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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 20 September 2021

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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Monday 20 September 2021

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SEVENTH SERIES

VOLUME 701

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-2022

House of Commons

Monday 20 September 2021

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Veterans and Military Charities: Additional Support

1. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the additional support for veterans and military charities announced on 6 September 2021. [903493]

4. **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the additional support for veterans and military charities announced on 6 September 2021. [903497]

12. **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the additional support for veterans and military charities announced on 6 September 2021. [903509]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The Government are committed to providing a gold standard of support for veterans. The

additional £5 million announced on 6 September followed a meeting of the Defence Secretary, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, me and the service charities to discuss measures to mitigate the impact of events in Afghanistan. That is on top of the £20 million already going to armed forces charities this year.

Lee Anderson: Sadly, some veterans end up living on our streets. The solution is not just to give them a bed, a job or a roof over their head; what they need is real, targeted mental health support. Will my hon. Friend please advise me what the Government are doing to make sure that our brave veterans get the targeted mental health support they richly deserve?

Leo Docherty: I am pleased to confirm that, in the form of Op Courage, we have bespoke mental health provision in the NHS, now running at £20 million this year. But this is not just about money; it is about ensuring that veterans are part of that care, and as peer support workers in Op Courage, they are.

Paul Howell: Will the Minister explain specifically how these announcements will help the veterans community hub recently opened in Newton Aycliffe by the lord lieutenant, Sue Snowdon, and veteran Scott Robertson? That fantastic facility provides mental health support, occupational rehabilitation and sports therapy. Will the Minister commend all those involved with the project, but specifically veterans Scott Robertson and Tommy Lowther? While I am about it, will the Minister also thank 100-year-old RAF veteran William Cooksey, who completed a 100-mile walk—10 miles for each of 10 days—to support County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, raising over £3,000? If the Minister would like to come and visit, he would be very welcome.

Leo Docherty: I am delighted to put on the record my thanks to veterans Scott Robertson and Tommy Lowther, and to the 100-year-old RAF veteran William Cooksey. They are clearly the best of us. If the Newton Aycliffe hub needs support, it should consider applying to the armed forces covenant trust fund. Of course I would be delighted to visit.

Gary Sambrook: I know that my hon. Friend's top priorities are the health and wellbeing of those people who have sacrificed so much for our country, especially in respect of mental health. Can he confirm that, if people who require specialist help were to reach out to NHS Operation Courage, they would get the bespoke care packages that they need and desperately deserve?

Leo Docherty: I can confirm that, and I am pleased to do so. The provision is first class. However, we are also after a change in culture, so that those who have served know that it is the soldierly thing to do to ask for help.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister must know that 79% of charities believe that the responsibility to support veterans should lie more with the Government and the armed forces themselves. Will he commit in detail at Labour's proposed duty of care amendment to the Armed Forces Bill, which aims to do precisely that?

Leo Docherty: I actually commend the long and noble tradition that we have of armed forces charities assisting the Government in their response to supporting veterans, and I am pleased that our support to them this year will top out at more than £20 million.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board is supposed to drive forward and co-ordinate better Government support for members of the armed forces, their families and veterans. The Scottish Government have asked repeatedly for that group to be reconvened. When can we expect its next meeting to take place?

Leo Docherty: I am happy to confirm that that meeting will take place within the next couple of weeks.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Combat Stress, a charity supporting veterans' mental health, has seen its income fall by £6 million in the current financial year. Will the Minister therefore accept that the Government's recent announcement of £5 million for the entire sector is simply not enough to support veterans' mental health?

Leo Docherty: That is a top-up; the provision is more than £20 million. I look forward to discussing that in detail when I visit Combat Stress tomorrow.

Operation Warm Welcome

2. **Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support Operation Warm Welcome.

[903495]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The whole Government are committed to ensuring that those Afghan nationals evacuated under Op Pitting are properly supported in the UK. Defence is supporting the cross-Government effort, Op Warm Welcome, and we are extending a hand of friendship in the spirit of compassion, comradeship and community.

Dr Wallis: I welcome the incredible efforts of our troops undertaking one of the largest evacuations in modern history and now working to extend that hand

of friendship to those brought back. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking them all for responding with such professionalism to the challenges faced?

Leo Docherty: Absolutely; I am delighted to put on the record our thanks. Amid the tragic scenes in Kabul, the bravery, professionalism and compassion of 16 Air Assault Brigade, the Royal Air Force and others was a light amid the darkness.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): For those eligible for the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme, arriving in the UK under Operation Warm Welcome has left friends and colleagues of our armed forces stranded in hotels without contact, support and help at the very time they need it. In the light of the outstanding skills of our armed forces, will the Minister talk to the Home Secretary about how his Department can lead on Operation Warm Welcome for those arriving under the ARAP scheme, so the right connections are made with those who served alongside these brave men and women to build vital bridges at each stage of the resettlement journey?

Leo Docherty: We are extending that warm hand of welcome. Of course, there is the requirement for some people to be in quarantine, but I can assure the hon. Member that a very thorough effort is being put in place to ensure that that hand of friendship is extended to all who have arrived.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Mr Speaker, thanks to your very kind invitation, 120 members of the armed forces who served will be welcomed to Parliament on 20 October, immediately after Prime Minister's Question Time. I hope all Members of the House will be there to give them a very warm welcome. I very much hope we are giving just as warm a welcome to all the refugees coming back from Afghanistan. There are 100 in my constituency. How can we find a way to give them a warmer welcome? Could local communities, for example, find ways of welcoming them to barbecues or other ways to make them feel at home?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for that question. I would like to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend's good offices for making that happen. Of course, there will be a very significant role for the wider community and the third sector to play in welcoming our Afghan friends. I recently visited an Afghan cricket team that had been put together by a local pastor. The whole community is quite demonstrably coming together.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The Scottish Refugee Council recently called for the UK Government to extend Operation Warm Welcome to Afghans who are still stuck in the asylum process waiting on decisions or who have previously been declined protection. Can the Minister confirm what discussions he has had with colleagues across Government on extending the programme in such a way?

Leo Docherty: I will, of course, pass that question on to the Home Office, but my expectation is that Operation Warm Welcome will run for as long as is necessary.

Daesh and Global Affiliates

3. **Mark Logan** (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help combat Daesh and its global affiliates including Islamic State Khorasan Province. [903496]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for hosting the G7 in Chorley at the weekend, and for the warm welcome you gave to many of my colleagues from across the House in that excellent showcase of both Lancashire and the United Kingdom.

The UK plays a leadership role in the global coalition, which is working to secure the enduring defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria. We also remain committed to supporting counter-Daesh efforts beyond Iraq and Syria. The UK continues to work to counter Islamic State in the Khorasan province through means other than military presence in Afghanistan, working with partners in the region to diminish the threat it poses. We will continue to do what is necessary to protect the British people, our allies and partners.

Mark Logan: May I give the Secretary of State a big warm welcome back to his place as Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence? Does he agree that it is in the interests of both Pakistan and China to ensure security and to combat radicalisation in the wider region around Khorasan and neighbouring provinces? To that effect, what discussions has he had with counterparts from both those Governments?

Mr Wallace: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. I am also delighted that my whole team has remained together on the Front Bench. I cannot remember that happening in any other Department in my time in politics, but it is a good thing to have continuity. It does, however, limit our excuse to say, “We are just getting on top of our brief.”

This is why Afghanistan matters. It is often the keystone or lynchpin in that part of the world. What happens in Afghanistan can ripple throughout the region and further along, as we saw with al-Qaeda in 2001—it is really important. The Minister for the Armed Forces and I will be setting off to the region this week to discuss that with a number of neighbouring countries. Pakistan and China are significant countries in the international community that we have to engage with to make sure that Afghanistan does not go from bad to worse, and that we reverse radicalisation where it appears.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right: the biggest threat from Afghanistan is the country becoming once again the base for extremist terrorist groups. The biggest risk is that the British Government give that the same lack of attention and preparation they gave to Afghanistan in the 18 months ahead of the NATO withdrawal, so why on earth is the Prime Minister now cutting back, by more than half, on his National Security Council meetings?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Member will be referring to a report by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy that he has commented on previously. The report makes a number of those points, some of

which I disagree with because, as I have said at the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister often chooses that, on national security, Departments can generate their concerns and come together with national security Ministers to discuss the issues. It does not always have to be done in a formal NSC meeting; it can be done in a sub-committee, where we sometimes get across even much smaller issues.

The report also makes the point that Afghanistan is not mentioned much in the integrated review, but the right hon. Member will notice that in the defence Command Paper it is mentioned nine times—it is incredibly important. We did not neglect it in the lead-up to the fall of Afghanistan; in fact, we were investing more troops and more people in the last few weeks until we got to the point.

Nuclear Warhead Programme

5. **Laura Farris** (Newbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the new nuclear warhead programme on the UK’s defence capability. [903498]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The replacement warhead programme will allow the UK to maintain our independent minimum credible nuclear deterrent for the foreseeable future. The UK’s sovereign nuclear deterrent exists to deter the most extreme threats to our national security and will remain essential for as long as the global security situation demands.

Laura Farris: I have the privilege of representing the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston, which has been tasked with developing the new nuclear warhead. Of course, I welcome the announcement last week of the AUKUS security pact, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that it will not undermine the strategic importance of the new warhead and that the AWE will remain at the forefront of our critical defence of this country?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to make something very clear about the agreement with Australia and the United States. This is not a programme about nuclear weapons; it is a programme about nuclear propulsion, to give the Australians the strategic capability that they have decided is the right capability to meet the threat. That aside, Aldermaston is an incredibly important part of the defence establishment, and the amazing workforce contribute and have contributed over the decades to ensuring that Britain has a nuclear deterrent that is credible. I am delighted to say that we continue to invest in those people, their livelihoods and the science base that is so important to ensure that we have that capability.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about the workforce. The reality is that the Government have just outsourced the fire service to Capita at both Faslane and Coulport. Capita is now, shamefully, cutting jobs—it has cut eight posts. The fire service has unanimously voted for industrial action and currently has an overtime ban on. When will he get a grip on the situation, end the outsourcing experiment and give the fire service the support it needs to keep the bases safe?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Member has obviously missed the point that we have nationalised Aldermaston recently in completely the opposite direction.

Defence Exports

6. **Sir Robert Syms** (Poole) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support defence exports. [903499]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): Alongside the Department for International Trade and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, we are hugely supportive of defence export campaigns to our friends and allies, a posture reinforced by the defence and security industrial strategy. I have conducted regular meetings on exports in Poland, Finland, Ukraine and Greece over the course of the summer. Tomorrow, I will engage in meetings in Tokyo before joining potential international partners on Type 31 in Rosyth, Babcock having announced only last week a frigate deal with Indonesia.

Sir Robert Syms: I congratulate the defence team on all the work that they are putting in to get more defence exports: not only is it good for British defence, but it is good for jobs. I have one concern, though: the licensing system seems to have slowed down, not only because of covid, but because it is very bureaucratic. Could the Minister take that up with the Department for International Trade, which deals with the matter, and have a word with it to try to speed this up? I fear that some of my local companies are losing business.

Jeremy Quin: I think that 11,000 licences were granted during the covid period, but I note my hon. Friend's concern, which I know is a real concern shared elsewhere in the House. DIT attempts to say that 70% of cases will be dealt with within 20 days and 99% within 60 days, but as we set out in DSIS, we need to get better both in transparency and in speed. We will be taking the matter up. I thank him for the question.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As the gap between ally and systemic competitor narrows, we heard last week that China is planning to join global Britain in the sunlit uplands of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. Given all that we have heard in the integrated review about the UK having a more joined-up foreign, security and trade policy, I would be interested to hear the Minister's opinion on this strange news and what it is about such a trade deal that the Chinese Communist party finds so attractive.

Jeremy Quin: I am not actually in a great position to speak on behalf of the Chinese Communist party, but I can speak on behalf of the Government. I am delighted that we have a tilt to the Indo-Pacific, and that is coming through in so many different ways in the policy of this Government. It is a part of the world that will have 40% of global GDP in the not too distant future. We need to be properly engaged, and that is what we are doing.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the new nuclear alliance with Australia and the United States, but I wish we would use a bit more robust language and say why we are doing it. It is to

stand up to China's current behaviour in the South China sea; let us not continue to be in denial about that. However, the timing and the manner of this announcement are not without diplomatic consequence, and prompt further questions about the cohesion, purpose and, indeed, leadership of NATO after the bruised departure from Afghanistan. There is no doubt that France has overreacted to losing a major procurement deal, but does the Minister recognise that China's authoritarian behaviour cannot be defeated by military means alone? We need all the tools and all the alliances working towards a common strategic aim, and if we do not resolve a sense of unity in the west and, indeed, NATO—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Chair of the Select Committee should know better. He cannot make a speech; it has to be a question. I got him in deliberately because of the job he holds, but he cannot take complete advantage of the Chair: it is not fair.

