designing and implementing their own policies to tackle climate change, that all the nations of these islands are given a fair voice at the meeting. It is also important to recognise that the nations of the United Kingdom are not necessarily moving at the same speed, or with the same priorities or the same degree of urgency, in addressing climate change. In that regard—and despite being the host of an event in Scotland—the Prime Minister does not necessarily speak for the whole United Kingdom on these matters.

Just last week, when the public in Scotland were asked who would better represent Scotland at COP26, the Prime Minister polled just 16% of the vote, while our First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, polled well over 50%. That was not an accident. I believe that those figures reflect the fact that the people of Scotland trust their Government to make these difficult but important decisions—the ones that are required to save the planet—and that they are extremely sceptical about the ability, or indeed the commitment, of the Prime Minister to make those changes. Scotland knows that our Government were among the first in the world to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency, and that this conference will provide Scotland with a fantastic opportunity to showcase to the rest of the world our ambitious approach to tackling the climate emergency and achieving a net zero future.

I expect that Conservative Members will be primed with notes saying, “What about this target that was missed?” or “What about that goal that was not reached?” Of course, they may be factually correct, but it is a consequence of setting the bar so high, and having an ambition to achieve that goes far beyond anything that has been achieved before, that on occasion, unfortunately, things will not go to plan and targets will be missed. But I—and, I am sure, the people of Scotland—would not want our Government to have taken the path of least resistance and to have set low, almost meaningless targets. And what we are doing is working, with Scotland recently managing to produce 97% of its electricity

requirements from renewable sources. In the decade to 2018, Scotland reduced emissions by 31%, faster than any other nation of the UK and ahead of any G20 nation. Transport, however, remains the largest source of emissions, which is why the Scottish Government are committed to reducing emissions by 75% by 2030, and have set a legally binding target of achieving net zero by 2045.

As we all know, the oil and gas sector is a significant and important player in the Scottish economy. That is why the Scottish Government are committed to a challenging but necessary “just transition”, to move away from fossil fuels and to a future based on renewable energy. We all understand that, while moving away from oil and gas is essential, and while it is important to do that as quickly as possible, it must also be done fairly. Those of us old enough to remember what happened in Scotland in the 1980s, when the Tory Government callously destroyed mining communities to such an extent that many have not fully recovered to this day, will understand why we could not possibly let that happen again. That is why, backed by £500 million, the Scottish Government's Just Transition Commission will work with communities, businesses and trades unions to ensure that those in high-quality, highly skilled jobs are supported in transitioning away from traditionally carbon-intensive sectors.

While Scotland is doing everything it can to meet those challenges, there are areas in which, because of the current constitutional situation with power being held in this place, we will require the UK Government to assist Scotland in becoming net zero by 2045. Specifically, that relates to our ability to benefit from the world-leading tidal energy technology that has been developed by companies such as Nova and Atlantis, but whose growth is being stymied by the lack of a proper route to market via the contracts for difference options, which would allow this hugely important sector to grow and flourish.

It is a similar story for the development of carbon capture and storage. The Government will remember, as we all do, how they pulled the plug at the last minute on the Peterhead carbon capture and storage plan back in 2015. After all the work that had gone in to preparing it, that was a particularly cruel blow for the UK Government to inflict. The only silver lining is that Scotland now has the infrastructure in place for when the UK Government announce their preferred carbon capture and storage facility next month. That would mean all the emissions from the Peterhead power plant, from the hydrogen production facility at St Fergus and from Grangemouth—Scotland's largest polluter—could be captured and stored in a basin deep under the North sea. Indeed, so vast is that basin that it is estimated that 6.7 million tonnes of carbon dioxide could be captured and stored each year by 2030, totalling half a gigatonne of CO₂ by 2050, with the ability to expand even further thereafter. As well as allowing Scotland to reach its net zero target, it is estimated that this one CCS project could create up to 20,000 green technology jobs. The Scottish cluster is ready to go, and if the UK Government fail once again to deliver this facility to Peterhead, it will quite rightly be seen as a political decision taken in this place, against the interests of Scotland.

In conclusion, the Scottish Government have repeatedly said that they are committed to working closely with the UK Government and others to deliver a safe, secure and, above all, successful COP26. However, they are also determined that this will be a people's COP and

that the communities and groups whose voices have been continually ignored and sidelined in climate discussions will be heard. Often vulnerable indigenous communities whose land has been devastated by soaring temperatures, a lack of rain, too much rain or rising sea levels, or destroyed by hurricanes or deforestation, must be heard and they must be heeded.

I am delighted that the Scottish Government have set up the world's first climate justice fund to support vulnerable communities in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda to address the impact of climate change. It would send a wonderful message to the world if the United Kingdom Government were to follow that lead and establish their own UK climate justice fund ahead of COP26. However, we should be in no doubt that in Glasgow next month the world's leaders will be drinking in the last chance saloon. For all our sakes, they have to get it right. Will be watching closely what they do.

1.3 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): It is a great privilege to rise and talk in this debate. I welcome the topic and I welcome the opportunity to discuss how we can involve the devolved Administrations in this. The first half of the speech by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) was a spectacular opening, and I pay tribute to him for that. It went downhill a bit, with a couple of political points and some charged polling. I would be interested to see who commissioned the poll and what the target audience was, but I am sure that we can take that offline to discuss it further.

Representing Montgomeryshire, I represent the Centre for Alternative Technology. The people there have been talking about this subject and devising plans since way before it was fashionable, and way before devolution. They have been at this for decades. I would have liked to hear much more in this debate about getting communities involved, more broadly than politicians and more broadly than the typical argument about the devolved Administrations being left out. Clearly, much of what needs to happen at this very important COP involves UK reserved powers.

I very much welcome the fact that the UK Government chose Glasgow and that we will be able to showcase what the devolved Administrations and many cities have led on. I welcome both the working groups that were set up early in this process to bring the DAs together with the COP President and to bring together the cities and Mayors of the United Kingdom, including Edinburgh, Manchester, Cardiff and Birmingham. They brought our huge urban conurbations together to talk about what we can do in the urban and rural space.

I thought it was remiss of the hon. Gentleman to comment about who should lead the welcomes and who should be front and centre. We need to put politics aside over the last couple of weeks before COP. We need to get behind the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the negotiations that are happening right now to get international leaders together. As the Centre for Alternative Technology has set out time and again, this needs to be tackled on a global basis.

I have no doubt that we will hear in this debate how the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government are world leading and the best. Maybe even the Northern Ireland Executive will feature, but let us be frank about

the significant changes that have happened under this Government. Let us be frank about the fact that we have settled the climate change argument and are moving at a pace on energy distribution and on fundamental policies that have been difficult to grasp. This debate is happening in nuclear week, and there is no doubt in my mind that the nuclear industry has a huge role to play in achieving that, be that through the small modular reactors of Dwyfor Meirionnydd or through Wylfa in north Wales, a larger, more strategic site. Clearly, these are UK competences that we need to be lobbying and leveraging the UK Government on.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Would the hon. Gentleman nevertheless admit that his Government now need to start moving ahead from the short-term decisions that they are making, and to start making real decisions and announcements in relation to energy and how it is to be funded in future? Otherwise, I fear that we will just be making more empty words.

Craig Williams: The right hon. Lady and I share the campaign to get an SMR into our area of the world, and she is of course right. We on these Benches are looking to the UK Government to make these important decisions. Sizewell C hangs over all our heads across the House, as do the more practical applications of SMRs. There are important decisions to be made, but I suppose that underscores what I am trying to say about how this debate needs to focus on bringing these ideas together.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Yesterday, I asked the Prime Minister whether he believed that burning fossil fuels would be a source of energy in the future and he replied that it would not. But he was only talking about coal. Today I have asked for a debate on this important issue. How do we go about stopping burning fossil fuels as a source of energy? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need an urgent debate in Parliament to discuss these vital issues?

Craig Williams: I was here when the hon. Member asked that question, and I heard the answer. It was a very good answer. I remember the Prime Minister emphasising coal, and that was not just words; it was clear action. I do not think anyone in the Chamber could doubt the reduction of coal in our energy network, and that has been due to clear action by this Government, putting their money where their mouth is. I would welcome a further debate on fossil fuels.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Does the hon. Member not realise, though, that his Government continue to funnel billions into fossil fuel projects overseas, locking communities into the fossil fuel age for generations?

Craig Williams: Clearly that is being phased out, but the hon. Member will know that her constituents expect a fair energy price. We need to transition carefully to new technologies—*[Interruption.]* I am sure she will have an opportunity to make a speech soon.

I want to bring my remarks to a conclusion, because I know that other Members want to talk in this important debate. Hopefully, to change the tone from some of what Opposition Members have said, this is about bringing together communities, businesses and third parties such as the Centre for Alternative Technology.

[Craig Williams]

Rather than have a fuzzy, politically charged constitutional debate, the UK Government have taken COP to Scotland, which is brilliant. There is no doubt a role for the Scottish Government, as the Prime Minister has said, but these international negotiations are clearly led by the UK Government. We must work together as a family of nations, but we cannot have a constitutional debate on the sidelines as it would distract attention and not help with the important matters at hand.

I implore SNP Members that, if they really want to put their mouth where these issues are, the next couple of weeks are critical. They should get behind the negotiation process and the communities that want to see real action. It is incredibly clear that politically charged comments such as “We want our First Minister to be at the head of the queue” add nothing.

Brendan O’Hara: I fear the hon. Gentleman may have written his speech before I gave mine.

Craig Williams: I have not written one.

Brendan O’Hara: That probably says a lot. Where in my speech did I suggest anything of the sort? I thought I was being collegiate from beginning to end, while pointing out areas of difference. Differences do exist, and to pretend that they do not is to deny reality.

Craig Williams: I will check *Hansard*, but I am absolutely sure that the hon. Gentleman mentioned a politically charged poll, to which I alluded. By implication, he was trying to undermine the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. I realise that his speech was written way before he came into the Chamber and I am merely retorting, but that seemed to be the charge. I finish by reiterating that I think such comments add nothing to this debate, and if there is any Opposition rhetoric saying, “We’re good, you’re bad,” I ask why. What does that achieve today? [Interruption.] There will be plenty of time for the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) to speak, and I look forward to intervening on her.

1.12 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I rise to make a short contribution to today’s important debate.

We all know that our planet and way of life in this country and around the world are facing an existential threat from climate change. COP26 is probably the world’s best last chance to get runaway climate change under control, and no one should underestimate the importance of the next few weeks.

The past few months have seen record high temperatures in the Pacific north-west, and we are increasingly familiar with extreme weather events closer to home. February 2020 was the wettest on record in Wales, resulting in Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis, which devastated homes in my constituency and many others. All this underlines the fact that this is not a challenge that we can or should leave to future generations; it is one that we must all face together now.

I am proud that the Senedd became the first Parliament in the world to vote to declare a climate emergency in 2019, and that is why the Welsh Labour Government

introduced measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Wales, culminating in a target of net zero emissions by 2050. The target is vital to protect our planet’s future, and it is an ambitious target that will require a concerted effort from all of us: Governments, industries, communities and individuals.

Of course, Governments must take a lead. Through their warm homes scheme, the Welsh Labour Government have installed energy efficiency measures in more than 60,000 households that are experiencing fuel poverty. They have also invested in major renewable energy infrastructure projects, including the Awel y Môr offshore wind farm and the world-class centre for marine engineering at Pembroke Dock. All the while, they are taking action to combat and limit the technologies that threaten our climate and environment in Wales and across the country, including by opposing fossil fuel extraction and maintaining the ban on fracking.

Wales has reached the milestone of generating more than 50% of the energy we consume from renewable sources, up from 19% in 2014. But of course there is more that must be done for us to meet our 2050 target and ensure a sustainable future for all communities.

Colleagues will know that, following the Senedd elections in May, the Welsh Labour Government established a new Ministry for Climate Change, under the leadership of Welsh Ministers Julie James and Lee Waters. This bold decision to bring housing, transport, planning and energy policy together under one roof is a clear signal that the Welsh Government will use all the levers they have to tackle the climate emergency. Their plan, “A Climate Conscious Wales”, is now in its second year of delivery, and a national flood strategy, published in October 2020, sets out how Wales will manage flood risk over the next decade.

In the coming Senedd term, the Welsh Government will expand renewable energy generation by public bodies and community groups in Wales, working towards a target of 1 GW of public sector and community renewable energy capacity by 2030. Of course the transition to a fully green economy requires difficult choices. In Wales, we are embedding the concept of a just transition through a social partnership, bringing together Government, trade unions and employers to consider the action that must be taken. We must also involve communities and residents.

As a relative youngster way back in 1992, I remember that the headline from the Rio summit was “Think global, act local.” That has stuck with me for many years, and it underlines that we can all do our bit to contribute to the whole but, as I said, Governments can and must take the lead.

I have outlined some of the measures being taken in Wales to combat climate change, and I hope there can be close co-operation with the UK Government as we all focus our attention on hitting that 2050 target. As we know, the UN climate summit, COP26, which this country is hosting in Glasgow in just a few weeks’ time, is a critical moment for our planet and our country. The eyes of the world will be upon us, so I hope Ministers will ensure they meaningfully involve the Welsh Government and, indeed, devolved and regional Administrations across the UK in the preparations for COP26. It is important that we provide a co-ordinated UK-wide approach to the challenges we face. If we cannot come at this together in our own country, we cannot expect

the rest of the world to rise to the challenge. COP26 is an opportunity to provide the leadership that we and our planet need. We are at a crucial point and it will take all of us to put our shoulders to the wheel.

I hope the Minister will provide some of the necessary reassurances that we are all looking for.

1.17 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, particularly given how close we are to COP26. If we are to make a success of COP26 and of cutting our emissions, it must be a national endeavour. The UK Government cannot do it alone, and no devolved Administration can do it alone. It will require all of us—local authorities, regional Mayors, devolved authorities, the UK Government and the private sector—to come together in this shared national endeavour.

Everyone has a vital role to play, because everyone has different economic levers to pull, everyone has vehicle fleets that need to become wholly electric and everyone has building stock, office stock and housing stock that need to change. Across every single layer, we all have an opportunity to be ambitious, to show the world what we can do and to show the world that team UK, as host of COP26, is working in the same direction.

I was pleased to see the Prime Minister recognise that it is a shared endeavour when he pulled together the COP26 devolved Administrations ministerial group, which brings together the COP26 President and not only the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but the climate change Ministers from all the devolved authorities, the Mayors and the regional advisory councils that my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) mentioned. Doing all of that, and pulling together the different levels of government and the private sector, shows the world what needs to happen. There are countries that look to us for that leadership.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): My hon. Friend just made the important point that COP26 is about countries coming together to work with the UK on tackling climate change. My constituents constantly have flooding. Our all-party group on the United Nations global goals for sustainable development has a new report coming out and it says that the SDGs are the framework for all countries to work together to tackle issues such as climate change and flooding in my constituency.

Antony Higginbotham: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and wholeheartedly agree with her. In Burnley and Padiham, we have suffered flooding as well, and this is not just a UK problem; it is a problem across the whole world. It is only by working together that we can solve some of those big issues.

I agree with what the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said about setting stretching targets. That is absolutely what we need to do. He is right to say that we may not always hit those targets, but we stretch them because it spurs on investment and encourages people to think innovatively. However, may I give a word of caution? We also need to make sure that stretching targets are realistic. There is a balance to be struck between stretching a target and creating a realistic one.

We should also use COP26 to show people where we have come from and what some of those stretching targets have achieved; we can look at the huge reduction in coal power, which my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire mentioned, and at the investment we are making in renewables. We need to see the rest of the world follow us in some of that investment. We have wind power in Humberside, hydrogen in the north-east, nuclear in the north-west and tidal up in Scotland. All of those things will make a difference and if we can use COP26 to encourage the rest of the world to follow our lead, and ideally to buy British as they are doing it, we will make this a success.

The devolved authorities, local authorities and regional mayors all have an important part to play. There are incredibly positive opportunities for all levels of government to use. I wish to say one more thing on cost, because the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) rightly mentioned the enormous cost that will come from this transition. We spoke about that at a meeting with Net Zero North West just a few weeks ago, and it is why it is so important that all of team UK works together. This cannot be done just by a local authority or a devolved Administration. It requires the broad shoulders of the Treasury and of the private sector as well. I hope that at COP26, in a few weeks' time, we see all of team UK, all the different representatives, come together to show the world what we can do.

1.22 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): The scale of this climate crisis is huge and we are reaching a pivotal moment, with COP26 just weeks away. That is the time when we all need to come together, and the UK Government must show that they can lead, prove their diplomacy and bring the world together to take that urgent action that is so needed. We have seen the scale of this climate crisis; over the summer, we have seen heatwaves, flooding, forest fires and fires in the Arctic. In my constituency, I have seen devastating flooding, which has a huge human impact. There are people in my constituency who are afraid to go to bed at night when they hear heavy rain, and they take it in turns to walk around the perimeter of their area—of the roads—looking at the river levels, living for weeks on end with their furniture upstairs. That is no way to live. That means we must be acting, as this is happening not only in our own backyards—across this country, across Wales—but across the world.

Wales may be a small country, but we are one that punches above our weight. The scale and delivery of what we offer is huge, showing that the Welsh Labour Government can lead the way on action—action on cutting carbon emissions and on recycling, making us the second best in Europe and the third best in the world. I am proud to have played a part in that. I am proud that when I was a special adviser to the Welsh Government for many years we brought in those strategies, with the result that we are now leading the charge. I am proud to have helped bring in the groundbreaking Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which puts sustainability at the heart of every decision the public sector makes in Wales. That is groundbreaking and it has changed how public service and the public sector work together in Wales. We also have a moratorium on road building and we have stopped fracking.

[Anna McMorris]

We are doing all those things in Wales to play our part, but we are not doing it alone and we cannot do it alone. We work alongside many other devolved nations and regions across the world. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) mentioned, we are also doing it at home, establishing a super-Ministry for climate, with the Minister for Climate Change, Julie James, at the helm, overseeing energy policy, housing, planning, transport, climate and environment. All those things are in one ministry together, and the UK Government could well take a leaf out of our book in Wales.

We have seen action not only at government level, but at local community level, where we all have local community groups working well towards this; so many people understand the impact that climate has. In my community and constituency, we know the Great Big Green Week starts this week and we have many events starting. I helped to establish a local climate organisation, an environmental organisation, called Footprints, which helps build awareness of what each and every one of us can do to play our part. I also wish to mention Martine Brown, who works with my local Birchgrove Women's Institute and has been a fantastic climate champion across the whole of Cardiff North.

Under Labour, Wales looks outward, working with other devolved nations and regions, where we know the action happens. I was fortunate to have played a key role in many COPs leading up to the Paris climate agreement. I saw the role that devolved nations and regions have to play. In the run-up to that agreement, I represented 50 states and regions across the world to make sure that in the official treaty—the official climate agreement text—it was ratified and acknowledged that these states and regions, devolved nations, play a part. It is where the action happens closer to the people. So why are Wales and devolved nations being left out in the cold at COP26? I hope the Minister can answer that in his response. Why have we had only three devolved meetings in the run-up to COP26? That is shameful.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the hon. Lady join me in being concerned at how state aid is now to be reserved to this place and at the impact that will have on the good work being done in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Anna McMorris: I thank the right hon. Member for that very good point. I hope that the Minister will address it in his response.

At the G7, the Prime Minister said that

“the world cannot have a prosperous future if we don't work together to tackle climate change.”

He was absolutely right, so why cannot he and the Government work closely with the devolved nations to make that happen as a central part of this COP?

We know that developing nations are where people are most vulnerable to the climate crisis. I have spoken to many people at the front face of it, and I have talked about those in my constituency of Cardiff North, but it is people across the world in developing nations who are suffering the most. They are most vulnerable, but they

do not have a seat at the table. Why not? They need that seat and they need proper finance where it is going to reach the-m.

We know that it is women who suffer most in the climate crisis—and it is women who find the solutions and the way out, keeping their families together. It is usually young girls who have to leave school early to cope and look after their family after suffering great floods or crises caused by the climate.

I hope that this Government will think again and put action over rhetoric and words. We hear great ambition and great targets, but no delivery and no action. As I mentioned in an intervention on the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), the Government continue to funnel billions into fossil fuel projects overseas. As they do that, they continue to cut aid. It does not work, and it is not compatible with tackling the climate crisis.

I hope that this is a pivotal moment, that we can come together and that the UK Government can learn from our devolved nations, work across the world and bring the world together to take action to meet the 1.5° target that is so desperately needed for the future of this planet and the future of humanity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I should say for the sake of clarification that I hope we can manage without a time limit this afternoon. That will be possible if Members take about eight minutes or less. Most have taken considerably less, but if others speak for longer I will have to impose a time limit, which would be a pity because it should not be necessary.

1.32 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I welcome this general debate on the devolved Administrations and COP26.

It is fantastic that the COP26 UN climate change conference, which is hosted by the UK in partnership with Italy, will take place this year at the Scottish Event Campus in Glasgow. Wonderful, cultural, innovative Glasgow was chosen by the UK Government to host COP26 because of its extensive experience in hosting world-class events, its commitment to sustainability and its excellent facilities. It has recently been awarded the status of global green city and is ranked fourth in the world in the global destination sustainability index, which promotes best practice in responsible business tourism. That is a great achievement for a UK city—a Scottish city—and for Glasgow City Council and all its residential and business communities.

COP26 will be the largest summit that the UK has ever hosted, bringing together representatives from nearly 200 countries, including world leaders, experts and campaigners, as we accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris agreement and the United Nations framework convention on climate change. The UK is already leading the world in tackling climate change, and as we emerge from the pandemic we are determined to go further and build back greener in a way that benefits every part of society in every part of the UK.

The Government's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution will help us to deliver on that mission, including by creating thousands of new highly skilled green jobs, restoring our natural environment and helping people

to save money by upgrading their home's energy efficiency. Our green industrial revolution will be powered by companies and technologies from across the UK, delivering on the Government's and our Prime Minister's promise to level up and create jobs as we build back better and greener.

COP26 will unite the world to tackle climate change, but it also unites Great Britain and Northern Ireland—the United Kingdom—in its endeavours. Its aim is to encourage other countries to increase ambition and boost their climate plans for emissions reduction, as well as increasing climate finance pledges for developing countries.

The UK leads the world in tackling climate change: we were the first G7 country to legislate to achieve net zero by 2050, and we are decarbonising faster than any G20 country. All the devolved nations are part of that progress. The UK Government have established a COP26 devolved Administrations ministerial group to bring together my right hon. Friend the COP26 President-designate, territorial Secretaries of State and climate change Ministers from the devolved Administrations. The ministerial group has been meeting quarterly and is designed to

“ensure effective engagement and collaboration on COP26.”

UK Government Ministers are working through the group to ensure that the summit is representative of the whole UK.

The UK Government are working with the devolved administrations to

“ensure an inclusive and ambitious summit for the whole of the UK.”

Ministers have repeatedly stressed that all parts of the UK will have important roles to play in ensuring the summit's success. As a member of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, I welcome the joint delivery framework agreed between the Scottish delivery partners, including the Scottish Government, and the COP unit. The UK Government say that they want it to be as inclusive as possible.

It is absolutely brilliant that the Scottish Government have been undertaking work to prepare for COP26, including by announcing a community engagement programme, the stated aim of which is to

“engage communities in the journey to net zero and empower them to take action.”

It is also fantastic that the Scottish Government will host COY16, the 16th UN climate change conference of youth. As the official youth event, it will give young people a voice in the climate negotiations and set out their hopes and expectations for them. I am aware that the Scottish Government have provided £300,000 to deliver the event, and that as part of the Scottish Government's legacy ambitions Scotland's Climate Week is running this week, 13 to 19 September.

I am really looking forward to going to Glasgow the Select Committee, including some hon. Members present, to see how preparations for COP26 are progressing. We really have a great opportunity in this country to host such a historic event.

1.37 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Madam Ddirprwy Lefarydd. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for securing this debate.

The summit to be held in Glasgow is a pivotal and welcome moment for the world to get climate action back on track as we look to rebuild post pandemic. It is also a welcome introduction for the world to the devolved nature of our islands' Union. To give some context, I will quote the Prime Minister:

“I guess I don't mind seeing a Saltire or two on that summit, but I want to see a Union flag—I don't want to see Nicola Sturgeon anywhere near it.”

It is clear from his words that the devolved Governments have never been far from the thinking behind our collective UK approach to the COP26 summit and the pivotal role of devolved Governments in its potential success. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams)—for Sir Drefaldwyn—made a very valid point earlier, even though he made it politically: climate change extends beyond the nation state. It also starts with what we do as individuals, and of course the role of the devolved Governments is absolutely critical within that.

The Governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have long been leading lights in the UK's climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. In Wales, our deep-seated commitment to sustainable development is enshrined in our founding constitution, I am proud to say; we have declared a climate emergency and legislated to ensure that decision making meets our global climate and justice responsibilities. In Scotland, our political cousins in the SNP, the gracious hosts of the summit, continue to implement the green transition both at home and abroad, in the latter case with a ground-breaking climate justice fund that brings much needed assistance to the global south. The same cannot be said in every case about this Government or their handling of the summit.

I recognise the work of the COP26 devolved Administrations ministerial group. I hope that today the Minister will greatly expand on the succinct communiqués—I think that is probably the best way to describe them—issued by the group to demonstrate this Government's engagement with the devolved nations. But, as many have said already and will continue to say, actions speak louder than words.

From support for fossil-fuel projects both at home and abroad to cuts to the overseas aid budget, inexplicable delays in key Treasury reports and the frankly shameful removal of climate commitments in trade deals, this Government have shambolically handled the dual opportunity presented as they are co-host to COP26 and the G7 president. In doing so, this Government have shown their conflict of priorities or disorganisation—we can describe it in different ways and I am sure it would be described differently on each side of the Chamber. For many people outside, and for many of our neighbours and the coalitions around the world, there will be a commentary on an obsession with display over substance, which has never been so dangerous as it is now, in that it threatens the global climate progress.

Just this week, the Scottish Government have had to step in to fund the UN conference of youth, which runs alongside COP26, after the UK Government refused. I thank the Scottish Government for remembering the fantastic efforts of the world's youth through the Fridays for Future movement and acknowledging the need for youth engagement in climate policy, given that, in 2019, 1.2 billion people—or 16% of the global population—were aged between 15 and 24 years old. Where Westminster

[Liz Saville Roberts]

falters, the devolved nations lead—a truth that I hope the world will see at COP26, when it will see the reality of the relationships of the nations of the UK. When we talk about global Britain, let us remember that other structures are in play and that we need to use them to best effect.

In conclusion, the devolved Governments have long had a role to play and responsibility for climate action. Despite the best efforts of Westminster and the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, they will no doubt continue to do their best. I therefore wish the Scottish Government the very best of luck with the summit, and I urge the UK Government to match the devolved Governments' levels of ambition and engagement, to ensure that this pivotal, critical summit is a global success.

1.42 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Despite being an MP who represents an English constituency, I believe it is important that Unionists, wherever they are from, speak up for the benefits of the United Kingdom. The “United Kingdom”; I love saying that. “British steel”, “British made”, “United Kingdom”—they all come together. I love the fact that we are a great Union together.

The United Kingdom is a world leader in tackling climate change. We are the first major economy to set a legally binding target to achieve net zero.

Anna McMorris: I think the hon. Gentleman has missed the point of this debate, which is about the role of the devolved Administrations.

Nick Fletcher: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment, but all four nations come together to create the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady questions whether the hon. Gentleman is speaking to the motion; I think I know the motion quite well, and the hon. Gentleman is introducing his speech.

Nick Fletcher: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We reduced our emissions by a significant 44% between 1990 and 2019. The speed at which we have managed to decarbonise our electric grid is just one example: a decade ago, 40% per cent of our electricity came from coal; it is now a mere 1.8%. Under this Government, this country is embarking on an ambitious industrial revolution that will help to transform the lives of people up and down the country, no matter which nation they belong to.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): In the light of the comments the hon. Gentleman is making, does he agree that it is about time that the Government introduced an outright ban on underground coal gasification in this country? UCG threatens my constituency in the Dee estuary, and COP26 offers the Government a perfect opportunity to show that they are absolutely serious about climate change and to ban UCG.

Nick Fletcher: There has to be a transitional approach to this issue; there is no way that we can just stop things happening. We have constituents who depend on us to make good decisions for them so that we can gradually move to net zero. We need to take people with us. Just banning things—banning flights, coal and other things—will not take the people with us. We need the people to go with us. If we do things correctly here, we will take the rest of the world along with us; if we do it wrong here, the rest of the world will not do it. It is very important that we do it properly.

The success of the campaign for a greener economy has been made possible only because of our Union, and the reduction of our emissions has indeed been a Union effort. The decision to host COP26 in Glasgow—one of our country's most important cities that has for so long been the gateway from the UK to the west—was made by the UK Government for the benefit of Scotland.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Fletcher: I think I have given way enough.

I am confident that COP26 will not only be a great advert for the UK's role in reducing emissions but an advert for the pivotal role that Scotland can play as part of our United Kingdom. After all, the summit will bring together representatives from 200 countries right at the heart of Scotland.

The Prime Minister has clarified that COP26 will be an inclusive enterprise in which all nations will feel fully involved. The evidence for that is widespread, with the relevant devolved Environment Ministers having considerable influence over the direction of the summit through the COP26 devolved Administrations ministerial group.

Until recently this has been a good-natured debate. I could speak to many other issues, but will finish by saying that if we all come together at COP26 and do the right thing for the right reasons, we can really make a difference to the rest of the world.

1.46 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to listen to all sides in this debate, and it is important that we debate and bring out the differences, because clearly there are some. Time and again from this Government I hear the word transition. I understand that argument and the importance of bringing people with us, but we might be in this transition for too long. We have an end date, and we have now been waiting for such a long time that the urgency of the current situation will dictate our having to take rapid, urgent action, rather than transitioning for too long.

Sally-Ann Hart: Does the hon. Lady agree that when it comes to transitioning, we cannot rip the rug out from under people's feet? We have to reskill people for future jobs so that they can have those jobs; otherwise, we will end up with people with no work.

Wera Hobhouse: I absolutely agree. We need to make sure that we have the right skills in place and that we create opportunities for each local community, area and region, so that people have jobs and we do not pull the rug out from under their feet. I totally agree on that, but we also need a Government who set a direction for

where all this is going and make coherent plans for how we create new job opportunities. What is the direction we are going in? When will we set the final time limit for, for example, ending the national gas grid? Those Government actions are currently missing.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is really rather disappointing that we are yet to see a net zero strategy document from this Government? We have been waiting for a significant amount of time for such a document to set the direction of travel for all Whitehall Departments and the Government themselves in respect of how they might achieve the UK net zero targets, and we are yet to see any sign of one.

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. The Opposition are waiting urgently for exactly those things because we want to co-operate. We all understand how urgent this issue is and how only co-operation among all nations will get us on the right track. We should not be setting each other up and creating competition among us, with people saying, “We’re the best here” and “We’re the best there”. The whole globe has to come together to tackle this urgent issue that transcends nations. The Government often do not understand that, which is why we are here to urge them to change the pace of their action. The negotiations begin in only 46 days’ time and will determine the choices that we make about the future of our planet. They will determine whether we want to be ambitious enough to limit global temperature rises and avoid the worst impacts of the climate emergency, which will hit the poorest nations the hardest. The fact that it is the poorest nations that will be hit the hardest is not well enough understood.

At this pivotal moment in the fight against climate change, the Government cannot continue to treat the devolved Administrations as an afterthought. There are so many brilliant examples of where the devolved Administrations and local authorities have got it right on climate. Wales, as we have heard today, is second in Europe and third in the world for household recycling centres. It is also admirable that it introduced the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, which is a progressive and forward-looking piece of legislation. The rest of the UK should follow Wales’s lead, as it is a global leader, and legislate a future generations Bill. I am not lining myself up to become an honorary Member for Wales, but offering credit where credit is due.