Jeremy Quin: All the questions were excellent, Mr Speaker, and I will try to deal with them. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Why is the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) shaking his head?

Mr Ellwood: I asked for an urgent question on this matter.

Mr Speaker: Order. Does the right hon. Gentleman want to withdraw that?

Mr Ellwood: I will withdraw it.

Mr Speaker: Right. I am in charge, and I am not trying to abuse my position, so do not abuse yours.

Jeremy Quin: First, let me make it absolutely clear that the agreement with the United States and Australia is a requirement—an Australian requirement—for their strategic purposes. It is a decision that they wanted to make in order to enhance their strategic capability and their strategic defence. We have very strong contacts and a relationship with Australia and the United States, quite transparently. It will be a pleasure to work with them, and to help to deliver this important strategic capacity for Australia.

As for France, again, we work very closely with the French. My right hon. Friend is well aware of that, and of the Lancaster House treaties. There are ongoing discussions about incredibly important joint defence initiatives that we run together. I was in contact with my opposite number over the weekend, and I am looking forward to our working very closely with the French in the years ahead, as we have always done in the past.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Given that Babcock's Arrowhead 140 frigate has been selected by Indonesia in an outstanding endorsement of Scottish engineering, will the Minister ensure that the Government expend all available effort to assist in future foreign orders, both for licensed build in-country and for foreign Governments to have their ships built in Scotland?

Jeremy Quin: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. As I said in my substantive answer, I have been working in Poland, Ukraine, Greece, and many other parts of

the world where Babcock has aspirations. The United Kingdom has a great belief in the Scottish yards—far more belief than the Scottish Government appear to have, given some of their recent contracts.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I, too, welcome the AUKUS deal, which gives great form to global Britain and could be very good for jobs in both Barrow and Derby. Can we remind the Australians, when they begin their 18-month assessment, that the UK's Astute submarine is arguably even more capable than the United States' Virginia class? And, by the way, it is cheaper.

Jeremy Quin: My right hon. Friend is a great advocate for British engineering and British defence jobs. There is an awful lot that is good about our Astute programme, but I am not going to second-guess the Australians' 18-month assessment. They will work that through, but both we and the United States are there to support them in the delivery of this extremely important strategic capability.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Stewart Malcolm McDonald.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is good to see you back from "Coronation Street" in such fine form, and to see the defence team still in its place.

When the Government presented the integrated review to the House, we were told that this Indo-Pacific tilt would not undermine interests in the Euro-Atlantic area. Can the Minister tell the House exactly how engaging in secret diplomacy against the mutual security and against the trust interests with one of our closest European allies helps our interests in the Euro-Atlantic area?

Jeremy Quin: I think that that would be an accidental misunderstanding of the situation on the part of the hon. Gentleman. The reality is that a close friend and a close ally decided that they had a different strategic need and wanted to do something differently, and approached us. It would have been very strange not to have engaged in very constructive talks with Australia in those circumstances. That is not being seen to be going behind people's backs; it is responding to a request.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: But that was exactly what it was. Let us not muddy the words here: Paris was deceived, was it not? Are common challenges not better faced when liberal democracies trust each other and understand each other's mutual interests? Whether it is on the rise of authoritarianism or on issues of climate change, terrorism or migration, we must be aligned with our Euro-Atlantic allies first. Has the fallout from AUKUS not taught us all that we need to pursue a comprehensive defence and security treaty with the European Union? Can the Minister tell us why France was excluded right from the start?

Jeremy Quin: We have a number of close relationships, including through the Five Eyes, that we pursue on a global basis. We have an extremely close relationship with France, with whom we are doing so much around the world and with whom we enjoy extremely close

relationships on equipment and support, as well as actively in the field. The bedrock of our relationships inside western Europe is of course NATO, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree with. That is absolutely vital, and it is the cornerstone of our defence. It is an area in which we work closely with our European allies, including France.

Apprenticeships in the Armed Forces

7. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on increasing the number of apprenticeships in the armed forces. [903500]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The armed forces are one of this country's biggest providers of apprenticeships. They have around 21,000 apprentices on programmes at any one time, ranging from engineering and digital to construction and driving, showing that if you join the armed forces, you get skills for life.

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that the Ministry of Defence is doing on apprenticeships. Can I confirm that his Department will continue to meet the public sector target of 2.3% for the hiring of apprentices? Will he also ensure that any company that gets a procurement contract with the Ministry of Defence employs a significant number of apprentices, and that otherwise it will not get the contract?

Leo Docherty: I am delighted to confirm that. Over 90% of recruits are offered an apprenticeship, and I am pleased to confirm that recent statistics show that 7.9% of our headcount are new apprentice starts, exceeding the Government public sector target of 2.3%. We have ongoing discussions with the Department for Education to increase that figure.

International Terrorism

8. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on tackling international terrorism in (a) Afghanistan, (b) the middle east and (c) north Africa. [903501]

16. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on tackling international terrorism in (a) Afghanistan, (b) the middle east and (c) north Africa. [903513]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): I routinely engage at all levels, both nationally and internationally, in order to tackle the threat of terrorism across the middle east, north Africa, and the wider region. We continue to work with allies and regional partners to promote a safe and secure Afghanistan and to prevent the terrorist groups from gaining any foothold in the country in the future.

Chris Law: What assessment has the Ministry of Defence made, in collaboration with the security and intelligence services, of the impacts of the cuts to UK bilateral aid to Iraq and Afghanistan on the increasing potential for international terrorism?

Mr Wallace: The reduction in conflict, stability and security funding, which is effectively what the hon. Gentleman is referring to, is partly because if it were to continue it could end up in the hands of the Taliban. Given that the fall of Afghanistan was happening, I do not think that that would have been a wise thing for anyone to do. Secondly, he should not rule out the fact that counter-terrorism funding both for here and abroad has increased significantly since 2015, with well over 30% of funding both to civilians such as the police and the intelligence services and to special forces and the armed forces. The direction of travel is increasing not decreasing and the capability that we are procuring, including the drones that we have recently signed up to, will give us extra capability that we did not have all those years ago in 2001.

Patricia Gibson: Can the Secretary of State indicate when an update will be given to the House on the terror threat that the UK faces following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the attendant heightened potential for terrorism being harboured there?

Mr Wallace: The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre sets the threat levels for this country, and it does so independently of Ministers. When those levels are changed, it will make a statement and the House will be informed. As far as a bulletin or update to the House is concerned, the hon. Lady is obviously free either to apply for an Adjournment debate or to table written questions, and we will be happy to ensure that we respond. On top of that, we have periodical updates on Afghanistan and the counter-Daesh strategy, and we will continue to provide them from time to time.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that long-term nation building from the ground up is not a feasible option in the future, and given that terrorist attacks could happen again, will the Secretary of State institute a serious review of counter-terrorism strategy, possibly based on pre-positioned forces in regional bases, to follow an active containment strategy?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend highlights an important point: when there is no partnership on the ground, how do we deal with imminent threats to the United Kingdom? I cannot speak for the whole Government on a review of the counter-terrorism strategy, first of all, because Contest, in its many iterations starting under the last Labour Government, is probably a world-leading counter-terrorism strategy. It is periodically refreshed, which will always be done in time to meet the changing situation. What I can tell my right hon. Friend is that, even before the decline in Afghanistan, I had instigated work on how we deal with changes to the environments in which we fight terrorism and on what capabilities we will need in future.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Will the Defence Secretary update the House on the work of French and British forces in Mali and the wider Sahel region?

Mr Wallace: The United Kingdom supports the French forces and Operation Barkhane in Mali with a squadron of Chinook heavy-lift helicopters. At the same time, we also have some 300 British forces deployed on the UN

multi-dimensional integrated stabilisation mission in Mali, which is one of the most dangerous UN deployments, to help nation building and peacekeeping. We also talk about the threat through intelligence channels, and we are both concerned about the Russian mercenary group Wagner, which is now appearing in many parts of west Africa.

Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

9. **Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** How many people have been assessed as being eligible for support under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy since 28 August 2021. [903502]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): Since 28 August, 7,900 applications have been made to the ARAP scheme, of which 900 appear eligible from the MOD's perspective. Obviously, there are Home Office checks that need to follow, and 50 applicants have thus far completed their Home Office checks and are being advised on how to proceed.

Clive Efford: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I have cases of people who worked for the Afghan supreme court, the Afghan Government or the Afghan armed forces. Clearly, they assisted in our operations in Afghanistan. Surely the Minister accepts that these people are at severe risk and should qualify under category 1 of ARAP, yet they have been refused. In the figures he has just cited, how many people who clearly qualify for ARAP have been turned down?

James Heapey: I have just given the numbers for those who have applied since 28 August. I completely accept that there will be interpretation but, having looked at a number of cases that we have been invited to review at ministerial level, I am satisfied that the right judgments are being made. I know that is a disappointment to many hon. Members who are working hard to support people in Afghanistan whom they consider to be at risk but, under the ARAP scheme, it is not possible for us to bring out everybody who has had a connection with UK armed forces. That is why the terms were set as tightly as they were. If the hon. Gentleman would like me to look at any particular cases, I look forward to having that in writing and I will do what I can.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): There is increasing confusion about the Government's administration of the ARAP scheme. In response to a written question, the Minister said that 1,194 locally employed staff had been relocated by the end of August, yet in a further answer he suggested that only 850 applications had been processed in the same timeframe. This means that at least 344 people are unaccounted for. The Prime Minister says the figure is 311. Will the Minister, therefore, tell the House here and now how many applications were received between April and August, how many were accepted and how many have been left behind?

James Heapey: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the exact detail he requests. Some 15,000 people were brought out in the airlift, as I think he knows. The discrepancy he thinks he has found in the numbers he quotes relates to the fact that 311 people had been called forward—they had successfully applied and been

cleared by UK Visas and Immigration for travel—but we were unable to get them on to a plane. That is different from the number of people who had applications in process at the time but had not been called forward for travel.

I know from all my engagements with colleagues on both sides of the House that they will understand that those two and a half weeks in Kabul were somewhat hectic. It will take some time for the dust to settle on exactly who is out and who we have yet to bring out, but we are still working very hard to do so. The security situation is dynamic and our partnerships in the region are being developed, but we have every confidence that we will be able to help those who need help.

Fleet Solid Support Ship Contract

10. **Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): If he will define the term “UK content” within the fleet solid support ship contract. [903503]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): The final contract for the manufacture of the fleet solid support ships will be awarded to a UK business, either solely or as part of a consortium. We have been clear that a significant proportion of the build work will be carried out in the UK.

Mr Jones: In spring, the MOD invited international companies to collaborate with UK firms to build the fleet solid support ship contract. Earlier this year, it awarded a £5 million design contract for the project. I have tried in numerous questions to the Minister to get the answers to these questions, and I have to say to him that his answers should be getting creative writing awards for the ways in which they avoid answering questions. May I ask him a direct question: who are the design contracts with—are they with the consortium or with the individual companies? Secondly, will he confirm that the prime contractor who wins this contract will be a UK company?

Jeremy Quin: We are engaged with the consortium as a whole. I would have to check for the right hon. Gentleman on the finer points of where exactly the contract lies within that consortium, but it is the consortium that is being appointed to conduct the design work and it is the consortium that will be expected to do that work. It is then the consortium that we will be turning to for the next stage. As he knows, four awards have been made and, from memory, they are for £5 million each. They go to each in that consortium, all of which have a UK component, and they will be presenting not only their design but their views on the next stage and the build programme. I will come back on the precise point he makes, as it is a fair question.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a bit rich of Labour Members to be nit-picking on this contract, given that the competition that they were calling for, whereby shipyards in the UK were to be required to build these ships, is precisely what the Minister has engineered. Will he confirm to the House that following last week’s outstanding Defence and Security Equipment International exhibition in docklands, where, as he has mentioned, there were further contracts for British shipbuilders, and following the announcement of the

establishment of the National Shipbuilding Office and AUKUS, the opportunities for defence shipbuilding in this country have never been greater?