The devolved nations’ knowledge and understanding of their local communities will be vital in providing solutions to the climate and ecological emergency. It is essential that they are included in a meaningful way in the lead-up to COP26. Local governments have been pushing for years now for a multi-level conference of the parties. As the COP26 president, the UK should be leading the way. I urge the Minister to push for stronger multi-level co-ordination, not just at COP26, but beyond.

There must be a deeper discussion on the localism of climate finance during the relevant negotiations, particularly on funds for loss and damage and adaptation. The devolved Administrations should have a seat at the negotiating table.

We Liberal Democrats have long believed in empowering local communities. Devolved Administrations must not be pushed to the fringes of these negotiations. Each one

of our family of nations deserves to be heard at COP26, the most important climate talks since the Paris agreement. Inclusion in the official party delegation is the only way to ensure that all the voices in our nations are heard.

There is also a strong desire among local authorities to be much more ambitious than central Government. Many were quick off the mark in declaring a climate emergency. My own local authority of Bath and North East Somerset was one of the first to do so—a month before central Government. Just this week, our council has launched its first ever climate and biodiversity festival. It is showcasing the action taken locally to tackle the climate emergency, but, even more importantly, the festival is about starting the conversation with our residents ahead of COP26.

May I say one more thing, Madam Deputy Speaker? It is alarming how few people in this country know what COP26 is about. I think the statistic was that about 13% of people in this country actually know what it is about. What have the Government done to engage people in this important discussion about climate change?

Nick Fletcher: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Wera Hobhouse: I will not, because we are running out of time.

The climate emergency is our shared responsibility. I am so grateful to those in our Bath community who have already got involved, and I urge all Members of Parliament to do something similar in their local areas in order engage local people in the discussions about the urgency of climate change and the very difficult decisions on which we need to agree.

The Government cannot deliver their climate programme without local authorities such as mine. Climate action begins at local level. The Government must empower local authorities at COP26 and beyond so that they can deliver on green transport, homes, energy, infrastructure and waste management policies that we need to implement if we are to get to net zero.

Again, it is a shame that our local government has been disempowered by central Government for decades now, and for the last decade in particular. We need to empower local authorities to do the things for local people, because only then will they have the real understanding of how to deliver to make sure that we have the jobs and the infrastructure in place. If central Government continue to disempower local government, we will not be in a good place. Most of all, the Government must recognise that the climate crisis is a real emergency, and that business as usual is not good enough. We need a change of pace from what we have seen so far from this Government and we need it urgently.

1.54 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I am delighted to be taking part in this debate and grateful to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for securing it. I am also delighted that the UK Government are working proactively with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure an inclusive and ambitious summit for the whole of the UK. As many Members have mentioned already this afternoon, all parts of the UK will have an important role to play in ensuring the summit’s success.

Colum Eastwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. It is good that some people are up for discussion across the Chamber.

It is wonderful to hear the glowing tributes about the devolved authorities from Members on the Government Benches—it is great to hear it—but if the Democratic Unionist party gets its way and pulls down the Stormont institutions, there will not be anybody at COP26 from Northern Ireland. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that this is an issue that the Government really care about, and if he thinks that they really want to engage with local devolved authorities and ensure that they actually exist, will he ask them to step in now and ensure that no single party can rip down the institutions of the Good Friday agreement when we are trying to deal with issues as important as this?

Simon Baynes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his interjection. It is perhaps an issue that is slightly above my pay grade. Perhaps the Minister would like to comment on it. The point I make though is that, regardless, as a member of the UK, Northern Ireland will be represented at COP26, but I take on board his point that he is making in a very genuine fashion.

The Climate Change Committee has noted that “the UK climate targets cannot be met without strong policy action across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, tailored for national, regional and local needs”

and that the

“governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have an increasingly important role to play in tackling climate change.” I think we can all agree on that.

I represent the Welsh constituency of Clwyd South, so I am determined that Wales, like the rest of the UK, should rise to the climate change challenge and play its part in this international conference. Like other hon. Members this afternoon, my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) talked about the importance of community groups in tackling climate change, and this is something that I passionately believe in. I am delighted that many such groups across Wales, and across the UK, are putting belief into action and providing solutions to some of the questions and problems that will be debated at COP26.

For example, there is the huge hydro-electric potential of small-scale energy products, such as the Corwen community hydro power scheme in my constituency of Clwyd South. Here, local people came together as a community to build a 55kW hydro scheme in the town. The scheme is 100% owned and run by the community; it raised £300,000 for the construction with a share offer five years ago, over 50% of which was bought by people in and around Corwen. The success of that has led to a second project, which we hope will go into effect in the autumn of this year.

I have also been championing the hydro-electric potential of the River Dee in Llangollen with Town Councillor Stuart Davies. I warmly welcome the decision by members of Llangollen Town Council in April to set up a task and finish group to investigate the feasibility of using the site of de-commissioned hydro units in the town. Schemes such as these highlight the vital role of communities in tackling the bigger challenges of the climate crisis. When it comes to providing the solutions, Wales has historically punched above its weight, and it continues to do so.

Anna McMorrin: The hon. Member is making some excellent points about local community initiatives. Does he agree though that some things need the impetus and leadership of the UK Government, particularly on waste? At the moment, there are still 3 million items of non-recyclable packaging being produced every single day.

Simon Baynes: I agree that the UK Government do play a vital role in this, and I take on board the point that the hon. Lady is making about waste, but I will come on to other aspects of what the UK Government can do later in my speech.

The Prime Minister has said that there is a huge role for Wales and the Welsh Government, stating:

“It’s a huge undertaking by the whole of the UK...Every part of the UK is now working together...to lead the world to get everyone to commit to net-zero by 2050”.

I know that UK Government Ministers frequently speak with their Welsh Government counterparts at the COP26 devolved Administrations ministerial group and liaise with the Welsh Government’s new Minister for Climate Change. As a strong supporter of the Union, I am pleased that the Welsh Government have said that they plan to attend COP26 as part of the UK delegation, as well as to join events with key international networks such as the Under2 Coalition and Regions4. They have also said that they are working closely with event organisers. The future generations commissioner has said that COP26 represents “significant opportunities” for Wales to showcase its achievements in tackling climate change “on a global platform”, and that the Welsh Government have been in discussions with COP26, including on hosting fringe events.

Let me turn to one of the more contentious issues that we have heard about this afternoon. If I may, I will summarise it using the words of the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for whose work and commitment to the environment and climate change I have very high respect. She used the word “transitioning”, which is really important in this debate, because I honestly do not think that any of the devolved Administrations or the UK Government get everything right all the time.

I take on board the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire about having an inclusive debate, but I would constructively suggest that there are areas for improvement by the Welsh Government. For example, they have been slow to establish long-term arrangements for environmental governance. The Interim Office for Environmental Protection is now up and running in England, but the Welsh Government have ruled out joining the OEP and are instead looking to establish a commissioner for the environment. This brings delays—and that is my point about transitioning.

Another such example is that, despite committing to introducing a clean air Act, the Welsh Government have announced that it will not be introduced in the coming parliamentary year. Again, the delay is disappointing. I am sure that some Labour Members could provide constructive explanations as to why the delays are taking place, but delays there are. We should really respect the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) that transitioning to the great climate change revolution that we all want is not always the easiest thing to achieve.

I return to the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) about the UK Government’s involvement. I am pleased that the

Government have committed £90 million to innovative Welsh net zero projects across the country. Wales has the opportunity to benefit from further UK funding, including the active £289 million industrial energy transformation fund, the £250 million clean steel fund, the £240 million net zero hydrogen fund, and the £1 billion carbon capture and storage infrastructure fund. I feel strongly that the UK Government, just like the devolved Administrations, are playing a constructive part in the process.

I join hon. Members from across the UK in my optimism and best wishes for the conference, which the eyes of the world will be following, and I look forward to continuing to champion the role of Wales and the UK in rising to the greatest challenge of our age.

2.3 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Once again, I am struck by a welcome and rare note of consensus across the House on this subject, and the sincere efforts of Members across parties to suggest areas where Governments might make further progress in their drive towards net zero and in creating the truly successful COP that we all want to see. Our planet depends on it, and it is heartening that many Members seem to recognise that. There were too many moments to pick out specifically, as I am conscious of time. Several questions were posed to the Minister, to which I am sure we will be interested to hear the answers, but it appears that the House is of one mind—or at least those Members present are.

Let me just quickly point out to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), in answer to his question to my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) about the poll showing the people of Scotland's preference for the First Minister to represent them at COP, that that was part of a wider opinion poll that, by the way, also showed the SNP taking every seat in Scotland at a Westminster election and support for independence in the majority.

Scotland's abundance of renewable energy resources is widely recognised. It is reckoned that Scotland has won the renewables bonanza, with marine offshore wind and green hydrogen production just a few of the exciting possibilities that we are looking to develop much further. In the last year, 97% of Scotland's electricity came from renewable sources. We also managed to reduce emissions by 31% between 2008 and 2018—faster than the rest of the UK and any G20 nation. Of course, there is much more progress to be made to achieve the ambitions that we all have for emissions reductions, but we are in a fair place, with plenty more to come.

The sixth carbon budget published by the Climate Change Committee said:

“UK climate targets cannot be met without strong policy action across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, tailored for national, regional and local needs... frameworks in Wales and Scotland are ahead of the rest of the UK in emphasising the importance of the potential health and environment benefits, and the need for a just transition.”

I have mentioned just a few of the areas in which Scotland is playing its part in addressing the world's climate emergency—I will be sharing others with the House shortly—but I think those examples serve to demonstrate why the UK Government should be welcoming the genuine participation of the devolved Governments

in COP26: they have very good stories to tell in their own right. I would have thought that a Government who were confident in themselves and their own achievements would be prepared to recognise and promote those stories at this vital climate conference. Scotland not only is providing the stage and setting for COP, but has offered a leading example in many of the areas that need to be tackled.

The Scottish Government have submitted an indicative nationally determined contribution. I understand that it is the first time that a devolved Government, city or region have presented their plans in the format required of nation state parties to the Paris agreement. Scotland also has the world's first climate justice fund, which was recently doubled, and which supports vulnerable communities in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda. We are European co-chair of the Under2 Coalition—a group of more than 220 Governments, representing more than 1.3 billion people and 43% of the global economy—and were one of the first Governments in the world to set binding net zero targets earlier than 2045. We have ambitions to be the world's first net zero aviation region by 2040 and to decarbonise passenger rail by 2035. There is so much more, but I hope that that short taster convinces Members and the Government that Scotland's measures more than warrant our inclusion at the heart of the negotiations.

There has been good co-operation on the considerable logistics around the COP. That is to be welcomed and shows that the Governments are more than capable of pulling together on this vital issue. We welcome the assurances from Ministers that the full costs of policing, transport and other services will be met by the UK Government, as has been agreed. It is, of course, also welcome that the COP President decided to set up meetings with Ministers from the devolved Administrations, stating as he did so:

“All parts of the UK will have important roles to play in ensuring the summit's success”.

However, he will know that, without enabling their meaningful involvement at COP, that exercise is in danger of looking like just box-ticking; and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) has already mentioned the rather brusque communiqués that have issued forth from those meetings. I urge the COP President and the UK Government to give serious consideration to the involvement of the devolved Administrations in the negotiations themselves. That would give additional weight to the Government's influence and credibility.

Anna McMorrin: The hon. Member is making some excellent points on the role of the devolved Administrations in the negotiations themselves. In a past career, I was involved in those negotiations, playing a part with Wales and Scotland along with the UK. It is so important that all parts of the UK are involved in the negotiations themselves. I hope that the Minister will answer that point today.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Lady. I absolutely agree and I am looking forward to the Minister's response on this.

As I say, the involvement of the devolved Administrations in the negotiations would give much more additional weight to the Government's influence and credibility,

[Deidre Brock]

which, I am afraid, particularly following their decision to cut £4 billion from international aid support and the consequent impact on many mitigation and adaptation projects in developing countries, is on a bit of a shoogly peg. It has been significantly diminished, to the COP President's considerable dismay, I am sure.

As the Leader of the House said this morning, COP presents an opportunity to encourage others in the right direction. Scotland's participation, and Wales's and Northern Ireland's, would surely point to the ambitious targets that can be set and the rapid progress that can be achieved, and would serve as a tremendous example of the differences that can be made quite rapidly by even a medium-sized country in its approach to this global crisis. A recent report by the Pembina Institute in Canada concluded:

"None of the oil-and gas-producing provinces are preparing for the decline of oil and gas with"

inclusive, equitable

"transition plans and sufficient measures to deal with fossil fuel liabilities".

Scotland, on the other hand, has just announced a £500 million addition to its just transition funding, with our First Minister making it clear that the destruction wrought on the mining communities by Government policies in the '80s would not be repeated. As she said, failing to plan for the transition to net zero is not an option. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute mentioned, it would be good to see the UK Government commit to match-fund that amount, at least. After all, the Exchequer has done pretty well out of Scotland's oil and gas profits for decades now. It is surely right that there is some recognition of that and that some of that money is returned to Scotland, and the north-east, to assist the tens of thousands of people currently employed to shift to employment in our burgeoning renewables sector, among other opportunities.

Scotland's Just Transition Commission, formed in 2019 by the Scottish Government, produced a report this year, the recommendations of which were all accepted in full by the Scottish Government. A new version of the commission that the Government intend to seek advice from over the life of this Parliament was announced just a couple of days ago. It is worth reminding the House that, in areas the Prime Minister has focused on in his 10-point plan for the UK, such as forestry, electric vehicles and finance, Scotland already leads the way. Scotland already contributes the vast majority of the percentage of plantings to the UK overall figures and recently announced a further £20 million for peatland restoration. We were the first to set ambitions for no new petrol or diesel cars. We created the first climate justice fund in the world. I look forward to the UK Government following suit on that, as it would send an extremely powerful message internationally.

As Scotland and Wales play their part, so we know that our targets cannot be met without similarly strenuous efforts by the UK Government. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we have been looking at renewables on the Scottish Affairs Committee, and our report on aspects of that topic is due out on Friday. Obviously, I cannot refer directly to its contents, but we have heard from a variety of experts on the impact that the unfair transmission grid charging system is having on renewables development in Scotland. Ofgem has been reviewing that outdated

approach, since 2018, I believe, but perhaps the UK Government could have a word in its collective shell-like and get it to put its skates on to arrive at a proposal that does not penalise those developers wishing to take advantage of Scotland's many natural energy resources.

Turning to other areas that my hon. Friend alluded to, carbon capture and storage has been rather kicked from pillar to post over the years, with two carbon capture and storage competitions announced, run and then pulled, at a cost of some £140 million, sadly, just before it looked as if the St Fergus cluster in Scotland was going to win out. We know UK climate targets cannot be met without strong policy action. The St Fergus cluster is by far the most advanced, having established capabilities and in-place supply chains, and deserves to be, I hope, one of the two selected early on in the current competition for increased UK Government investment. I also urge the Government to engage more substantially with the Under2 Coalition on a formal role for states and regions in the negotiations and on the agreement.

We have all seen newspaper reports of silly games being played by Whitehall advisers over how they can cut Scottish Ministers out of participation at COP, but a positive outcome from COP is so much more important than such pettiness. Surely there could be no better sign that the UK is comfortable with being a country of four nations than to invite Scottish Ministers and others into the negotiations to help the UK to deliver the most successful COP26 outcome possible.

2.14 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to respond to this debate on behalf of the Opposition. It has been an interesting and, I must say, surprisingly good-natured debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on securing it.

Let me state at the outset, as indeed I have on each of the all too infrequent occasions this place has considered COP26, that I very much hope we will have more debates on this important subject in the 46 days that remain before the start of the conference. This is a critical moment in the fight against runaway global heating, and the lives of each and every one of our constituents will be affected by its outcome. I think it is still fair to say that this House has not been given sufficient opportunity to engage properly with the summit in the way it should have been, given its significance.

We have heard many thoughtful speeches covering a wide range of issues relating to COP26 and the devolved Administrations. I draw the House's attention, in particular, to the strong contribution made by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute, the excellent contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), and the passionate speech by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), whose contributions I always enjoy and who rightly stressed that while we must have a just transition we must also have climate action at pace and at scale, not least because every year that we delay that action, that transition will become more disruptive for the people we represent.

There is already debate under way internationally about whether the role of devolved Governments, as well as regions and cities, should be more prominent in

the UNFCCC process, and if so, how. For example, should their efforts be formally considered as part of the periodic global stock-takes of the Paris agreement so as to provide for a more accurate sense of where individual countries are in implementing their climate commitments? Of course, when it comes to the negotiations themselves, and our country's role as the host of COP26, primary responsibility lies with the UK Government as the formal party to the UNFCCC. However, as this debate has aptly illustrated, all the constituent parts of the UK clearly have an important contribution to make in ensuring that the summit is a success, and a role in shaping the objectives and efforts of the COP presidency that we hold.

As a number of hon. Members mentioned, the COP26 devolved Administrations ministerial group is the primary mechanism through which the latter can happen, but I hope that as a result of this debate the Government will go away and consider whether they have got the balance right in the extent and nature of the engagement—and, one would hope, collaboration and co-ordination—that has taken place to date, and whether it might in any way be improved on over the coming weeks. Ultimately, we cannot allow tensions between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations—or, for that matter, as several hon. Members said, any constitutional bickering—to put at risk in any way the outcome of this important international event.

Much of the debate has focused on the record of the devolved Administrations as regards their role in UK-wide emissions reductions. That was obviously to be expected, not least because the main input that devolved Governments in general have in domestic implementation and reporting under the UNFCCC process is through the Marrakech partnership for global climate action. However, given the centrality of delivering on our domestic climate commitments to the success of our COP presidency, both in establishing our country's credibility and in maximising its influence as hosts of the conference, we would argue that the devolved Administrations' efforts in this regard are just as important to the outcome of COP26 as their ability to directly influence the Government's negotiating objectives and efforts.

Several hon. Members referred to the record of the Welsh Government, who have not only legislated for a net zero target but published a series of detailed strategies to ensure that that target is met, and are using the policy levers at their disposal to drive decarbonisation efforts, whether that be the use of planning and marine policy to reduce fossil fuel extraction, their innovative housing and optimised retrofit programme, or their success in ensuring that more than 50% of the energy that Wales consumes comes from renewable sources.

Northern Ireland, of course, faces a unique set of circumstances, and concrete progress in areas such as transport has been held back by the failure to deliver on key promises made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. Even so, the Executive in Northern Ireland are in the process of legislating for a climate change Bill. As the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), who is no longer in his place, mentioned in his intervention, it is incredibly important—I hope the Minister takes this on board—that the Government are doing everything possible to ensure political stability in Northern Ireland, not least to help get that legislation through, if possible, before the next set of elections.

When it comes to Scotland, we rightly acknowledge that the Scottish Government have set an ambitious 2045 net zero target and that the Scottish climate change plan has been updated to integrate it, but it is also the case that the SNP Scottish Government have failed to meet their emissions reductions targets for three years running and—I think SNP Members would agree with this—without an acceleration in progress on delivery, beyond the power sector, Scotland will achieve neither the net zero target it chose to set itself nor its interim target of a reduction in emissions of 75% by 2030. Nor—this is the one partisan point I will make in what has been a good-natured debate, but I think it warrants saying—will Scotland's claim to climate leadership be taken seriously if the SNP Scottish Government fail to take a firm stand against projects such as the development of the Cambo oilfield, which I would argue are at odds with that net zero target.

Deidre Brock: Unfortunately, energy is still reserved to Westminster, and the decision on Cambo rests with the Westminster Government. The First Minister has sent a letter to the Prime Minister questioning that and asking that the project be reassessed and, until that reassessment has been made, the development paused or, indeed, halted. That is an important point to make. Of course, the licence was issued under a Labour Government back in 2001 and 2004. That is another point that needs to be made, if we are to get a little party political about it.

Matthew Pennycook: There was no question there, but I take the point. I do not think it is justifiable to hide behind the UK Government or to reference decisions taken in the past. Yes, the leader of the Scottish Government has called for a review. I urge colleagues on the SNP Benches to come out unequivocally in opposition to the Cambo development, as we on the Labour Benches have done.

Ultimately, we all must do more. If each of the devolved Administrations is to exploit the climate action opportunities available to them in key areas such as agriculture, tree planting, waste management, buildings efficiency and public transport, they require a comprehensive net zero strategy from the UK Government and, we would argue, as part of that strategy, a framework for delivery covering every level of sub-national governance.

That point brings me neatly back to the UK Government, and I will begin to bring my remarks to a conclusion at this point, not least because many colleagues want to speak in the next debate. As much as the devolved Administrations can and must do everything within their power to help ensure COP26 is a success, they will be held back unless and until the UK Government do the same. I have to take issue with the contribution from the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), who seemed to suggest that any attempt to chide the UK Government's record when it comes to climate and any attempt to push the Government to do better somehow undermines the Prime Minister at negotiations. It is precisely because we want to strengthen the UK Government's hand that we are arguing that we have to get our own house in order before 1 November and that crucial conference.

It will only be by beginning that conference having unequivocally established our country's credibility as a climate leader here at home that we will have the necessary

[Matthew Pennycook]

influence as host in the critical moments that are bound to arise during the negotiations. That means getting on track for net zero, not just announcing the target. It means showing that we are prioritising decarbonisation across the whole of Government, that we have a comprehensive plan for achieving net zero, that we have locked in a genuine green economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis, and that all decisions the Government make, whether they relate to potential deep coalmines in Cumbria or new fossil fuel projects in the North sea, are entirely consistent with our net zero target. They are not at present.

The Government now have precious little time left to bolster their domestic credibility and to secure the wide range of other pre-conference outcomes necessary to make COP26 a success, not least ensuring that the 2009 promise of \$100 billion in climate finance annually to the developing world is honoured by the end of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly later this month. We must look at our Government's contribution to that commitment. Put simply, every sinew must be strained in the weeks ahead, or we run the very real risk of failure in Glasgow in November. Were that to happen, it would not only be an embarrassment for the Government, but a disaster for our planet. We owe it to future generations to do everything we possibly can to make this conference a success.

2.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Duguid): First, I associate myself with the remarks made by both Opposition Front Benchers on the relatively good-natured nature of this debate. It is fair to say that across the House and across the country, we share an ambition to deliver on the targets we have set. We may debate how we do that from time to time, but we all share that ambition. I also congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for securing this debate. I thank Members from right across the UK—all nations of the UK and both sides of the House have been well represented today—for their contributions.

As a number of Members have said, there are now only seven weeks until the start of COP26, when parties will come together in Glasgow to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris agreement and the United Nations framework convention on climate change. COP26 will be the moment that we will secure a path to global net zero emissions by 2050 and define the next decade of tackling climate change. Together with our Italian partners, with whom we co-host the event, we will work to prevent global temperatures from rising by more than 1.5° C and protect our planet and people from the intensifying impacts of climate change.

To achieve that, the UK has spent the lead-up to COP26 taking four key goals to Governments across the world. Those are, first:

“Secure global net zero by mid-century and keep 1.5 degrees within reach”.

Countries have been asked to come forward with ambitious 2030 emissions reductions targets that align with reaching net zero by the middle of the century. To deliver on those stretching targets, countries will need to accelerate

the phase-out of coal, curtail deforestation, speed up the switch to electric vehicles and encourage investment in renewables, among other things.

The second of those key goals is:

“Adapt to protect communities and natural habitats”.

The climate is already changing, and it will continue to change even as we reduce emissions. At COP26 we need to work together to enable and encourage countries affected by climate change to protect and restore ecosystems and build defences, warning systems and resilient infrastructure and agriculture, to avert, minimise and address loss of and damage to homes, livelihoods and, sadly, in some cases even lives.

The third goal is “Mobilise finance”. To deliver on our first two goals, developed countries must make good on their promise to mobilise at least \$100 billion a year in climate finance by 2020. International financial institutions must play their part and we need to work towards unleashing the trillions in private and public sector finance required to secure global net zero.

The fourth goal is “Work together to deliver”, a key theme in today's debate. We can only rise to the challenges of the climate crisis by working together. At COP26, we must finalise the Paris rulebook—the detailed rules that make the Paris agreement operational—and accelerate action to tackle the climate crisis through collaboration between Governments, businesses and civil society. Again, that is a key point made by many Members today.

Working together also extends to working together across all parts of the United Kingdom. The UK Government are committed to working with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure an inclusive and ambitious summit for the whole UK. All parts of the UK will have important roles to play in ensuring the summit's success.

On summit preparations, the UK Government, on behalf of the UNFCCC, is delighted to be hosting COP26. As we prepare for November, we wish to create a safe, secure, sustainable and inclusive COP26 that sets the conditions for outstanding policy outcomes. We want this to leave a lasting legacy of change in Glasgow, Scotland and the UK, leaving Glasgow flourishing as the host city, while representing value for money for the UK taxpayer. The Government are working closely with public health officials across the UK, the Scottish Government, all our partners and the UNFCCC to enable relevant delegates to participate on an equal footing, while also using technology to make the summit as inclusive as possible. In common with many international events, how COP operates has to adapt to the covid context, so we are making suitable arrangements for that.

The Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council, Public Health Scotland and all the emergency response services in Scotland must be recognised for their work in that.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Beyond the established blue zones and green zones, we also have the fringe around COP26: a very inclusive community with community involvement. A huge part of COP26 is about communities talking to politicians and putting pressure on us to do the right thing. I am delighted that SWG3 has the hub sponsored by *The New York Times*, which has been organised by Louise Hunter, a constituent of mine.

David Duguid: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's constituent will appreciate that mention. With regards to the role of devolved Administrations—the key point of the debate—the COP26 devolved Administration ministerial group, which the COP President-designate chairs, ensures effective engagement and collaboration on COP26 with Ministers in all the devolved Administrations. The most recent one, which I was delighted to attend, took place yesterday. The CPD also regularly speaks to the relevant Scottish Government Minister, Michael Matheson MSP, on the operational matters that I described earlier.

On the role of First Ministers, all parts of the UK will have important roles to play in ensuring the summit's success in line with precedents, and we expect First Ministers and Ministers from the devolved Administrations to play a role, including as part of the UK delegation. The Prime Minister has said that he wants the First Ministers to play an important role. Discussions are ongoing.

Before I conclude—we are pushed for time—I will reflect on a few things said by the CPD in response to a Scottish Parliament Committee this morning. He said that the UK Government welcome the devolved Administrations providing further views on where they wish to be involved. The UK Government will shortly engage with the Presiding Officers of all the devolved legislatures to invite Members to express an interest in attending COP26 in the blue zone. He has ongoing engagement in chairing the UK Mayors and Regions Advisory Council, which includes input from mayors and councils across the United Kingdom.

Anna McMorrin: Will the Minister give way?

David Duguid: Yes, I will take one last intervention before I conclude.

Anna McMorrin: I thank the Minister for being generous. Will the devolved Administrations be within the negotiating team in the delegation? Will they be in the room, taking part in the delegation?

David Duguid: Like I said earlier, there will be a net zero committee—[*Interruption.*] Fundamentally, as the shadow Minister acknowledged, the United Kingdom is the negotiating party, but, as I said—I will refrain from going into detail, because hon. Members are in their places for the following debate—we are committed to getting as much involvement as we can from the devolved Administrations and parliamentarians in those devolved Assemblies in the run-up to the negotiations. I thank hon. Members again for their valuable contributions and for their support to date as we continue preparations for the United Nations climate change conference, COP26, in Glasgow.

2.33 pm

Brendan O'Hara: I put on record again my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), the hon. Members for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham), for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and the Minister for a useful and thoughtful debate.

Although I am the Member of Parliament for Argyll and Bute, where I have lived for the past 20 years, I am Glaswegian to the straps of my second-hand boots. I would burst with pride if Glasgow's COP26 becomes a turning point for the world, but we know that that is not a given. World leaders have the future of our planet in their hands. They have an onerous responsibility, but it is one that they must rise to and meet. They cannot let us down. I thank all Members and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role and response of the devolved Administrations to COP26.

Criminal Justice System: Families Bereaved by Public Disasters

2.35 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move

That this House has considered proposed reforms to the criminal justice system to better respond to families bereaved by public disasters.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this timely debate about learning the lessons of the Hillsborough disaster so that never again will families bereaved by a public disaster have to endure the more than three decades-long ordeal of the Hillsborough families. It is about changing the law to ensure that what happened to them can never again happen to any families bereaved by a public disaster.

I begin by noting that, since the final criminal trials arising from Hillsborough collapsed in May, Mr Andrew Devine sadly died, aged 55, as a direct result of the catastrophic injuries that he received in the crush at Hillsborough in 1989. Liverpool coroner André Rebello recorded a verdict of unlawful killing following his death, which confirms that Andrew Devine is the 97th victim of the Hillsborough disaster. It is only right that his name is read aloud and noted in this place, as were the other 96 by Steve Rotherham, the former Member for Liverpool, Walton, in a debate in the House in 2011.

Hillsborough was a national disaster, not just a disaster affecting Liverpool or a disaster affecting football, and the lessons to be learned are applicable far beyond the circumstances around it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that important point. The debate is obviously centred on Hillsborough, but the lessons apply to other public disasters such as the contaminated blood scandal. The people who have been infected and affected by that scandal stand in solidarity with what she proposes: to ensure that no other family ever has to go through what the Hillsborough families have gone through.

Maria Eagle: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend. It is true that there is a much broader application for the lessons learned from Hillsborough as they relate to other disasters.

The last of the criminal trials relating to Hillsborough collapsed in May, some 32 years after the event. It is surely a catastrophic failure of our criminal justice system that it took so long while still failing so badly to do justice to those who died, their families, those injured and the traumatised survivors. There is something very wrong with how our legal system handles public disasters. Thirty-two years after 97 people were unlawfully killed at a football match, primarily through the gross negligence of the South Yorkshire police—that was proven at the second inquests to a criminal standard of proof—no one has been held to account through our criminal justice system for those killings. For 32 years, those responsible for the disaster have sought to blame the victims and survivors for what happened and deny their own culpability.

It took 23 years for the truth to be acknowledged, following the work of the Hillsborough independent panel in 2012. It was fortunate that the panel was even

set up to do its work following the 20th anniversary memorial event. Earlier that day, Andy Burnham and I, as Ministers in the Brown Government, and with the permission of the Prime Minister, launched our joint call for all documentation relating to Hillsborough to be published to facilitate transparency. The Hillsborough independent panel was established with the powers of a data controller only because of insight from Lord Michael Wills, who was then in charge of freedom of information at the Ministry of Justice. Only because of that formulation was the truth about what happened on that terrible day finally able to be revealed incontrovertibly, with documentation. Only because of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—I am glad to see her in her place—was it allowed to complete its work after the change in Government in 2010. It would have been easy to cancel it at that point, but she did not. For that, she deserves great credit.

It should also be noted that the Hillsborough independent panel was a non-legal process and that it worked by making use of openness and transparency. As a consequence of its work, the original inquest verdicts of accidental death were quashed, but it took 27 years for correct inquest verdicts of unlawful killing to be recorded. Families had to fight for 23 years for the truth to be officially acknowledged, but to this day no one has been held to account for the Hillsborough slurs and the decades-long smear campaign that was conducted by those responsible, the South Yorkshire police, to deflect blame from themselves on to the innocent victims—the dead, the injured and the traumatised survivors.

As Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron apologised to the families in 2012 for the smears they had endured over what was then a 23-year period. From the Dispatch Box, he said that

“these families have suffered a double injustice: the injustice of the appalling events—the failure of the state to protect their loved ones and the indefensible wait to get to the truth; and then the injustice of the denigration of the deceased—that they were somehow at fault for their own deaths. On behalf of the Government and indeed our country, I am profoundly sorry that this double injustice has been left uncorrected for so long.”—[*Official Report*, 12 September 2012; Vol. 550, c. 285-286.]

That full and unequivocal apology was made nine years ago. That should have put a stop to the self-serving lies by the representatives of those who were at fault, but it did not.