Jeremy Quin: I was so flattered to be awarded the creative writing award by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) that I was perhaps too kind. There is an awful lot that is great going on in British shipbuilding at the moment. He has been calling for the design contracts to be awarded, and they have been awarded; we are getting on with the fleet solid support ships. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) says, there is also great news on Type 31. There is a lot of good news in the sector.

Mental Health Services: Armed Forces

11. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve provision of mental health services for members of the armed forces. [903508]

19. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve provision of mental health services for members of the armed forces. [903516]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The Defence Medical Services provides a responsive and comprehensive treatment service for personnel requiring medical intervention. We have improved access to mental healthcare and given armed forces personnel greater choice with the introduction of new ways of working, including digital triage and remote video consultation.

Dame Diana Johnson: As the Minister knows, the armed forces covenant states:

“Those injured in Service, whether physically or mentally, should be cared for in a way which reflects the Nation’s moral obligation to them”,

but the Government have missed targets on all mental healthcare for veterans across all services in England. Unless that changes, does it not risk rendering the covenant, which I know the Government want to strengthen, meaningless? They need to get their act together on mental health services for veterans and the armed forces.

Leo Docherty: On the contrary, we are giving teeth to the armed forces covenant by passing the Armed Forces Bill, and we will ensure that no veteran, in whatever circumstances, is ever disadvantaged.

Gerald Jones: As we know, charities across the UK, including many that have supported veterans, have been hit hard during the pandemic, impacting on the services they provide, so what additional support are the Government offering charities, in order that they can cope with demand? What more can the Government themselves do to support veterans, given that their record so far is pretty poor?

Leo Docherty: On the contrary, we are putting an additional £3 million into Op Courage, which makes a total of more than £20 million this year, and an additional £5 million into armed forces charities, which means that

more than £25 million will go to them this year. That shows that the Government are putting their money where their mouth is.

Defence Sector Jobs

13. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support jobs in the defence sector. [903510]

15. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support jobs in the defence sector. [903512]

20. **Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support jobs in the defence sector. [903517]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): Last week was a good week for defence jobs: I announced investments in laser and radio-frequency weapons, which will sustain 249 jobs and create 49 more, including 30 in Northern Ireland, and investment to enhance the capabilities of C-17 and Chinook, which will support 200 UK jobs and create 50 at RAF Brize Norton; and on Friday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a £170 million investment in next-generation submarines, which will support 250 jobs at Barrow and 100 jobs at Rolls-Royce Derby. The UK sector more broadly already directly and indirectly supports more than 200,000 jobs throughout the UK.

Bob Seely: First, I thank all the service personnel involved in Operation Pitting and pay tribute to the as-ever impressive leadership of Brigadier James Martin.

Radar is vital to our nation's defence, and the Royal Navy's radar is made in Cowes on the Isle of Wight. Do the Government have a plan for the development of next-generation radar?

Jeremy Quin: We absolutely do. My hon. Friend is an assiduous proponent of the Island's defence sector. In the summer, I visited GKN Aerospace in Cowes, which is one of a number of great companies on the Island. On radar, my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that we are working closely with BAE Systems on the potential spiral development of the existing maritime radar.

Nicola Richards: My constituency of West Bromwich East boasts great skills and is only 30 minutes away from the Telford production hub for the British Army's Boxer fighting vehicle. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that UK small and medium-sized enterprises, including our fantastic businesses in the Black Country, get proper access to contracts in defence supply chains?

Jeremy Quin: MOD spending on equipment and support with SMEs exceeded 21% last year. We are determined to push that proportion higher and I will publish a revised SME action plan later this year.

On Boxer, to which my hon. Friend referred, over 60% of the contract is expected to benefit UK suppliers. Following the integrated review, we are considering expanding the purchase, which will create even more opportunities for SMEs, including those in the Black Country.

Dr Johnson: Lincolnshire is rightly proud of its RAF links. The future combat air project will support jobs and bring crucial capability. Will my hon. Friend confirm that it is on track, with both our international partners and our industries?

Jeremy Quin: It is absolutely on track. Further progress was made last week with our international partners Italy and Sweden, both of which I have been in discussions with over the summer, and it is on my agenda for my meeting tomorrow with the Defence Secretary in Japan. Our £2 billion investment in the future combat air system is benefiting from the co-investment of hundreds of millions of pounds from our industrial partners.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Of course, jobs in the defence industry depend on contracts, so may I come back to the question about the fleet solid support ships posed directly by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), which the Minister has tried to slide by? Why does the Minister not give a clear message to the industry and the workforce that the Government will prioritise British jobs and the design contracts will clearly go to a British firm? Why not make a proper decision and send that message, which should also go to the steel industry?

Jeremy Quin: I am hoping to send an exact message. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that, as I have said, we have made it absolutely clear that the contract will go to a British company, solely or as part of a consortium. We have introduced the social-value model, which is included in the defence and security industrial strategy, and it will play a significant part in the overall assessment phase. The right hon. Gentleman has pushed for this competition for a long time; it is ongoing and is going to happen, and I am looking forward to it. I am certain that British companies will be absolutely embedded throughout the process.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that companies in the defence industry have been subject to a spate of takeovers. Many familiar names, such as Cobham and GKN Aerospace, are now in foreign hands, while Meggitt has recently been subject to a takeover bid from a US-based company. Even though the companies involved have promised to protect jobs and research and development, that has not prevented them from selling assets and closing factories. Workers at GKN Driveline at Erdington in Birmingham are going on strike to protest against a proposal for 500 redundancies next May. What are the Government doing to ensure that when British companies are taken over, promises to keep jobs and research and development in this country are kept?

Jeremy Quin: As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, the legislation that we passed broadening the scope in which intervention can take place was cleared through this Parliament and is ready to be introduced. We take very seriously our responsibilities under the Enterprise Act 2002. This is a matter for the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy acting in his particular capacity, but guarantees can be sought and enforced as part of that process.

Military Operations Without United States Support

14. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the UK's ability to conduct military operations without the support of the United States. [903511]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The Ministry of Defence conducts a range of operations, domestically and overseas, both independently and jointly with allies, including with the United States. We keep our operations and our broader military posture under continuous active review.

Sir Edward Leigh: Now, following the debacle in Afghanistan, we know that we cannot rely on America, will the Secretary of State make his commitment clear to our closest and traditional ally, France, which is vital for our interests, particularly in regard to migration and many other issues? Will he commit himself to working with the French to improve relations and perhaps involve them in this new relationship in the Pacific?

Mr Wallace: I listened to my right hon. Friend's points. First of all, the United States and France are our closest allies. The United States is the cornerstone of NATO and by far outspends and out-contributes any other European nation. It has been the guarantor of European security for decades and we should not forget that. When it comes to France, I have an extremely close relationship with my French counterpart. I met her only a month or two ago and I had a dinner with her in Paris a month before that. We speak regularly. Britain and France are joined at the hip on many issues, including on complex weapons; counter-terrorism; Africa, both west and east; and indeed Iraq and Syria. There is absolutely no intent here by the United Kingdom Government to slight, upset or drive a wedge between us and France. Members may like listening to the media, but, fundamentally, we have more in common than we have things on which we differ. There was no sneakiness involved, and we did not work behind France's back. Fundamentally, it was Australia's right to choose a different capability and it did.

Topical Questions

T1. [903520] **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Despite NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the middle east and the wider region remain a major source of threat to the UK. We will continue to engage and to invest to keep us all safe. We remain in NATO's training mission in Iraq and fly missions under Operation Shader. Most recently planes from the RAF conducted a strike against Daesh on 6 September. Syria remains a cause of concern, with 900,000 civilians still trapped in Idlib province. It is now the Government's view that Turkey's presence is providing stability and averting a catastrophic humanitarian crisis there. That is something that the UN representatives also made clear to me when I visited some months ago. We continue to work to update our defence and intelligence assessments and work across Government identifying options to support our NATO ally, Turkey.

Mrs Drummond: Mr Speaker, I am sure that you are as pleased as I am with Operation Warm Welcome. What a warm welcome are we giving to those members of the Afghan armed forces and intelligence officers who have come to the UK from Afghanistan through Operation Pitting, many of whom have trained in our military establishments such as Sandhurst and the Royal College of Defence Studies, which I was involved with last year. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to identify them and perhaps integrate them into our own armed forces?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. The Minister for Defence People and Veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), is leading the charge here. Some of those people who are arriving here are finding the outlook strange and confusing—they have literally taken off one uniform, got on a plane and arrived in the United Kingdom. We in the Defence Department felt that it was incredibly important that the veterans' community, local government, the Home Office and so on reach out a hand of friendship and support them as they integrate into society. We are looking at those who have already qualified, including those who have been through Sandhurst into the armed forces, to see what we can do for them. All the way through, we shall mentor them and put our arm around them.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State, John Healey.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I want to ask the Defence Secretary about the Ajax armoured vehicle, the biggest defence procurement failure since the Nimrod. What did the Defence Secretary know about the Ajax flaws when he published the integrated review in his Defence White Paper in March, scrapping Warrior, scaling back Challenger and fully backing Ajax?

Mr Wallace: I know that this was a troubled programme; I have never resiled from that at all in this House. In fact, as the right hon. Member will know, since I took over this job we have been determined to open up the programme and get to the bottom of its failings. We will shortly come to the House with more detail on that. Going right back to March 2010, this has been a troubled programme that needs to be fixed. Can it be fixed? That is what we are working to do. It is nothing to do with linking Warrior and the others, which the right hon. Member is trying to make the case for.

John Healey: This is not just another troubled programme or another piece of Army kit. The Secretary of State's defence White Paper confirms that Ajax is fundamental to the future of British ground forces. Our NATO allies in Europe already see a Prime Minister with the hots for his Indo-Pacific tilt. Now Ajax, alongside the AUKUS nuclear propulsion pact, raises serious concerns over Britain's sustained contribution and commitment to NATO. What is the Secretary of State doing to settle those concerns?

Mr Wallace: First of all, what the right hon. Member has missed is that I committed to and brought forward the buying of Boxer, which is a German-British-Dutch project that will be made in Telford, providing jobs. I

also brought forward the Challenger 3 upgrade, with Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land—a German company partnering with a British company to provide jobs. That is a strong, solid, metallic commitment to Europe. At the same time, we press forward with the future combat air system with Italy and Sweden.

T7. [903526] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): My constituents hold the armed services in the highest regard, so there was some serious dismay when the Army reserve centre in Chipping Barnet appeared on a list of sites for potential housing development in the emerging local plan. Will the Minister give me the strongest assurances that the Territorial Army centre will stay in operational use for the foreseeable future?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): I am pleased to be able to confirm to my right hon. Friend that the High Barnet Army reserve centre has a continuing defence use and there are currently no plans for its sale.

T3. [903522] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Academics at the London School of Economics have concluded that the UK Government's plan to lift the current cap on Trident nuclear weapons based on the Clyde from 180 to 260 are inconsistent with their obligations under the non-proliferation treaty. Specifically, the 40% increase constitutes a breach of article 6 of the treaty. May I therefore ask the Secretary of State: is international law of no concern to this Government?

Mr Wallace: No, I think I would just say that I have it on better authority than those academics that we have not.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Department use the combination of our EU exit, the Enterprise Act 2002 and the new social value rules from Her Majesty's Treasury to ensure that more British ships are built and with more British content?

Mr Wallace: Yes, it is really important that we seek to build more British ships, but we should also recognise that there is an international collaboration on shipbuilding. I recently signed with the Indonesian Defence Minister to buy the design of the Arrowhead Type 31. That design originated in Denmark, but the intellectual property was shared with us, so we and British jobs now profit from that sale. International collaboration is important and it unlocks investment. We are now going to indicate the longest shipping pipeline for many decades so that British companies can invest knowing that there are ships in the pipeline.

T4. [903523] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Earlier, I raised serious concerns about the fire service crews that are based in Faslane and Coulport following outsourcing to Capita, which has cut jobs. The Secretary of State dismissed my concerns out of hand, saying that the service is nationalised. Will he confirm whether Capita is running the service or not? If he does not know, he needs to get a grip of this.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Member should have listened to my answer. He was making a point about privatisation and I was making the point that Aldermaston had just

been nationalised by the Government, which was the opposite ideological scene than that which he was trying to imply.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): As a veteran, I know of the hard work, dedication and often sacrifice of our great armed forces. There are many families in Wolverhampton who live and support what the great armed forces do. Will the Minister do everything that he can to ensure that all serving and former service personnel have all the support they and their families need?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Service families are at the heart of the defence community. Our assistance to them includes wraparound childcare, which is currently being piloted, and support for partner employment. We will shortly bring forward the armed forces families strategy, which will deliver choice and flexibility to service families, because people must be able to serve their country while also supporting a family.

T8. [903527] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What discussions have Ministers had with the Home Office regarding the Commonwealth visa issue for former serving personnel? That is entirely missing from the integrated strategy review and I would like to know when this House will get an update.

Mr Wallace: We published a consultation on a number of proposals for the visa system around Commonwealth soldiers. We will be publishing a response very soon and the hon. Gentleman will get the answers he requires.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My hon. Friend has already referred to the great economic benefits resulting from the £400 million investment in enhancing C-17 Chinook capability, but does he agree that it will also help us to ensure that we can continue to undertake complex operations like the recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, where C-17 transport aircraft played a key role?

Jeremy Quin: Absolutely; it did play a key role. It is a very valuable asset, alongside others, including the A400M, which also has a connection with my hon. Friend's constituency. I have visited his constituency, where there are great skills in the defence sector. I was delighted to make that announcement and I am delighted to see that investment going into that part of our country.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of the introduction of operational MGS—MOD Guard Service—employment contracts on levels of staff fatigue and security at UK military bases?

Mr Wallace: Whenever we examine new arrangements for services for our military, of course we examine all the impacts on security, accountability and indeed performance.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Secretary of State inform the House what Members should do when they are contacted by people who have

been of assistance to our armed forces in Afghanistan but whom they have reason to believe the Taliban are hunting? Is there any help that we will be able to give them, and how should we go about approaching the Government to secure that help?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): In the first instance, my right hon. Friend could advise them to go to the ARAP website and apply to the scheme, but it does no harm at all to write to me or my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in parallel, as many colleagues have done, and we are working through those cases at best speed.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When people who are pursuing successful careers in the armed forces go back to their old schools and say, “Look, this is what I have done; this is what you can do”, that can be a real incentive to recruitment. Does the Secretary of State agree that this would be a good way for him to co-ordinate with the Secretary of State for Education in future?

Mr Wallace: That is an incredibly important way to inspire young people about the careers that are ahead. When politics do not get in the way of that recruitment, it is much better. I remember being banned from a school in Dundee when I was doing military recruiting—*[Interruption]*; not me personally—because ideologically it did not fit with some narrative.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Following on from the question from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) about those individuals who are working with British military forces in Afghanistan, what is going to happen to those who find that they have been refused under the ARAP scheme? Will they then be referred to the Home Office or to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, or are they being left in limbo just now?

James Heappey: They do not automatically get referred to the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme; instead they are invited to apply to it. In letters from the MOD to colleagues explaining that people have not been eligible for ARAP we are providing the details of how to apply to the ACRS.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State able to update the House on any plans to renew the Red Arrows’ Hawk aircraft, which are now quite old, in the near future?

Mr Wallace: There are no plans to renew them. The taking out of service of the non-Red Arrows Hawk T1s will provide a significant amount of spares and support for the current Red Arrows fleet going forward. There are currently no plans in the immediate future, or even the medium term, to review the Red Arrows.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), the Secretary of State stated that the fire services of the naval bases in Faslane and Coulport had been nationalised, yet Capita won the contract last year to provide the fire services for those naval bases. Would the Secretary of State like to come to the Dispatch Box, perhaps to rectify that anomaly?

Mr Speaker: We have a willing Secretary of State for the hon. Member.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): I think the best way to rectify this, Mr Speaker, is to read *Hansard*, where you will see very clearly, in black and white, that I referred to the Atomic Weapons Establishment.

Mr Speaker: It is on the record and we are not going to continue the debate.

UK Gas Market

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): With permission Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the UK gas market. As hon. and right hon. Members will be aware, over the weekend I held discussions with Ofgem and energy companies, and this morning I held a further roundtable discussion. Today I will set out the Government's approach to managing the impact of high global gas prices affecting the UK and countries across Europe.

To begin, I want to make two points extremely clear. First, I must stress that protecting consumers is our No.1 primary focus and will shape our entire approach to this important issue. Secondly, I reassure the House that while the UK, like other countries in Europe, has been affected by global prices, Britain benefits from having a diverse range of gas supply sources. We have more than sufficient capacity to meet demand, and we do not expect supply emergencies to occur this winter. There is absolutely no question of the lights going out or people being unable to heat their homes. There will be no three-day working weeks or a throwback to the 1970s. Such thinking is alarmist, unhelpful and completely misguided.

To begin, I would like to set out some of the context for the global situation we are now witnessing. As the world comes out of covid-19 and economies reopen, we are seeing a dramatic uptick in global gas demand—much faster than many had anticipated. High demand in Asia for liquified natural gas, transported globally by freight, means that far less LNG has reached Europe. Weather events in the US have also affected LNG exports to Europe. Increased demand, coupled with reduced variety of supply globally, has put upward pressure on the price of gas traded globally. High wholesale gas prices have subsequently driven an increase in wholesale power prices, with a number of short-term markets trading at, or near, record levels. While we are not complacent, we do not expect supply emergencies this winter. This is a very important point. It is not a question of security of supply.

The Great British gas system has delivered securely to date and is expected to continue to function effectively, with a diverse range of supply sources and sufficient delivery capacity to more than meet demand. The National Grid electricity system operator has the tools within it to operate the electricity system reliably and to balance that system, and we remain confident that electricity security can be maintained under a very wide range of scenarios. We are not reliant on any one particular source for our gas, unlike many of our friends in Europe.

As right hon. and hon. Members should know, domestic production is our largest single gas supply source. It accounted for about 50% of total supply last year. However, the UK also benefits from an excellent relationship with Norway, one of our most important and reliable energy partners, which delivers nearly 30% of our total gas supply. In the last half hour, I was privileged to speak to the Norwegian energy Minister and welcome today's announcement from Equinor that its gas production will significantly increase from 1 October to support UK and European demand. Our remaining supply is sourced from global markets via two interconnectors to

the continent, and also through our LNG infrastructure, which is, as many hon. Members know, the largest in Europe.

The global gas situation has obviously had an impact on some energy suppliers. We have seen four suppliers exit the market in recent weeks and we may expect to see further companies do so in the coming weeks. I must say, having been Energy Minister for nearly two years before I became Secretary of State, that we often see companies exiting the market at around this time of year ahead of the renewables obligation certificate payment. There may well be more of them this year, but I want to make it clear that it is not unusual for smaller energy suppliers to exit the market, particularly when wholesale global prices are rising. The sector has seen regular entry and exit in the last five to 10 years; indeed, that is a feature of a highly competitive market.

The current global situation may see more suppliers than usual exiting the market, but that should not be any cause for alarm or panic. We have clear processes in place to ensure that all customers are supplied with energy. When an energy supplier fails, Ofgem typically appoints another supplier to take on serving its customers and there is no interruption to supply. I reiterate that our primary consideration is for the customer.

I will stress three principles that are guiding the Government's approach. First, the Government will not be bailing out failed companies. There will be no rewards for failure or mismanagement. The taxpayer should not be expected to prop up companies who have poor business models and are not resilient to fluctuations in price. Secondly, customers, and particularly vulnerable customers, must be protected from price spikes. Thirdly, we must ensure that the energy market does not pay the price for the poor practices of a minority of companies and that the market maintains the competition that is a feature of the current system. We must not simply return to the cosy oligopoly of years past where a few large suppliers simply dictated conditions and pricing to customers.

I reassure all right hon. and hon. Members' constituents that the energy price cap, which saves 15 million households up to £100 a year, is staying. It is not going anywhere. As I said earlier, our priority in this situation has to be the consumer—the Great British public—and the cap effectively protects, as it has protected, millions of customers from sudden increases in global prices this winter. We are committed to that price cap and it will remain in place. Meanwhile, our warm home discount, winter fuel payments and cold weather payments will continue supporting millions of vulnerable and low-income households with their energy bills. It is absolutely vital that the energy supply sector remains a liberalised competitive market in order to deliver value and good service to consumers.

As a result of high global gas prices, right hon. and hon. Members will perhaps have read that two fertiliser plants in Teesside and Cheshire shut down last week. They suspended the production of CO₂ and ammonia. That decision has surely affected in the short term our domestic supply of carbon dioxide, which, as everybody knows, is used in the food and drink sector, as well as in the nuclear and health sectors. Yesterday, I met Tony Will, the global chief executive of CF Industries. We discussed the pressures that the business is facing, and we have explored quite thoroughly possible ways to

secure vital supplies. Work is ongoing across Departments in Whitehall and across the Government to ensure that those sectors impacted and affected by this announcement have appropriate contingency plans in place to ensure that there is indeed minimal disruption. To maintain our domestic supplies of CO₂, we are in constant contact with the relevant companies that produce and supply CO₂, and we are monitoring the situation minute by minute.

Over the past few days, as has been widely reported, I have held several discussions with chief executives of the UK's largest energy suppliers and operators and also with Ofgem to discuss this vital issue. Just this morning, I chaired a roundtable with UK energy companies and the representatives of consumer groups, in which I reiterated, as I have on the Floor of this House, the need for all of us in Government and across the industry to prioritise customers—in short, to protect the consumer. Meetings are continuing across Government today and throughout the course of this week. In terms of further actions and statements, this afternoon, shortly after the statement presented here, I will be making a joint statement with Ofgem, setting out the Government's next steps following the healthy and in many cases illuminating discussions with it and suppliers.

Our security of gas supply is robust, but it is the case that the UK is still too reliant on fossil fuels. Our exposure to volatile global gas prices underscores the importance of our plan to build a strong, home-grown renewable energy sector to strengthen our energy security into the future. Thanks to the steps we have taken as a Government, renewable energy sources have quadrupled in gigawatts of capacity since 2010—far more than quadrupled, in fact—but there is still clearly a lot more we can do in this area. That is why we have committed to approve at least one large-scale new nuclear project in the next few years and are backing the next generation of advanced nuclear technology with £385 million, helping to attract billions of pounds in private capital and to create tens of thousands of jobs.

To conclude, consumers come first, and we must protect our constituents.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before anybody bothers to raise the matter, I say to the Secretary of State that it is totally unacceptable to take so long—almost 13 minutes—and not to have warned the Opposition. I would have thought that the people who put the statement together would have timed it. It is 10 minutes for a statement, and we need to get back to the rules of the House—not the rules that I make, but the rules that this House makes. I say to the shadow Secretary of State that I am sorry you did not know the statement would take so long, but by all means take an extra minute or whatever to compensate. But, please, in future, we should get this right and not take advantage of Members who are here to question the Secretary of State.

3.44 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and agree that we should not be alarmist on the issue of security of supply, but I fear his statement was much too complacent on the price and economic impacts of the current situation.

First, on continuity of supply, we support the Secretary of State taking all necessary measures to ensure that families and businesses continue to have access to energy and that we secure the issue of CO₂ supplies. The Secretary of State says that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that customers of failing companies get taken on, but the scale of the problems in the market will provide an unprecedented test of those mechanisms, so does he believe that taxpayer support will be necessary to deal with the problem? If it is, we must ensure value for money. I welcome his caution about outcomes that lead to taxpayer subsidy for big companies to further concentrate their market share, but can he therefore explain the alternatives and what he proposes happens to the customers of suppliers that do not get through this crisis? He is making a statement later this afternoon, and it would be good to know what he is going to say.

Secondly, on the impact of price rises on businesses and industry, can the Secretary of State set out his plans to support businesses, particularly energy-intensive industries? Has he considered with his colleagues the provision of Government support, including possibly loans, to help businesses facing difficulties? On consumer support, he is right to keep the price cap in place—it is a measure I have long supported—but the rise in the price cap of £139 means half a million more families will be plunged into fuel poverty. At a minimum, he should be looking at making the operation of the £140 warm home discount automatic and possibly extending it, but even that will not be enough. Families are facing a triple whammy: rising energy prices, national insurance rises, and, at the end of this month, the £1,000 cut in universal credit. These energy price rises turn the indefensible decision on universal credit into an unconscionable one. If he really wants to put consumers first, if he really wants to help working people, and if he really wants to tackle fuel poverty, is it not time, even at this late stage, to cancel this terrible decision on universal credit?