Since evidence began to be heard at the new inquests in April 2014, there have been legal proceedings that have required the families to maintain a public silence to avoid prejudicing them, yet the apologists and defenders of the South Yorkshire police and of the individuals responsible for what happened on that day have not been silent. They have reiterated the smears for which the Prime Minister apologised to the families in 2012, and they have done so inside and outside the courtroom. We must change the law to stop this kind of cruel abuse, perpetrated by a public authority using taxpayers' money over decades, from ever happening again.

We must stop legal proceedings arising out of disasters from lasting for decades and from going so wrong, because once things go this wrong, our legal system appears to find it very hard to put things right. We must give the collective voice of the bereaved families agency in the proceedings that inevitably follow a disaster. We must search for the truth using transparency as a key

tool, not allow the legal forums to become a way for moneyed vested interests to set about evading their responsibility for the disasters they have caused. The Public Advocate Bill, which I have introduced again into the House—I have been doing so for a number of years, as Lord Michael Wills has done in the Lords—will do that.

It is timely to have this debate because I know that the Government are now considering their response to Bishop James Jones's 2017 report into the lessons to be learned from Hillsborough, which was commissioned by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead. I hope that, as part of the response to that, the Minister will agree to legislate for an independent public advocate. I know that the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland) was very sympathetic. I am sorry to see that he has lost his place in the Government as I think he was very sympathetic to this call.

My Bill seeks to put bereaved families collectively at the heart of the response to disasters through the establishment of an independent public advocate, who if the bereaved families wish it, will act as a representative of their interests, an adviser and a guide. The advocate, as a data controller, would be able to establish a panel, like the Hillsborough independent panel, to facilitate transparency about what has happened at an early stage. Crucially, this would give the families the capacity to decide collectively on an initiative that would put them at the heart of events, instead of feeling, as bereaved families often do, that they are a mere adjunct to proceedings. This enforced transparency, shining a light into the darkest recesses of the reaction of public authorities caught up in disasters, would torpedo attempted cover-ups and do so at an early stage.

Let me be clear: this role would not replace that of more traditional legal advocates—barristers, solicitors—who would continue to act for individuals in specific legal proceedings; it would fulfil a different and an additional role. The proposal would not require new institutional arrangements or place any burden on the Exchequer. It would not require an open cheque book. On the contrary, the transparency it would bring could save millions of pounds in drawn-out adversarial proceedings over many years or decades.

I am pleased to have the support of many of the most prominent and active members of the Hillsborough Families Support Group who have written a letter published today in the *Daily Mirror*. They say:

“We are members of families bereaved by the Hillsborough disaster more than 32 years ago who have been active in the campaign for truth and justice.

It took us 23 years of relentless campaigning to have the truth about what happened to our family members finally officially acknowledged. It took 26 years to get accurate inquest verdicts of unlawful killing. The collapse of the criminal trials in May means that after 32 years no-one responsible has been held to account by our criminal justice system for the unlawful killings of 97 innocent children, women and men.

We do not want any other families to endure what we have had to go through simply because they are caught up in a disaster through no fault of their own.

We believe that an independent Public Advocate as proposed by Maria Eagle MP and Lord Michael Wills would stop families bereaved by public disasters in future from ever having to go through what we have had to endure over the last 32 years.

We note that the Government of Theresa May consulted on establishing such an office in 2017 but the proposal appears to have been dropped by the current Government.

We hope that the Lord Chancellor will use the occasion of the debate in the House of Commons on September 16 to announce the creation of an independent Public Advocate as promised in his 2017 manifesto. We consider that such a change will be an important part of the legacy of the 97 and of our long and hard campaign for truth and justice.”

As the Government are considering their response to Bishop James's report, I say that I know, because he has told me, that he is fully supportive of the establishment of an independent public advocate. He told me that he has been persuaded by his experience of meeting families involved in other disasters, such as Gosport and the infected blood scandal, that such a position is necessary. I am very supportive of his own findings. In particular, three recommendations of his are key: the proposed charter for families bereaved through public tragedy, equality of arms at inquests and the statutory duty of candour. These measures are undoubtedly valuable, and the Government should adopt them. However, I think the only way of preventing disasters going so catastrophically wrong over decades is to establish an independent public advocate. The families back this reform, Bishop James backs this reform and the Conservative party had it in its manifesto in 2017, so I hope that all of us across the House can get behind it and legislate for it now.

I was first elected to this House, over 24 years ago, on 1 May 1997. The first of my new constituents to contact me shortly after were the bereaved families of those who had been killed in the Hillsborough disaster then nine years earlier. They had by that time already endured almost a decade of legal actions, including the Taylor inquiry, the first inquests, civil claims, decisions not to discipline or to prosecute the South Yorkshire police commanders in charge on that day, judicial reviews of various such decisions, appeals and every other kind of legal action imaginable, such that it seemed even then as though there was little chance of further recourse for them through our legal system.

I met four of the Hillsborough Families Support Group committee in the home of one of them in my constituency. I met Phil Hammond, who lost his son in the disaster and was then chair of the Hillsborough Families Support Group. I met Jenni Hicks, who lost both her daughters in the disaster. We met in the home of Doreen Jones, who lost her son and his fiancée, and very nearly her daughter too. I also met Trevor Hicks, who was prominent then in the campaign.

I was struck by the raw pain and deep anger of Phil Hammond. I still remember it; it was as if he was reliving the day of the disaster—as if it had been yesterday—in minute detail as he talked, yet this was nine years on, and almost all possible legal avenues had already been tried and had failed the families in getting to the truth or achieving justice for the bereaved. He was so appalled and upset at the fact that he felt that his young son who had been killed was being blamed for what had happened to him when he was a wholly innocent boy and that those responsible, South Yorkshire police, were not intent upon telling the truth and learning lessons, as Lord Justice Taylor had exhorted them to do, but were instead engaged in the callous pursuit of blaming the victims of the tragedy, no matter what pain and hurt they caused in the process.

While we had a tea break in our meeting, I overheard Trevor Hicks telling Jenni that he had been contacted by a new witness who perhaps had some information

[Maria Eagle]

about one of their two young daughters and what had happened to her during the missing hours between their going into Leppings Lane and the confirmation that both of them had been killed. I was struck by the fact that this basic information was what the inquests were supposed to have provided to the grieving families, but the inquests came nowhere near fulfilling that basic purpose. It was not until the second inquests began, a full 17 years after this meeting, that our legal system even tried to answer those questions for the bereaved families.

I knew how wrong things had gone, how thoroughly the families had been let down and their loved ones, Liverpool fans and the survivors traduced, and I have tried to do all I can to help them and other families ever since. They have all been central figures in the Hillsborough families' fight for truth and justice, along with many others, and I want to take this opportunity to say that without their unbelievable efforts over so many years the truth would not have been acknowledged and the correct inquest verdicts would not have been handed down. Their achievements and those of other families and representatives, such as Margaret Aspinall, Sue Roberts, the indefatigable Anne Williams and others too numerous to mention, are monumental. Their fortitude, dignity, persistence and determination had to be seen to be believed. They have needed all of those qualities for all of the 32 and a half years that it has taken.

This year the Hillsborough Family Support Group has disbanded, knowing now that they can do no more. They have the truth and they have achieved a measure of justice, but there has been no accountability. They have, between them, all truly done everything they possibly can for their lost loved ones. Now it is up to those of us in this House and Ministers in this Government to learn the lessons that their commitment, their fortitude and their togetherness over such a long period have taught us. We owe it to them to get it right: we owe it to those 97 people unlawfully killed by the gross negligence of South Yorkshire police on that day in 1989 to make sure that what has happened to these bereaved families and survivors can never happen again to families bereaved in public disasters—and there will be more disasters; there have been.

The establishment of an independent public advocate will help to achieve that. I call upon the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary and the Government to heed those who really do know best, the Hillsborough families themselves, and use the occasion of this debate to announce that they will now do what they said they would in 2017 and establish an office of the independent public advocate. Now is the time to move forward and implement those learned lessons of Hillsborough and at long last change the law to prevent what went so wrong in that case from ever happening to any other families again.

2.52 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this important debate. I thank her for her kind words about me, but I also congratulate her on a passionate and heartfelt speech. I agree with what she said; I will come on to the reasons why but want

first to say that she has been a fine and fiery champion for the Hillsborough families since she entered this House. I am only sorry that it has taken so long for us to get to the position where the Hillsborough families actually know what happened on that day and where Government should be in a position to take action to ensure other families do not suffer in the same way.

In my time as Home Secretary and Prime Minister I dealt with a number of situations where victims, survivors and families bereaved as a result of public disasters found that their pain and suffering were compounded by the fact that they had to deal with the reaction of various organs of the state. Obviously, the hon. Lady focused on Hillsborough, but, as the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) referenced in an intervention, that is not the only example of such situations happening. Too often the public sector and Government, which should be supporting bereaved families when there has been a public disaster and be on the side of those families, instead retreat into a defensive position: they put up the barricades. The families and victims and survivors then find that they not only have to deal with the aftermath of the tragedy—with loss, injury and all the other aspects of that tragedy—but that they are beating their heads against the closed door of the public sector. That is in the criminal justice system and in other aspects of the public sector.

Of course, what that leads to is an adversarial situation where both sides grow increasingly apart and increasingly sense that the other is just against them. That should not be the case, but more than that, that adversarial situation makes it much harder to provide for the needs of the bereaved families, it makes it much harder to get to the truth of what has happened, and it hampers the justice process.

It was the need to change that situation that led me to putting this commitment in the Conservative party manifesto in 2017:

“To ensure that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families over the last twenty years is not repeated, we will introduce an independent public advocate, who will act for bereaved families after a public disaster and support them at public inquests.”

However, that is not just an idea that we have heard from the Conservative Benches; the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood has been promoting it for some considerable time, and it has cross-party support. It should have support from everybody in the House. May I just say, as an aside, that I am grateful that the Chairman of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), is here? I am only sorry that there are not more of my colleagues here to speak on what I consider to be a very important topic.

The need for an independent public advocate was echoed later by Bishop James Jones in his report, “The patronising disposition of unaccountable power”. He wrote:

“I believe that this report confirms the need for an independent public advocate in these circumstances, but to ensure that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated I would caution against the adoption of too narrow a definition of ‘public disaster’. As this report shows, many of the experiences of the Hillsborough families are very sadly also reflected in the experience of families bereaved through other forms of public tragedy where the state has fallen short.”

He provided a charter for the public advocate. He also suggested that they should be involved in ensuring that social work and other support was available to bereaved

families in engaging with the media, to try to ensure that the bereaved were treated with dignity and respect—something that certainly did not happen in the case of the Hillsborough families; in fact, the very reverse happened to them—and in ensuring that bereaved families were kept properly and fully informed at all times.

That point of information is critical. Families want to know what is happening; they want to be informed. But that can be a two-way street, because there will be occasions when it is important for the families to have full information as to why they cannot have a particular piece of information—for example, if it would prejudice an ongoing criminal investigation. What matters is that there is that degree of transparency and not a feeling of cover-up.

Critically, the independent public advocate must be not just, as the name suggests, independent, but someone who can be recognised as independent by the bereaved families. To put it simply, the independent public advocate is there to be on the side of the families, to help explain and guide them through the processes and to get information for them—including, I suggest, dealing with breaking down any barriers to information that are put up by the public sector.

None of us wants to see any more public disasters that lead to the loss of lives, but sadly, as the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood said, we know that things will happen, and therefore it is imperative that the Government act with urgency to put in place an independent public advocate. We took an important step in 2017. I am sorry that it was not repeated at the 2019 election. The previous Lord Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), recognised the importance of this issue, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to him for the work that he did in Government. He recognised the need for this role, and I hope that the incoming Lord Chancellor will do so too.

I am certain that introducing an independent public advocate is critical to ensuring that families bereaved as a result of public disasters in the future do not suffer in the way that the Hillsborough families suffered, but that they have someone they can turn to in their hour of need, and someone who they know will be working for them. Let me say to the Government that it is not just in the interests of those families but, actually, in the interests of the Government and the public sector that an independent public advocate should exist and should be able to ensure that we do not get into an adversarial situation, smooth the relationship between the two sides and ensure that everything moves rather more quickly. Governments should not just see this as something they may or may not be giving to potentially bereaved families in future; they should see that, actually, there is an interest for the Government in having an independent public advocate in place. That is certainly what I would argue. I would hope that the introduction of such a post would, over time, lead the public sector to recognise that it should not be defensive in such situations and that it should take a different approach—stopping the cover-up mentality in future.

I want to raise one further issue if I may. The reason why the most recent trials collapsed was that, although it was accepted that individuals had doctored evidence, it was evidence given to what was an administrative function of the Home Office rather than a public inquiry.

Obviously, the Inquiries Act 2005 did not exist at the time. If we take the logical next step, it would be to set everything up as a 2005 Inquiries Act inquiry. Government Departments have a natural reluctance to set up public inquiries, partly because of the cost and the length of time they often take. We have seen, through the Hillsborough independent panel, that there are often other means of getting at the truth that can be equally beneficial and indeed, in terms of process, may be more helpful to all those involved. I ask the Minister to consider whether it is possible for the Government to address the issue that something that is not under the 2005 Act could lead to a similar situation in future, but to keep open the options for Government in terms of the types of inquiry that can be set up—the panel or the 2005 Act.

Finally, I want to return to the issue of the independent public advocate. I absolutely agree with everything the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood said on this issue. It is something the Government should take up as a matter of urgency. I am happy to beat a path to the door of the new incoming Lord Chancellor, once he has got his feet under the table, to try to persuade him, should he show any reluctance, of the importance of doing this. The Hillsborough families deserve that. They have been through hell since that fatal day. They do not want to see other people having that same experience. We owe it to them.

3.2 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): This is the commitment from the Government in their consultation paper, apparently establishing an independent public advocate:

“The government is committed to introducing an Independent Public Advocate who will act for bereaved families after a public disaster and support them at inquests and inquiries.”

I welcome the presence today of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). She has done so much to push this matter on, and I would like to thank her.

The consultation ended on 3 December 2018, not far off three years ago. I need not remind right hon. and hon. Members, as my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) did, that it took from 1991 to 2016, a quarter of a century, for a decision to overturn the 1991 verdict of accidental death for the 96 Hillsborough victims, now 97, concluding that those who lost their lives were unlawfully killed. In that case, the wheels of justice did not even move one inch for decades, let alone grind slowly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) put a written question to the Justice Secretary on 13 January 2020 on when the process would be in place for the advocate. The Minister responded, “in due course”. At the risk of sounding a tad exasperated, an awful lot of things come in due course—the timeline is pretty long. For example, the end of the world will come in due course. So it would be helpful if the Minister could, in due course, preferably by the end of this day, give the House a date for when the Government’s commitment to what they promised will actually be delivered.

Is it too much to ask, on behalf of those who lost their lives in those dreadful disasters, that their families and loved ones will be able to get the answers they need and deserve, the support they need, the comfort they need and the justice they need? The justice is calling out

[Peter Dowd]

to be heard. It is our responsibility here to ensure that those cries, those demands, those entitlements are not just heard, but acted on. Is my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood asking for too much?

I thank my hon. Friend for pursuing this matter with her usual single-mindedness and determination. Her usual forthrightness, focus and tireless work on this issue is matched only by her compassion for those affected by such life-changing experiences. She has shown that again today in spades. It is the responsibility of this House to match her action, her compassion and her determination and support her Bill, not in due course, but now. Let the Minister end this delay, prevarication and procrastination now—today, this afternoon. Let him give not just another commitment or promise, but on behalf of the Government, a cast-iron guarantee that they will support my hon. Friend's Bill through its parliamentary journey. In a civilised and modern democracy, which has had more than its fair share of disasters that have so affected the lives of so many people, is it really too much to ask for the Government to get on with the job? Is it too much to ask the Government to deliver what they promised? Is it too much to ask the Government to ensure that the victims, in the wider sense of the word, are looked after?

It is time to stop hiding behind the hackneyed old excuses for not acting. We all know that the Government can act if they choose to do so. Only this week a Bill spending £10 billion annually—the Health and Social Care Levy Bill—went through the House of Commons in just one day. Why did the Government do it? Because they wanted to and because they had the will, the wherewithal and the commitment to do it. That is the question that the Government must ask of themselves: do they have the commitment? It is the question that this House must ask of them. It is the question that the families of the victims are asking. It is the question being asked of the Government by so many people who see the injustices being prolonged. Do the Government have the will to do it? If so, the next question is: when?

Finally, my hon. Friend's Bill has the widespread support of so many individuals and groups, including our former Members of this House, Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham, the Mayors of Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region. It also includes the former Hillsborough family support group led by its former chair, Margaret Aspinall, who my hon. Friend referred to and who did so much over 30 years to keep the flame of justice burning for the 97 people who died as a result of that disaster. Let the passing of this Bill be another tribute—one of many—to those who have lost their lives in such tragic circumstances and to the persistence, passion and determination of their loved ones.

3.7 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a privilege and it is actually very humbling to speak in this debate. I wanted to do so both as Chair of the Justice Committee and out of respect for my fellow Committee member, the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle)—as well as the victims, of course, of this awful disaster and many others—because

she has pursued this issue with great vigour as a constituency MP. She has also pursued it—I am grateful to her for doing so—through the Justice Committee and the report that we recently published on reform of the coronial system, so I particularly wanted to be here.

As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will start by asking the House's indulgence of the fact that I may need to leave before the end of the debate, because there is a pressing family matter that I need to attend to and which the Front Benchers and the hon. Lady also know about. None the less, I thought it was important to be here.

I also welcome the Minister to his place. He will know from his service on the Justice Committee how seriously this matter has been taken and the energy with which the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood has pursued this case. She has done a service for the House, for her constituents and for the country more broadly, because this raises important issues of policy relating to how we deal with a particular tragic set of circumstances, where there are multiple deaths in consequence of a catastrophic failure through the regulation or other form of conduct by a public authority, in most cases, and sometimes by significant private corporations.

I was also particularly pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) here, and I join the tributes to her for the courage and sheer decency that she showed throughout her pursuit of this issue both as Home Secretary and Prime Minister. The fact that she continues to pursue these issues having left office, says a great deal about her and the calibre of person she is. I agreed with everything that she said in her speech, and I hope that the Government will take it on board.

I cannot see for the life of me why we did not continue that commitment to a public advocate in the 2019 manifesto. As far as I am concerned, to paraphrase John Maynard Keynes, the facts have not changed, and I see no reason why we should change our opinion either. The overall cost of such a matter to the public purse is very small indeed in comparison with the importance in human terms of the issues that arise, and the public good that can arise. The purpose of inquests is not simply to determine the cause of death, but also—particularly through the powers of the coroner to write a statutory letter—to improve behaviour for the future, and to change practice. I think the importance of that is often underestimated.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for all those reasons. I also wish to join in the tributes that have been paid to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), who showed such sensitivity towards this issue during his time as Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. I have made no bones about what I feel about his departure from government. I simply say now that the Government are the poorer for his departure.

The specific issues that we are debating have been well rehearsed by the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood, and I do not seek to repeat what she has said, but I do point out that what she has said is reflected, in many respects, in a number of the recommendations of the Justice Committee's report on reform of the coronial system, which was published earlier this year. I am grateful to other members of the Committee, past and present, for being here today.

The coronial system has many merits, but in these cases it does not work satisfactorily. There are other issues with it, some of which coincide with the issues that are highlighted here. Examples are the variation of practice between coronial areas and the lack of a strong system of central support—the appointment of a new Chief Coroner, together with the work of the first two Chief Coroners, has done a great deal to improve that, but there is still a lack of structure to underpin it—and the fact that the inquest rules and procedures do not give the coroner anything like the degree of case management control that, for instance, a High Court judge or a circuit judge would have in the same circumstances, in terms of dealing with interlocutory issues, admissibility of evidence, and the appropriateness of lines of cross-examination.

If we are to try to preserve the coronial system, which I think is a good one, we must ensure that it can be adapted to different types of case. That which relates to a tragic death, for example in unexplained circumstances, but where the medical issues are pretty simple and straightforward and there are no other significant extraneous issues of fact to consider—or even to a comparatively straightforward but sad personal injuries death—requires a procedure that is wholly different from, and much simpler than, that which occurs in multi-handed inquests in which significant state or private actors are engaged and in which the issue of legal resource will come into play.

We also need to think about the position of a purely inquisitorial system when there are third parties, the bereaved families, who have a direct means of engagement. Regrettably, the current system cannot always guarantee that they will have the level of input to the system that they should have, and that they will have, for example, sufficient access to evidence to make the case in a way that enables them to feel that all the relevant issues have been fully ventilated.

There are broader issues, too, that arise from Hillsborough, in relation to what I think we can now perceive to be deficiencies in the substantive law itself, in two areas. One, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead referred, is the whole question of the status of evidence given to a non-statutory inquest. I think most people were surprised that that exists. It was inevitable—the ruling of the judge, Mr Justice Davis, a very experienced trial judge, cannot be faulted in law—but that does say something about the position of the law.

Perhaps, as my right hon. Friend suggested, it would be a measure of over-engineering to require every such inquest to be conducted on a statutory basis, but that is the only safe means by which people could be held to account in these circumstances. Perhaps we could expand the definition in some way, let us say by analogy with the law of perjury or by adopting other definitions of misconduct in public office, because after all these people were acting in public office in this case when they made the demonstrably false statements. There ought, surely, to be a legislative device which could achieve that, and I am sure that it would have the support of the whole House. Maybe the Law Commission could be asked to look swiftly at these matters. It is able to respond in a timely way to specific technical issues of law when required.

There is also the issue of procedure. We need to strengthen the tools for coroners to get to the truth and ensure fairness for all the relevant parties and interests involved. We also have to ensure that, in cases involving bereaved families, the families are made much more central to the system. That is why we have recommended that there should be a charter for bereaved families appearing before the coronial system. There is already a guide to service for bereaved people, and that is fine as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. We recommended going further and putting this on a much stronger and more formal basis. We also recommended strengthening the amount of specialist support services available.

I rather regret that the Government have not gone as far as I would wish in adopting all these recommendations. Again, the cost in the overall scheme of things is tiny. The Minister, when he was a very effective member of the Justice Committee, often made the case that, when we talked about spending on the courts system, we were talking about a fraction of a fraction, and I totally agreed with him. Well, spending on support services for bereaved families in coroners inquests and proceedings is a fraction of a fraction of a fraction, if I can put it that way, but the benefit in human and societal terms would be very great indeed. I hope that the Government will reflect that they can move further on their response to our recommendations.

In addition to arguing for a charter of rights, we argued that there should be a much more structured means of ensuring access to evidence. At the moment, this is far too dependent on the discretion of the individual coroner. There are not the same rules on the disclosure of evidence as would exist in a criminal trial on like facts in the Crown Court, and that is unsatisfactory. We also supported the recommendation for a duty of candour, and I suspect that Bishop James's report will also go down that route. I know that the Government have said that this recommendation will be considered alongside their response to Bishop James's report. The Select Committee reached this conclusion on very compelling evidence. The evidence that we heard throughout the inquiry pointed strongly in one direction on virtually all the points before us. I hope that, when the Bishop has produced his report, the Government will take the opportunity to act and bring in a duty of candour.

The other important issue that we want to look at is equality of arms. Where there has been a significant loss of life and where significant public interest issues arise in terms of the conduct of those responsible for the premises or the events that have given rise to the deaths, it cannot be right that one side can be represented by heavyweight legal teams, effectively at the taxpayer's expense when these are public bodies, while the families have to rely on the very restrictive parameters of the exceptional funding scheme for legal aid. Again, we are not talking about a large number of cases. We are not talking about a general extension of legal aid to inquests, because that would change the inquisitorial nature of the system. That is not what we are arguing for, and that is not what the evidence has suggested. It said that, for a specific type of inquest involving specific tragic events, equality of arms and fairness would dictate that those families should have access to non-means-tested legal aid. That would be in the public interest, to ensure that

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

all the issues were properly ventilated and that the coroner's recommendations would fully deal with any issues relating to the prevention of future deaths.

I have perhaps trespassed for some time on the House's time, but I think this issue warrants full and proper debate. It is a shame that we do not have more people here to discuss it, but I hope that we will have other opportunities to do so. If I am unable to be here when the Minister responds to the debate, I shall read his remarks with interest. I know that he will respond fully and conscientiously, for he is a considerable asset to the Government and I very much hope that he will continue to be so when the day is out. I am confident that he will, if there is any reward for ability and diligence in politics. I know that he is well seized of these issues, and if he cannot give us everything that we would like today, I urge him to ask the new Lord Chancellor—who I hope will continue to be his boss—to take these issues seriously and not to be afraid to revisit them, because there is profound evidence to support them. On that Keynesian basis, if the evidence and the facts are there, a shrewd person will act according to the evidence and facts and make these reforms, which would cost very little but would achieve a great deal.

3.19 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for securing this important debate. She has, for many years, worked with campaigners and used her voice in this place to speak up for our city, which suffered its darkest hours on and in the aftermath of 15 April 1989.

Our city on the banks of the Mersey in the north-west of England is one that knows only solidarity, love and empathy. We are a city that has one another's back, and we know all too well that an injustice to one is an injustice to all. I can say proudly that the bonds that were forged in the fire of 15 April 1989 are as strong as ever.

As I have said previously in this place, Scousers have long memories. We shall never forget. We will continue to mourn our lost sons and daughters, and we will always fight for justice and for truth, opposing with every fibre of our being those who continue to spread the appalling lies of that fateful day.

More recently, in July, we lost Andrew Devine, who suffered a severe loss of oxygen in the crush on that day in 1989, resulting in brain damage. We now say, "Justice for the 97."

It is these characteristics of solidarity and love, and these experiences of loss and trauma, that have come to define who we are as people. That spirit of a people who speak with one voice is written in the words of Jenni Hicks, who lost her two daughters, Victoria and Sarah, at Hillsborough:

"I'll never get that accountability for my daughters but we're still fighting on behalf of Grenfell, Manchester Arena and other disasters that are bound to happen in future. What runs alongside the loss of my daughters is the knowledge that this is a country that's prepared to accept this injustice and that's why the system has to be changed. You can't just say that's it, that's how it is. If something's wrong you have to try and do something about it."

Those words resonated with me and I am sure they will with anyone who reads them. After it was ruled in May this year that the quest for justice and the accountability

that comes with it may well be over, Jenni had the bravery to recognise the progress that had been made and that the decades-long campaign had not been in vain, even if those responsible for the loss of human life and the resulting cover-up will not be held accountable.

While the trial was proceeding and they were denying a cover-up, present-day South Yorkshire police were agreeing compensation to 600 relatives and survivors on the back of the force's campaign of lies, perverting the course of justice and sweeping under the carpet their own gross negligence that resulted in the deaths of so many. The fight for justice was long and, yes, it has still eluded all in our city who believe with every fibre of our being that, with truth, comes justice and that, with justice, accountability should follow. Of course, as we know, the latter has never been delivered for the people of my city.

But we do not sit still in Liverpool. We say "Never again," and it does not just apply to our struggle. Jenni Hicks has it right. If something is wrong, we have to try to do something about it. That is why we are here today. Sadly, we know too well that future disasters will happen, that human suffering at certain flashpoints will be immense and that the establishment's immediate response will be to batten down the hatches and protect its own interests, against the interests of those who have suffered and lost so much. If any small flicker of light can come from the darkness of Hillsborough, it must be protection for succeeding generations from the pain and anguish of the lies, misinformation and cover-up that we witnessed and suffered for more than three decades.

We know here today that we can go so much further, and the provision afforded under law can be expanded. Ultimately, the criminal justice system must better respond to families bereaved by public disasters. Not doing so is a grotesque abdication of the responsibility of those in this place to those we represent—those who do not possess the levers of power and those with little resource, other than their collective and determined voice. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood said, this is why we need thorough legislation and the introduction of an independent public advocate. I also thank the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for her comments today.

So when we say, "Never again" on Hillsborough and the likes of Grenfell, we are not just referring to the tragedy itself. Loud and clear, we say "Never again" for a decades-long fight for what I talked about earlier: truth, justice and accountability. If the law does not place itself on the side of ordinary people—good and decent people—it will only consign itself as a hobby tool for the privileged and powerful in safeguarding their own interests. I implore this Government to hear the voices not just of those in this place today, but of the people who do not walk these corridors of power. Let us give some power to them. Let us elevate their voices. Anything less is an injustice itself.

3.26 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for securing a debate that is of such great significance to our constituents. Like all of my hon. Friends from Merseyside, my thoughts today are with the loved ones of the 97 victims of the Hillsborough disaster. Andrew Devine, the last victim, died in July,

aged just 55, from the catastrophic injuries he suffered that day, before he ever had the chance to see justice done.

More than 30 years after the tragedy, the campaign for truth and justice continues. Throughout it all, the families of the 97 have endured things most of us could barely begin to imagine. The pain and grief of losing loved ones who simply went to watch a football match but never came back is heart breaking, but the disgusting lies and smears against the victims by the gutter press, the protracted efforts by South Yorkshire police to cover up their role in that day's events and the disinterest in doing anything to redress injustice shown by successive Governments all magnified the terrible hurt suffered by the families. Through all this, those families and their supporters stood firm and dignified. They never gave up their quest for justice. We must take inspiration from their determination. It is incumbent upon those of us who have the privilege of serving in this place to ensure that no one is left to struggle so hard and for so long again.

I applaud the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood to enshrine the right to a public advocate in law. For far too long, grieving families have been forced to navigate complex legal bureaucracies alone, without the resources, connections and access to expertise that the wealthiest in our society take for granted. Her private Member's Bill would go a long way to putting this wrong to rights and to ensuring that no one is denied justice, as the families of the Hillsborough victims have been. I look forward to supporting its Second Reading next month. She has brought to this debate characteristic passion, as well as her considerable experience, both in law and in government, but in truth it should never have fallen on her shoulders to fight this fight. The right to a public advocate has broad cross-party support and was even included as a proposal in the 2017 Queen's Speech, but more than four years later, the people whose lives were torn apart by the Hillsborough disaster are still waiting, as are the victims of subsequent disasters such as the Grenfell fire.

The Lord Chancellor's unceremonious firing yesterday was met with widespread condemnation from Conservative Members, but it would have been warmly welcomed by many of the people I represent who have waited so long to see the Government honour their commitments. After all, a Justice Secretary who does not see justice done does not merit that high office. His successor must prove that the Government are serious when they say that they are committed to giving families bereaved by public disaster a voice. They must act to end the wait for truth and justice.

3.30 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for everything that she has done for Hillsborough survivors and families. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for allowing me leave from the Building Safety Bill Committee. I know that he and my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) both desperately wanted to attend this debate; however, they have to attend the Committee to scrutinise the Bill, so I place this on record on their behalf and for their constituents.

On Wednesday 26 May 2021, the British legal system and the establishment delivered their final insult to the families and survivors of Hillsborough, after three decades of what felt like a targeted attack on them and on a city. Ninety-seven people were unlawfully killed at Hillsborough, due to police gross negligence. A nightmare 32-year ordeal through the British legal system has ended with an outcome that feels like a final insult. Mr Justice William Davis's ruling in May acquitted two ex-South Yorkshire police officers and the force's former lawyer of perverting the course of justice by amending police statements. Mr Justice Davis's view, apparently, is that the police officers and their solicitor could, in principle, legally withhold crucial evidence from the Taylor inquiry.

The result is that nobody has been held accountable for the needless deaths, injuries and enduring trauma suffered at Hillsborough, despite the 2016 inquest verdicts that the 96—now 97—victims were unlawfully killed due to the disastrous actions of the police and the officer in command, Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield. Is it any wonder that faith in the legal system has been utterly corroded for many after the experiences suffered?

This can never be repeated. Justice has been denied for so many. That is why the proposed Bill and set of reforms matter so much. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) has been a champion of the families and survivors since her election; I thank her for everything she has done for them. She will never know how much it has meant.

My own experience will be familiar to many survivors, but I would like to take the House back to a 16-year-old in 1989—how his view of the establishment was shaped and why this Bill matters so much to him. I watched the horrors of Hillsborough unfold from the side pen because of fate.