Thirdly, we need to learn longer-term lessons from this crisis about the lack of resilience in our energy system that has contributed to very large price spikes. The Secretary of State is right that there are global issues, but the UK is facing particular difficulties. Let me give some examples of Government decision making. In 2017, the gas storage facility, Rough, then 75% of our storage, was planned for closure. The Government could have acted to keep it open but did nothing. Our lack of gas storage was raised by industry, the GMB union and the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in 2019, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). A Minister said in reply that

“the UK's gas system is secure and well placed to respond effectively to unexpected changes in supply and demand”.

Were the Government not, then as now, far too complacent on the issue of gas storage?

Next, energy efficiency could significantly cut the demand for gas, but we have had the fiasco of the green deal followed by the fiasco of the green homes grant and then the delayed heat and buildings strategy, and emissions from buildings are today higher than in 2015. When is the Secretary of State going to have a proper retrofit plan?

Our new nuclear programme is stalled, and while the Secretary of State is right that we have made progress on renewables, the truth is that we need to go further

[Edward Miliband]

and faster, with a more diverse supply. Above all, there is not yet enough of a clear plan from Government for how we meet net zero with affordability and security. People have read what the Climate Change Committee said in its most recent progress report this summer:

“It is hard to discern any comprehensive strategy”.

Is not the truth that there is a direct line from the delay, dither and failure to the issues we face today?

I therefore urge the Secretary of State in the midst of this crisis to use this autumn’s net zero strategy—delayed—the net zero review, also delayed, and the comprehensive spending review to finally put in place a proper plan. Households, businesses and energy suppliers are looking to the Government for support and direction as we face this crisis; it requires not words but action and delivery. It is long past time for Government to get a grip.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I apologise, Mr Speaker, for issuing such a lengthy statement.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about a plan, but we have plans and strategies galore. We have the energy White Paper, which was widely well received and which I was very happy to present as Energy Minister, and we also have the Prime Minister’s 10-point plan. I was struck by the fact that when former US Secretary of State John Kerry came to the UK he publicly said that the UK’s plans for decarbonisation were more advanced than those of any other country.

The right hon. Gentleman has a legitimate concern about vulnerable customers, and I have made it very clear to the industry and to Ofgem that they are absolutely our No. 1 priority. We are looking at the warm home discount. As a Government, we have always focused on protecting the vulnerable and people in fuel poverty, and we will continue to do so.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is entirely right that the UK is far better placed than most other European countries when it comes to the sources and diversity of its gas supplies, not least thanks to the two major liquefied natural gas terminals in my constituency at Milford Haven. Will he join me in paying tribute to the teams working at the South Hook and Dragon LNG terminals and also make a commitment today to work with me, the port authority and the industry on the Haven to make the transition to the next stage of our energy development and see a new generation of floating offshore wind and other renewable energy sources there?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend will be well aware that there is a commitment to floating offshore wind in the energy White Paper and the 10-point plan. We have explicitly set a 1 GW target for 2030 and I fully expect and hope that that will be exceeded. I am also very pleased to be able to tell him that I am very keenly focused on Dragon LNG. I have not yet visited it in my two years as Energy Minister and Secretary of State, but I would be very happy to accept his invitation.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Secretary of State almost brought himself to say it. Decades of underinvestment in renewable technologies, the barriers put in place by Brexit, 11 years of Tory austerity, a national insurance tax hike, the plan to rob £20 a week

from those claiming universal credit, rising food prices, emptying shelves and now energy consumers facing skyrocketing, eye-watering bills—let us call this what it is. It is a cost of living crisis, and one created on the watch of this UK Government.

So what now? What is the plan? I do not, with all due respect, think that the Secretary of State’s warm words quite cut it. He mentioned the energy price cap, but what he failed to acknowledge was the fact that in just a matter of weeks the cap will be at its highest level ever. Will he therefore back new financial support for those in the lowest-income households, and of course, will he call on the Chancellor to scrap his cut to universal credit?

The Secretary of State acknowledged that, of course, it is not just households that are being hammered by these rising gas prices but businesses, too, particularly those that produce and transport goods. He did not say what specific support he intends to provide to those businesses.

On renewables, one of the key solutions to our supply issues lies not in nuclear—of course not in nuclear—but in the Scottish Munros, with hydropumped storage. When will the Secretary of State finally introduce a mechanism to make that technology come to the fore?

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to ask the Secretary of State what message he would have for the likes of the Prime Minister, who of course told us in 2016 that if we voted to leave the European Union energy bills would be reduced.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I find it extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman is still re-litigating the so-called Brexit wars. This is a serious issue, and it is not the time to re-fight the battles of five years ago.

I am fully conscious of the outstanding contribution of hydroelectric power. In fact, I was just speaking to the Norwegian Minister, and that country has 96% of its electricity derived from hydropower. The geography of our country means that we cannot reach that level, but I have absolutely asked officials to look into it, and the hon. Gentleman will know, given my record both as Energy Minister and as Secretary of State, that I am a very keen supporter of renewable energy. As I have always said, and as I said to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the Government’s focus on safety, consideration and protecting vulnerable customers is absolute.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to reassure consumers that energy security in the UK is safe, but does he agree that, as we transition away from fossil fuels towards renewables, we need to move urgently towards far greater electricity market reform? We urgently need an independent system operator, and we need much more local generation and local energy pricing to encourage consumers to use plentiful wind and solar energy, when they are being generated, for their optional energy use.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I thank my right hon. Friend very much. I remind the House that when I was appointed as Energy Minister, she was the Secretary of State in the Department, and she pushed a great deal of reform and innovation in this area. I reassure her that conversations about an independent system operator and how we can modernise the way we balance the electricity system are

happening all the time, and I would be very open to hearing her suggestions about how we can bring that about. I think that energy security in this country, thanks in part to her efforts when she held the post I currently hold, is good. We have a diversity of supply, we have considered a wide range of renewables, and in fact we are pioneering and leading the world in the development of renewable technology.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. There are, of course, a whole range of important questions to be answered to ensure that we do not face similar energy crises in the future. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will be asking Ministers to answer those questions over the coming days and weeks, but may I ask the Secretary of State a specific question today? Can he guarantee that the warm home discount rebate will continue to be paid to consumers who are forced to change energy supplier?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman tempts me on to dangerous ground. Of course, any guarantee of that kind has a fiscal implication, which, as he will no doubt be aware, is also a matter for the Treasury. We are in constant discussion about that. I look forward to seeing him in his usual place at the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on Wednesday. I know that he takes these matters very seriously, and I am sure that we will have a fuller discussion of these subjects then.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State talk to the industry urgently about having more gas storage capacity? We have tiny capacity compared with most advanced countries, and that would provide a buffer to smooth supplies and keep prices down if this turns out, as we hope it will, to be a short-term interruption to supply from Russia and America.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend, with his characteristic acuity, hits the nail on the head. Gas storage is definitely an issue, but the fact he points out is that we do not know how long this spike in the gas price will last. We must not precipitate a rush or, through any alarmism, instigate panic. There is no cause for that at all, but clearly this is a situation that needs to be reviewed. I am very happy to speak to him about particular solutions. I know that he has various views on interconnectors, and I look forward to discussing with him very frankly the way ahead.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) referred to our “tiny capacity”. The UK cut its strategic gas storage to 1.7% of annual demand, when a former Government adviser suggested that it should be closer to 25%. In the light of that, why did the Government allow the Rough storage facility off the Yorkshire coast to close without taking action?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said repeatedly, we have a wide source of energy supply. We have by far the largest offshore wind capacity in the world. There is no reason why we should be inducing panic because of the closure of gas storage facilities. It is something that I said we should look at, but I do not think it is right for hon. and right hon. Members to stoke alarm simply by focusing on questions that are not really relevant to today’s debate.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I declare an interest as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on energy security. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the action he is taking to protect consumers and to calm the concerns that some commentators and some Members have expressed. Does he agree that diversity is key to reducing the long-term risk of such volatility in the markets? That means diversity of supply, diversity in energy generation—be it wind, nuclear, biomass, hydro or other sources—but also diversity in the location that the energy is generated. Some nations, regions and even countries have an excess supply on some occasions and a shortfall on others. The greater the diversity, the less the risk. Is he sufficiently reassured that Ofgem is sufficiently proactive in this field?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend spoke about three distinct categories. I can assure him that on all three we have a degree of robustness. On the spread of the gas supply, I said that we have a wide range of sources for gas. On electricity generation, I can reassure him that with our work on renewables—onshore wind, offshore wind and solar—there is a much wider range of electricity generation supply in the UK than in practically any other country. On geographical spread, he will notice that a lot of installations and a lot of that capacity are spread very evenly across the United Kingdom. I happen to know that because I spent a large part of the past two years visiting those sites.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): CF Fertilisers, based in my constituency, is one of the plants that has had to close down in the light of cost pressures. There are obviously many impacts on consumers as a result of this decision, but the employment prospects of my constituents are at the forefront of my mind at the moment. I am pleased to hear that the Secretary of State met the company yesterday. I wrote to the Department over a month ago pointing out the need for urgent action on the cost pressures the company was facing, not just in terms of global gas prices but a number of other factors. I hope that discussions prove fruitful, and not just for my constituents’ jobs. We do not want to get into a situation where we are relying on importing carbon dioxide from other sources, because that will not help us to reach net zero and will put us risk of other fluctuations in world prices.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his ongoing interest in and passionate support for employment in his constituency. I spoke to him considerably about Stellantis over the last few months. I am very focused on the two CFF plants, one of which is very near or in his constituency. The other, of course, is in Billingham on Teesside. We are looking at both sites and trying to do what we can to support ongoing production in both those places.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his interest in renewables, hydrogen, new nuclear and CCS. He has already referenced the incredibly difficult situation facing CF Fertilisers in Stockton, which has been forced to suspend production because of gas prices. Is he aware of the knock-on effect that that can have on businesses that CF Fertilisers supplies, such as Huntsman in Wilton, and the further knock-on impact to the rest of Teesside’s chemical industry? Can I impress on him just how interconnected our industry is and how losing one player could lead to a domino effect?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He and I have visited a number of those sites together. He is quite right to say that there is a chemical cluster reliant on the ammonia produced out of the CFF plant in Billingham. I say that that is a good cause to argue for the sustainability of the site. It is something we are very aware of and it was brought up in the discussion with the CEO yesterday.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I listened very carefully to what the Secretary of State had to say, which was that protecting consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers, was the Government's No. 1 priority. Will he then seriously reconsider his position and lobby his colleague the Chancellor to reverse the £20 universal credit cut? Many of my constituents who are in receipt of universal credit are hard-working people on low wages, and they need that money to meet spiralling energy costs and the increased cost of living.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. and learned Lady is aware that we are entering a comprehensive spending review process at this moment. I am speaking to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor all the time about all sorts of things and all sorts of measures that we can bring in to make sure that people are protected from this gas price hike.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is absolutely right that we continue on our energy transition to net zero. I welcome the Government's ongoing commitment to increasing renewable and low-carbon capacity across the UK, not least in the form of carbon capture and storage, for example, as proposed by the Acorn Project at St Fergus in my constituency, where, at the moment at least, about 30% of the UK's gas comes ashore. Does my right hon. Friend agree that while we still have a demand, albeit a declining demand, for natural gas, we must ensure that that demand is satisfied by domestic sources as far as reasonably possible?