In 1988, I had stood with my two friends directly behind the goal—it was edgy, but we walked out celebrating a great victory and got home safely. In 1989, we had another Kopite with us. We headed back to the same place for the big game hours before, full of excitement and anticipation, like so many others. My friend started feeling extremely uncomfortable with the numbers, and we decided to move our way back down the tunnel to a side pen. That was fate, because it was before Duckenfield made his disastrous decision. I am sure all four of us who were there, and who are now parents and grandparents, thank whatever powers made us take that fateful decision to move.

I knew my dad and his mates—

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ian Byrne: Yes.

Sir George Howarth: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and suitably emotional case. As he knows, I spent a day at the original inquest; does he agree that that inquest, which thankfully was overturned later, was an absolute travesty of what should have taken place? A few moments ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) talked about the importance of truth; an inquest should be the occasion on which we get the truth, but that inquest did not.

Ian Byrne: Absolutely. I thank my right hon. Friend.

I knew my dad and his mates were also in the stadium, along with many of my friends from school and my area. You immediately think of your nearest and dearest, while watching events, powerless to do anything, next to the pens. I will never, ever forget the kindness of the people of Sheffield who, as we walked home to the station, numbed, were asking whether we wanted to phone home to tell our families that we were safe. Like many others, I had family and friends in Leppings Lane, and—this was before we had mobile phones and social media—we were hearing rumours of how many people were injured and how many had died. So it was a long, long journey home. In the next few days, I got the call from my dad saying he was okay, plus his friends. But then the calls came telling us we had lost friends from school and our community. It is something you never forget. Thirty-seven people who died at Hillsborough were teenagers.

Back in 1989, the printed media were all-powerful, and in the days after the disaster, when you were trying to come to terms with what had happened and process it, we had the infamous headline from the rag I will not name. The “Truth” headline made me, at 16 years of age, question my own sanity. I had watched the fans supporting each other, giving mouth-to-mouth on the pitch, ferrying the injured on stretchers—how could this be what the media were saying? Then we had South Yorkshire police initiate the smears and lies that reverberated around the world, backed by the Prime Minister of the day, Margaret Thatcher, and her press officer, Bernard Ingham. The narrative was all-powerful and the establishment was spinning it for all it was worth. And we had a set of fans and a city that never stood a chance. In the face of the unrelenting media onslaught and spin, if I was questioning my own eyes, how easy was it for the vast majority of this nation—and, indeed, the world—to swallow the orchestra of lies that was the establishment’s version of Hillsborough?

In the weeks after Hillsborough, when we had laid our scarves on the hallowed turf at Anfield and laid our friends to rest, I was visited by two police officers from the West Midlands police force to take my version of events on that fateful day. We sat down in my living room—I was 16—and the first and last question was, “How much alcohol had you drunk on the day, Ian?” I asked them to leave—that is the polite version for this Chamber—and that was my first taste, in person, of the cover-up by the respective police forces. That is why the proposed reforms—the Public Advocate Bill, the Hillsborough law and the set of measures that have been so well outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood—matter. We cannot ever allow the events and response after a disaster to be shaped by the perpetrators and the innocent to be smeared and denied justice. We cannot ever again allow mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters to go through the pain and agony that the families and survivors of Hillsborough endured.

If we learn one thing from the greatest miscarriage of justice ever seen in this country it must be this: truth and justice must be something that every victim of a disaster can expect to receive from the state. The template must be the Hillsborough independent panel, which changed everything. I am eternally grateful to the politicians

who enabled it and to the panel members for their work in giving the world the true story of the Hillsborough disaster.

In this fight for truth and justice, I have met some of the greatest people I will ever meet in my life—through the tragedy of Hillsborough. These are the people and experiences that have shaped my life and my thinking. Over the last three decades, I have watched politicians from both side of this House betray the families and dismiss their version of events, afraid of upsetting the establishment narrative. And some on this side still pander to the media barons responsible for the headlines that have caused such anguish to our people and city. It is hard to swallow now that we know the real truth.

The decision by a judge in May to ensure that no one was held accountable for 97 unlawful killings, after 32 years of lies, smears and cover-ups, was a bitter pill to swallow for so many. I personally feel a huge sense of responsibility—as a 16-year-old boy at Hillsborough who has travelled to these green Benches—to the families, survivors and my city to do everything in my power to ensure that we have some form of legacy from an establishment that owes us.

My esteemed colleague’s Bill and its proposed reforms will give some comfort to the families and survivors that other families involved in any future disaster will not face what befell them after the fateful day of 15 April 1989. I wholly support the Public Advocate Bill and I urge the Minister to do the same.

3.40 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is an honour and a privilege to follow my friend, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), in this debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on her tireless campaigning on this issue and on what I thought was an excellent speech that covered what the families have been through for years and years.

I pay tribute to the bereaved families, the survivors and the campaigners for their courage, tenacity and inspiring example to people fighting injustice everywhere. I was only two years of age when the Hillsborough disaster happened, but I grew up with people who were affected by it. We are a city influenced by it still today.

Let me thank the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for being here today and for her continued support, which I know means so much to the families. I hope the Minister will take away the real feeling and passion that we have heard today.

It is 32 years since the victims of the Hillsborough disaster left to watch a game of football and never came home. It is nine years this week since the Hillsborough independent panel report exposed the gross negligence of members of the South Yorkshire police, who, instead of answering for their actions, sought to shift the blame on to those whom they had failed to protect. We remember it as “Truth Day”. It is five years since the inquest verdicts found that the victims of the Hillsborough disaster were unlawfully killed, and it is seven weeks since Andrew Devine, who suffered life-changing injuries at Hillsborough, became its 97th fatality.

We know now that witness statements were altered, that the reputation of the victims was impugned, and that lies were fed to the gutter press in one of the most

despicable cover-ups in modern history, yet the only conviction secured was for a health and safety breach, resulting in a fine. No one has ever answered for the unlawful killing of 97 people. What kind of justice is that? What message does it send to those who campaigned for decades not only for truth, but for accountability? What message does it send to the bereaved families and survivors, who were forced to bite their tongues while discredited slurs about their loved ones were repeated inside and outside the court? The horrific experience that they endured is all the evidence that we need that the legal system in this country is broken. It is incapable of delivering justice for bereaved families and survivors, and it needs to change.

I commend the tireless work of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood to help deliver that change, and I am proud to add my name to her Public Advocate Bill, which would provide support for bereaved families at an early stage following a public disaster to prevent them from having to endure what the Hillsborough families have endured.

Back in June, following the collapse of the recent trials, the then Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice told me in this Chamber that the Government would engage with the Hillsborough families and survivors every step of the way to review and propose changes to the law, and I hope that the new Secretary of State will commit to do that as quickly as possible.

The Public Advocate Bill has the support of the Hillsborough families and of survivors—including my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby—so when it is brought back to the House next month, will the Minister guarantee that the Government will not block its passage through Parliament? Together with this vital change, it is also time to take forward the work of the families, the former Member for Leigh, Andy Burnham, and my predecessor, Steve Rotherham, to introduce a Hillsborough law. This would make it a legal duty for public institutions to tell the truth in proceedings, investigations and inquiries, and to act with candour and frankness. Ahead of the inquiry into the Government's handling of the pandemic, calls for a Hillsborough law have also been taken up by families whose relatives died due to covid-19, so it could not be more pressing.

During the last debate on this matter, the then Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice said that the Government were considering the points made by the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, in his 2017 report on the experiences of the Hillsborough families, including in relation to proposals for a Hillsborough law. Will the Minister tell us when the Government will publish their response to the report and on what timetable they will act on the report's recommendations? Although criminal proceedings may have prevented a public response until now, the Government have had years to consider the report's findings, and there is no excuse for any further delay. Our legal system must be fundamentally rebalanced, so that the bereaved families and survivors have access to the same tools as the powerful and the state.

Let the greatest legacy of the decades-long fight for truth and justice following the Hillsborough disaster by the families, survivors and campaigners be the introduction of these changes to ensure that their experiences are never repeated.

3.46 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing it, on all her work in support of the families and for a Public Advocate Bill, and on the clarity and passion with which she spoke today.

Those who lost loved ones on that painful day of 15 April 1989 and since, including many in my constituency have not only suffered bereavement in the most terrible of circumstances; they have then had to endure decades of pain in the pursuit of justice. I pay tribute to everyone who has been involved in that campaign. The collapse on 26 May 2021 of the trial of two retired police officers and a solicitor who were accused of perverting the course of justice was absolutely devastating for families and campaigners. In 2016, an inquest jury ruled that those who tragically lost their lives were unlawfully killed, yet no successful criminal charges have been brought against any individual. That is a massive failing of the criminal justice system.

Let me turn to the proposed reforms of the system. I fully support the Public Advocate Bill—the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood—which would establish a public advocate to provide advice to and act as data controller for representatives of the deceased after major incidents. Between September and December 2018, the Government ran a consultation on establishing an independent public advocate. It is disappointing that nearly three years on, the Government are still analysing the feedback to that consultation, so will the Minister give us an update today on when the Government will be issuing their response?

I thank the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for her commitment to support the 97 and for making it clear that she supports the concept of the public advocate. I ask the Minister: is that the current Government's view? If so, why have they not yet brought forward their own legislation or at least responded to their own consultation? In the aftermath of the collapse of the trials in May, Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester and long-time Hillsborough campaigner, called for there to be

“a duty of candour in law for public officials”.

The Right Rev. James Jones, who was the Bishop of Liverpool between 1998 and 2013, in his report on the experiences of the Hillsborough families, called for a statutory

“duty of candour which addresses the unacceptable behaviour of police officers—serving or retired—who fail to cooperate fully with investigations into alleged criminal offences or misconduct.”

In addition, the report of the Daniel Morgan independent panel has proposed the creation of a statutory duty of candour to be owed by all law enforcement agencies to those whom they serve, subject to the protection of national security and relevant data protection legislation. Shortly before the summer recess, the Government indicated that they were considering this, so will the Minister tell the House whether there has been any progress?. On 10 June, the previous Secretary of State for Justice told the House that following the collapse of the trials earlier this year, the Government's focus would

“be on publishing the Government's overarching response to”

[Margaret Greenwood]

James Jones's report,

"after having further consulted all the families."—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 1128.]

So what consultation with the families has taken place between then and now?

As the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), has noted in this House, the issue of the creation of a statutory duty of candour is particularly urgent given that there will soon be an inquiry, sadly, into the covid-19 pandemic. We need to see action from the Government. No families bereaved by public disasters should have to go through what the brave families who lost loved ones at Hillsborough have had to endure.

3.50 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Truth and justice: two words that should underpin our criminal justice system. But from Hillsborough, to Orgreave, to the Shrewsbury 24, to Grenfell, we know that too often this just is not the case. The recent collapse of the Hillsborough trials, where police who perverted the course of justice by tampering with evidence were let loose with no case to answer on a mere technicality, lays bare the current flaws in our system. There are no words that do justice to the agony and the trauma the families have faced in their decades-long fight for justice, nor how this defeat crushed the last remaining hopes and faith the survivors, families and their supporters had in our justice system. The fact that no individual has been held responsible by the justice system for the decisions that led to the deaths of 97 people is nothing short of a national scandal.

The same applies for the families of those who have died at the hands of the police, particularly black victims, who make up 8% of deaths in police custody despite being only 3% of the population. Cases such as the untimely deaths of Christopher Alder, Kingsley Burrell and Sean Rigg have seen inquest after inquest into police conduct fail to hold a single person accountable. Indeed, since 1969 just a single police officer in the UK has been convicted for their role in the death of someone in their care.

We must seize this opportunity today for a serious rethink about how we support survivors and loved ones who are already dealing with the pain of bereavement so that no one ever has to face this nightmare again. We need measures that will rebuild trust in these processes; measures that will promote transparency and uphold accountability; measures to prevent things from going wrong as they did with Hillsborough. We have seen some recent progress after much campaigning by survivors and bereaved families, supported by incredible organisations such as Inquest. Just last week, the Government response to the Justice Committee's inquiry report on the coroner service put forward some positive commitments around the means-testing of legal support for some bereaved families. This commitment is incredibly welcome. If properly implemented and coupled with non-means-tested publicly funded advice for families, it will make huge strides forward in ensuring equality between families and public bodies at inquests—a fundamental principle that the state has a duty to uphold. However, there has been no response from the Government on the calls

from the Justice Committee for major reforms to the statutory duty of candour, creating a system for appealing coroners' decision, or the establishment of a charter of rights for bereaved people. Can the Minister explain why his Government are yet to come forward with a position on these crucial reforms, and give us a timetable for when they are likely to do so?

I now turn to the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill, which is backed by the Hillsborough Family Support Group. I thank the families, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for her work on developing and bringing this legislation to Parliament. If adopted by this Government, it would enable families to set up an independent review and establish an independent, fully-resourced public advocate supporting the survivors and families who have lost loved ones at the heart of the process to get answers for their loss. These much-needed steps would improve trust and transparency in systems that alienate relatives and survivors, who too often feel pushed to one side in the official scramble to shift blame and protect reputations. To avoid taking action is to be responsible for preserving a system that time and again shields actors of the state from accountability, while deflecting blame on to their victims.

Last month, Andrew Devine tragically became the 97th victim of the Hillsborough disaster to be unlawfully killed. In his name, and the names of the 96 other victims, I ask a simple question—yes or no—will the Minister take this opportunity today to commit to the provisions in the Public Advocate Bill, as well as the recommendations from the Justice Committee report, and take these long-overdue steps to redress the balance of the scales of justice and provide survivors and families with the support they need to gain truth, justice and true accountability? As we know, justice delayed is justice denied.

3.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to participate. Just last Friday, the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) was here for the consideration of private Members' Bills and referred to this debate. I wanted to come along—I do not provide support to any of the victims as an MP—to convey from my point of view our understanding of what the debate means to everyone here today. None of us could fail to feel the sorrow, hurt, loss and raw pain that we have all heard here today. The hon. Lady has been a stalwart in putting this matter forward, and I wanted to come and support her, and I am here today to do just that, and I put it on record.

If I may, I will refer to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). I am always impressed—I have said this to her, so it is not something she has not heard before—that she is on the Back Benches contributing to debates. I am impressed every time I come here and she does that, because it shows the depth of her and her commitment to the issues she brings forward. We should all be impressed by that, including the Conservative side.

This is a very sensitive topic, and I know there are people listening today who are members of families who have lost loved ones due to public disasters. Many out there will resonate with what those MPs who have spoken today have said, as well as with those who have

spoken before and are not here now, and they will understand where the Bill needs to go. We look to the Government to respond positively. We all know—I have written down “96 Liverpool fans”, but as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) reminds me, it is now 97—that the impact goes long beyond the event. I remember well that awful day and the vivid scenes that took place afterwards.

The previous Justice Secretary stated that the Government would

“always consider opportunities to review the law”.—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 1128.]

Well, today is the day, and the House is asking for that to happen. However, given the devastating situations that families were left in as a result of what many families perceived to be Government inaction after the Hillsborough disaster, it is fair to say that a review of the current law is the minimum action that could be taken. Steps must be taken, as every hon. and right hon. Member has referred to, to ensure that this process is never repeated in any way and that the correct process takes place not only for victims, but the victims’ families who have been left behind.

The motion for this debate is clear. It calls for reforms that

“better respond to families bereaved by public disasters”.

I want to take a moment to reflect on an event in the past that also supports the claim for reforming the criminal justice system. I refer to the Omagh bombings of 1998. I also remember that day. It was a Saturday, and I always remember it very well. It was 15 August, and 29 people were killed.

Sir George Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is right, as others have, to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). I add my thanks to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for all she has done to support the families. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the major problems that has beset all this is the lack of a process that takes any account of the legitimate interests of those who either were bereaved or survived it? Does he therefore believe it is about time we put that right?

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for intervening. Absolutely, we want to associate ourselves with those who lost loved ones in Liverpool and their pain. We in Northern Ireland have had the same pain for some 23 years from the Omagh bombings in particular.

After multiple court cases and futile arrests, there was no real closure for those poor families. My point is: this is not a Northern Ireland-based dig-up of history but another illustration of how there is, as the right hon. Gentleman said, a lack of justice and judicial support for the families of the victims. For 23 years, the families of the Omagh victims have had no closure and no explanation. The process that they have been through shows again that we need to do better by victims of public disasters.

Such disasters should be treated no differently from individual cases. The mark left behind is the same. The pain is the same. The long-lasting hurt is the same. The feeling of losing a loved one hurts all the same, and more effort needs to be put into reforming the system to ensure that there is a better response to the families of

the victims. They have waited for something to happen, but nothing has happened. That could be done through communication and better liaison between families and the police, emergency services and, ultimately, the courts. I look to the Minister for a response.

The Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill would allow for better scrutiny for investigations. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood said that, as did the right hon. Member for Maidenhead—everyone has said it. Perhaps I sometimes look at things simplistically, but it looks simple enough—so just do it. I fear that, all too often, victims are left in the dark, making the process more devastating. An independent advocate would allow for those all-important questions to be answered from the aftermath of a tragedy that is still raw. We have witnessed that in recent years with Grenfell, which other hon. Members referred to, and the Manchester Arena bombings. Many of us did not cry tears at that, for people we did not know, but for the victims, the tears, the sorrow and the hurt are the same, and we need to help the victims. They and their families should be at the forefront of legislation. The authorities have a moral duty to ensure that information and investigative movements are transparent to all victims’ families.

One of the most prominent duties of hon. Members in this House—we all do this, hopefully to the best of our abilities—is to represent our constituents. I stand up here for all who have suffered loss with no closure or justice at all. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland knows only too well about victims, and there is often little to no closure. As we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members, it is crucial that no negligence or wrongful information has the potential to dissipate relations further. I cannot fail to be angered about that; I want the response to be as it should.

The core element of the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill is to ensure that things are done properly from the start. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood has raised this issue in Parliament over a great many years—long before I came here—and I hope that consideration will be given to the Bill. I urge the Minister, to whom I look as a friend, to work collectively with the victims’ families. It is not enough, and moreover it is not fair, that it is down to the families to set out their own methods of support and victims support groups. The Government must do more to ensure that the pain that victims’ families go through is met with understanding and support. If we cannot give support to our grieving and vulnerable, we as a society are failing and we in this seat of democracy as MPs have failed. Today we want to take failure and make it success, so we look to our Minister to make that happen.

I support the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood and everyone who has spoken across the Chamber. I would just say this: to their repeated efforts to secure this support in legislation, I add my voice—as one who represents Strangford in Northern Ireland and does, I believe, understand the pain—as I do to the request they have put forward today. That request in this House today will help us all in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and, on behalf of the victims and on behalf of the families, make sure that we can learn from past mistakes and simply, but most importantly, do it better.

4.5 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I would like to start by saying, in my 21 years in Parliament, what a privilege it has been to participate in this very important debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for securing this debate, as well as Lord Michael Wills for his work alongside her in championing the Public Advocate Bill (No. 2) Bill.

We have had so many important speeches in this debate. There is the leadership shown by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), and I think we are all very grateful for her continuing to champion these issues. It has been good to hear from the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), as Chair of the Justice Committee, as well as from my hon. Friends the Members for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson).

We heard two very emotional speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and they both brought tears to my eyes. The truth is that I may well get emotional myself, because I have been thinking throughout this debate about the victims and the loved ones of the Grenfell fire, and my friend Khadija Saye and her mother, who lost their lives. It is for that reason that we must set this right, because tragedies have come after Hillsborough, and we are still waiting. That is unacceptable because we have to demonstrate that we can act, so I hope that the Minister, when he rises to his feet, has some news for us on this occasion.

None of us in this House will forget that, in the FA cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest in 1989, 97 football fans tragically lost their lives. The victims were young and old. Jon-Paul Gilhooley, Liverpool legend Steven Gerrard's eldest cousin, was the youngest, aged just 10. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood recognised, the most recent is Andrew Devine, who died this summer as a result of the catastrophic injuries he received 32 years ago.

Inquests carried out since the Hillsborough tragedy have shown that the 97 victims were unlawfully killed by the negligence of others. The authorities shamefully failed the fans whose lives they were supposed to protect. But it was not only the lack of experience at managing large crowds that was wrong and it was not only poor decision making; it was the gross and repugnant lies that they have since admitted and the desperate attempts to cover their own tracks. Earlier this year, the collapse of the most recent case was yet another slap in the face for the families of all those who lost loved ones at Hillsborough.

It is truly shameful that, still today, not one person has been held accountable for these deadly failures. The truth about what happened that day in 1989 was only acknowledged 23 years later as a result of the Hillsborough independent panel, but still not one person has been held accountable, not one victim has got what they deserve, not one family has received closure. South Yorkshire police have not been held accountable for their lies but tried to deflect blame from their own failures on to the victims. The lack of justice in this case

fatally undermines the very concept of a public inquiry: what is the point of a public inquiry if it is incapable of shedding light on the murkiest of dealings and if it is incapable of or unwilling to provide closure for the families of the victims?

The reforms we are debating today stem from the Hillsborough tragedy but their benefits would reach far beyond it. The appalling thing about the travesty of Hillsborough is that it is by no means a one-off. I referenced the parallels that I see in the dishonesty and criminality at the heart of the Grenfell tragedy, in which I personally lost a friend. I will never forget waking up on the morning of 14 June 2017 at around 5.30 am, a few hours after the catastrophe had started that would take the life of my friend Khadija Saye and 71 others. What has emerged since the blaze is a pattern of deception and untruthfulness from the authorities. The inquiry is still ongoing but not one person has been arrested for the clear criminality that has been revealed, no one has been convicted, no one has been punished, no one has been held to account to this day. It breaks my heart to admit there will be more injustices like it; that is why it is so important that our justice system is prepared for them.

The Opposition firmly believe that changes to the law are needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood is right that an independent public advocate should be available to the victims of disasters to advocate for their best interests, to establish a panel to review all the evidence, documentation and data relating to the tragedy, and to advise on the course of action most likely to get justice and push for it. The creation of an independent public advocate was promised in the Government's 2017 manifesto, and I am sure all in the House will agree this is too important a promise to break.

The Opposition also support the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill, as proposed by Andy Burnham, former Member for Leigh. When disasters like Hillsborough occur, the public expect those in official positions to be honest and transparent about the events which took place. If mistakes are made, they expect officials to be held to the same standard as they themselves would be if they made a mistake at work. That is why the Opposition support the principle that those in public office should face legal consequences if they fail to co-operate with inquiries in a truthful, open and honest way.

The Opposition would also take steps to end the fundamental imbalance of power at the heart of the inquest system. It is absurd beyond belief that after terrible events like Hillsborough and Grenfell a modern-day David and Goliath situation exists when it comes to public disasters. It simply cannot be right that state bodies and their representatives have unlimited access to a pot of public money to spend on the country's best legal minds while the families of victims get little or nothing. How can it be just for a family who has gone through the most unimaginable pain of losing a member in horrendous circumstances to have to rely on crowdfunding just to be represented at inquest? Yet we know this happens all the time.

Let us consider the case of Zane Gbangbola, which I raised last year. On the evening of 7 February 2014, seven-year-old Zane and his mother and father went to bed in their Surrey home and owing to circumstances which remain unexplained Zane tragically died in his

sleep and his father was left paralysed for life. The inquest into Zane's death found that he died as a result of poisoning caused by a petrol pump in their home; however, doubts regarding this verdict have been expressed from all sides of the political spectrum. When Zane's family applied for legal aid they were denied it because the case was not considered to be in the public interest. Of all those present at the inquest into their son's death, they were the only ones not to be publicly funded. How can it be fair for this family in their moment of absolute grief to be left to present their case with one crowdfunded lawyer against six teams of top lawyers funded by the public? Labour would end this injustice by ensuring that bereaved families at inquests and public inquiries received public funding to ensure that they have basic equality of arms in their struggle for justice. Both these changes would put victims first, leaving the justice system much better prepared for the worst.

Truth and justice are the fundamental principles that must guide us in this debate. The families of victims must be supported, and authorities must be held to account. Those are simple commitments that everyone in this House can agree on. We cannot have more cover-ups. We cannot have decades of mistruths placed on the shoulders of victims who have already suffered too much. We cannot allow lies to linger for as long as they did over Hillsborough ever again. It is time for the Government to do the decent thing and change the law.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Occasionally—very occasionally—a debate takes place in this House that has such searing force that it lodges forever in the memory because of the way in which it measures up to the gravity of the subject matter. This is one such debate. I thank the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for securing it, but even more for giving a speech that was of such exceptional clarity and force that I hope not just her constituents, but those more widely in the great city of Liverpool, will read it and, even better, listen to it.

I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), to whom I shall return in a moment; the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd)—what a joy it is to see him in his place—my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill); the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) and for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley); the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who also made an exceptional speech; and the hon. Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I want to mention the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, because it says an awful lot that, having acted as Home Secretary and as Prime Minister, she now acts as a Back Bencher. That can be encapsulated neatly, hon. Members may think, by the single word “duty”. She encapsulates duty, and Parliament is the richer for it.

The Government recognise the fundamental importance of placing the bereaved at the heart of any investigation that follows a major disaster. That, perhaps, is taken as read. We remain committed to ensuring that bereaved people are supported. That means that they are not just treated with the basic humanity and respect, which I am afraid was not the case in the past, but provided with—the

hon. Member for Garston and Halewood used this word—agency, given a voice and thought of not as spectators but as participants. The way she put it—I think she was absolutely right—was that the bereaved cannot be considered a mere adjunct to proceedings. I cannot put it better than that.

Stepping back from inquests for a moment, I think that there is a new and welcome culture in that regard in criminal courts, as well as in inquests, in so far as I remember that when I began prosecuting as a barrister, witnesses and the bereaved were considered to be completely incidental. In fairness, because of reforms made when the Labour party was in power and while we have been in government, there has been a welcome trend to ensure that witnesses are spoken to by prosecuting barristers, shown round the court, given a copy of their statement and so on. However, we do need to go further.

Before I turn to the IPA proposals specifically, I want to take a moment to set out a bit of context. Just before I do that, however, let me reiterate that the apology that was made from this Dispatch Box by David Cameron for the double injustice that the hon. Lady referred to is as relevant today as it was then. It is worth spelling out what that double injustice was: the first injustice for the families was losing their loved ones, and the second was being traduced.

Let me turn to that context. In recent years, as the House has discussed, a forensic spotlight has been shone on the experience of the bereaved, and on bereaved people in general. First, there was the report by Dame Elish Angiolini into deaths and serious incidents in police custody. Then, most pertinent to today's proceedings, there was the report by Bishop James Jones, commissioned by the former Prime Minister, to ensure that the pain and the suffering of the Hillsborough families would not be repeated. I want to take a moment just to focus a little on what was said in that report, a copy of which I have here and have had the opportunity to re-read.

In section 2 of the report, on the proper participation of bereaved families at inquests, Bishop James Jones talked about two things in particular: first, legal representation for bereaved families in appropriate cases; and, secondly, cultural change. Legal representation can be so important. It was, in fact, the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, who ensured that in those second inquests the families did have legal representation. If one takes a moment to read what is in Bishop James Jones's report, one can see that he included some of the testimony from the bereaved families. One said:

“The second inquest gave me my children back.”

The opportunity to lodge pen portraits, and to have those lawyers to speak to, was transformational in terms of providing the very agency to which the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood referred.

Bishop James Jones went on to talk about another matter as part of proper participation: cultural change. Here, I wish to pick up the point made by the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead. Bishop James Jones, in paragraph 2.95, said:

“I believe that ‘proper participation’ of bereaved families at an inquest is not just a question of funding, but also of cultural change.”

[Alex Chalk]

What he observed was the point that others have made: “the highly adversarial behaviour of some lawyers employed by public bodies suggests that additional training may be required for solicitors and barristers working in the inquest system.”

He was not the first person to make that point. The Lord Chief Justice Lord Judge, in his judgment of 19 December 2012 which quashed the original inquests, described the original proceedings as having been “scarred” by having degenerated into “a kind of adversarial battle”. That is something we need to consider as well.

The current Chief Coroner, his honour Judge Teague QC, said publicly that it is “precisely the inquisitorial nature of the coroner’s investigation that is important to the centrality of the bereaved. Where proceedings take on a more adversarial character, the focus is liable to be diverted away from the bereaved where it properly belongs and channelled instead into some extraneous satellite dispute, with the risk that it ends up as yet another form of litigation.” I speak as a lawyer myself. I know that sometimes that can make the situation worse.

Sir George Howarth: Mr Deputy Speaker, I neglected to apologise earlier for not being here at the start of the debate. I was chairing Westminster Hall and it was therefore impossible for me to be here.

The Minister is making a very good point. I can remember an exchange between the right hon. Member for Maidenhead and myself when she was Home Secretary in which we talked about the stereotyping of people. Somewhere at the bottom of all this, the way in which the judiciary and some sections of the media dealt with it was all about a stereotype—a stereotype of football fans—which was convenient for them, but actually, in this case, bore no resemblance to the truth. Does he agree that stereotyping in any situation is wrong, but that in this one it has been absolutely appalling?

Alex Chalk: What an excellent point. The idea that all football fans are the same, behave the same way and think the same way is an absurdity. Perhaps we understand that better now than was the case 30 years ago.

To conclude the point about the context, what has happened since 2017 is a document that was referred to, but which I just want to take a moment to discuss—“A Guide to Coroner Services for Bereaved People”. I mention it because there is a welcome focus on bereaved people and it contains all the information that one would expect. I will not rehearse it in exhaustive detail, but I just want to pick up on one point made by the former Home Secretary and former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, which is that it is really important that there is never inequality of arms—in other words, in a situation where the state is potentially on trial or certainly under scrutiny, it acts towards the bereaved parties in a way that is defensive and unfair. So I was very pleased to see the annex to that document effectively has a code of conduct in those circumstances. It states:

“Where a Government department has interested person status to an inquest, the Government and the lawyers it instructs at inquests will adopt the following principles”.

I will not read them all out, but it includes, in paragraph 3:

“Communicate with the bereaved in a sensitive and empathetic way which acknowledges and respects their loss.”

Hon. Members would have thought that that is obvious, but it bears emphasis. The annex also includes:

“Keep in mind that the bereaved should...Be at the heart of the inquest process...Feel confident that the inquest will get to the facts of what happened...Feel properly involved throughout and listened to.”

That is part of a new code of conduct and it is absolutely right.

I want to make a final point in focusing on there not being a “closed door of the public sector”, which is the phrase that my right hon. Friend the former Prime Minister used. The Bar Standards Board published, I think as recently as this week, resources for those practising in the coroners’ courts, which includes instructions to:

“Adapt your style of communication and engagement to the unique purpose of inquests”—

and so on. That effectively says to representatives, “Remember bereaved people. They are not simply observers in this. They are participants. They are vulnerable people. They deserve to be treated with respect.”

Finally on context before I turn to the IPA, there have been very important changes made to the exceptional case funding scheme. I know that there are a lot of people in the House who greatly value legal aid, and we certainly do. The Government recognise that although legal aid is generally not available for inquests—by the way, that is as it should be, because the inquest is essentially a fact-finding process—there are some circumstances where legal representation may be required for bereaved families, as the former Prime Minister noted in respect of the second inquests, and that is provided through the ECF scheme.

We believe that where there should be legal aid for bereaved families, access to it should be as simple and easy as possible. That is why we have reviewed this process as part of our legal aid means test review. Following that work, I am delighted that we have made a commitment, in the Government’s response to the Justice Committee’s report of its inquiry into the coroner service, that ECF applications for representation at inquests will no longer be means-tested. That is a very important development. It will broaden the scope and access to legal advice and support.

Let me turn to the IPA and the Bill that the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood prepared, which I have read. As the House knows, in 2018, the Government consulted on proposals to establish an IPA, and the consultation looked at a range of issues about how best to support those bereaved following a public disaster. It asked a number of challenging questions because, as always, we know in this House that the devil is in the detail. We need to focus on issues such as: how exactly an IPA should interact with investigatory bodies, how one avoids duplication, whether the IPA should be involved only where fatalities occur, whether it ought to have a wider remit, and so on.