Kwasi Kwarteng: What my hon. Friend says is entirely reasonable. I pay tribute to him in his role as Under-Secretary of State in the Scotland Office, where he and I spoke about these issues almost continually, it would appear—we spoke about Acorn and we spoke about carbon capture. He will know that I am passionately committed not only to carbon capture but to ensuring that we have a decent domestic supply of natural gas.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Natural gas is a fossil fuel, and we all know that fossil fuel extraction and consumption have to end by 2050 at the latest. What is the Government's precise timeline—not a 10-point plan, not imprecise promises, but their precise timeline—to phase out the national gas grid and replace it with renewables, in which case we would not be here in the first place?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will know that to answer that question we would have to have a much clearer view, in terms of the safety and applicability of hydrogen, for example, in the national gas grid. That is clearly a big part of our ability and the speed with which we can decarbonise the gas grid. She also knows that I am committed to decarbonisation; I am committed to the hydrogen strategy that was published six weeks ago, and there are ongoing trials to see whether we can use hydrogen to decarbonise the gas grid.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): To what extent is the UK collateral damage in a European-wide crisis caused by the Kremlin's weaponising of gas supply and its attempts to intimidate the EU into accepting Nord Stream 2, potentially as a precursor to more violence in Ukraine? Should we not see this hybrid war for what it is and plan long term accordingly?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As my hon. Friend knows and has expressed, there are geopolitical elements to this in terms of the reliance of a large part of Europe on Russian gas. I am here to reassure people about a common misconception. We are not dependent at all on Russian gas. The gas sources are as I have described—50% are local, 30% are from Norway and about 18% are from LNG, which comes from all around the world—so I want to minimise the notion that we are somehow at the mercy of Russian gas policy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): This crisis is causing steelmakers across the country to suspend their operations during periods of the day when the costs of power are peaking at thousands of pounds per megawatt-hour. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that he is engaging with the steel industry to ensure that this crisis does not end up crippling our steel industry, which of course underpins our entire manufacturing sector?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Member knows that I am constantly engaging with the steel sector—in fact, I resuscitated the Steel Council as one of my first acts when I was appointed Secretary of State—and I am always in ongoing conversations with it. I have, I feel, made a contribution to making sure that we can have this industry on a sustainable basis, but I am very happy to talk to the hon. Member, among other colleagues.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Unlike the Opposition parties, my right hon. Friend knows that we cannot just keep spending billions of pounds every time there is a major problem, but I have to say that he also knows that the keys to prosperity through production are prices, profit and loss. May I ask him now to prioritise affordability and security of supply by removing all fiscal and other disincentives to oil and gas exploration, including shale gas, to increase domestic production levels?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have rehearsed the shale gas issue many times on the Floor of the House. As Energy Minister, I was confronted with a situation in which the experiments with shale gas induced a reading of 2.9 on the Richter scale and people's plates were falling off their walls. They wrote to me to say, "We've got to stop this," and there was a moratorium. There is a moratorium, and I have said very explicitly that when the evidence changes we will look at it, but for now there is a moratorium on shale. However, my hon. Friend knows that I understand and fully appreciate the effect of supply and demand as well—perhaps not as well as he does, but better than the Opposition.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am very glad to hear the Secretary of State say that protecting consumers is now his Government's primary focus; it is just a great shame that it has not been in the past. He continues to expose people to high energy prices by refusing to look at the demand side. I do not think that

the words “energy efficiency” or “home insulation” have passed his lips once this afternoon. When will he properly learn the lessons of the failed green homes grant, the green deal and the scrapping of zero-carbon homes? When will he put in place the comprehensive street-by-street local authority-led insulation scheme that we know will get emissions down, fuel prices down and jobs up right across the country?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady knows that we have discussed the heat and building strategy, and I have discussed it personally, on a number of occasions. We have said that it will be published very soon, and I look forward to her response when it is.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s hard work over the weekend to secure our gas supplies and protect consumers. Does he agree that the long-term solution to energy price spikes is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and accelerate the transition to a more cost-efficient and resilient energy system based on renewable energy and nuclear power, through projects such as Wylfa Newydd in my constituency?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s indefatigability on this issue. There never seems to be a moment when Wylfa is not on her lips, and I fully appreciate her passion for it.

Nuclear is clearly a big part of the answer to this, which is why—as Members who have read it will know—it is the third point of the 10-point plan. It is clearly an essential part of our energy mix for the future.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I, too, am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement, and specifically for meeting representatives of CF Fertilisers, which has stopped production in my constituency, with a knock-on effect on industries needing the carbon dioxide that it generates as a by-product. He will remember my many meetings, letters, parliamentary questions and points made in the House about the perfect storm brewing for firms such as CF Fertilisers—rising fuel prices, a bizarre funding mechanism from Ofgem for gas transportation costs, and the lack of appropriate support for energy-intensive industries to mitigate high carbon emission prices. He says that talks are ongoing, but can he say a little more about what he is doing to get CF Fertilisers producing as soon as possible, and when we can expect policies to make our energy and related costs competitive against Europe?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would say that our prices are very competitive. Offshore wind, for example, started off at about £150 per megawatt-hour, and at the last auction round it was £39 per megawatt-hour. We have seen the cost of renewables fall considerably over the past 10 years. As for CF Fertilisers, it would be premature of me to say exactly what the Government are going to do. A range of options are being considered, and I hope that the Government will be able to update the House shortly.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): How long does the Department expect these elevated global gas prices to remain at their current level? May I also press the Secretary of State a little on nuclear? I agree with him that it is an essential part of the energy mix, but in relation to large-scale nuclear, what are his plans beyond the one plant that has already been agreed?

Kwasi Kwarteng: It would be foolhardy of me to speculate at the Dispatch Box on what the gas price will be even tomorrow. If I were in a position to know what the prices would be at a later date, I would probably not be a politician; I would probably be a gas trader. That aside, however, I think we have to accept that the prices could be high for longer than people anticipate, just as they could fall very quickly. The marginal dynamics of these markets can shift extremely rapidly. Those of us who followed the oil price last year will have seen that we had an oil price of \$20 a barrel, and that in the same year it reached nearly \$80. There is a considerable amount of volatility in these markets, and it would be rash of me to predict their course.

As I said earlier, we are committed to nuclear, which is the third point in the 10-point plan, and that means not just large-scale nuclear, but small modular reactors as well.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It is beyond doubt that Scotland is an energy-rich nation, but a quarter of our people live in fuel poverty. If the Secretary of State is a free-marketeer and is not prepared to see taxpayer support go into the market, does he not think it is time for a publicly owned energy company to be brought into being to help us through such difficult times?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not really follow the hon. Gentleman’s question. On the one hand, he is saying that I am a free marketeer, but then he is asking me whether I think there should be a state-owned energy company. I think I would avoid the latter outcome, in so far as I can, but as I always say in these things, we are looking at all options. I think that there are market-based solutions. I think that the industry will come together and that, with the Government and Ofgem, we can plot a course through this.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Alongside the increasing gas prices, consumers are facing a double whammy through increasing petrol prices, which, as FairFuelUK has pointed out, have gone up by 9-to-10p over the past six months. Will my right hon. Friend maintain the fuel duty freeze, which is vital for motorists and businesses? Will he also look at reducing VAT on energy bills, which is something that was indicated during the Brexit referendum debate? That would make a big difference to hard-pressed consumers.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would like to thank my right hon. Friend, but he has been in the House long enough to know that VAT and the fuel duty freeze are beyond my remit. However, as I have said many times, I speak to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor about these issues on a regular basis.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The decision to raise the energy price cap to its highest-ever level will push half a million people into fuel poverty next month. At the same time, an additional 800,000 people will be pushed into poverty by the £20 a week cut to universal credit. On top of that, the national insurance hike will hit low-paid workers the hardest. These are political choices, so rather than relentlessly attacking the working class, will the Minister avert a worsening winter poverty crisis by cancelling the cut to universal credit, raising taxes on the richest and bringing energy

[Zarah Sultana]

companies into public ownership and running them for the public good, not private profit, to slash bills and cut carbon?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I appreciate that these are talking points that have been given to the hon. Lady by the Whips—

Zarah Sultana: No they are not.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I totally understand where that is coming from, but I have said repeatedly that universal credit is an issue across Government and there is no way that I can commit to anything on that in the House. We are absolutely focused on protecting people in fuel poverty. All our policies have been focused on that, and I would suggest that she reads our 2019 manifesto to see the extent of our commitments to help those in fuel poverty.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Interconnectors are vital for our energy security and for reaching net zero, for both gas and electricity. In a White Paper last year, the Government aimed to get 80 GW of interconnectors in by 2030, which is three times what we have now. However, Ofgem, which is leading on this, seems to be dragging its feet. What can this Government do to get these interconnectors going and increase our energy security?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The issue of interconnectors is very important. There were clearly incidents with a couple of the interconnectors last week, so we need to guarantee that they are safe, but my hon. Friend is quite right to say that the 80 GW target is still very much something that we intend to achieve, and I am working with and speaking to Ofgem to be able to get there.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As you know, Mr Speaker, this is a bit personal for me because the village of Altnaharra is the coldest place in the UK every year. With the cut to universal credit, far too many people are going to have to make the hellish choice between switching off the electricity and paying for food. Did I hear the Secretary of State correctly? Will he maintain the fuel price cap where it is at the moment? Secondly, will he look positively at a Northern Rock-type of enterprise to pick up the customers of those companies that, perish the thought, might go under?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There are two issues there. I have said that I have committed to the price cap mechanism, but it is not up to me as Secretary of State to determine what the level of the cap is. That is an issue for Ofgem. Secondly, we have made some progress on protecting customers and there is an ongoing need to do that, but I would be happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman and to discuss his ideas on this.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): On Friday, I visited the National Grid gas compressor station at Churchover in my constituency, which is at the centre of both the UK and the network of a resilient system that is distributing a diverse and flexible supply around the UK. Does the Secretary of State agree that, in terms of supply, we are in the fortunate and strong position of having built up a network to supply the current circumstances and to be adjustable for the future introduction of hydrogen?

Kwasi Kwarteng: An excellent question from my hon. Friend. All the conversations I have had over the weekend and today have stated clearly and unambiguously that security of supply is not an issue. That is thanks to the hard work that people in his constituency, in National Grid, in Ofgem and across the system have put in over many years.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Secretary of State said we have to wait for his plan to find out what he will do to retrofit buildings and reduce dependence on carbon fuels, but local authorities across the country are way ahead of the Government. My local authority in Greenwich is experimenting with air-source and ground-source heat pumps. When he produces his report, does he think local authorities will be front and centre in creating local plans so that we can drill down into local communities to bring about the change we need to achieve zero carbon?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman is right that I welcome local initiatives. Only a month ago, I spoke at a forum at which representatives of local government were enthusiastic about getting behind net zero. I welcome all initiatives where local leaders are driving the push to net zero.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): We have heard a typically reliable and reassuring statement from my right hon. Friend. He mentioned the Ofgem guarantee for when a supplier fails. Will that guarantee protect customers' credit balances, and how soon will they be able to access them? Will fixed-term deals that customers have negotiated with their current supplier always be respected through the transfer?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend did not mention it in particular, but we have a supplier of last resort process, which has been relied upon over the past few years and involves a transfer of customers in the way he describes. We may well have an updated version of that process in the light of the threats posed to a number of suppliers. I look forward to discussing the details with him when the statement is made.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Secretary of State says he is working on contingencies, but the meat industry says its CO₂ supplies will be depleted within a fortnight. Is he sure that pork and poultry will not be the next items to disappear from our supermarket shelves?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am working very closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have spoken to the Treasury, and we are keen to push forward plans very soon to make sure there is a consistent and regular supply of CO₂.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As Russia completes its sinister Nord Stream 2 pipeline and tightens its stranglehold on gas supplies to Europe, why are we not fully exploiting Rolls-Royce modular nuclear reactors to decrease our indirect dependence on Russian gas and our direct dependence on French and Chinese nuclear technology?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend knows that coming up with a fleet of small modular reactors cannot be done overnight. It takes about 10 years to develop the technology. As I have said repeatedly, it is a key part of our nuclear strategy and is the third point of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan. I frequently speak about this to Warren East, the chief executive officer of Rolls-Royce. As a consequence of the spending review period, it is something that we hope to be able to commit to on the UK balance sheet.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The question my constituents will have today is what the cost will be to them. As we know that serious costs are coming on to some of the poorest people in our constituencies, will the Secretary of State commit to speaking to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about cancelling the cut to universal credit and will he speak to the Chancellor about putting additional measures in place to avert fuel and food poverty?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will appreciate that I speak to colleagues across Government all the time, particularly in respect of alleviating and lessening the burden on very vulnerable constituents.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Secretary of State spoke of the challenges facing CO₂ supply, which is crucial to the food and healthcare industries. What work are the Government doing to ensure there is supply, and can he confirm that there will not be any deficit of CO₂?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I spoke to the CEO of CF Fertilisers yesterday, and a number of hon. Members have raised that concern. We are trying to see how we can secure a constant supply of carbon dioxide.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The loss of the IFA interconnector last week saw the UK lose two fifths of its capacity to import electricity from Europe, further increasing our dependence on natural gas. What pressure are the Government bringing to bear on National Grid to speed up these repairs and to invest the 19% increase to its pre-tax profits to better secure the UK's energy network?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. Clearly, to have interconnectors fail in the way they did last week, in the midst of a global gas price spike, is very concerning. We are looking at what went wrong and seeing what we can do with National Grid to hold it to account and to make sure that the risk of this happening again is minimised.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The rise in the wholesale price of gas began back in January, with it rising by 250% since then. Why did no one in the Department anticipate this scenario?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have anticipated many scenarios. I alluded to the fact that the oil price went from about \$20 a barrel to \$80 a barrel within just one year, and we have always been aware that commodity prices, particularly where demand can be very volatile, can be extremely volatile indeed. We look at that on a very regular basis.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Secretary of State has just talked about the volatility of the market, but there is no denying that the Prime Minister assured us that energy prices would fall post Brexit. As many of my constituents are set to fall further into fuel poverty and as 10,406 of them face a cut of £20 a week in their universal credit, can the Secretary of State tell us what he thinks of the Prime Minister's irresponsible and wildly misplaced assurances about the future of energy prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said to one of the hon. Lady's colleagues, I am not here to re-fight the 2016 battle of Brexit; it should be accepted, in her case with good grace. We have moved on from the Brexit debate, and I am extremely focused on ensuring security of supply and ensuring that vulnerable customers are protected from undue increases in the price of gas.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I just take the Secretary of State back to his statement, where he said he is going to be making a joint statement with Ofgem this afternoon? Assuming that that has in it some announcements that he has not covered in his statement just now, may I ask for an assurance as to when he is going to come to the House to update us? Perhaps Mr Speaker could arrange for that statement to take place tonight at 10 pm, so that we can question the Secretary of State. I ask that because, as he will know, 15% of energy consumers are off the gas grid, with a bigger proportion in constituencies such as mine. They do not benefit from the price cap, so will he set out at the Dispatch Box for those local consumers of mine in the Forest of Dean how he is going to be helping them with this very significant rise in gas prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I cannot make any assurances of that kind to my right hon. Friend. As a former Chief Whip, he knows the practices of this House very well. In fact, I seem to recall that in those coalition days we frequently made statements, not necessarily on the Floor of this House. I would be very happy to update him. I do not think—[*Interruption.*] I have a different memory of it, but we can discuss that later. I would be happy to talk to him about the measures that are being put forward; it is an Ofgem-led thing, but it is also something the Government have worked on—this has been done together.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Given that Wales is a major net exporter in electricity and came second in the UK growth index for the potential for green development, what are the British Government doing to ensure that the Welsh Government have all the levers they need to reach their potential and ensure that the people of Wales get a dividend from our strength in electricity production?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I am not sure whether we have scheduled this in, but one action point is that I want to do a call with the devolved Administrations this afternoon. After this statement, I will be very much looking forward to seeing some of his colleagues and people in the Welsh Government, as well as those from some of the other DAs.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I welcome the steps this Government have already taken to protect energy supply in the UK, specifically the warm home

[Simon Baynes]

discount scheme and the winter fuel payment scheme. Will my right hon. Friend expand on the ways in which he is working with colleagues across Government to protect the most vulnerable, in Clwyd South and the rest of the UK, during this winter?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have consistently, in our discussions on net zero and in our attempt to decarbonise the economy, sought to protect the most vulnerable of our constituents. He will know that I am seeking to protect the schemes he mentioned and, if possible, to enhance them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Gas users in towns and rural areas throughout Northern Ireland face a 35% increase in the cost of gas. One in five families in Northern Ireland is in fuel poverty. It is clear that this is fast becoming a cold and long winter for the working poor on the poverty line. How will the Secretary of State and the Government give the assistance that will surely be needed for those who need it the most?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) mentioned the warm home discount and the winter fuel payments; we try to protect the most vulnerable with lots of such schemes. On the call I had earlier, I was delighted to see Citizens Advice, which is particularly aware of such issues. I am very prepared to engage with the hon. Gentleman to see how his constituents and Northern Ireland can withstand what may well be a long and difficult winter.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. On a practical level, will he ensure that Ofgem recruits more customer-facing advisers and has a fully functioning helpline and easy-to-use website, so that those consumers whose energy supplier does go bust, whether in Kettering or elsewhere, do not face a Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency-type customer service experience?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend can rest assured that I will raise those precise points with the chief executive of Ofgem when I speak to him tomorrow.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The fluctuations in commercial gas prices particularly affect energy-intensive sectors such as ceramics, and the high price of commercial electricity does not encourage the transition from gas. Will my right hon. Friend look into what more can be done to support energy-intensive sectors and to support jobs like those in the ceramics sector in my Stoke-on-Trent South constituency?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I was pleased over the summer to see the advanced ceramics manufacturers and the great work that is done in my hon. Friend's constituency and neighbouring constituencies. Having worked with the steel industry, I am conscious that we need a plan to reduce electricity costs.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): With threats in the grey zone increasing, is Russia playing ball with its gas prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: It is not for me to comment on Russian energy policy or strategy here, although we can speculate about its motives. My job, and that of the Government, is to ensure that, whatever Russia does, we have security of supply and can protect our most vulnerable consumers. That is exactly what we are doing.

Edward Miliband: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it relevant to what has just happened?

Edward Miliband: Yes, Mr Speaker.

To follow on from the point made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), I submit that it really is not good practice for the Secretary of State to come to this House and say that he will make a joint statement with Ofgem this afternoon to set out the Government's next steps, but refuse to tell Members what is in that joint statement. The point of his coming to the House is for him to be questioned on Government policy—including policy to be announced this afternoon.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am happy to answer the right hon. Gentleman. He will appreciate that this is an extremely fast-moving and dynamic environment. As of 4.32 today, we have not finalised the statement, so it would be premature of me to make an announcement right now. There will be subsequent House of Commons events—we have oral parliamentary questions tomorrow and I am to appear before the Select Committee on Wednesday—so we can discuss these issues in full detail in the next few days.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that the ministerial code says that Ministers are answerable to this Chamber, not to anybody outside? It is about being here. I do not think this is acceptable. It is continual. I thought we had got the message through to the Prime Minister when I had a meeting with him, but it is obviously not reaching Secretaries of State and Ministers.

If you want to make some statement afterwards, Secretary of State, I hope you have it covered by somebody making a statement at the same time. This House deserves its respect. People here, on all sides, are elected to hear from you and to be told here first, not to be told second hand by the media and that somebody might come to the House tomorrow if they feel like it. What would have happened if it had been Thursday? It is not right, it is not acceptable and we are going to have to get this right. I am telling you now: I will begin to change the course of what you think the direction is.

Mr Harper: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The reason that I raised this matter is that, if announcements are made this afternoon by Ofgem about the Government's policy, which is what it says in this statement, I need to be able to ask the Secretary of State questions about consumers who are off the gas grid, who are not protected by the price cap. About a third of my constituents are in that position. It is no good saying that those questions can be asked by the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; I am not on that Committee, and I need to be able to ask them in this House. I just ask the Secretary of State: when will he come to the House?

Mr Speaker showed last week that, when the Government want to make an urgent statement, he was willing to facilitate it. The House is sitting late tonight. The Secretary of State could come back tonight, make the statement and we could ask those questions that our constituents want us to ask at the earliest opportunity. That was the point of the question that I asked during the statement, and Mr Speaker has given his very clear steer.

Mr Speaker: I go out of my way to ensure that this House hears, but I cannot work on my own; it works two ways. I am saying to you that this House needs to hear. Ofgem is very important, but it is not elected. The people here are elected to serve constituents. The ministerial code needs to be sent to every Minister and every Secretary of State, with the point about where responsibility lies underlined.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I hear what you are saying, but I have to remind the House that this is part of a cross-Government approach. It is quite right that we are speaking to Ofgem and I cannot tell my right hon. Friend what time that statement will be published.

Mr Speaker: Can we make sure, through the Clerks, that the Secretary of State gets a copy of the ministerial code? Have it underlined and then we will have a discussion. Right, let us see if we can move on a bit.

International Travel

Mr Speaker: I have to say that I enjoy Mondays, but this has been a bad one. I do not like being tested.

Before I call the Transport Secretary to make a statement, I want to put on record my disappointment and frustration that, despite repeatedly making it clear that Ministers should make important statements to this House first, the media apparently knew the contents of the Transport Secretary's policy announcement at the end of last week, before Members of this House. The Government's own ministerial code says that that must not happen. It is not acceptable for statements to be made to the media before being made to elected Members of this House. It defies belief that the Government only decided the policy on Thursday night after the rise of the House. In other words, this statement should have been made last week before the media were told.

I have raised this before with the Government and with the Transport Secretary. I sincerely hope that I will not have to do so again. In any event, there should be no doubt that, if the media continue to hear about important policy announcements before this House, I will ensure that hon. and right hon. Members will have every opportunity to hold Ministers to account.

I do not want to have to do this, but if we have to grant an urgent question on the areas of those Departments that continue to make statements outside this House, I will have to come to a view that something must be coming before we are told. That is a silly position in which to get ourselves. The Government need to get their business through, but the Government also have to respect the Members who are elected here. This is the second time. It is not personal against the Transport Secretary. We need to get our act together. We need to show the due respect that Members deserve. They matter to me. They matter to the constituents. They should hear it first, not the media, and it should not be trailed elsewhere. In the end, constituents knock on the doors of Members, not the Secretary of State's.

4.38 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on international travel. I will start by apologising because I do share your frustration. It is the case that the meeting that decided this policy did not take place until Friday, and I put in immediately to make an oral statement off the back of that. I appreciate how frustrating it is to read speculation in the newspapers, much of which turns out to be incorrect, and I bring new information and the correct statement this afternoon.

The past 18 months has been hugely frustrating for everyone wishing to travel abroad and, of course, for the travel industry itself. In 2020, the only weapon that we had to fight the spread of covid was simply to keep people apart and prevent them from making all but the most urgent of journeys.

However, this year has seen very significant progress. In February, the Prime Minister asked me to reconvene the global travel taskforce to develop a plan for safe and sustainable travel—to return to international aviation. It is a framework that allows us to co-exist with endemic covid-19 and live with the virus on our travels while still protecting us from the most dangerous variants.

[Grant Shapps]

Through the work of the taskforce over recent months, we have instigated gradual reopening of international travel to allow families and friends to reunite, and businesses to get moving again. Over the summer, we implemented a number of improvements. We took advantage of the progress of the vaccine roll-out here and abroad by starting a pilot to allow passengers who had been fully vaccinated in the UK, Europe and the US to travel to the UK from amber list countries without the need to self-isolate or take a day 8 test. We also increased the number of countries and territories on the green list to 43 and allowed for the full restart of international cruises in line with the traffic light system.

At this final checkpoint, I am pleased to be able to ease restrictions further while still safeguarding public health and providing confidence to travellers. We are one of the world's most vaccinated countries, with more than eight out of 10 people fully jabbed, and we must use that to our advantage to restore freedoms that were, by necessity, lost over the past 18 months. In August, we launched the pilot to exempt from quarantine those who had been fully vaccinated in the US and Europe. That pilot has been successful. I am delighted that it provided a much-needed boost to international travel during the summer.

Throughout the crisis, I have remained in regular contact with my opposite number, US Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg. As the Prime Minister has arrived in the United States of America, I am delighted to announce to the House today that the Government there have agreed that vaccinated Brits will be able to travel into the US from early November, reciprocating the policy that we introduced this summer. This is testament to the hard work and progress made by the expert working group set up at the G7 to restart transatlantic travel—the flagship route of international aviation.

We will now expand the policy to an array of other countries, including Canada and Japan, from 4 October for those who can demonstrate their fully vaccinated status. That will bring the number of countries and territories in scope to 50.

The UK will now set out certification standards that it expects other countries to meet so that their citizens can benefit from this change. We will happily work with anyone who applies and can meet those standards, and will onboard them. I can tell the House that we are in the final stages of doing this with our friends in the United Arab Emirates. Recovery is the best way to support the aviation sector, and as one of the world's most vaccinated countries, we can now use our advantage to liberalise travel further while protecting public health.

Let me now update the House on the next phase of reopening international travel more broadly. When we did not have a substantially vaccinated population, our focus was necessarily on considering countries and territories based on risk—hence the traffic light system. However, vaccines mean that the emphasis can now shift to an individual's status instead. I am pleased to announce that we will introduce a new, longer-term framework for testing and health measures at the border that will remain in place until next year at the earliest.

First, from 4 October, we will replace the traffic light system with a single red list of countries and simplified travel measures for arrivals from the rest of the world,

depending on vaccination status. Secondly, we will remove the requirement for fully vaccinated passengers to take a pre-departure test if not travelling from a red list country. Thirdly, by later in October, we will have moved away from day 2 PCR testing to a new system of lateral flow tests for fully vaccinated passengers arriving from non-red list countries. If passengers test positive, they will be required to take a confirmatory PCR test, which will be genomically sequenced to identify and mitigate the risk of variants entering the UK. That PCR test will be at no further cost to the traveller. Those changes will reduce the cost to passengers, simplify the process of international travel and remove a significant source of frustration.