It is right to say that there was a mixed reaction from those who provided responses, including on the circumstances in which such an appointment should be triggered. There was also the issue of the name. As the consultation document noted, the Government do not see an IPA as providing legal advice and representation—of course not—and it is not an advocate in that sense. It also noted that such an IPA may be supporting a “diverse group of people whose views may differ, perhaps strongly”.

Just as the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth) made the point that it is absurd to put all football fans in one category, it is also very dangerous to put all the bereaved in one category, and we must be mindful of that. There was, however, more agreement on the importance of the IPA dovetailing with other support already provided. Plainly on that latter point, it will be important to consider the new and, we would suggest, significantly improved landscape, in terms of the culture and support that I referred to.

Since that consultation, there have been a number of significant events, such as a new Government, a general election and a pandemic, but perhaps most importantly, there has been a criminal trial, which has been referred to. Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that that does mean that there are necessarily some things that cannot properly be discussed for fear of prejudicing, but that is now behind us, and I am pleased to announce today that we will be responding to the 2018 review by the end of this year, and I expect it to be rather earlier than that.

Quite apart from that, the Government are committed to continuing their engagement with the families bereaved by the Hillsborough disaster. Indeed, we have done so earlier in the summer and will continue to do so. It is critical that the lessons that can be learned from their awful experience are not lost. To that end, the Home Office has been working closely with its partners in the relevant Departments and organisations, and is now engaging with the Hillsborough families before publishing the Government's overarching response.

The former Prime Minister made the point that we must make sure that other types of inquiry do not fall within the loophole that has been observed in criminal cases such as this. If an inquiry is not set up under the auspices of the Inquiries Act 2005, we need to ensure that we do not have a situation in which people can apparently avoid the consequences of their actions. We are considering very carefully a report from the Law Commission, which, as Members will know, is there to look at lacunae in the law and try to improve it. The commission came up with some recommendations in December last year, considering potential offences of corruption in public office and breach of duty in public office. Those are two potential offences that we are looking at with great care.

Ensuring that the bereaved are still at the heart of the investigatory process that follows a major disaster remains fundamentally important, and important steps have been taken. However, we are going to go further and, as we do so, we will continue to welcome the interest and, yes, the challenge—the proper challenge—from people standing up for their constituents, standing up for their city and standing up for accountability. I thank Members on both sides of the House for some measured, powerful and principled contributions today.

4.31 pm

Maria Eagle: I thank the Minister for his response and the information that he will now be responding to the consultation. “By the end of the year” is a little disappointing. I appreciate that there has been a change of Lord Chancellor and that always delays things, but it should be remembered that we will be heading towards 33 years by then.

As I think the Minister should have understood from the debate today—including the powerful contributions from a survivor of Hillsborough, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), and from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—the power of the emotions expressed indicates quite what an impact these events have. The small, cheap, relatively speaking, reforms that have been proposed will make a real difference. The introduction of a public advocate, and three or four proposals in the report from the former Bishop of Liverpool, will make a real difference to bereaved families and survivors. They will be a monument to the powerful campaign—which has continued for 32 and a half years so far—of the Hillsborough families, the survivors and those who have been bereaved and affected by this terrible disaster.

I hope that the Minister will remember the emotion and power of the speeches because something really must be done. Just coming back in December and saying, “We will have a code of conduct” will not cut it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It has truly been an honour to be in the Chair during this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered proposed reforms to the criminal justice system to better respond to families bereaved by public disasters.

Chatham Docks

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mike Freer.*)

4.33 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I am extremely proud of my constituency, its people and its history, particularly our great maritime history and the connection with our river, the Medway, which has been a significant contributing factor in how the five Medway towns—Rochester, Chatham, Strood, Gillingham and Rainham—have developed over the centuries. The towns have been a hive of industry and innovation, and home to talented and exceptional people who have shaped, and continue to shape, the area that I love so much.

The fact that we have the River Medway flowing through our towns means that we have a rich industrial and commercial past and present. We have had large numbers of cement works, shipbuilders, boatbuilders, brickworks, world-class engineers, manufacturers, aerospace workers, energy producers, artists, innovators and significant industries based in the Medway towns. Our geography has played a major part in the towns' success and meant that Chatham was chosen as home to the royal dockyard, which has been in existence since 1613 and in its heyday was the most important shipbuilding and repair dockyard in the country. The dockyard was sadly decommissioned in the 1980s, after much opposition from the people of the towns and one of my predecessors, Dame Peggy Fenner. It was a devastating blow to the Medway towns and had a major impact on its people.

Since the closure of the naval dockyard, fantastic work has been carried out by successive Governments, local authorities, businesses and investors to see the old dockyard site regenerated, making it a vibrant area with housing, leisure, universities and businesses. The historic dockyard site has been separated and preserved, with our three deep-water basins built in the mid-1800s being maintained and still in use. One is now a thriving marina. The second is used by the local community and for water sports. As recently as 2019, we welcomed HMS Medway and, in 2017, HMS Richmond and the Dutch Navy frigate HNLMS Holland. The third basin, known as Chatham docks, is a working commercial port, where many businesses are benefiting from what is a strategic, regionally significant asset, a 70-acre commercial port and manufacturing hub. It is home to successful and growing maritime and construction businesses providing over 800 jobs and 16 apprenticeships, with far more—around 1,500—in the supply chain or in some way dependent on the facility. Businesses with a combined annual turnover approaching £175 million and future investment plans for more than £60 million are occupying the land, buildings and berths.

Despite all this, the landowners have said that they feel the site is no longer viable and that too much investment would be required to repair or renew the lock gates. Therefore, they wish to close the docks and in their place build high-rise flats, with tall promises on the number of jobs that will be created there. I must point out that this is in the context of the landowner already having developed over 26 acres with high-rise flats and mixed-use retail and leisure, through which the landowner has already realised significant increases in land values. As Members might imagine, the suggestion of closing Chatham docks has united residents, businesses and political opponents against the idea.

Medway Council is currently finalising its draft local plan. It has been widely suggested that the council will redesignate Chatham docks for housing and mixed use when the draft local plan is finally published. Changing the designation of Chatham docks from commercial to housing will be another devastating blow to the area, the local economy, the businesses operating within the dock, the supply chain and the people who work there, putting an end to future use of a strategic infrastructure asset, despite there still being a need and a demand, on a site that would never ever be replaced. Redesignation within the local plan by the council would be an overwhelming contribution to the closure of the docks and to the loss of businesses, jobs and opportunities for generations to come.

Independent consultants have said that

“the economic and strategic implications of terminating the port operation make no sense for the local community and for the wider region since this move is both irreversible and not required from an economic or financial perspective.”

Much has been said by the landowner and the council about the viability of the docks, which has been challenged robustly by the businesses that operate there. That is supported by evidence and independent assessments. The cost of the repairs to the lock gates has been used as one reason why the dock needs to shut. So this could be the end and the last chance of ever seeing a large naval vessel enter Chatham again. That was never the intention when the three basins were handed over to a private company in the 1980s. In fact, the intention was that basin 3 would always be accessible for large ships, as per agreements that were put in place at the time. Development would also mean establishing a fixed access road between basin 2 and basin 3, which would landlock basin 2 forever. How very sad that, when there could be so many other options, we will oversee its destruction. I hope Medway Council learns from the regrets of London at what was done to its old dock basins in the name of regeneration, and of Liverpool at the loss of its world heritage status. I wonder whether the Minister could offer an insight into how regionally important infrastructure can be protected within the planning system.

To support a narrative around the closure of the docks, the success of the businesses operating within it has been described by some as a “moot point,” so this is an opportunity to highlight their success and continued growth. Chatham docks is a thriving port that provides high-end, value-added employment ranging from semi-skilled and skilled through to highly technical work, with staff educated to degree level and beyond. This is an area of growing businesses offering high-quality jobs, with technology and investment contributing to increased productivity locally.

The docks are well used and the operations benefit directly from the good harbour and berthing facilities on the River Medway. Such facilities are unavailable anywhere else on this stretch of the coast from Essex to Kent. Located at the docks are some very large and successful businesses, including Downton, the national logistics company, and ArcelorMittal, a leading manufacturer of steel fabric reinforcement, as well as Uplands Engineering, EPAL and other businesses whose activities include waste recycling, ship repair and the importation of timber, cement and steel products.

Examples of current and recent major infrastructure projects involving the businesses based within the docks include the Olympic park, Crossrail, Wembley stadium,

the Tideway tunnel and many others. There are also marine businesses within the supply chain based on the river, including GPS Marine Contractors, which operates all over Europe. The company has said it would need to pull out of the Medway if the docks were to close.

Part of the business of GPS Marine Contractors is transporting goods by barge. It transported 2.3 million tonnes of cargo by barge to and from three major projects in London, which eliminated 7.5 million heavy goods vehicle road miles and reduced CO₂ emissions by 7,200 tonnes compared with using Euro 6 trucks. This year the company began using hydrogen-treated vegetable oil, which is 100% renewable and derived from waste vegetable oil, and it is now trialling a number of post-combustion technologies to reduce emissions further.

Scotline, one of the UK's largest importers of timber, has also invested heavily in the Medway towns and in green maritime technology. Big names such as Hanson, Tarmac and Cemex all require the facilities at Chatham docks and the skills of the businesses within it to service their fleets of vessels to transport the aggregates needed to continue the huge building programmes in London, the south-east and beyond.

ArcelorMittal has recently announced that it is planning an additional £1 million investment in its site, following its successful bid to help build the High Speed 2 line. It expects to employ 50 new members of staff—newly trained, highly skilled and well-paid people—between now and the end of the year, with further opportunities on the horizon.

These are exactly the opportunities I would like to see more of in my constituency and the wider region, and it is testament to those businesses that they are continuing to deliver and grow with this uncertainty hanging over their future. These small examples show that Chatham docks are providing the right opportunities for local businesses to win contracts and support national projects. Closing down the site for housing would prevent any future for this type of development and growth. My constituency's unemployment rate is in line with the national average at 5.2%, equating to 3,755 people looking for work, which is 1,585 more than in March last year. It is clear that greater certainty would allow even more confidence for businesses to invest, including major investment in the short term by Street Fuel Ltd in its south-east recycling operation and in expanding its current ship repair and dredger maintenance facilities. The future investment plans would seek to grow the existing employment figures from 800 to more than 1,000 people in the port and manufacturing jobs. This would also mean a big increase in apprenticeships offered.

Oxford Economics has advised that manufacturing sector workers, such as the ones at Chatham docks, enjoy significantly higher wages than the median average. Nationally, the median wage in the manufacturing sector is £27,430, which compares with a figure of £23,084 in the economy as a whole. This positions workers on the site at Chatham docks significantly above the national averages, generally and by sector.

The landowners have claimed that the docks are unsustainable. Who could blame a developer for being drawn to the attractiveness of a capital return on 3,600 flats over that of a commercial dock? A financial viability report produced by the Crossley Group of chartered accountants suggested that the return on capital employed is above the expected average; that the overall return

and level of rental income should be sufficient to rectify the historical lack of maintenance and repairs of the docks; and that there is potential for further opportunities to increase returns. That is against a backdrop of the businesses within the docks being prepared to cover the costs of the replacement lock gates.

More worryingly, after much concern expressed by myself, councillors, residents, businesses, academics and industry, Medway Council still feels that the docks must be redesignated for housing in the local plan. That is because the Government's blunt formula for housing targets in Medway is 1,662 a year, resulting in a total of 28,259 over the life of the plan. In itself, that is an undeliverable target for a such a small geographical area, which is already densely populated. Medway Council says that it must redesignate the docks for housing, lose these jobs and damage our local economy in order to meet the Government's housing target. Has the Minister or his Department had discussions with the council on what its assessment is of the number of homes that it could deliver across Medway without closing the docks?

The council has also said that if it is unable to build those flats on the docks, it would need to build them elsewhere on another site within my constituency. Medway is made up of three constituencies, but nearly two thirds of the total target is being proposed to be built in Rochester and Strood, particularly on the Hoo peninsula. That is causing tremendous angst within the communities I represent. My constituents feel that their way of life is being destroyed in order to build for the overspill from London: to build flats that local people cannot afford without the provision of well-paid jobs such as the ones we will lose if the docks close. These homes are being marketed to buyers outside Medway and, would you believe it, are even being advertised in China. So really, what is my community gaining? Do the Government really want to see thriving, growing commercial businesses and regionally important infrastructure close, people being put out of work and future opportunities being lost, in the pursuit of building flats to meet arbitrary housing targets? Most people find it unbelievable that this is even being considered.

Medway has a thriving economy made up of a diverse range of businesses; it is second in terms of the concentration of transportation and storage facilities. Our local economy is uniquely reliant on this sector, and proposals by the landowner to move businesses to Sheerness do not offer an alternative solution. First, there are not the same facilities and the businesses would be unable to operate in the same way—that is if this offer of moving those businesses to Sheerness, which has been much talked of, ever actually materialises for these businesses. It is absurd to think that businesses that are using a unique piece of infrastructure can just be relocated anywhere.

The majority of workers are local to Medway: 20% live on the doorstep of the docks and 65% live in the Medway towns. There is also an associated supply chain that stretches across the local area and the wider region. An economic impact report has concluded that the docks generate a total economic benefit of £258 million; for comparison, that is 10 times greater than the published economic benefit generated by our much-loved and promoted Historic Dockyard Chatham part of the site, which no one would ever suggest closing to make way for flats.

Our coast and waterways are one of the United Kingdom's greatest assets. We are blessed with the River Medway, which has shaped our towns historically and has an important role to play in our future. We have increased our focus on the Government's ambition of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and it is vital that we support resources such as Chatham docks and the work of the investing, innovating and nimble businesses that use our waterways, which are essential to our moving forward with decarbonising the economy. With our close links, we are uniquely situated to reduce the time and cost of trade between Medway and London.

The dock operations benefit directly from good harbour and berthing facilities that offer the opportunity to significantly improve the position with respect to the climate change emergency declared by Medway Council and the key outcome of achieving a clean, green environment. There is huge potential environmental cost to Medway from the closure of the docks, with a massive increase of 12,610 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions a year through the loss of on-site recycling, engineering and the transportation of finished goods that can currently be transported by river. We should be building a strategy and working with some of our impressive local businesses based at the docks, in the supply chain or operating on the river, creating opportunities to contribute further to our carbon reduction targets and sustainable development of our local economy for the future.

The message is loud and clear: the closure of Chatham docks would mean short-term gain for some, to the detriment of the long-term future and prosperity of the Medway towns. At the heart of the 2019 Conservative manifesto was the importance of place and community to so many people across the country. We recognised that allowing communities to make sure that their town's future is in the hands of the people who live there is the best way to ensure that they can thrive. If we allow Chatham docks to turn into housing, we will be failing to live up to that promise. It is the last remaining and most significant facility left on the river today; if it is lost, we will lose not only jobs from Medway, but future opportunities for generations to come. Once it is lost, we will never get it back—in today's world, the impressive docks structure would never be built because the expense would be far too great.

In my maiden speech on 25 June 2015, I quoted from my predecessor Dame Peggy Fenner:

"Does my right hon. Friend believe that the people of Rochester and Chatham elected me to support a Government that would do what has just been done to their dockyard? My right hon. Friend need not reply. I shall tell him the answer: they did not, and I will not."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1981; Vol. 7, c. 391.]

Forty years on, the similarities are extremely sad, but this time closure is avoidable.

I hope the Minister will agree that common sense will prevail and that the right decisions will be made for the people of my constituency, rather than the opportunity being taken to put cash into just another developer's pocket, losing an asset like Chatham docks for generations to come.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind the Minister that at 5 pm the Whip will again move that the House adjourn; I will then propose the Question so that the Minister can continue.

4.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes):

We all appreciate that a reshuffle has been going on, although it seems to have been paused for the moment. I strongly suspect that the Prime Minister has tuned in to this debate; if so, and if he has a gap to fill in his ministerial appointments, I think he will have been compelled by the passion and enthusiasm shown by my hon. Friend, who already has experience as a Whip and a Minister. Should he have an opportunity to return her to government, it would be a very smooth transition. The only problem is that if the Prime Minister is watching this speech, he will see my hon. Friend's brilliant oratory followed by my mundane contribution, which might mean that I get dropped off the list. So I hope he is quite busy and caught only the first half of this debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate and raising issues that she feels passionately about—she certainly conveyed that passion. I shall address those issues in the context of the wider regeneration effort that she, Medway Council and local communities continue to pursue and to which this Government and previous Administrations have given considerable support.

First, I acknowledge the role of all Medway towns in our national heritage and economy. As my hon. Friend described, the strengths of the transportation and storage industries in this part of the Thames estuary are a real asset, as are, indeed, many of the impressive local businesses that have made their home in the Medway towns. I understand the important role that the waterways play in the Chatham economy past, present and future, from Chatham's proud shipbuilding history to its modern-day aspirations to support the Government's net zero ambitions. I am sure that links to the river will continue to be a huge part of Chatham's future.

As my hon. Friend highlighted, the future of Chatham docks is currently uncertain. The docks are part of the urban waterfront, surrounded by residential, commercial and academic assets, including the Medway campus of the University of Kent. I understand the desire to protect the existing businesses and industry currently at the docks but, ultimately, it is not for central Government to comment on their immediate future. We have, though, been encouraged by the significant regeneration and change over the 30 years since the closure of the naval dockyard. I know that my hon. Friend contributed to the thinking of the Thames estuary growth commission, which reported in 2018 and to which the Government responded positively.

Chatham continues to suffer from high levels of deprivation, making it one of the most challenged parts of the Thames estuary. It consistently performs worse than the national average in key social indicators such as child poverty and financial prosperity, although we recognise the progress that has been made in recent and challenging times. My hon. Friend set out some of the exciting things that are going on in the area. The Government have continued to support efforts to regenerate the area, committing more than £50 million to projects in the area via the South East local enterprise partnership.

Aside from around £28 million committed to local transport improvements, significant investments include more than £8 million for the new Medway innovation

park at Rochester airport—at the opening of which I understand my hon. Friend presided as guest of honour. The Getting Building fund that we announced last year is supporting two projects in Medway, with just under £2 million for the Britton Farm learning, skills and employment hub and £2.3 million for digitally connecting rural Kent and Medway. Each of those projects will help adults into new employment opportunities, with a focus on new and emerging digital skills.

Additionally, we are investing £9.5 million in Chatham town centre through the future high streets fund. We have already set out some of the key elements of our levelling-up strategy, including the community renewal fund and the levelling-up fund, and I am not surprised to hear that Medway has bid into both. As those bids are currently being considered, I am afraid that I cannot dwell on them too much. Nevertheless, I am pleased that there is such enthusiasm, which speaks to the desire and appetite to continue to strive to do more to revitalise Medway, especially as we begin to emerge from the pandemic.

I recognise the concern about the future of Chatham docks. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend is aware, I cannot discuss the details of individual plans because of the quasi-judicial role of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in the planning system. Nor can I comment on individual sites.

Medway's last local plan was adopted in 2003, and I reiterate today that having an effective up-to-date plan in place is essential to identifying development needed in an area, deciding where it should go and dealing with planning applications. The local plan will set out the vision for Medway and a framework for addressing housing needs and other economic, social and environmental priorities. It is a key tool for encouraging and directing investment in the local area, helping to secure the housing and jobs that our communities need.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Eddie Hughes: The national planning policy framework is clear that strategic policies should set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and design and quality of places. They should also make sufficient provision for a variety of considerations, to include housing—including affordable housing—employment, retail, leisure and other commercial development, as well as infrastructure, community facilities and a number of other considerations.

The Government are clear that councils and their communities are best placed to take decisions on local planning matters, providing certainty for communities, businesses and developers. The preparation of local plans involves ongoing engagement and consultation with local communities, businesses and other interested parties. There will be further opportunities to make representations on the local plan in a consultation prior to its submission for examination. I encourage my hon. Friend and her constituents to take every opportunity to shape the local plan for their area—that feels like an invite that I do not need to make. I think she will be very firmly involved in that.

My hon. Friend has raised concerns about the number of new homes that can be delivered across Medway. Our manifesto commits us to a target of 300,000 homes being built a year by the mid-2020s, and delivery of at least 1 million more homes, of all tenures, over this Parliament. That is why, in the national planning policy framework, we introduced a standard method for assessing local housing need to enable all communities to have a clear, transparent understanding of the minimum number of homes that they need.

However, local housing need is not a housing target. It is a standard method of measuring housing need in an area that is used by councils as a guide when they develop their local plans. Councils decide their own housing target once they have taken account of local constraints, such as green belt, that prevent it from allocating enough sites to meet need. Nor does the method dictate where homes should go. It is up to councils to decide what sort of homes can be built and where they should be located in their area. Indeed, councils can only adopt a plan that is sound. It must conform with national policy, be supported by evidence and take the views of local people into account. Each plan is subject to a public examination in front of an independent inspector, who plays an important role in examining plans impartially to ensure that they are legally compliant and sound.

Our changes last year to the standard method enable us to plan for approximately 300,000 houses a year while prioritising brownfield sites and urban areas, where homes are often least affordable. This Government strongly encourage the re-use of suitable brownfield land, especially for development to meet housing need and to regenerate our high streets and town centres. Indeed that is why the Government have made significant investment of £400 million through the brownfield housing fund and £75 million through the brownfield land release fund to unlock brownfield land across the country.

However, brownfield sites vary greatly, and local authorities are best placed to assess the suitability of each for development. It is true that paragraph 123 of the national planning policy framework sets out that where an area is

“currently developed but not allocated for a specific purpose in plans”

then local planning authorities should take a “positive approach to applications” where this would

“help meet identified development needs”.

However, it goes on to say that this should only happen

“provided this would not undermine key economic sectors or sites or the vitality and viability of town centres, and would be compatible with other policies in this Framework.”

Our policy is clear. We support brownfield regeneration to meet needs for different land uses, but this must also support a strong economy and local prosperity. I acknowledge the commitment of my hon. Friend in her efforts to deliver the best possible future for the people of Chatham, and will continue to reflect on the points that she has raised during the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

5.4 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 September 2021

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

UK Maritime Sector

1.30 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Before we begin, can I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking? This is line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering or leaving the room.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's maritime sector.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir George. May I first draw the House's attention to my declaration of interests? I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group for shipbuilding and ship repair. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for the debate, and the 16 Members from across all parties in the House who supported the application.

It is right that we meet today, in London International Shipping Week 2021. This is an opportunity to discuss the maritime sector, which is worth some £46 billion to the UK economy, ranging from shipbuilding and ship repair to ship brokerage in insurance, in which we are world leaders. It is an opportunity to speak up for the sector, which we need to do. I am a passionate believer in a bright future for this country, and the sector supports 1 million more jobs than air and rail. Further, 95% of UK imports and exports are transported by ship.

During the pandemic, we took it for granted that we could order on Amazon or similar sites, and that the package would arrive, but few people consider how that package actually comes to their doorstep. I know Mrs Jones certainly does not give much thought to that. However, it is important, and other aspects are in play—48% of our food supplies come through the maritime sector, as does 25% of our energy needs.

The sector is vital to the resilience of our economy and is also a wide-ranging industry. Ports, for example, generate £600 million in private sector capital each year. It is a source of highly skilled, well-paid jobs. There is an important issue here across the industry, which is mentioned in the briefing note I received from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers: we must invest in those skills and ensure that we have not only individuals with the right set of skills, but the right numbers of workers. As the RMT quite rightly points out, its membership is an ageing population. It is important that we focus on that and make the sector attractive to young people as an industry to come into.

Internationally, the sector will be worth around £3 trillion by 2030 and it is a great source of exports from the UK. Indeed, many businesses throughout the UK are providing not only products for the marine sector around the world, but services. My own region, the north-east, has

a long tradition of service industries working around the world. When the Dubai flight from Newcastle recommences at the end of November, marine engineers will be flying all round the world to service ships, but their companies are based in the north-east. It is important that we recognise that fact.

The sector's problem, certainly in shipbuilding and in other areas, is that there is a view among the public that this is a smokestack industry—an industry of yesteryear. It is quaint that we are involved, but the sector is not the future. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. I do not know how we can do this—the debate obviously allows Members to highlight the issues—but we must promote the sector and say that it is not only important to our economy in the present but can be more important in growing our economy in the future. That is where the Government come in; they have a key role to play in.

Let me turn to the shipbuilding and ship repair sector, where there have been welcome moves by the Government, such as the national shipbuilding programme. We have a shipbuilding tsar—the Defence Secretary—and to be fair to him, I think he is committed to this, but does he actually believe that we can be a world-leading shipbuilding nation again? I think we can, with the right support.

It is a mistake to think that there is any shipbuilding industry around the world that is not reliant on the state—either directly owned by the state or provided with huge subsidies. We should not get into the mindset that if we have to put money into the shipbuilding and ship repair industry or help it with finance, that is somehow a bad thing. It is a good thing if we can grow the industry. The Koreans do not bat an eyelid at putting in huge amounts of money, nor do our European neighbours—the Norwegians, the French, the Germans or anyone else.

The other key issues are port infrastructure, which will be important, and skills. I will talk later about research and development, because the next thing that will change radically in this area is the green agenda. This country has an opportunity to get ahead and be world leaders there.

I welcome the national shipbuilding strategy, but we are still waiting for the refresh, which was promised in August. Its main emphasis—this is self-evident to anybody who knows the industry—is that the industry needs a drumbeat of work running through it. The strategy committed to a 30-year drumbeat of work, but we must ensure that that is a reality, and the Ministry of Defence, which is obviously constrained by the Treasury, is still not laying out that clear pathway for the industry. We saw that with fleet solid support ships, which I will refer to later.

There have been some welcome moves in defence and elsewhere, whereby people are looking at how the UK shipbuilding industry underpins prosperity. The Royal United Services Institute study of aircraft carriers said that 36% of the money that went in came directly back to the UK taxpayer in tax and national insurance, and that is not counting the knock-on effect of the local economic boost generated in those areas. We should not just look at the top line when we are considering contracts; we should look not just at the price, but at how that money comes directly back to the Exchequer.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

We need a whole-Government approach to ensure that, when we procure ships, we look to the UK. There was an announcement last week or the week before about Border Force's new cutters. The existing ones were built in Holland, and I think one was built in Finland or Estonia. That is a £200 million contract, and the default mechanism should be to get them built in the UK. If 30-odd per cent. comes straight back to the Exchequer, that is an opportunity.

A throughput of work is important because that allows industry and business to invest. It is a way to draw in capital to the industry. The problem is that the Ministry of Defence is still in competition mode, which no other country in the world is into, so we have a farcical situation with a fake competition going on between four consortia for the FSS contract. We had a great example of how to do it when we procured the aircraft carriers. Yes, there was a shotgun marriage between various UK yards to provide them, but it worked.

Let us look at those contracts. There was a lot of controversy about the cost, but the build was on time, on budget and world beating. There is nothing like it. We should be proud of that. That was an opportunity to get a consortium of companies together to produce world-beating ships, but what did we do? We broke up the alliance afterwards, which was absolutely shocking. It should have continued.

From the point of view of the taxpayer, should we give out contracts to various companies no questions asked? No, we should not, but we should have a partnership approach rather than competition. The partnership approach should ensure that we have a skills agenda and that we get value for money. Also, the partners put their own shareholder capital into the business. I was speaking to businesses this week at DSEI, the defence and security equipment international exhibition. They do that, but they want certainty. We have the strategy in a nice glossy document, but there is an old mindset of false competition. If we can get that drumbeat of work running through the industry, we will be world beating not only in providing great first-rate ships for our Royal Navy, but in being able to compete for work regarding other vessels. That will be key.

I am not talking about only the bigger yards. The Wight Shipyard Company, which recently won a Queen's award for international trade, is a small company on the Isle of Wight that produces great vessels. Companies such as that should be the first call, rather than throwing contracts open to international competition, because no other country would do that. There is certainly an opportunity to look at that sector for Border Force ships. Again, that would give security to individuals.

We need some joined-up thinking. We need to ensure that the Treasury not only looks at every single contract, but that the work is there for the long term. The easiest thing in terms of the build programme would be to get on and order the FSS vessels. If we did that, we would have a throughput of work in Rosyth and other places, and we would retain skills. An important thing in the shipbuilding report is that if we are to retain skills or get an influx of new skills into the industry, we need a continuation of work. What we do not want is stopgap areas where we are not employing new apprentices and

the workforce get older and older. That point was made by the RMT about its members who work on ships. Oversight is needed. What other skills do we need and in what areas? That is a role for Government as well.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt. The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the skills that we need to create a workforce who can work in the sector. I am interested in his thoughts on retrofitting, because a lot of merchant vessels out there need to be retrofitted with modern technology that allows us to meet our green ambitions. That goes hand in hand with the way in which we want to train a new generation of skilled workers, especially on tackling climate change.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Gentleman speaks with a great deal of knowledge, and he raises an interesting point. I think the understanding is that we cannot ever compete with the Koreans or others in the far east, because they will do the work cheaper. He knows as well as I do that the country that is doing more retrofitting than anywhere else is Norway. Let us be honest: Norway is not paying poverty wages to its workforce, and it has different overheads from other countries, so if Norway can do it, we can do it, but we need a strategy for that. I will come to green shipping in a minute, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a huge market. New green technology will come in, but a lot of it will be retrofitted to existing vessels.

That brings me to research and development. What we need from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is an R&D fund that is ringfenced for the industry, because that would ensure that we got the innovation we need. One area that I have spoken to several Members about is hydrogen, which will need a large amount of R&D. Some good companies are already doing that type of work, but we perhaps need to provide them with Government assistance and access to capital.

We have some great brains thinking about green technology in shipping, but I fear that we will get foreign investment coming in to buy out some of those companies and to provide the capital, but they will then take all that abroad. What we need to do—it can be done by the Government—is give support to the new technology here in the UK, so that we can retain not just the technology, but the jobs that will be done now and in the future in a host of areas in green shipping, as well as the new technologies that will come through. I accept that some of those might not work, but we should be brave enough to invest. It is not a great scandal if, at the end of the day, something does not work. It is important that that is done, which is why marine research and innovation need to be at the forefront of any initiative we undertake.

We have the maritime enterprise working group, but it remains on a non-permanent basis. I do not wish to criticise the Minister, because he is passionate about the sector, and about aviation as well. If I remember correctly, he is a bit of a plane spotter when it comes to knowing different types of aircraft. He announced the £20 million investment in the clean maritime demonstration competition, which he described as a turning point. That was welcome, and it is great that he did it, but he must get more money out of the Treasury for the sector. If we do not get more money to the sector, we will be at a disadvantage.

The opportunities are there. We talk about the carbon targets that we want to meet, which are good. If we do this right, however, we can get jobs out of it as well, so it is important that we invest now and that we ensure that the talk about net zero and so forth has some real teeth. It would be sad if we had new and innovative companies working in the sector, but the technology went abroad, and we ended up importing it or allowing other countries to develop it. That technology will be very important.

Within this new agenda, we must take a legislative stance as well. We are a world leader in working with the International Maritime Organisation and others on standards and regulations for the future. Those will be new concepts, so ensuring that we have regulations and international governance that are in our favour, not that of the Chinese and others, will be important. I do not underestimate the Chinese in particular, in terms of their wanting to have international rules that favour their industries rather than ours, so it is important that we play a key part in that process.

I will finish where I started. This is an industry of the future. We need to talk more about it, and we need to invest in it. Yes, the private sector involvement is hugely important, but if Government money and strategies can be put in place at the key point, they could be huge levers, not only to lever in more private sector capital, but to grow the sector. Perhaps we just need to say to people, “Just think when you are ordering things—how do they get to your doorstep?” That is the basis of it.

I am a passionate advocate for the sector. It is not yesterday’s industry; this is the industry of tomorrow. What it needs is a direct and clear strategy, and money behind it. Now is the time to provide those things.

1.51 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you back in your place, Sir George. I congratulate both the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee on listening to his passionate request for it.

Notwithstanding the UK’s rich and proud maritime history, there is a concern at times that the sector is overlooked and that the lead role that it can play in delivering the Government’s key objectives of levelling up, building back better and decarbonisation is not as centre stage as it should be.

This debate provides the opportunity to showcase the sector and its various facets, such as ports all around the UK, including, in my own area, Lowestoft, the UK’s most easterly port. It serves the southern North sea, which includes one of the largest clusters of offshore windfarms in the world, rich fishing grounds and gas fields in which to store carbon.

Lowestoft has an illustrious maritime past, being the former fishing capital of the southern North sea—a title that it wishes to regain—and the home of two great shipbuilders, Richards and Brooke Marine, although both are sadly long gone. That said, Lowestoft’s dry dock, which is run by SMS Marine, is increasingly busy. In fact, it got the contract for the refurbishment of the UK Border Force vessels. That in itself was welcome, but the point that the right hon. Gentleman made—namely that we really want the actual building of the boats in the first place, which is the important bit—was correct.

New businesses are moving into Lowestoft, such as SSE and ScottishPower Renewables, with operations and maintenance bases in the port. Associated British Ports has exciting plans for the future, and it is vital that national Government provide the right policy framework so that those plans can be realised.

ABP’s plans are focused on the Lowestoft Eastern Energy Facility, or LEEF, which over the next five years should bring significant upgrades to facilities in the outer harbour, creating key capabilities to support the UK’s journey towards achieving net zero. This project will deliver infrastructure that will ensure the port can accommodate the next generation of offshore support vessels. The facility will provide a site that is suitable for operations and maintenance activities, in addition to a quayside suitable for construction support. This is an investment estimated at around £25 million, which will enable the port of Lowestoft to add to the £30 million per annum that it already contributes to the local economy. In doing so, the project will help us to reach net zero, and it complements well the Government’s levelling-up ambitions.

From LEEF, it is appropriate for me to move on to REAF, which is the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries. In 2018, the local fishing industry came together with local councils, the New Anglia local enterprise partnership and Seafish to produce a report on how to revive the local fishing industry as the UK left the European Union. The report was launched here in the House of Commons in October 2019.

Following the trade and co-operation agreement reached with the European Union at the turn of the year, which, frankly, was a let-down for so many, the strategy has been revised to take into account the setting and policies within which the fishing industry now has to work. Initial funding has been secured to implement the strategy and, while I will not go through the 11 recommendations in full, I will highlight the following features, which complement the aspirations of other maritime sectors and fit in well with the Government’s levelling-up and decarbonisation agendas.

The first is the need to embrace the industry’s whole supply chain, from the net to the plate. The second is the importance of ensuring that it is local communities, local people and local businesses that benefit from a revived industry. The third is the importance of reducing CO₂ emissions. The report recommends that all offshore demersal vessels fishing in the southern North sea part of the UK’s exclusive economic zone should, in due course, be restricted to 500 hp. The fourth is the need to invest in supporting port, marketing and processing infrastructure. Finally, there is the importance of attracting and training new entrants to the industry, which East Coast College in Lowestoft will be doing. It has set up a new course.

As I go on about fishing, I see the Minister’s eyes may be glazing over because he is saying, “What has this got to do with me? This is for the fisheries Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.” That highlights the particular challenge that the maritime sector faces, in that it touches on the work of a large number of Departments. The Minister himself is from the Department for Transport. We also have the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is overseeing the levelling-up agenda, the Department

[Peter Aldous]

for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with the fisheries Minister and, as we have heard, the Ministry of Defence when it comes to contracts for the Navy. That is five. That emphasises the need for joined-up and co-ordinated Government, and I hope that in his summing up the Minister will confirm that that is happening.

I welcome the freeport initiative, which I sense the Minister will refer to in his summing up and, in particular, I welcome Freeport East at Felixstowe and Harwich, which is 50 miles down the coast from Lowestoft. However, I express a note of caution and emphasise the importance for Government of not jumping from one intervention to the next catchy initiative, but continuing to see through proven strategies that are already up and running. Like other enterprise zones around the country, the Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth enterprise zone, which was set up in 2012, has been very successful. It has an energy focus and is firmly in line with the levelling-up and net zero strategies. It now needs reigniting and that can be done by reallocating the existing footprint of the enterprise zone around Lowestoft port and the adjoining PowerPark. That could create more than 300 jobs, support 40 new businesses and generate between £1 million and £3 million of retained rates.

Earlier in my speech, I mentioned the need for the Government to provide the right policy framework for the maritime sector to realise its full potential. The framework that I would urge the Government to adopt is broadly Maritime UK's spending review bid. Time does not permit me to go through that in detail, but I believe it is compelling. It will create a large number of well paid, exciting and innovative new jobs right through the supply chain. Those jobs will be in coastal communities where they are much needed and will fuel the levelling-up agenda. Moreover, the strategy will set the UK firmly on a course to meeting its net zero maritime obligation.

In conclusion, it is important to re-emphasise the lead role that the maritime sector can play in the post-Brexit economy, particularly in terms of levelling up and decarbonisation. There is, as I have mentioned, a requirement for joined-up Government and also, I sense a need for maritime-proofing of economic policy. I say that having just read the Salvation Army's report on the levelling-up agenda, which concludes that coastal communities have not been properly recognised in the place prioritisation that has accompanied both the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund. I hope the Minister will allay any concerns I have in this respect in his summing-up.

2 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Sir George. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing the debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it.

Such debates are all too rare. That, in itself, is an illustration of what the briefing from Nautilus calls "sea blindness". One of the biggest difficulties the maritime industry faces is getting the political attention it needs in just about every respect—whether for its own development, for health and safety on vessels, or for minimum wage implementation. It all happens far from

sight at sea. This debate is a welcome opportunity for those of us with an interest in the maritime industry to put some of those concerns on the record.

It has been a difficult couple of years for those working in our maritime industry. During lockdown, many seafarers found themselves in difficult situations, caught between different lockdown regulations—testing, tracing, self-isolating—in different countries. In its briefing, Nautilus highlights its survey, which shows that about 11,000 maritime professionals fell through all the gaps in the safety nets; none was able to get assistance from the job retention scheme or the self-employment income support scheme. That statistic illustrates the different way in which the maritime industries work compared to those based onshore.

Both the right hon. Member for North Durham and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) believe that this is an industry with a future, and I endorse that sentiment. However, I would say that there is nothing inevitable about the UK maritime sector having a bright future; it will require a determined and driven strategic agenda from the Government to ensure that that actually happens.

We have seen the issue at different times over the years. Going back 15 or 20 years, the Blair Government introduced the tonnage tax—a really good, welcome initiative. However, it never really achieved its full potential, beyond getting tonnage to flag under the red ensign, because it was difficult for the Government to get the conditionality attached to it: getting the number of officers trained under the tonnage tax, and then getting the shipping companies that had trained them to keep them on. There was a commitment to train officers in order to qualify under the tonnage tax. After that box was ticked, there was a commitment to retain them for a year, but after that, there was a cliff edge. There was a glut of one-year post-qualification officers.

That is the challenge facing the Government, and I do not envy them. It is difficult for any individual country to take on companies operating in an effectively global environment. This is probably the best working definition of a global industry. In its briefing, the RMT illustrates some of the challenges affecting the enforcement of minimum wage legislation. This was something of particular concern a few years ago, when I discovered that many of those working on the freight ships going from Aberdeen to Shetland, in my constituency, were deemed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs not to be in its remit for enforcing the minimum wage because the boats operated in international waters. Its definition of international water is being outside the 12-mile limit.

I give credit to HMRC and the Government for having closed some of the loopholes, but we know that many of the jobs advertised will come nowhere near the level of minimum wage protection. The RMT briefing for today quotes some examples of that:

"The expansion of Irish Ferries into Dover is a case in point. Irish ferries pay below the National Minimum Wage to its Cypriot registered ships".

That is Irish Ferries coming into Dover in Cypriot registered ships—seeing that, one begins to understand the complexity of international shipping. It continues:

"as revealed by recent inspection of the *WB Yeats* by the Inspector for International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) in France (Irish Ferries have blocked ITF access in UK and Irish ports)".

It then quotes the pay rates on the W. B. Yeats, Rosslare to Cherbourg, in June 2021. A bar and galley steward gets an hourly rate of £6.47; an able seafarer has an hourly rate of £6.89; both a cook and a plumber had an hourly rate of £7.42; a receptionist earned £7.69; and a bosun earned £9.39. In fact, going back a few years, some of the ships that were operating in the North sea were paying figures that were less than half the lowest figures in the RMT briefing. It shows that, because of the way the industry is structured and operates, enforcement of conditions is a game of regulatory whack-a-mole.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am grateful to my good friend for giving way. I congratulate him on the work that he has done in the last couple of years to ensure that national minimum wage rates are paid to seafarers. Does he agree that what we would like to hear about from the Minister is a proactive approach to ensuring the enforcement of the national minimum wage?

Mr Carmichael: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is characteristically generous. Others in the House, him included, have been working on the issue as well. It comes back to the first point I made: as a former Prime Minister used to say, sunlight is the best disinfectant. People like us, talking about issues like that, on occasions like this, do allow pressure to be brought bear, which ultimately leads to progress being made.

The right hon. Member for North Durham spoke about the need for a more proactive, and less competition based, approach to the awarding of contracts. In principle I agree with him, and I understand what he is saying when offering comparators from Europe and around the world.

To sound one note of caution, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) knows, we have a difficult recent history of this north of the border. Two ferries are being procured from a shipyard owned by the Scottish Government: the replacement for the Glen Sannox and Hull 802—so called because, although it is now heading towards five years overdue, it still does not have a name. Partnership between Government and industry of the sort that the right hon. Member for North Durham is talking about worked very effectively with the procurement of the aircraft carriers and is something we should be taking seriously. However, the rigours of private sector involvement are needed to ensure that these ferries are obtained on time and give value to the taxpayer, as well as giving longer-term security for the workforce in the domestic shipyards we have left.

We saw this week that, in the tender for the construction of the two ferries to serve Islay and Jura, two of the shipyards tendering are in Turkey, one is Romanian, and one is in Poland. Not a single shipyard in Scotland or anywhere else in the United Kingdom is now being invited to tender by the Scottish Government. That shows that we need to have the strategy that everyone else has spoken about. If we have a gesture here on a difficult news day there, we do not do any favours for the people who work in these shipyards, never mind island communities such as Islay and Jura.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front Benchers at 2.30. The right hon. Gentleman has already taken up more time than will be allowed to

a Front-Bench spokesman, and there are other speakers trying to get in. There is no time limit, but I would ask him to bear that in mind.

Mr Carmichael: I have effectively, Sir George, covered the material that I intended to cover. With your restrictions in mind, I am happy to conclude.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): I now feel obliged to impose a time limit of seven minutes on Back-Bench speeches. That should enable everybody who wants to speak to get in.

2.11 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is good to see you in your place, Sir George. I will endeavour to meet your time limit, although as hon. Members know I can talk about the maritime sector till the cows come home.

I would very much like to associate myself with the remarks made by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who has set out as good an exposition as any of why we need to prioritise shipbuilding and the maritime sector. I agree that we often do not celebrate the sector enough. It is very telling that, through the horrendous couple of years of the pandemic, the supermarket shelves stayed full. That is because our maritime sector kept going. I suspect that it is only when things start to go wrong that people start to realise its importance. In that respect, we had something of a stay of execution when there was a slight difficulty in the Suez canal; I do feel that we are perhaps still yet to see the out-turn of the difficulties created by that.

It is great pleasure to contribute to this debate as chairman of the all-party parliamentary maritime and ports group and during London International Shipping Week. We have had a lot to celebrate in the ports sector this week: only yesterday, we heard confirmation from DP World that it is investing a further £400 million in a new berth at London Gateway, and Forth Ports are due to invest a further £1.2 billion in new port facilities at Tilbury3, following hot on the heels of Tilbury2, which I can tell the House took just under a year between planning permission and the ships arriving. That shows how dynamic the sector is. If only our public sector procurement could deliver things as quickly.

That success is very rarely celebrated. I know that I am preaching to the converted when I address all this to the Minister, who has taken on the brief with characteristic ambition and gusto; he is much respected in the sector, and we hope he continues to do the job for quite some time. Could I just ask him to switch his phone off, perhaps?

The right hon. Member for North Durham referred to the fact that maritime is seen as a smokestack industry. When it comes to how public policy makers see the sector, I could agree with him more. They generally do not see it as part of the future, yet it is an intrinsic part of our present. We cannot talk about global Britain or the importance of trade if we do not actually value the means by which we secure that trade. We really do need to make sure that we champion the sector more.

I lose the will to live when I have meetings with public policy makers in my constituency, which is, as I often call it, the port capital of the UK. It is the fastest growing port in the country, yet I still have to tell them

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

that the ports are our future and ask why they are wasting time prattling on about spending money on creative industries, which frankly are never going to contribute as much to the wealth of this country as the maritime sector does.

As Great Britain, it is part of our DNA that we are a maritime nation, but sometimes we say these things and then realise there is not very much to back them up at all. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) put it very well when he talked about how the sector touches on various Departments, because one of the tragedies in how we get things wrong in government and policy making is that so many of these things are siloed. We plonk maritime in the Department for Transport, which has to deal with providing infrastructure for how we get around the country, but maritime is at the heart of how our economy functions in an international way, as well as of employment. We need to get better at making sure that we deal with all those things.

I will make just a couple of final points. First, I totally endorse what the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said about seafarers. I also say gently to the Government that we are very good at lecturing other countries around the world about poor working conditions, but we look the other way when they exist in our sphere of influence; there are many complex reasons why that might be the case, but we must value seafaring and make sure it is adequately compensated. I give my personal thanks to my hon. Friend the Minister for finally getting the cruise sector moving, a sector that has obviously been hit very badly during the pandemic.

I have one final ask before I sit down. I endorse the comments made by the right hon. Member for North Durham about the need to foster investment in new technologies, particularly if net zero is going to mean anything, so I particularly encourage the Minister to look at Windship Technology, which I am hugely excited about. I think it could offer such a big future to this industry, but that technology and innovation is in every danger of going elsewhere if we do not do our bit to support it. I could go on for much longer, but I will sit down now.

2.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to add a Northern Irish perspective to the contributions that have already been made. First, I thank my friend the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for his contribution, and for setting the scene for us so very well.

Northern Ireland can be proud of its maritime heritage and excited about its maritime future: from the construction of ocean-going liners to fighting ships for our armed forces, facilities to build offshore wind farms, cutting-edge technologies designed to secure carbon-neutral status for the United Kingdom's maritime sector, and the tradition in my own constituency of Strangford of a sustainable fishing industry, providing fresh, healthy seafood and, importantly, good jobs.

Companies such as Harland & Wolff are synonymous with the maritime sector in Northern Ireland. The shipyard's huge cranes continue to dominate the Belfast skyline as

the company celebrates 160 years of marine manufacturing. I well remember, as an 18-year-old in the mid-1970s, guarding Samson and Goliath as a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. That was one of the roles we had to do, because it was so important to ensure that there was no terrorist attack on those cranes. It is superb to see Harland & Wolff exhibiting at this week's Defence and Security Equipment International exhibition here in London. I very much look forward to the Ministry of Defence rewarding that shipyard and its partners with future contracts for new ships for the Royal Navy and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, which as well as delivering the finest ships for the nation would help achieve the Government's goal of levelling up the UK's economy, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned. It is very important to remember that this would provide a much-needed boost to the entire economy of Northern Ireland.

In many ways, Northern Ireland and Belfast share a special bond with Scotland and the shipyards of the Clyde, but surely—I say this very gently to my colleague and friend the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens)—there is something not quite right when the latest HMS Belfast is being built in Glasgow. Artemis Technologies is a relatively new company on the maritime scene in Northern Ireland, but last year it was awarded a significant UK grant to research and develop zero-emission ferries that will revolutionise the future of maritime transport, so we need to be efficient in moving forward and be visionary in what we foresee for the future.

Artemis leads a Belfast maritime consortium that brings together the best in Northern Ireland's academia and other partners, including Belfast Harbour port authority. This kind of consortium is not unique to Northern Ireland. The Kilkeel Harbour network works collaboratively, based—as the name suggests—around Kilkeel harbour in my neighbouring constituency of South Down. That network brings together boat builders, marine engineers, ship painters and various other ancillary businesses. Over the past 18 months, it has created new employment against a background of what we know have been very challenging circumstances.

G. Smyth Boats is one of the companies in the network with an order book stretching for several years. It supplies small fishing vessels to customers throughout the UK, Ireland and beyond. The hon. Member for Waveney is absolutely right to say that the maritime sector stretches further than the big ships and container ships—it goes as far as local fishing communities, such as mine in Portavogie and Kilkeel, where this development will happen in a bigger way. Indeed, the latest new-build from G. Smyth Boats will be launched this week.

The network has the fishing industry at its core, and the fishing industry is at the core of my constituency of Strangford. In May, my party colleague and Northern Ireland Executive Minister Edwin Poots MLA published the “Fisheries and Seafood Development Programme”, which is probably the most extensive review of the sector carried out in the United Kingdom in recent times. It is very important to us. The Minister recognises the importance of it, and so do I. The FSDP does not hide the challenges facing the fishing industry: an ageing fishing fleet, and the need to build new ships and recruit fishing crew. Nevertheless, the opportunities more than outweigh the challenges. The report advocates investing

£100 million in fishing harbour infrastructure to help create a place where we can build those boats, not only for Northern Ireland but for the United Kingdom, Ireland and far beyond. The predicted timeframe for the delivery of that infrastructure fits neatly with the future negotiations between the United Kingdom and the EU, whose stated aim is to secure enhancements to the UK's share of fishing resources within UK waters.

Delivery of the FSDP's recommendations needs support from central Government, and I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on that. I suspect he does not have direct responsibility for it, but have the discussions that the hon. Member for Waveney referred to taken place? That is important, as there are different sections and Ministers have different roles to play.

The first part of the £100 million UK seafood fund was revealed last week, with £24 million of investment for cutting-edge science and fisheries research—the two together. It is important that those overseeing the fund and applicants to it consider the practical application of the projects to ensure we cover all the necessary maritime requirements. Too often, we see such funding being taken up by academic projects that might be important but have no practical application to the industry. They just have a visual impact on the maritime sector and the fishing sector in particular, for which they have allegedly been designed.

Competition in the marine space is growing. The maintenance of a sustainable and economically viable fishing industry is important to me, as it is to all my constituents. Marine protected areas and their highly protected cousins can also displace the fishing effort. Again, we are looking at the impact on the fishing sector of the central Government's priority for more wind energy from offshore sites.

Recent headlines about a national shortage of haulage drivers struck a chord with me, as I have lobbied the Government over many years on recruitment and retention. I asked a question at business questions today and, to be fair, I was fairly encouraged by the Leader of the House's response on what the Government are doing on that.

As an island nation, we depend on the sea for trade. It would be remiss of me not to refer briefly to the United Kingdom's vital maritime trade lines—namely between Northern Ireland, Scotland and England—and the impact on them of the protocol that the Government negotiated with the EU as part of the Brexit deal. Much has been promised to resolve the issues relating to the sea border created by the protocol, but actions speak louder than words. I was encouraged by the Prime Minister's answer yesterday to the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), but I would like to see actions, not just words. There should be no restriction on maritime trade on any trade between the islands of this great nation.

Our maritime heritage is important. We have much to look forward to, be proud of and learn from. It provides us with a tremendous foundation to ensure that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can once again resume a role at the pinnacle of the global maritime community, where we were in the past and can be in the future.

2.24 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing the debate. It is curiously unique that we have

not had many of these debates, but, going back through *Hansard*, we find that, all too often during London International Shipping Week, the topic is ignored. As a former shipbroker who worked in Singapore, then London and Nigeria, I really do believe I have seen some of the finer sides of the UK shipping industry and what it means to our economy.

I must start by saying what a fantastic opportunity this is to get together in this Chamber and see the common-sense agreement across the House about the value of the maritime sector—in coastal communities, ports, infrastructure and pay—and what needs to be done across the country to see it thrive.

I pay particular tribute and attention to the shipping services of this country. Although a significant proportion are based in London, I hope that colleagues will also reflect that across all four corners of the UK there are burgeoning businesses benefiting from the UK's leading shipping services, whether that be in accountancy, arbitration, classification, consultancy, education, finance, insurance or legal—it is all based here. Be it in Singapore, Nigeria, Geneva or the middle east, people always talk of the UK as the capital of the shipping industry. This is something that we need to protect, not be complacent about; we must reflect on that and recognise that if we do not compete, if we do not challenge those around the world, we will lose our status.

I hope my hon. Friend the Minister recognises that this is a debate not for us to have a go at him, but for us to encourage him. We know him to be a highly energetic Minister to whom we offer a great deal of support to take this issue up. We also have what I believe to be a very ambitious maritime strategy, the 2050 strategy, which touches on several of the right points that have been raised in the debate. The third or fourth point in that report states that if we are not turbocharged and are not active in supporting and securing businesses in the UK, they will move abroad. Singapore and Geneva are competing every day to take businesses away from this country to be based in theirs.

Therefore, we must recognise the need to point out our failures, where necessary, to support our successes where available, and to look for opportunities that Government policy can support. The right hon. Member for North Durham talked about research and development, and I am so pleased that he did. We have rightly committed 2.4% of GDP to research and development in our manifesto, as Government policy. We talk about the invention of the telephone; I think now about the inventions we can put hand in hand into shipping services to allow us to tackle climate change, to look at the new inventions that will help us create a truly 21st century and green maritime sector that can be traded not just across the UK and our coastal communities, but across the world to be used by others.

I am particularly delighted that the right hon. Gentleman also talked about Norway. We are not necessarily expecting the UK to be building oil tankers and container ships, but we must look to try to retrofit vessels with new, high-end technology that allows us to capitalise on the work of the International Maritime Organisation and its ambitions for carbon neutrality by 2040. It is eminently possible and should go hand in hand with our levelling-up agenda.

[Anthony Mangnall]

We are home to companies such as Lloyd's, the Baltic Exchange, Platts and numerous brokerages, two of which I have served with. I think they were probably rather pleased to see the back of me. However, there is a sense that this is an industry that is open to people from all walks of life. In some cases, there is no requirement for a degree, it can be entered into at any stage. When we talk about the levelling-up agenda, it is something that we must recognise as eminently achievable and that allows us to attract more people.

I have a few pleas to the Minister. We need to look at tax regulation and incentive schemes. We need to look at how our maritime flag is used both in the UK and abroad. We need to look at how we can champion maritime security. We need to talk more about supply chain resilience. We also need to think about how to get more people into maritime colleges. I am very pleased to say—and there will be an invitation to follow—that Noss on Dart in my constituency is setting up a maritime college within South Devon College, with the express purpose of getting people into the maritime sector at every level. There are opportunities coming up, and I would say there is broad thinking in further education colleges about how we can support this sector.

We have the history of being a very strong, globally leading trading nation with an extraordinary maritime history. We must return to that thinking, because it will help us in our ambitions of global Britain. It will help us in our ambitions as we join new organisations like the comprehensive and progressive agreement for transpacific partnership, which I hope we will be doing next year. It is perfectly fair to think of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) as Helen of Troy—she could launch a thousand ships. That is what we should be aspiring to do in the years to come.

The motto of the Baltic Exchange is, “*Dictum meum pactum*”—my word is my bond—and we must be very conscious that there is huge opportunity for us to develop the sector, to support it, to grow it and to encourage people to enter it. We can, once again, rule the waves.

2.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir George. I think you are the first Chair in a Westminster Hall debate taking place during a reshuffle who is not of the governing party, so I do not need to send you good wishes for the reshuffle. I see that the Minister is still in his place, which I think we will take as good news for now.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and everyone who has contributed to this excellent debate. It has been very enjoyable listening to everyone. Of course, a debate such as this would not be the same if I did not mention that I am still proud to represent the Govan shipyards and the workers there, who are the undisputed greatest shipbuilders in the world. I am pleased that BAE Systems is now looking at shipyard investment and at ensuring that it can build ships more efficiently at the Govan site. That is something that I hope the Minister will take cognisance of, because many of us believe that the Government have a role to

play in providing finance and helping companies to invest in their shipyards so that they can compete—not just for defence contracts, but for contracts elsewhere.

I very much agree with the right hon. Member for North Durham about the fleet solid support ship contracts. A number of us in the APPG have been chipping away at the issue for a while. I have always found it quite fascinating that we were told they were not defence ships, because I have tabled parliamentary questions to ask what weaponry there would be on fleet solid support ships. I have received a long list, so I am bewildered as to why they are not designated as defence ships, but it seems that progress is being made.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for his charitable interpretation of the CalMac ferries situation, because my personal view on that is probably not repeatable in *Hansard*. Those of us who advocated remaining in the EU, such as the right hon. Member and me, have always felt—I certainly have, as someone from a public sector background—that one of the weaknesses of the case was the EU public procurement rules. It would help if the Minister outlined whether the Government are looking at the procurement rules and perhaps making it easier for local authorities and public bodies to provide contracts to local suppliers in various situations.

I want to associate myself with the comments made about seafarers, because it really is important that the national minimum wage is now enforced. Many of us were grateful that the Government changed the rules so that the national minimum wage would apply. It is now important that that is enforced, because the RMT, in its excellent briefing, has already given us examples of where it is not being enforced, and where seafarers are not being paid the national minimum wage. I recognise that the Government produce a list every year, and it certainly would not surprise me if some of the shipping companies appear on that, but perhaps the Minister could outline what work his Department and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs are doing to ensure that there is real enforcement.

The maritime economy is very important both to the Scottish economy and that of these islands. It is estimated that the direct value of the maritime economy to the UK's gross value added was £46.1 billion in 2017, supporting 200,000 jobs directly and 1 million jobs both directly and indirectly. Shipping alone contributed £6 billion to the economy in 2020, representing 19% of all transportation, and the UK's shipping fleet is the 24th largest in the world. Some £9.9 billion of the GVA is added to Scotland, with 41,000 jobs directly supported. Apart from the seafarers' situation, workers in the maritime sector are usually highly skilled and well paid. According to Maritime UK, they are 42% more productive than the average worker. Pre pandemic, the sector was predicted to grow by 15% between 2018 and 2023, but obviously that has been disrupted, and the true level of growth remains to be seen.

It is also important that we should recognise the value of Scotland's maritime economy and marine environment, and protect the environment while growing that economy in a sustainable way. Scotland has 60% of the UK's fishing waters and an abundance of marine resources. It is important to treat those as national assets, to be protected, developed and enhanced, not just for this generation but for future generations.

Scotland included shipping, defence and marine tourism in its previous national marine plan. That will be developed into a maritime strategy, and a dedicated agency will be established to put Scotland's marine assets at the heart of the blue economy. The Scottish Government have pledged support for the growth of sustainable marine tourism to turnover of more than £0.5 billion by 2025.

There are great opportunities to explore greater maritime trade with the UK, and we should be ambitious to increase direct trade with the European Union. I want to see that 102% rise in direct shipping to France since the Brexit barriers were put in place, because the EU sees it as harder to ship through England to Scotland. Brexit has led to direct shipping and ferry routes to Spain and Calais.

We ask the UK Government to commit to serious and sufficient investment in the maritime sector. Historically, the UK Government have not included international aviation and shipping in their carbon budgeting—although they have changed that now, which is important, as I am sure the Minister agrees. It is important to include shipping emissions, as they can make up 3% of carbon emissions every year. Decarbonisation should be a key part of investment in the maritime sector going forward.

I congratulate all hon. Members on their fine contributions today on the maritime sector. As someone who represents a great shipyard community, I will support other hon. Members in ensuring that we have a thriving maritime sector going forward.

2.37 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is terrific to see you in the Chair, Sir George. I am sure all hon. Members echo that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is one of the most effective operators in this Parliament at holding the Government to account, but he also always keeps his eyes on the horizon and has vision in what he talks about. The maritime industry does indeed have a very bright future for our country, and I congratulate him on leading the debate.

I was going to make some remarks about the reshuffle, but the hon. Members for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) have stolen all my lines. I will just say to Government Members, "Hope to God that your phone batteries last the day for you all."

To be discussing the maritime sector in London International Shipping Week is a great honour. I pay tribute to everyone in the maritime sector, which played such a crucial role in getting this country through the pandemic and will continue to do so in the months ahead. We have had an inspiring and enjoyable debate—the House at its best.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) always sticks up for the people of Suffolk, for Lowestoft port, for fishing and for the technology to come. I wish his beloved Ipswich Town all the best—I think things will pick up for him this season.

For the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), Orcadians may be crofters who can fish, and Shetland Islanders may be fishermen who can croft, so he has a lot to say, and he says it well. However, I want to make the serious point, in relation to Nautilus,

that we do not discuss the maritime sector enough in Parliament. As for the RMT and the Irish Ferries ship, the *W. B. Yeats*, I remind hon. Members that Yeats wrote a poem called "The Indian to his Love":

"Here we will moor our lonely ship... how far away the unquiet lands".

We will make unquiet lands for Irish Ferries while it pays its workers below the minimum wage. All of us in this House should agree on that and highlight it every time, as the RMT does. It is not right not to treat its workers with dignity and respect. The right hon. Gentleman will be happy to know that I have just booked my summer holiday in his village—I let him know so he can go on holiday, too.

The hon. Member for Thurrock is a proud champion of the all-party group and could launch a thousand ships from her constituency alone. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is not in his place, talked about Belfast and its maritime heritage, but also its future—zero emissions, ferries, ships, and the fishing industry in his constituency. I will put in a bid for the port of Foyle as well. It is underutilised, and we could see more cruise ships stopping there.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) talked about education and the leaders of the future. We need the agglomeration in our ports, getting people into well-paid jobs that can be equivalent to level 5 without the debt of a degree. He used his experience in brokerage to highlight that really well.

Seafarers and the maritime industry have kept this nation fed, fuelled and supplied, often at great personal cost. I spoke to the industry this week. Mareel at Holyhead crews vessels across the world, and then there are Holyhead Towing crews as well. They have operatives across the planet who have not been able to get home. They have stood by their posts to make sure the British shipping industry works.

Revitalising our maritime sector would unlock tens of thousands of green jobs across the UK. That could be the stimulus to regenerating our often overlooked coastal communities and provide the opportunity to renew the many towns and villages dotted along the coastline. I speak frequently to those in the sector. They tell me how keen they are to make the changes needed to develop, innovate and change for the greener. However, the Government need to fund and support that radical transformation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham mentioned the £20 million for the competition—that is great, and we welcome it—but that must be a vanguard for what we need to do in future to ensure that we have good strategies to turn what we have got into what we need, to get what we want. That is what we have to do with the agglomeration of our maritime industry around our coasts and our component islands.

Another thing I call on the Government to do is turn the tide on, so to speak—if you will pardon the pun, Sir George—with financial backing for the shipbuilding industry. What all the biggest shipbuilding nations today have in common is either financial support for the industry or Government subsidies. We have heard some fantastic contributions, but why do the Government provide backing to the car industry and not the maritime sector, which had just £3 million committed this year, in

[Mike Kane]

one competition? Government must do more to attract investment by backing home shipbuilding credit guarantees and loans.

Decarbonisation and rebalancing of the economy are possible, and UK maritime, with its wealth of talent and expertise, has shown time and again its ability to generate enormous value. Shipping will be key to the journey to net zero by 2050. We cannot get there without decarbonising our shipping. The Government recognise that and have put maritime in their “Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution” as an industry difficult to decarbonise.

I am sure the Minister will make much of the clean maritime demonstration programme today, but while the investment is welcome, as I have said, we need more. This could be a fantastic opportunity for our country, as currently there is no clear global leader setting the pace to develop these technologies. If we are prepared to act fast and invest in the UK, we can become a scientific and green technological superpower—the hon. Member for Totnes said a 21st-century superpower—bringing jobs and prosperity to our neglected seaside communities and once again making our maritime industry world leading.

There is no time to lose. We have a moral duty and an environmental obligation to control pollution and reduce emissions. We must make a fair transition to green technology and to automation, but this must also be a just transition, ensuring that our seafarers and maritime professionals can avail themselves of the new opportunities. Government must do more to develop the sector, support the creation of new training and employment opportunities, and incentivise shipowners to commit to providing opportunities for employment for UK seafarers. I will always be an advocate for more investment in our maritime sector, which will enable us to become the vanguard of the green maritime industry.

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): It is very good to see you in the Chair, Sir George. It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), who always manages to quote poetry in his speeches and make me feel a very flat speaker in contrast.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing this truly timely debate on the UK maritime sector. He speaks with enormous enthusiasm, experience and expertise on the matter, and I am grateful to him for everything that he has put before us today. I entirely share his passionate enthusiasm for the sector and agree that it has a very bright future. I thank him for his comments. As it happens, I agree with a great deal of what he said—not quite everything, but a great deal.

Mr Kevan Jones: Careful—the reshuffle is not over yet. [Laughter.]

Robert Courts: That is a good and timely point. The Government will be relieved to know that we do not agree on quite everything.

I can think of no better moment to discuss this issue than during London International Shipping Week. The right hon. Member is absolutely right that, to quote another of his phrases, the maritime sector is not some “quaint” industry that plays a historic role in our past. This is very much an issue of the present, as we see in London International Shipping Week, which is the second-biggest international gathering this year, I understand, after COP26. It is the highlight of the maritime year and shows that not just the capital but the whole of the UK is the best place in the world to do maritime business.

Maritime business is very varied. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) rightly pointed out, services are a major part of it as well. It is, of course, seafarers and shipbuilding, but it is also the much wider services side of things. He is quite right to draw attention to that.

I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) that he need not fear: the maritime sector is not overlooked and never will be, certainly for as long as I am in this position. I appreciate that I do not know how long that will be, as everyone would say. Perhaps the greater reassurance is that, for as long as the Prime Minister, for whom this is also a major priority, is here, the sector will not be overlooked.

I start with the issue of decarbonisation, which has clearly been a major part of the debate today. I would suggest that this country is leading the way on this. We have announced the winners of the clean maritime demonstration competition, a £20-million fund to develop novel zero-emission technologies. It is the biggest competition of its type that the Department for Transport has run, so I ask hon. Members to bear that in mind. The right hon. Member for North Durham mentioned hydrogen; my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) mentioned Windship. They have asked for demonstrators, essentially. That is what we are seeking to do: to decide and demonstrate what the likely technology is going to be.

We can disagree—we will have to agree to disagree—on whether this is turning point, but I suggest that it is a welcome way forward. I know that hon. Members all accept that, and London International Shipping Week is a great time to showcase the competition. It shows the innovation that is required and that exists, and it also the investment that we are putting into it from both industry and Government—it is key that it is a partnership. We hope that the demonstrators will be a springboard for bolder projects that are yet to come.

It is absolutely clear that there is no shortage of ambition in the sector with regards to greening the sector. That is important for the two reasons that hon. Members have stated: for emissions, clearly, but also, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, for protecting the environment—cleaner in both senses. He is quite right to draw attention to that, and I am grateful to him for doing so.

I will spend a little bit longer talking about shipbuilding, which has been a major part of today's debate. Shipbuilding will very much be a part of our next chapter. The UK has a long, illustrious shipbuilding heritage. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, spoke movingly and vividly of Harland & Wolff, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West spoke passionately for Govan, one of the great shipyards

of the UK. Together, we have built some of the greatest, most iconic vessels that have ever graced the waves. Shipbuilding remains an integral part of our manufacturing sector, sustains thousands of jobs across the UK and brings millions into the economy, as we have heard.

Mr Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Courts: Once I have agreed with the right hon. Gentleman one more time, if I may. He asks whether we believe that we will become a world-leading shipbuilder. Yes, we will.

Mr Jones: Will the Minister inform the House whether he has any indication of when the refresh of the national shipbuilding strategy will be produced? I know that is in the hands of the Ministry of Defence, and the MOD's idea of summer—or any season, frankly—bears no relevance to anything that we would think, but I would appreciate some indication because the industry is keen to get on with it.

Robert Courts: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the precision he would like, but it will be before the end of the year. I hope that provides some indication of going forward.

The industry has historically suffered around productivity and under-investment, and we need to become more competitive on the international stage. Government support is, of course, vital to achieving that aim. It is key that we work in partnership with the sector to reinvigorate its fortunes and those of the wider supply chain, which we have heard so much about today. With that in mind, the new post of shipbuilding tsar—who is, of course, the Secretary of State for Defence, as the right hon. Member for North Durham knows—has been created. That is to support UK industry to enable it to step up and become more productive and innovative. As part of that, a vital step forward has been announced this week: the creation of the National Shipbuilding Office.

The right hon. Member for North Durham spoke of the Carrier Alliance. He is quite right that it has been a fantastic project and that it showcases the best of the UK, but I would suggest that it is also slightly different, given that it is a once-in-a-generation major product. We are looking at something that requires ongoing, routine investment in shipyards and that leaves a legacy, because we need to build on the legacy of the shipyards to have that drumbeat of ships that we all wish to see and to provide that for the future.

That is what the National Shipbuilding Office is looking to do. It will be the strategic centre driving this change across Government and the industry. In other words, it will do precisely what my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney rightly asked for—as, indeed, did the hon. Member for Strangford—and avoid the siloing that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock rightly referred to.

That is what the National Shipbuilding Office is intended to do. It is to bring together all the Departments that hon. Members have referred to, but then add industry to ensure that it is a key team effort. That will, of course, support innovation—to ensure that skills are also aligned—and the supply chain. It will outline the vision for the UK's shipbuilding enterprise, and the strategy that I referred to in answer to the intervention from the right hon. Member for North Durham.

A good example of the way the country can showcase its real innovation is the new national flagship, which is a sign of the Government's determination to support prosperity, jobs and skills in the UK shipbuilding sector. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Wights, the shipyard company on the Isle of White. I was at the boat show in Southampton yesterday, and met with RS Sailing, which is developing a green, electrically powered, rigid inflatable boat, and with the marine division of Barrus and Bruntons Propellers—highly efficient propeller technology—to give a few examples. The Society of Maritime Industries event, earlier this week on HMS Albion, brought together all those industries, and others.

Companies such as that, with technology such as that, could be showcased in this new national flagship, which is a sign of the Government looking to provide a showcase for technology, and be part of the drumbeat of ships, so they would understand when the Government were procuring new vessels. A major part of that is the MOD's Type 31s and Type 26s, all the way through to our naval support vessels. However, we also have civilian vessels—ice patrol, ocean surveillance, and, of course, research. The RRS Sir David Attenborough is the latest example of those very high-quality ships being produced by the UK. A new fleet of Home Office cutters is also being considered, should funding be confirmed, with the intention of securing UK value for that.

I will talk about the DFT's fleet for a moment, too. That fleet is often overlooked, although it is one of the largest civilian fleets. It is operated by our general lighthouse authorities to ensure that navigational aids remain operational in all circumstances, and that seafarers are made aware of dangers such as wrecks. That role is often understated, but it is terribly important, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) might agree; I am sure it is important in his constituency. I will take the opportunity to thank everyone who works for Trinity House, the Northern Lighthouse Board, and Irish Lights, for their professionalism in extremely difficult times, and for keeping people safe. We are also commencing projects to build new vessels for Trinity House and the Northern Lighthouse Board. Both will go out to formal tender shortly.

A great deal of vessels, in terms of number and breadth, are available in the Government's pipeline, and there is no reason for that not to include fishing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney rightly pointed out.

I will say a word or two about skills. Skills are clearly part of the Government's levelling-up agenda and a massive part of the industry. Today, as we also heard from my hon. Friend, the Maritime UK coastal powerhouse event takes place. Coastal communities are very much part of levelling up and of the industry we are discussing today. We need to ensure, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes rightly pointed out, that we have the skills we need not just to recover from covid-19, but to look to the future and to ensure we have the skills we need for the industry. That is a key part of the Maritime 2050 strategy, which the Department produced about two years ago. It brings together, in conjunction and consultation with industry, the plan for the future.

A key part of that plan is the Maritime Skills Commission. Professor Graham Baldwin was appointed as chair, alongside 18 commissioners, and it has £300,000

[Robert Courts]

in funding. One of its recent focuses has been green skills, to which my hon. Friend also drew attention. The Seafarer Cadet Review was also published in June.

I am grateful that hon. Members mentioned East Coast College and South Devon College, which are looking at STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—skills in their own ways in their parts of the world. That is critically important work, close to all our hearts.

My comments must be slightly constrained by the fact that a spending review has been announced recently. The Government will announce how we will continue to invest in public services, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is working up a business case for a home shipbuilding credit guarantee, which is part of the spending review considerations. We continue to look at what other financial support might be available to work jointly with industry.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West asked me about public procurement. There was a Green Paper, and those responses are being considered by the Cabinet Office. The DFT will continue to review the tonnage tax regime.

I am conscious that my speaking time is running out, although there are a great many other things I would like to talk about. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes rattled off a list of things, each of which could make for a great debate in its own right—flag, tax, supply chain. I would love to have debates on those subjects; maybe he will apply for some. I do not suppose it is my job to encourage the holding of debates, but I just have.

I should also give a plug to the debate on the cruise industry scheduled for next week, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock will attend if she

possibly can. I appreciate the support of and constructive criticism from all Members. We have had an interesting, helpful and constructive debate.

2.57 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank the Minister, who has a real passion for the sector and for aviation. We have had a good, well-informed debate. The main point is clear: this is about people and the skills we need for those people. We cannot take those for granted and we must invest in them. As was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), we must ensure that people are not only well trained, but properly remunerated.

The other side of the issue is procurement, where the default position in the sector should be to procure and buy from UK yards—I make no bones about it. There is no excuse for not doing that; no other country in the world does not do it. The idea that we are considering buying ferries from Turkey is nonsensical.

That has to be the default position, and the Treasury should remember that the money comes back into the UK economy. We must ensure that the Treasury gets the fact that money spent in UK shipbuilding and in the UK maritime sector is money that will not only grow the sector, but procure jobs for the future.

I shall finish where I started, with a point on which I think we all agreed today: this is not an industry of yesterday; it is an industry of the future. We must make sure it is, and make sure it is attractive for young people to come in to, so that we not only get the well-paid jobs and skills, but benefit the broader UK economy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK's maritime sector.

Timpson Review of School Exclusion

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

3.1 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before we begin, can I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking? This is line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the implementation of the recommendations of the Timpson Review of School Exclusion.

I am delighted to have secured the debate. This is the first time I have led a Westminster Hall debate and I am pleased it is on a topic that many hon. Members care about deeply. I am also delighted, and we are fortunate, that we have the opportunity to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) who conducted the review for Government. This vital review of the use of school exclusion found that more needed to be done to ensure exclusions are used fairly and consistently, so that every child has access to the high-quality education they deserve.

As a former trustee of an alternative provision multi-academy trust and a chair of governors at a pupil referral unit, I have seen how high-quality education within alternative provision can turn young people's lives around. Indeed, as an employer leading a business in the creative sector, I worked with AP schools to find career opportunities for young people who thought differently but had creative flair. However, often, because of either an underlying special educational need or challenges in their home life, they had not quite managed to fit into mainstream schooling. With that in mind, I established the all-party parliamentary group for school exclusions and alternative provision when I came to the House to look at ways in which we could reduce the number of preventable exclusions and promote best-quality education for pupils who are excluded.

I thank all those working in the sector, particularly over recent months during the pandemic, who, because of the children, stayed open all the way through. I pay particular tribute to two individuals who have helped me to understand the sector: Seamus Oates, London regional director for the Ormiston Academies Trust, and Karen Thomson, my first head when I became a governor at a school in Warrington.

Through the APPG, we have met many pupils and parents, as well as teachers and local authority inclusion needs experts, all of whom work day in, day out with pupils excluded from school. They continue to urge the Government to implement the important recommendations of the Timpson review. While some progress has been made in implementing those proposals, a lot more still needs to be made, so I am delighted the Minister is in Westminster Hall today to give a progress update.

Our collective determination should be to ensure that every child being educated in alternative provision obtains better outcomes than they would have achieved in a mainstream school. With better models of AP working effectively with the sector, as well as more funding, we will be a few steps closer to making that aim a reality.

Therefore, these recommendations have never been more important, as pupils return to school from a year of immense disruption. Even prior to the pandemic, we were starting to see a dangerous uptick in the number of permanent and fixed-term exclusions. I say again that the most vulnerable children—those known to social services and those with special educational needs—are most likely to disappear from school rolls, and I am afraid the pandemic has only further entrenched what is a barrage of disadvantage.

One of the most worrying conversations I had during the summer recess was with a mainstream headteacher at a school in Warrington who highlighted the number of children now appearing on the local authority's at-risk register. Those children were becoming involved with county lines drugs gangs and entering the criminal justice system owing to schools being closed, and they are now at risk of permanent exclusion from their mainstream school.

The Government have rightly been concerned about the learning that pupils have lost over the last year. We should also be concerned that that disruption to learning might well reverse progress that the Government have made since 2011 in closing the attainment gap. However, a growing cohort of pupils are not returning to school, and consequently they cannot access the support in which the Government have rightly invested.

As schools reopened, we found that pupils were disengaging from school at a frightening pace. Nearly 100,000 pupils were severely absent last year, missing more than half their education through non-attendance. We also face an increase in mental health issues in our classroom, with the rate of children with probable mental health disorders rising from one child in nine in 2017 to one child in six in 2020. All those factors point to an increased need for upstream support, by which I mean that if we are to avoid permanent exclusions, we need to intervene earlier.

Teachers and parents—those who have been through the exclusion process with their children—as well as inclusion leads told us during sessions held by the APPG that we need to invest in a system that offers both high standards and high support for our most vulnerable learners, securing every pupil's right to high-quality education. One of the first steps to achieving that would be recognising the importance of alternative provision in the education landscape and enshrining the role of giving support to pupils at risk of exclusion.

As was found by the review undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, the best AP across the country offers some of the greatest expertise in working with children who have challenging behaviours and additional needs. Those providers are seen not as a last-chance saloon, but as a place where life chances can be transformed. That is where we need to be with every alternative provision school in the country.

As the APPG has heard, the very best APs work along a continuum of support, offering outreach and advice to schools and pupils upstream to ensure that as many children as possible can stay in mainstream classes while accessing the support they need. They do not want children to go into AP; they want to support them in mainstream schools. That is what great AP schools are doing.

One brilliant example is the Pears Family School, an AP that not only supports pupils excluded from school but draws on its expertise as an AP with a reputation for

[*Andy Carter*]

exceptional parental engagement to build the capacity of mainstream teachers to support those learners in their classrooms. It does that by offering continuous professional development focused on parental engagement, supporting teachers with strategies to engage with parents. Its approach has been found to re-engage disaffected pupils, and it offers holistic support to vulnerable pupils and their families.

Although that is an admirable example of the potential of great AP, I am afraid that it is not yet the norm across the country. Far too many pupils can only access the support of an AP if they have experienced a school exclusion; it is the last chance they get. As pupils return to school, we need to think about how we build this capacity to elevate the status of APs as respected experts in the education ecosystem.

We cannot, however, elevate the status of AP if we do not invest in it further. I am afraid it is unacceptable that schools for excluded pupils are often totally unsuitable buildings passed down by local authorities—schools that are no longer used for mainstream education. They have all the hallmarks of the last chance saloon. Before coming here, and more recently through the APPG, I have heard and, sadly, seen some horror stories about the buildings the schools are operating out of. I specifically recall visiting buildings on the Wirral when I was a governor in Warrington and seeing smashed windows, walls painted black, and furniture that was around 40 years old. That is not a suitable educational environment for children who have been excluded from mainstream schools.

Some alternative providers are offering education in neglected commercial premises and old converted houses that are simply unfit for purpose. Four in five respondents to the Centre for Social Justice's AP capital survey said that the facilities in AP were simply not on a par with mainstream schools, and we have heard from parents who say that turning up to AP schools that look like dumping grounds, rather than schools, further raises anxiety about being placed in an AP, not just for parents but for children too. That only serves to reinforce the stigma and anxiety felt by pupils and their families following their AP referral. The review by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury suggested prioritising AP in any upcoming capital funding. Like many Members, I welcome the Government's significant investment in improving the quality of the schools estate over the next 10 years, and I will take the opportunity to ask the Minister whether we can please prioritise these settings in the next round of capital funding, and invest significantly in expanding buildings and facilities for pupils who need AP.

I also ask the Minister for some clarity on when the special educational needs and disability review will be published. Although it is essential that the Government take the time to understand the scale and complexity of the changes needed, every delay extends the time in which those children and families are not getting the help they require. We also need some assurances that the SEND review will focus on AP reforms and how to create a system that enshrines APs as experts in the education landscape.

I am aware that the Government have made some progress in some areas, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments rightly recognise that many of

the recommendations have been taken forward, but there are many on which we still need urgent action. As such, can the Minister tell us when she expects the AP workforce programme to be published, and what plans there are to establish a practice programme that embeds partnerships, allowing them to intervene earlier through the introduction of a practice improvement fund? Finally, can she tell us what steps have been taken to introduce more substantive training on behaviour issues into initial teacher training and the early career framework? I look forward to hearing her responses, and thank her in advance for addressing Members.

3.13 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, for what I think is the first time—I apologise if we have crossed swords in this place before. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate to take place, as well as my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (*Andy Carter*), who in the short time he has served in this place has already become a great champion for children who are at risk of school exclusion, highlighting the consequences of it. His chairmanship of the APPG is already reaping benefits for the profile of this important subject and the work and collaboration that are taking place on it, both inside and outside Parliament.

Despite my now being back in this place, the review I carried out was an independent review at the behest of the then Secretary of State, which was commissioned in March 2018 and published in May 2019. The last time we debated the review was on 2 March 2020: it was essentially an almost-one-year-on review of the review to check against progress. Of course, that was pre-pandemic, so we were still looking at the review through the lens of the world as it was then.

From memory, it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (*Nick Gibb*) who responded to that debate. I will take a moment to pay tribute to his incredibly long and fruitful service at the Department for Education as Minister for School Standards; I was there with him from 2012 until 2017, apart from a short period when he was allowed a breather. Many Members across the House recognise that he has shown a great deal of commitment, dedication and perseverance, to the benefit of many children in this country, and I wanted to put that on the record.

When we look at the response then and the position we are in now, we have to factor in that many children have had to endure a very different environment over the last 18 months. I want to explore how that may impact not only on the range of responses we have to the prevalence of school exclusion, but how it may bring about new opportunities to improve the way that we work more upstream, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South said, to prevent as much disruption to education as possible.

Although exclusion will have a severe impact on any child, the analysis in my review showed that it affects only 0.1% of all children. However, that is 40 children a day. We need to make sure that we make the best of that situation for every child. Similarly, there are around 2,000 suspensions every day—I believe that is what they are being called; we used to call them fixed term exclusions—so there is a lot of disruption in the education system daily.

When I conducted my review, I understandably had to encompass a whole spectrum of different views and senses of what is right and wrong in the management of behaviour in schools. That was sometimes quite tricky territory. However, the consensus I found was that everyone understood the need for the headteacher to have some autonomy and discretion to use exclusion where appropriate, and very much as a last resort where nothing else will do, and that there have to be high standards in schools around values of respect and good behaviour. However, people also recognised that there are children who, for whatever reason—from what I called “in-school” or “out-of-school” factors in the review—find it difficult to meet that level of behaviour and interaction in school. That gets to the nub of how we need to respond and intervene earlier when we recognise that there may be a problem in that child’s life.

I remain of the view that exclusion is an important tool in the headteacher’s toolbox. We should not be looking for some artificial figure of how many exclusions there should be—what we need are the right reasons for exclusions and, as a consequence, the right number at the right time. However, that would be less of a concern if we knew that was true in every case: one finding of my review was that there was not always an appropriate use of exclusion. That is particularly worrying as we know that vulnerable pupils are most likely to fall foul of exclusion, as we have heard already, in particular those who have been diagnosed with special educational needs or come into contact with social care.

We look at the impact that exclusion has on their life prospects: on their educational attainment, their employment, the aggravation of mental health issues and the correlation with the criminal justice system. All the evidence is there. We know that we can do much more for these children and young people if we work at a more preventative level and ensure a greater continuum of support through some difficult times by involving all those who work with children, not only in schools, but in the agencies that support schools, including pupil referral units and those working in alternative provision.

We are looking at the overlaying of the pandemic and still trying to come to terms with how that will manifest in the longer term. We are already seeing reports of heightened anxiety for some children, with social disconnection problems that have been bottled up at home. That has led to some disengagement from education for those who were not able to get online every day and to get into each lesson when they were at home. All that has an impact on their ability to progress and reach their potential.

Although we do not have any data beyond the autumn of 2019—before the pandemic—Cheshire West and Chester Council, the authority in which my Eddisbury constituency falls, has published a report with Social Finance. The report shows a rising level of pupil absence and a rising use of exclusion by schools in the first term after lockdown restrictions ended last year, in an area that has a lower-than-average exclusion rate. That finding may not be the same across the country, but it is certainly an indicator that there may be some fallout and additional issues for children who have gone through that experience.

Indeed, the number of suspensions in the Chester West and Chester area went up from 62 to 93, and the proportion of children being suspended for the first

time rose from 40% to 54%. That is just one snapshot in one part of the country, but that is why it is important that we look at the matter carefully and consider, as more data comes out, whether it is an aberration or a deeper problem caused by the disruption over the last 18 months.

Unfortunately, that could also point to the risk of rising persistent absence and exclusion. The children most at risk of slipping out of education—and not only those who live in poverty, but those who may have a social worker because life outside school is unsafe—are more prone to exclusion. On the face of it, covid makes the risk of exclusion more likely rather than less, but at the same time, the conclusions of my review, and its recommendations, still hold water. In fact, in many respects, it is even more important to implement them in a timely manner.

I know you are a great fan of googling the word “Timpson”, Mr Stringer, so I am sure that you are aware of the Timpson tracker, which is on the IntegratED website. When I first saw it, I thought it was something that would track me doing the marathon a few weeks later, which was clearly not the case—it would have been a very long viewing period if it had been. The tracker sets out the progress on the recommendations in my review, from those that are still in progress to those on which we have not made any progress at all. At this juncture I want to thank the Minister, because I have had a number of opportunities to engage with her on that progress since the last time we debated the matter in Parliament. We had a discussion with officials on 25 May, and that provided me with some reassurance that further work was going on, although because of the pandemic, it had perhaps been done differently from how we had anticipated. None the less, the will and the determination to make progress were clearly there. In the time I have left, I will refer to just some of the recommendations, to push them forward again and ask the Minister what progress has been made in the intervening period.

Recommendation 8 is to establish a practice improvement fund. I have highlighted that on a regular basis because, although I fully accept that there is a spending review to come and that sometimes funds have to be found within existing budgets—or even within slightly smaller existing budgets after a spending review—that part of the overall package of recommendations is crucial because it homes in on what we know from the evidence our review collected on what actually works on the ground and which tools professionals need to have a strong response to any difficulties children have at school, so that exclusions can be avoided.

The recommendation considers the transition points from primary to secondary school, and in-school units, as well as how many children have attachment and trauma issues. In that respect, I pray in aid the Attachment Research Community, which, along with the National Association of Virtual School Heads, has produced a call to action to help raise awareness of attachment and trauma needs in schools across England. The recommendation also looks at teaching, learning and emotional wellbeing in schools, and really aims to complement and extend some of the existing Department for Education guidance on supporting mental health in schools.

[*Edward Timpson*]

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to tell us more about the work on mental health in schools, particularly on having a trained lead in each school, and on how attachment and trauma could be fused into that work so that every school's workforce has some basic knowledge of how attachment and trauma manifest, and how staff might be able to respond in a way that really helps to keep children on the right path.

There has also been interest in the behaviour hubs that have been announced by the Government. Twenty-two schools and trusts have signed up, including six that have a relationship with alternative and specialist provision, which is an important step forward. It would be good to hear from the Minister about how that is starting to have an influence on pushing out the good practice, and what steps will be taken in the future.

Recommendation 11 may, on the face of it, seem a synthetic recommendation compared with others, but I still see it as an important part of how we change the conversation around alternative provision, particularly pupil referral units. The recommendation deals with the stigma that is often attached to PRUs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South said, they can seem like a dead-end place where pupils are put to be kept out of sight. We know there are PRUs all over the country that are not like that at all. We have seen some tremendously impressive examples where they are turning lives around, working directly in mainstream schools, and helping with the work they do. Renaming PRUs in a way that reflects their role both as schools—places of learning—and as places that support children to overcome barriers to engaging with education seems to be one way of making people view their role within the system more positively and constructively.

Recommendation 10 draws on the excellent opening speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South, particularly about alternative provision and the need to have a strong workforce. We are starting, particularly post-lockdown, to hear some APs report difficulties with recruiting subject specialist teachers. There are shortages in many professions at the moment, but fortunately for APs, there is a route to quality within their workforce. Recently, I was lucky to be able to thank the founding cohort of the Difference Leadership programme, led by Kiran Gill, who graduated after their first two-year placement programme in good and outstanding APs. They are already having a profound impact on the ground. Within the first months of the course, leaders reported a 65% reduction in internal and external exclusions, and an 80% improvement in de-escalation incidents. That is not just a single improvement; for example, the Pendlebury Centre pupil referral unit works on the continuum of need that we have heard about, and very closely with the mainstream schools around it. This work is starting to see a real culture change in the way that schools and PRUs are working together to resolve problems as soon as they possibly can.

I want to touch upon the illegal practice of off-rolling, which is in my report. Off the back of my recommendation—I do not have the number to hand, it may be recommendation 26—the Education Committee were looking at how Ofsted might make sure that where they have found off-rolling during an inspection, they make that clear on the face of the inspection report. The

consequences of that, in my judgement and review, should be that the leadership and management aspect of the school's inspection be deemed inadequate in all but exceptional circumstances. That still has some time to cement itself within the inspection regime, but it is important that we call out the extremely sharp practice of off-rolling, which is ultimately illegal, and squeeze it out of the school system.

I am realistic. Having been Children's Minister, I know that there are often principles that one agrees with and accepts, as is the case with the Government's response to this review, but that is not always then ad idem with one's ability to bring them into practice. There may be some need to nuance them and fashion them slightly differently as circumstances shift, and of course the pandemic is one such circumstance.

I am clear that the will is still there in Government, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister says at the two-year—it is over two years now—review point to establish how much progress we have made. We know there is a lot of knowledge and understanding in the school system, and a commitment to do better and learn from the best, and many of my recommendations point to achieving that, as well as having a much more cohesive and transparent system where we can track children more easily, we do not lose them to the system, and we can respond more efficiently and effectively in providing the support they need to make the best of their education.

We have some fantastic schools all over this country and children who want to learn. We just need to make sure we do not leave any of them behind, and this review provides a great opportunity to do just that.

3.30 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to speak in this important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for his review, which I have studied at length. I concur with some of the recommendations and certainly with his speech today, but I think some of the recommendations need to go further.

What I have tried to do in preparation for today's debate is to take a bigger view of what happens in the journey of a child and to look at how we can give a far better experience to that child. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for adoption and permanence, which this week published its report "Strengthening families", and I thank the hon. Member for his part in that. I have also looked at children who experience extreme trauma and at the impact that has on them, and talked to parents, young people, agencies and schools in my constituency. Rather than looking just at the behaviour of a child, my conclusion is that a child does not reach the point where their school determines that exclusion is necessary, without first being on a trajectory that takes them to that place. Therefore, we have to look at the life course of a young person, identify early indicators and invest in the stability that that child needs to take them down a different path and to know they are secure, safe and have worth.

The work being done in this place around 1,001 critical days is critical in ensuring we get the right foundations not only for the child, but for the whole family. Parenting

is the most important role anyone plays in our society. Yet, the investment in parenting is scant. Of course, that starts before a child is born. We need to invest in the vital skills of a parent to build that security around the child. Also, as a state, we need to think about the instruments we need to put in place to help parents too. It is a difficult journey, but the more investment we put in, the greater the likelihood that we will see the fruits of that investment later on.

A child may have multiple challenges. They may be neurodiverse, have underlying health conditions, have experienced trauma or not formed good attachments. At any point along the journey, the system, instead of pushing them away, must draw them close. That is perhaps why I do not fall in line with the hon. Member's report—I believe that more needs to be done to draw children in rather than push them away. That is the experience of many of these children: they are pushed away from so many places, which escalates and spirals their lack of attachment and identity, and makes them so insecure.

Exclusion reinforces harm to many children and pushes them further into risk, as the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) so ably said in opening the debate. It destroys the threads of security that a child may have and is ultimately costly both to the child and financially over a lifetime.

Children who experience adoption are 20 times more likely to be permanently excluded, and five times more likely to be excluded for a fixed period. In fact, they are 16 times more likely to be suspended at key stage 1. Those children already have the challenge of processing their identity, security, trust and attachments. More often than not, they have layers of significant trauma, and are often excluded far earlier than other children. The trauma of exclusion builds on that trauma, and therefore does not achieve the outcome of security, which is why we have to make that early investment.

The all-party parliamentary group has looked at the value of the adoption support fund. We must ensure it is there at the right quantum to provide the services and support that are needed. If security and stability are wrapped around a child's education, with continuous relationships, that can help build stability for them. The transition points, which hon. Members have referred to, can be very challenging and confusing for a child. It is therefore vital that we have relationships to bridge those transition points. A system in which everything changes in those relationships every year for a child can be very disruptive, so we need to look at continuums in a child's life that can take them through their schooling.

If a child is taken to their safe place in a school—a place that is calming, caring and engaging and that invests in them—we will see different outcomes. It is therefore right that we build schools that have those spaces where children can go. As we have heard, and as we know from our constituencies, many children are experiencing real mental trauma at this time. Mental health challenges are starting in younger and younger children, and we are all experiencing from our constituencies children who are in a place of distress at such a young age. It is therefore important to create safe spaces that any child can go to when they are feeling insecure in class.

The challenge I want to set the Minister today is to create therapeutic schools. We should see schools not just as educational environments but as places that

support the whole needs of a child. The rise in exclusion demands that. We need not isolation, but engagement; not exclusion, but inclusion. If an excluded child is pushed into rejection, they are pushed into further risk and harm. We have heard about county lines and people who prey on vulnerable children. They give children the rewards that they are seeking—not the right rewards, of course—and draw children into a different space that is unsafe for them. Ensuring that we have safe spaces is therefore absolutely crucial.

Children today are exposed to mental health challenges, trauma and harm—let us face it, none of us experienced this when we were younger—thanks to the scale and pace of social media and so many other things that they have to navigate their way through. We have to find a better space for our young people. As I have said many times in this place, many intergenerational challenges are replicated through children. We therefore need to break some of those cycles with a trauma-informed process. We must look at the child's holistic needs—their home, their school environment—and understand them far better. If a child is not secure, they will not learn and attain, and inequality will grow. Therefore, that is absolutely crucial.

I have also said many times in this place that we need to look at what children are learning and the environment they are in. My sister, who works in early years with children with many challenges in their lives, last night pointed me to a YouTube clip by Prince EA, called "I Sued the School System". I recommend it to all hon. Members; it is really worth six minutes of their time. I see hon. Members nodding—I do not know whether they have seen it. It talks about the way we need to develop a different kind of curriculum for children. Of course, it will be about inclusion. It will draw on children's skills, and draw them into the system more and more. That is how we stop the rejection—the feeling of being pushed away—that so many children feel.

My city of York has a high standard of education and a high standard of caring for young people who are very challenged. It gives children an opportunity for a fresh start, so that if children find their school environment challenging, it will move them to a different school in the city. Many schools engage with that, so that children are kept within the school education system. Of course, alternative provision is also available for children. Within that, however, I note what is happening statistically. We saw a real drop in the number of permanently excluded children in the city—it is now about three or four children a year, which I would say is three or four children too many—but the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions has started going up. That was with the introduction of isolation units in schools, which are incredibly harmful for children.

Looking at the figures for 2018-19, 472 children in York were suspended for disruptive behaviour, 192 for threatening behaviour, and 123 for verbal behaviour. We must therefore find alternative solutions to keep those children in school, because many of them would have been pushed further into risk outside school. I also think that we have to take a safeguarding approach. I have raised this issue with the Minister in questions, and we are due to meet to discuss school-age children outside the school environment and the risks that they are exposed to. We therefore need to look at harm reduction

[*Rachael Maskell*]

in the school environment, where safeguarding is strong, but also outside. Of course, when children are suspended or excluded, they are outside that safe environment. We have to do a lot more on that.

In conclusion, I want to say to this to the Minister: let us draw children into safe places, and not push them away. Let us invest, not deprive a child of perhaps the only hope they have—the only safe place they go. I know that the Government have yet to get on this path, but the whole education system needs reform. With a refreshed Department, perhaps there is an opportunity to once again look at the curriculum, the environment and the purpose of education. Let us not escalate, but de-escalate, risk for these young people.

3.42 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) for securing this important and timely debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for the work that he did on the review. I agree with the vast majority of the recommendations, and I think the Government should implement them fully at the next possible opportunity.

I could not agree more with the points made by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about therapy and the importance of a therapeutic approach. I am very fortunate to be an associate governor at a special school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs in my constituency. The school has only been going for just over a year, but it has done an absolutely fantastic job so far in supporting some of the most vulnerable young people in my constituency, who are slowly but surely turning their lives around—not long ago, many people had given up hope. They have got that hope back again because of the fantastic work going on at the school.

With regards to alternative provision and PRUs, I am in complete agreement with the points that have been made today. From the perspective of society, there should be nothing more noble and important than working in these institutions, which are often the last opportunity and the last hope that these young people have. They should not be places where people give up hope, both from a staff perspective and from the perspective of the people there. They should be good buildings—they should be our best buildings—and they should have our best teachers and our best educators. Frankly, the stakes could not be higher for society in terms of us getting it right at that point—often the last opportunity for us to make a positive intervention.

I also align myself strongly with the points made about the transition points between primary and secondary schools. It is often those with special educational needs who struggle with the transitions. Those transitions can be in relation to everything in life—transitions from education into the workplace, from primary school into secondary school, from A-levels into university. They will be made much harder by covid-19 and the destruction that that is introducing to education settings. I am talking about off-rolling, which I plan to come to later in my speech.

As the Minister knows, I am fortunate enough to sit on the Education Committee, and I have done so since I was elected to this place 20-odd months ago. I am a bit of a dead record when it comes to special educational needs. I always find a way of getting it in, at any sitting, whatever the subject, whether that is exam results, Ofsted or mental health. I always try to find a way of introducing the perspective of, and how it impacts, children with learning disabilities.

From the data provided, we know that those with special educational needs are very much at risk of being excluded. Some data I saw said. I think, that more than two out of five of those permanently excluded had special educational needs. The stakes could not be any higher when it comes to getting the provision right for those with special educational needs, so we need to get it right.

We have a number of remarkable people who are unconventional thinkers—creative thinkers—who do not think in the same way or process information in the same way. If we get the support right for those individuals, funding and organising it properly, so that it is not just about them treading water and being average achievers, they could be far from average achievers and be some of the most creative people in society. A lot of this is about not losing their talents to society. Yes, it is about them, their families and what is morally right, but it is also about not losing their talents, which is an incredibly important point to make.

There is a very fine line between a lot of those individuals getting the support that they need and flying, and not getting their needs met and turning against the system. Sadly, so often, they then end up in our criminal justice system, which we are seeing right now, as the Education Committee is conducting an inquiry into prison education. The fact is that more than 30% of those in prison have some kind of learning disability, although I think it is far higher than that. A lot of people, when they get into the criminal justice system, have their learning needs meeting, where they talk about the kind of support that they might get in prison. The Government have introduced some screening, but that is not the kind of intensive diagnosis that I would like. I would like each person who goes into prison to meet an educational psychologist to get diagnosed properly, so we have a clear picture of whether they have disabilities and, if they do, what kind of disabilities they have. Even at that late stage, we can hope to turn their lives around and to give them the educational support that they need.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Is it not right to have those diagnostic opportunities in schools? So many children in school, in particular the neurodiverse, wait years and years before they have a diagnosis.

Tom Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point, which I was about to come on to. It is important that we get that intervention right, that we ensure that each person, when they go into prison, meets an educational psychologist for diagnosis, for two principal reasons.

First, yes, it is about the individuals and, even at that late stage, about hopefully being able to make positive interventions in the education provided. Secondly, I think we are a bit blind at the moment: we think that 30% of those in prison might have learning disabilities,

but it might be as high as 50%. We just do not know, and we need to understand the scale of the problem. If it is 50%, not 30%, surely that just increases the argument for why the stakes are so high and why we need to fund special educational needs properly right from the start, as the hon. Member for York Central said—getting diagnosis as early as possible, putting the resources in and making these things possible. I could not agree more. I have dyslexia and dyspraxia. When I was 12, I had the reading and writing age of an eight-year-old, and it was only when I was diagnosed at 12 that I got the package of support that I needed to turn it around from an academic point of view. I could not agree with the hon. Lady more on that point.

The stakes could not be higher. I speak as somebody who has been in that situation where I am in a large class, my eyes glazed over, not understanding why I cannot process information in the same way other people do, sometimes feeling as though I am thicker than other people, sometimes feeling that there is something wrong with me. The teachers in the classroom do not always have as full an understanding about different types of learning disability as possible, so of course we go back to teacher training, and why it is so important that every person going through teacher training has that as a fundamental part of their training, so they can understand the different needs: that not all young people think and process in the same way, and that not thinking in a conventional way does not mean that you are thicker than anybody else. Sometimes it can actually mean that you are more creative, and I have said to a bunch of autistic kids in my constituency, “Weaponise your disability. You think differently; you can be creative.”

However, the impact of covid—the disruption we have seen to the education system over the last 20 months—may make this harder, and may increase the likelihood that some young people with learning disabilities get excluded. It comes back to that point about transitions. It has not been easy for any young person over the last 20 months, because of the disruption—not knowing how they are going to be assessed, not knowing whether they are going to be at school or not—but we know that people with learning disabilities particularly need certainty and structure, and they have not had that for the last 20 months. My concern is that that could impact behaviour; my concern is that the disruption over the last 20 months might have particularly impacted those with special educational needs, and we might see more risk that a lot of these individuals could be excluded.

I want to make a final point before I sit down. I do think that exclusion needs to be an option. It needs to be there; we need to balance trying to do the right thing for all children with the disruption that can be caused by disruptive pupils to other pupils in the classroom. It can absolutely have a detrimental impact on the education of an entire school, but of course, we need funding into alternative provision; we need to have no stigma; and we need to have a good number of special schools, which as I have seen—and, as an associate governor, continue to see—can literally transform the lives of many young people.

However, when we come to this point about off-rolling and the sense that this may be happening, perhaps subtly, a lot of it comes back to Ofsted and the way that we assess schools and the framework. Sadly, from the conversations I have had with a number of teachers, they

often feel that there is a conflict between doing what they believe to be morally right, in terms of the education that they are part of providing and supporting the most vulnerable children, and actually—not unreasonably—wanting to be professionally successful. If there is the sense that there is a conflict there, we need to work to take it away, and there is a new Ofsted framework in place, but what are school assessments ultimately about? Surely, they are about the positive difference made. That should be the key thing: to what extent has a school made a positive difference to the lives of the children that it works with, acknowledging that not all schools have the same proportion of those with learning disabilities and those without, and not all schools operate in the same area and some pupils can have more challenging backgrounds? We should not be in a situation where a school can sometimes feel that it is punished for being good when it comes to providing for special educational needs. We have got to have an Ofsted framework that encourages and incentivises schools to put the extra effort into supporting those with learning disabilities.

I guess it has been a slightly sprawling speech, but my point is that my concern about exclusions is that there are too many occasions where sadly, those with learning disabilities are at risk of exclusion because their behaviour can be unconventional, and often when they are excluded and go somewhere else, that final chance for them—whether it is alternative provision or something else—is not as good as it should be. There is this bigger point about how high the stakes are. Exclusion should be an option: it should be something that we consider, but we have got to have an Ofsted framework that encourages first-class SEND provision. I know I have only spoken about special educational needs today, but as I warned you, Mr Stringer, I can be a bit of a broken record when it comes to that topic, and I make no apologies for it. Thank you very much.

3.54 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) on securing this crucial debate.

School exclusions have a negative impact on children’s lives and educational outcomes, and therefore have a negative effect on their adult lives and outcomes. It takes a lot of support and determination for a person who has been excluded from school, often many times, to decide that they do not want to be a victim of their negative school experience for the rest of their life, and it often takes a huge effort to turn that around.

Excluding children has an impact on a child’s mental health; a recent study found that exclusion can lead to new-onset mental health conditions. Research also suggests that better access to mental health support for pupils who struggle at school could prevent future mental disorders and exclusion from school. I know the Minister is very aware of that.

I spent many years as a magistrate before coming to this place, and I have witnessed a correlation between previous school exclusions and involvement in the criminal justice system. Early intervention and prevention and supporting parents in their parenting skills to break the cycle is key. Investment is much needed here, as in the family hubs that I know the Minister supports fully.

[Sally-Ann Hart]

The Ministry of Justice has found that 85% of young offenders received at least one fixed-term exclusion, and a study looking at the background of adult prisoners found that 63% of prisoners had experienced a fixed-term exclusion at school, and 42% were permanently excluded. Government statistics show that the number of permanent exclusions has increased in the UK.

It is worth noting that exclusion rates vary widely between schools. A 2019 study by England's Children's Commissioner found that 88% of exclusions take place in only 10% of schools. That means that most schools do not exclude children, but try to help them and keep them in school. In the autumn term of 2019, the only term of 2019-20 for which we have comparable data, there were 3,200 permanent exclusions, up by 5% from 2018-19, and 178,400 fixed-term exclusions, up by 14%.

The Timpson review, which I absolutely commend, found that some cohorts of pupils are more likely to be permanently excluded, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities. Many Members today have discussed that. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) is right that more than two in five of all permanently excluded pupils have some form of special educational need. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities have had a disproportionately high exclusion rate since records began. As a member of the APPG for SEND, I find that quite concerning.

Pupils supported by social care also have some of the highest chances of being excluded. Pupils with a child in need plan are around four times more likely to be permanently excluded compared with their peers; pupils with a child protection plan are 3.5 times more likely, and looked-after children 2.3 times more likely to be excluded. Pupils eligible for free school meals are four times more likely to be permanently excluded, and ethnicity also plays a role in school exclusions.

Many of our children who are persistently excluded are some of the most disadvantaged and often neglected children. We cannot allow these most vulnerable children to be overlooked by our education system. Giving every child the best start in life is a guiding principle of the Government's approach to education here in England. We Conservatives believe that no matter the background of a child, the wealth of their parents, their race, their needs, their gender or sexual orientation, every child deserves a fantastic education or at the very least a suitable one, and the opportunity to build the foundations they need to thrive in the world of work and become functioning members of our communities. That must include those children who are failed by the system.

I pay tribute to Carole Dixon, chief executive of the Education Futures Trust, which supports vulnerable children, families and adults across Hastings, St Leonards and Rye by removing barriers, providing one-to-one support, developing their resilience and improving their life chances through education.

Many children have complex needs and struggle in mainstream school. Alternative provision must be considered a major part of a child's education in those circumstances. It can provide for those children's needs. Alternative provision should also be seen as an integral part of any local authority's core offer. I am a member of the all-party group for school exclusions and alternative

provision, and we have heard that alternative provision should be properly monitored and registered, and should focus on the child's interests and needs, which help them build trust, confidence and resilience. I support the Timpson recommendations and commend them to the Minister, particularly those relevant to the upcoming SEND review.

4 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Let me also pay tribute to the outgoing Minister for School Standards, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb). I have shadowed him since I took on this role and know him to be a decent, communicative and respectful opponent. I am grateful for that. Last night, I passed on my personal respects and gratitude to him, and I am happy to do so today on the record. He is also the Member of Parliament for the area I grew up and went to school in, which has been another great source of conversation between the two of us because I ended up going back to secondary school at the age of 25, so I had a lot to talk to him about.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). He, with the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), not only triggered the debate and gave us the opportunity to have this conversation today, but set the tone in a thoughtful and wide-ranging way. For that, I think hon. Members across the House are grateful.

I will start my remarks in the way the hon. Member for Warrington South and the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) did, by paying tribute to the teaching profession and all those who support students in schools. As the hon. Lady pointed out, most schools successfully support students to make the right decisions on behaviour, learning and delivering outcomes that are successful for them, their families and our community. We should be entirely grateful for that. However, today's debate focuses on the areas where we do not succeed, and we need to do much better overall.

Most teachers do a tremendous job. Despite the considerable challenges they face, they work tirelessly to deliver high-quality learning to all children, regardless of background. They face mounting workloads, coupled with cuts to real-terms budgets, and they have adapted to the unique circumstances of the pandemic. However, where teachers exclude too easily, honest conversations need to be had about why. They are working against a system with high incentives to exclude and too few incentives to include. Moreover, they face a Government who are reticent to address the vulnerabilities underlying exclusions, which their policies have sometimes fostered.

The impact of austerity fell directly on schools, but it also fell indirectly on young people. Cuts were made to children's services and the wider network of partners designed to support children and to keep them healthy and safe. That has led to a rise in vulnerability. Between 2014 and 2018, the numbers of children being looked after, subject to child protection plans and becoming homeless or living in temporary accommodation, all increased. We know that vulnerability is a key driver of behaviour that leads to exclusions, so it is no wonder the rate of permanent and fixed exclusions rose dramatically over the same period.

Economic vulnerability is a key factor behind exclusions, but other characteristics matter too. According to analysis by the Centre for Social Justice, pupils eligible for free school meals are four times more likely to be permanently excluded than others and more than two in five of all permanently excluded pupils have some form of SEND, a matter particularly close to my heart. Concerningly, the rise in school exclusions shows no sign of ending and more and more pupils are getting stuck in a vicious cycle of exclusions, unsettling for them and unsettling for the school at large.

The historian and critic R.H. Tawney once said:

“What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish for all its children.”

I doubt that any parent would desire a system in which exclusion is used so readily, especially when we know the consequences of exclusion are so severe. They are felt in education, where only 7% of permanently excluded children receive GCSEs in maths and English. They are felt in work, where only 54% of pupils in alternative provision are in education, employment or training six months after leaving key stage 4. They are felt in the criminal justice system, with an NSPCC analysis of serious case reviews showing that 31% of serious violence victims had received a fixed-term exclusion.

Where no other options are available, exclusion should of course be open to schools, teachers and leaders. I have been involved in establishing two schools, both in areas of quite extreme deprivation. I became chair of governors of one of those schools at the very beginning. In the previous year, the predecessor school had permanently excluded 12 children. That was unacceptable to me. As chair of governors, at the beginning of the new school, I set the target of getting to zero in one year, while increasing student outcomes and attainment.

We managed to get it down to one. In that one case, the child had stabbed six other children with a hypodermic needle. In such circumstances, we cannot allow other students to feel so unsafe. The line cannot be crossed. In those circumstances, exclusion should of course be used, but with a very heavy heart.

We reduced permanent exclusions down to one. At the same time, in one year, we managed to achieve a 100% increase in children with five GCSEs including maths and English. The link between permanent exclusions and the use of exclusion and de facto increasing exam results is simply not there. By never writing off a young person and making sure that the right support is there at the right time, an atmosphere is created that sends a message to every student, whether they face challenges making the right choices in life or not, which ultimately fosters an environment that is conducive to learning for all students.

We must fix the underlying problems that drive problematic behaviour first. As schools balance the desire to keep children in schools with accountability for the performance of others, we must act to introduce sensible safeguards to prevent overuse, not least when—as I saw in my period as shadow Minister for youth justice—children are often excluded while being criminally exploited. That is utterly heartbreaking. Some are even trained by gangs in how to become excluded in the first place, to free up time for drug running and more.

A few years ago, with the serious violence epidemic reaching its peak, the Government seemed to recognise this. They commissioned the hon. Member for Eddisbury

to lead a review into school exclusion, attempting to understand how the system could be sensibly rebalanced to allow more children to remain within mainstream provision.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on that report, as the Opposition did at the time. We welcomed his findings and recommendations. The Government did too, “in principle”. Two years on, only six out of 30 of the recommendations have been implemented. Like the Lammy review, when it comes to tough action to tackle unfairness in public systems, the Government must do better to walk the walk. It is not just rhetoric—it means something.

The recommendations ignored by the Government to date include a practice improvement fund to disseminate best ideas on tackling exclusions across the country, and empowering local authorities to lead on partnership working, thus ensuring a truly joined-up approach between all parties involved in the process. Critically, that includes making schools accountable for the results of excluded children. That would ensure that pupils were never dismissed as a problem to be got rid of but were subject to proper tailored interventions that gave them the education that they so sorely need.

The Prime Minister took office on a platform of cracking down on crime, yet his Administration have shown no interest in cutting off the pipeline into crime or tackling child criminal exploitation. I am afraid that Conservative Members were even whipped to vote against my amendments to the recent Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. Without shutting off this pipeline, no amount of police action will succeed.

I close by asking the Minister the following questions. What is her rationale for failing to implement the remaining recommendations in the Timpson review? What plans does she have to evaluate the success of the exclusions process as part of the Department’s forthcoming review into the statutory guidance? Along with the hon. Member for Warrington South, I ask the Minister: when will the review into tackling racial and SEND disparities be published? Will she commit to making sure that new exclusions guidance provides specific protections for children subject to criminal exploitation?

There have been too many wasted opportunities. We need to act now to make sure that the school exclusion process is rigorous and fair. If we fail, it will not just be other people’s children who suffer; it will be us all.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): In calling the Minister, I ask her to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the Member who introduced the debate to make a winding-up speech.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) on securing this important debate. I apologise that I needed to step out for a couple of minutes earlier.

I also thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and so many other Members for their kind and personal words about my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb). I saw how, as Minister of State for School Standards for so many

[Vicky Ford]

years, he worked tirelessly to make sure that children all across our country had access to first-class education. He always put the most disadvantaged children first, and in the past 18 months I have learned a huge amount from him. I wish him the very best, and I join you all in sending him our thanks for everything that he has done for children.

The Timpson review was a very positive and comprehensive report that has influenced the Government's approach to exclusions and behaviour. All children deserve the best start in life and, as the Timpson review states, every child has a right to

“a high-quality education that supports them to fulfil their potential.”

The review also recognises, however, the right of every headteacher

“to enable their staff to teach in a calm and safe school”

environment. The Timpson review shone a really important spotlight on how certain cohorts of children were more likely to become excluded than others and how that can affect their outcomes. We are really grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury both for his work on this really important report and for acting as an advocate on this issue more widely.

We are taking forward the vast majority of the report's recommendations. I would like to reassure all those listening today or following this debate that the Government are pursuing an ambitious programme of work to improve our understanding of behaviour and wellbeing, as well as putting in place additional support for children who have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion.

That work is a combination of concrete actions that we have taken through the pandemic, the behaviour programme of the Department and the SEND review, which I have broadened to include reforms to alternative provision. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) spoke so passionately about special educational needs and disabilities. I reassure him and all those present that a key aim of the SEND review is to make it easier for children with special educational needs to access support in good time.

As we are all aware, children and young people have experienced substantial disruption in the past 18 months. Excluded children, and those at risk of exclusion, are some of the most vulnerable in the country, which is why it was so important that we not only kept schools open for vulnerable children, but kept our alternative provision open for all who attend such institutions.

We also provided AP with additional support. As part of our £3 billion education recovery package, we provided additional support of £1.7 billion for all schools, including AP. We also ran the really important AP transition fund, which provided targeted support to around 6,500 year 11s, to help them move on and remain engaged in post-16 education and training, including apprenticeships and FE courses. Last term, I visited an AP setting in Hyndburn, and I heard from the school that all but one of the year 11s who had left in the summer term of 2020 were still in education, employment or training nearly a year later. The extra support for transition at the end of the summer of 2020 made a huge difference, which is why we are continuing it for that same cohort—the year 11s—into FE next year.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we set up an AP stakeholder group, which brings together some of the best leaders of alternative provision in the country. They have helped to guide us on the best way to support vulnerable children through the pandemic and beyond. They are helping us to shape the AP reforms through the SEND review. In line with the recommendations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury for a practice improvement fund, and as part of the AP reforms, we are looking to codify and boost the quality of AP, so that all children and young people can access the best in-class provision and all mainstream schools can draw on specialist support upstream, to get in the early intervention. That is part of the work that we are doing with our AP stakeholder group and will be bringing in through the SEND review.

We know that our engagement in education is a key protective factor against many harms. Vulnerable young people can be at risk of being drawn into crime or gangs, and they will benefit from specialist support if they can stay engaged with their education and out of harm. Therefore, we are not waiting for the SEND review before putting in more specialist support to help such children. We have recently launched two really exciting new projects, focusing on areas with serious violence hotspots.

From early next year, the DFE will be establishing 10 SAFE taskforces—SAFE stands for support, attend, fulfil and exceed. They will be led by mainstream schools in order to protect and re-engage children who are truanting, who are at risk of permanent exclusion or who are at risk of being involved in serious violence. That will include £30 million of new funding over three years and will enable additional support and interventions, to reduce the probability of such children and young people being excluded.

That will complement the pilot that we are doing in 21 alternative provision specialist taskforces, which is launching in November. It will draw specialists from across health, education, social care, youth services, youth justice and mental health, as well as family workers and speech and language workers. Where necessary, the pilot will enable the specialists to be co-located in the AP setting. That will help deliver targeted wraparound support to pupils in order to reduce truancy, improve rates of employment, education and training, reduce the NEET risk, and reduce the risk of involvement in serious violence. It will also improve mental health and wellbeing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South made a number of good points and spoke about the importance of capital. We are investing £300 million in this financial year to support local authorities to deliver new places and improve existing provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, or for those children who require alternative provision—almost four times as much as the Government provided to local authorities in the previous financial year. Spending for future years will be determined as part of the spending review.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about the importance of really early support for families and parents when children are very young, and I so agree. That is why the Government have worked with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) on her

review of those 1,001 days—the very early years—and how to give children the best start in life. It is also why I and the Government are so committed to championing the family hub approach.

I come back to the issue of exclusion. We know that exclusion is an essential tool for headteachers to use when a serious incident has occurred, for example, or when there is persistent disruption. However, we are very clear that it should be used only as a very last resort. Longer-term trends show that the rate of permanent exclusions across all schools followed a downward trajectory from 2006-07, when the rate was 0.12%, until 2012-13. It then rose a little, but has remained stable since 2016-17. Permanent exclusions remain a rare event; there are roughly six exclusions for every 10,000 pupils. As expected, the number of exclusions decreased during the pandemic, but according to the data that we receive from schools, in the last summer term there were only 40 permanent exclusions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich mentioned off-rolling. Let me be very clear: off-rolling is unlawful and is never acceptable. Ofsted will hold schools to account for how they use exclusions, under its behaviour and attitudes judgments, and its new revised education inspection framework considers the rates, patterns and reasons for exclusions: differences between different pupils; whether any types of pupils are repeatedly excluded; and any evidence of off-rolling. The revised framework in 2019 strengthened the focus on this issue. Of course, Ofsted needed to stop its inspections for some time during the pandemic, but where inspectors find off-rolling it will always be addressed in the inspection report and, where appropriate, it could lead to a school's leadership being judged inadequate.

One of the Timpson recommendations was to update the guidance on suspensions and permanent exclusions. We have committed to revising our statutory guidance on exclusions so that headteachers are able to have further clarity when using exclusions, and we will be consulting on this guidance and the non-statutory guidance on behaviour and discipline later this year.

The Timpson report also recommended that the Government reviewed the number of days that a pupil could be suspended from school. Currently, the number is 45 days in an academic year, although it is rare for children to reach that limit. In 2019-20, just 27 pupils received that type of temporary exclusion from schools in England for 45 days in a single academic year. However, the Government are considering these arrangements and we will update our plans in due course.

The Timpson review also recognised that certain groups of children with particular characteristics were more likely to be excluded, which includes pupils who were eligible for free school meals, pupils with a child in need plan, and pupils with black Caribbean or Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) spoke about looked-after children and exclusions. However, there is good news. I am delighted to say that since we introduced the virtual school heads into local authorities, looked-after children now have some of the lowest rates of exclusion compared with their peers. The virtual school head role has been so successful that we are now expanding it so that virtual school heads can support all children who have a social worker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South mentioned the need to upstream support for children's mental health and wellbeing, which is so important. We are putting considerable investment into mental health in the education system. The additional £79 million announced by the NHS in May will support the roll-out of mental health support teams to an estimated 3 million children and young people, which is around 35% of pupils in England, by 2023.

We are also progressing with the training of a mental health lead in every state-funded school and college in England. Our £9.5 million investment this year is expected to train up to 7,808 mental health leads this year. That training will include how to support children with attachment problems and trauma. Our new relationships, sex and health education curriculum also plays a part here; I am thinking especially of the mental health and wellbeing modules. We rolled those out, advanced the roll-out of those, early on in the pandemic—in the summer term of that school year—alongside extra training for staff.

Rachael Maskell: We know that there is a real shortage of clinicians with expertise in paediatric mental health. I wonder, with the work that the Minister is doing, whether she is talking to the Department of Health and Social Care about the need to really increase the number. What we find is that although teachers, as mental health leads, can provide certain support, they do not have the clinical skills and experience to supply the expertise needed.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Member for that very good point. It is true and it is one of the things that I have spoken about at length over the past year and a half with the former mental health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who is now Culture Secretary.

Improving the paediatric mental health support for children in the health service is also a very important part of the Government investment here. The mental health support teams, which wrap around our schools and can bring together different levels of support, depending on what the child needs, have also been extremely helpful in different areas. That is why it is so good to see those being rolled out. We do not expect teachers to be mental health experts, but we do think that training a mental health lead in every school can help them to identify the children who need more support, and to promote wellbeing, which is so important. Goodness—I saw so many children having a great time with their wellbeing over the summer during our holiday activities and food project.

We have also talked about children and young people with autism. The Government have updated the autism strategy over the summer. For the first time, that includes specific references to supporting children and young people.

We want to better understand the link between wellbeing and behaviour, so we are developing a pilot for a pupil survey to understand their perception of wellbeing and behaviour in mainstream secondary schools. Behaviour does matter. We know that behaviour can have an impact on teacher wellbeing and retention and on young people's life chances. The Government recognise that we need to understand the drivers of behaviour and what the barriers

[*Vicky Ford*]

to learning, engagement and attendance are, so we are pursuing a programme of work to do more to improve behaviour and discipline in schools, in recognition that good behaviour and strong discipline are key parts of school improvement. The behaviour hubs programme will mean that schools with exemplary behaviour cultures can work one on one with schools that need to turn around their approach to behaviour management. We expect that to help at least 500 schools over the next three years.

This goes alongside a golden thread of high-quality support, training and development that will run through the entirety of a teacher's career. It begins in initial teacher training and goes through the implementation of the early career reforms for early career teachers and on to the introduction of new and reformed national professional qualifications for more experienced teachers and leaders. Also, in April, we announced plans to launch a national behaviour survey. That survey will provide a more accurate, timely and authoritative picture of behaviour across all schools. It will cover topics ranging from low-level disruption, to bullying. That will also help us to understand what more needs to be done.

I am really grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South and for Eddisbury for raising their concerns on this issue. I would like to assure them that, throughout the pandemic and going forward, the

Government have had and will have a laser focus on supporting vulnerable children, targeting support at those at risk of exclusion and improving support for those who have been excluded. I know that the hon. Members will all be looking forward to receiving the SEND review and the AP reforms in the months ahead.

4.29 pm

Andy Carter: I thank the Minister for that very full response. I want to conclude by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), my hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), and the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), for their comments.

I will finish by saying that the reason we are talking about exclusion is that it impacts the life prospects of young children. That is the purpose of this debate—what we can do to influence that—and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the implementation of the recommendations of the Timpson Review of School Exclusion.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 September 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Supply Chain Finance in Government: Boardman Review

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): On 12 April, the Government announced that the Prime Minister had asked Nigel Boardman to investigate the development and use of supply chain finance in Government, especially the role of Lex Greensill and Greensill Capital, including associated companies or companies in its group, and any related issues that Mr Boardman considered were in scope. In accordance with the terms of reference, Mr Boardman provided the Prime Minister with part 1 of his report which sets out Mr Boardman's findings of fact. This was published on 22 July (paper reference DEP2021-0641).

The purpose of the review was to establish the facts and any lessons to be learned. Mr Boardman has now delivered the second part of his report, including making recommendations. These recommendations and wider suggestions, for institutions in public life to consider, are being published today.

As Mr. Boardman's report recognises, the Government have already committed, through the declaration on Government reform, to continually reinforce high standards of conduct in public life through proper process and transparency so that the public can have trust and confidence in the operation of Government at all levels.

The Government note the work of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, Treasury and Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committees, as well as the forthcoming "Standards Matter 2" report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. We will consider their work alongside Mr Boardman's recommendations, and set out a substantive Government policy statement to Parliament in due course.

I am depositing a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses, and publishing it on gov.uk.

[HCWS293]

TRANSPORT

Motor Vehicle Driving Licences

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The haulage sector has been experiencing a shortage of HGV drivers worldwide for some time. The issue has

been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic as driver testing had to be suspended for much of last year, meaning the shortage increased further.

This country enjoys a robust and resilient supply chain. Nevertheless, there is no room for complacency and this Government are determined to do what they can to mitigate the effects as far as is possible. It is therefore vital that we expedite legislation that will expand and accelerate testing—while at the same time acknowledging that the road haulage industry must play its part in improving recruitment and training by offering better pay and conditions.

The Department for Transport and other Government Departments have worked closely with the haulage sector considering a range of options to improve the number of HGV drivers. As part of these measures a consultation closed on 7 September on change to streamline the HGV driving licence regime and removing a separate trailer test for car drivers. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has already taken administrative action to increase capacity and offer more practical HGV tests but more is needed.

The first of these measures will be addressed via a draft affirmative statutory instrument that will be laid before Parliament today and will mean that car drivers will no longer need to take another test to tow a trailer or caravan, freeing up some 30,000 test slots annually. This additional capacity can be used to reduce the backlog in HGV testing.

To make rapid progress on this, we are making use of the urgent procedure under paragraph 14(6) of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. I am of the opinion that, by reason of urgency, the requirements for the statutory instrument to be published in draft 28 days before it is laid, and for a scrutiny statement to be made before laying, should not apply.

Accelerating the legislation by forgoing the 28-day publication period will allow earlier laying of the legislation than would have otherwise been possible and strengthen the steps we have already taken to increase testing capacity and ease supply chain issues as quickly as possible. Arrangements will be in place to ensure that the changes made by the legislation are operationally effective as soon as the legislation is in force.

Road safety continues to be of paramount importance. We will engage with training providers and insurers to test the response to this change and to explore how we can seek to ensure that any road safety concerns are addressed. We will also explore options for an industry led accreditation that could offer a standardised testing approach if that would be welcomed by the market, insurers and consumers.

[HCWS292]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 16 September 2021

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Update

The following is an extract from the statement on 14 September 2021.

Sajid Javid: There are commercial reasons why we have cancelled the contract, but I can tell her that it was also clear to us that the vaccine in question that the company was developing would not get approval by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency here in the UK, and obviously she is not recommending that we administer vaccines that do not get approval.

[Official Report, 14 September 2021, Vol. 700, c. 820.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell).

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid: There are commercial reasons why we have cancelled the contract, but I can tell her that it was also clear to us that the vaccine in question that the company was developing **has not yet gained** approval by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency here in the UK, **and may not**, and obviously she is not recommending that we administer vaccines that do not get approval.

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