I would like to take this opportunity to confirm that the policy on children remains as now: they are quite simply treated the same as vaccinated adults, regardless of their own vaccination status, whether they are resident in the UK, or from one of the 50 countries and territories whose vaccinations we recognise. Unvaccinated passengers and passengers with vaccines not authorised or certificates not yet recognised in the UK arriving from non-red list countries will still be required to take a pre-departure test, a day two and a day eight PCR test, and to self-isolate.

I can tell the House today of another significant easing of the rules for those who change flights or international trains as part of their journeys here. This change will ensure that passengers who remain in airports and in railway stations will only be required to follow the measures associated with their country of departure rather than any countries they have transited through as part of their journey. That will make a very substantial difference to travel by unlocking transit routes across the world. In advance of transitioning to our new international travel framework, I can also confirm that Kenya, Oman, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Egypt will be removed from the red list at 4 am on Wednesday 22 September.

The changes we are making mean a simpler, more straightforward system—one with less testing and lower costs, and allowing more people to travel, see loved ones and conduct business around the world. Our judgment is that these changes are the right ones for this moment, making travel significantly easier for people while retaining crucial protections against variants of concern, which remain the largest threat. They will provide a much-needed boost for the travel industry. However, it is certainly not the end of the story. We will further review these measures early in the new year, when we hope to be in a different context that will allow us to go that step further ahead of booking windows for the spring and the summer of 2022.

Above all, the changes I have announced today demonstrate that through vaccination there is a path back to normality after a torrid 18 months in which many of the things we take for granted have been put on hold. Now is the time for us to get our country moving once again. I commend this statement to this House.

4.46 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on putting the historic county of Lancashire, and particularly Chorley, on the international map over the past week.

I thank the Transport Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Following the Government reshuffle, I look forward to continuing to work with him as he stays in post.

Labour called for this simplified international travel system back in May, but even after this announcement, no one should believe that the travel industry is back to normal, or that our borders are any safer from new variants coming into the country. Although we support scrapping the confused traffic-light system, we still have not seen the country-by-country assessment that would give us confidence that the decision to allow travel is based on sound science and not politics. It is disappointing, after making repeated representations at this Dispatch Box, that the Government have still only published assessments relating to 15 countries. Will the Secretary of State now finally publish the full list of every country, including a clear direction of travel, rather than just those that are changing from one category to another?

The requirement to carry out pre-testing and testing on arrival to the UK for Brits returning has put a heavy financial burden on families, with the UK overseeing the most expensive testing regime in the whole of Europe. Over the summer it was estimated that tests had cost British travellers £1.1 billion. Yet about 300,000 people did not adhere to the quarantine rules, and only a fraction of those coming from green and amber list countries were actually checked on arrival, as border staff were clearly overwhelmed. We have a serious concern that of the 11,000 positive cases tested over the summer of international travellers returning, just 3,000 were sent for genomic sequencing, leaving us potentially open to new variants. Can the Transport Secretary confirm, as his statement seems to indicate, that now all positive PCR tests will be sent for that testing for new variants?

In addition, it appears that from the end of October travellers will have to pay for a lateral flow test when returning to the UK. How will that work in practice? How much will travellers be expected to pay for those tests, and, importantly, will they be in place for the October half term?

We have long called on the Government to work with international partners to introduce an international vaccine passport. Although we hear reports that progress is being made, as we have heard today too, the truth is that it has been very slow in coming and many plans still have not come to fruition. Can I ask why it has taken so long to make the progress set out so far?

Importantly, when Eurostar and the aviation and tourism sector needed financial support from Government, the promised sectoral deal never came. There was a stand-out omission from the statement: it beggars belief that there was no mention whatever for the 81,000 workers on furlough. They face a cliff edge in just 10 days' time, but there was not a single mention of them in the statement. In the absence of a clear plan, clear communication and sustained industry support, jobs have been lost that could well have been saved. We now hear that the next review will not take place until the new year. Some of those people will be lucky if they have a job at the end of October. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that those jobs are safeguarded and that we give those workers the respect and dignity they deserve?

Grant Shapps: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I was somewhat surprised not to hear him refer to the stand-out announcement in my statement, which is

that the world's busiest, most profitable and most important airline route—the transatlantic route—is about to be reopened. I would have thought he would welcome that from the Front Bench.

It is hard to know exactly what the Opposition think on this subject. Last year, they backed our self-isolation measures. By last summer, the hon. Gentleman was calling for quarantine to be lessened. Come February, they changed their mind again and wanted every single traveller to go into hotel quarantine. By March, they were back saying that it should be done on a case-by-case basis. Fast-forward to May, and the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), called for a complete pause on international travel—I am curious how that would help the aviation sector restart—only to be contradicted a month later by the hon. Gentleman, saying that more countries should go on to the green list. In June, he called for the amber list to be scrapped, and by August he was back to saying that there should be no loosening of international travel whatever. What he seems to be saying is basically what a stopped clock says. It is right at least twice a day—in his case, at least twice a year—but I am not clear how his approach would help in any way, shape or form.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Joint Biosecurity Centre assessments. They will be published in the normal way for the additional countries. He asked about the cost of testing. I thought he was calling for PCR tests for everyone—at least, he was at one of those points in the past year and a half. The cost of a lateral flow test will obviously be much less and provided by the private sector, with the PCR provided by the NHS.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the vaccine passport. Again, I reiterate that there are 50 countries where we will recognise their vaccination progress. I described in my statement how we are introducing a system so that we can onboard and add other countries who meet our level of requirements. As I say, the most important country of all in terms of international aviation, the USA, has confirmed today that we will be added to the vaccine passport approach as well. We are making progress. If we had listened to the Labour party—I do not know, perhaps we would have closed down the whole of aviation by now.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the milestones announced by the Secretary of State for Transport. I recognise his hard work as well as that of the aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in unlocking us further. I know you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will be as excited as me about the ability to visit the United States, for loved ones to reunite and for business to expand. This is more welcome news. With all this fantastic news, can I ask the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that we have the resilience, through border control, at arrivals to ensure that all this demand that is about to be unleashed can be delivered?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is an excellent Chair of the Select Committee on Transport—always tough, but fair. He has rightly pointed out that there is likely to be a big expansion in the amount of transatlantic and other aviation. Things such as the pre-departure test form will be greatly simplified by not having to prove a

[Grant Shapps]

pre-departure test at check-in. On the other side, coming back into the UK, it is Border Force that runs those services. It has spent a lot of time over the summer integrating pre-departure tests, vaccine status and other information into its e-gates. It is now trying to incorporate that. I will certainly be reflecting his comments in discussions with the Home Office, which runs Border Force and will want to make things as smooth as possible as the numbers pick up.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): For months, the sector, airlines, airports, unions and politicians from all parts of the House have called for an extension of furlough, which ends in just 10 days' time, having essentially given up on the sector-specific support deal promised by the Secretary of State and the Chancellor. The Government again refused to listen, but, miraculously and coincidentally, the scientific evidence arrived to allow the UK Government to relax the rules just four days later. Will the Secretary of State outline what clinical advice he has received on removing pre-departure PCR tests and on the change to lateral flow testing from PCR testing on day two?

Testing international travellers before and after travel is an important part of Scotland's border health surveillance to minimise the risk of importing variants of concern. The Scottish Government, and indeed the Welsh Government, want to maintain a four-nations approach to international travel restrictions, but they will need to consider carefully the risks associated with the proposed changes to testing before aligning with the UK Government. The First Minister will provide a further covid update to the Scottish Parliament later this week.

The Scottish Government's changes, with sensible safeguards built in, recognise the success of the vaccination programme and will provide a welcome boost to Scottish tourism. A four-nations approach is obviously preferable, not least because Scottish travellers, as we have seen, will travel down to English airports to fly, and that may affect routes and could further job losses at airports such as Glasgow airport in my constituency. However, the Scottish Government are absolutely right to look at the evidence in detail before making such an important decision.

Moreover, the last time that there was a divergence in policy, the UK Government went against the scientific advice that the Scottish Government followed, and the result was the importation of the delta variant with huge numbers of passengers arriving in England from India. In many cases, they went on to Scotland. If there is to be a divergence, however temporary, will the Secretary of State work with airports in England and the Scottish Government to ensure that the correct checks are carried out on passenger arrival paperwork, so that passengers cannot arrive in England to travel on to Scotland to circumvent the different rules?

Grant Shapps: I think it would be wrong not at least to acknowledge that the delta variant has got to every single country in the world—including Australia, which does not allow its own citizens to come back freely into the country, even with quarantine. By throwing that in, the hon. Gentleman rather weakened the rest of his argument. The Joint Biosecurity Centre is so called because it works with the devolved Administrations.

The chief medical officers work together as part of that set up and, as he surely must know, provide us with the same advice to consider.

The hon. Gentleman's first point was on the furlough scheme, which has been of enormous assistance to aviation everywhere, including in Scotland. The very best help we could give to Scottish aviation workers and others would be to stop curtailing aviation and travel industries in the recovery. Those are not my words. Edinburgh airport said that the Scottish Government's "decision to diverge yet again...further" curtains

"Scotland's aviation and travel industries in their recovery".

It leaves travel agents in Scotland, led by LAH Travel's Linda Hill Miller, saying that it will be a "very bleak winter" in Scotland if the policy does not shift.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's confirmation that Kenya will come off the red list on Wednesday. Does he agree that we must continue to make travel between the UK and Kenya even easier, such as through fewer restrictions for those who are fully vaccinated, to increase trade and boost business between the UK and Kenya?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to the excellent work that my hon. Friend does as trade envoy to Kenya. I am delighted that Kenya has come off the red list. As I mentioned, we will provide details for how countries can onboard themselves to meet our requirements, and I look forward to adding to the list of 50 countries where people who are fully vaccinated will be able to come and go very much more easily. I look forward to working with her on that plan.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We all hope that our vaccines will prove effective against any new variants so that we can all get back fully to normal, but we also have to be incredibly vigilant against any possible new variant that develops and that is resistant to our vaccines. The Secretary of State will know that in previous waves—at the beginning or with the delta variant—we have not had either sufficient surveillance or a fast enough response from Government to prevent those variants from spreading. What can he say about his new surveillance regime, both in terms of testing and response, that will prevent those problems from happening again, especially when it looks as though the testing and genomic sequencing is being downgraded?

Grant Shapps: I thank the right hon. Lady, who approaches this from a very wise perspective. The first thing I would say is that of course everybody will appreciate that we now have over nine out of 10 adults with at least one jab and over eight out of 10—83%, I think—of adults fully vaccinated. Of course, as that picture has been replicated around the world, that makes it easier to allow and open up international travel, and it is part of the balance.

The second thing to say is that using lateral flow tests, which provide virtually instant results, means that people may not be out and about for an extra day or perhaps more before they get their results. That of course has to be factored against the fact that a lateral flow test is known to be less observant—with different specificity and sensitivity rates—than a PCR test. The scientists have taken all of that into account in providing ideas for this regime. Of course, it is critically important that a

lateral flow test is then backed up by a PCR. It will be, and we will also be talking more about requirements for ensuring that the lateral flow test has been properly taken.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome this statement, with a pragmatic approach to covid-19 testing for international travel and recognition of vaccines, and also, on the day that the Prime Minister is in New York, the news that the US Administration—this has taken a lot of work from the US-UK taskforce to achieve—are opening up to fully vaccinated passengers. Can my right hon. Friend say when slot allocations will be reviewed, particularly with a view to the spring and summer season next year?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on the future of aviation all-party parliamentary group, which has not gone unnoticed by Ministers throughout the difficult 18 months. He is right about the sensitivities of things such as slot allocations. It is quite a technical issue to do both with the way that allocations at busy airports are granted and—I suspect he is getting at this—with something called the 80:20 and 50:50 rules, which are about the amount of usage on allocations. He will know, because he has a major airport in his constituency, that there is a difference of opinion, quite rightly, between the airport operators and the aviation companies—the airlines themselves—about where the correct balance should lie. The aviation Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who is sitting right next to me, is keeping these matters under constant review and is doing an excellent job with it, and I invite the two of them to have a meet-up.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It took half a dozen letters, two ministerial meetings, bilateral talks and endless questions, but as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Britain-Pakistan trade and tourism, I am pleased that the Government finally listened to calls to remove Pakistan from the red list.

Last year, Virgin Atlantic began running direct flights from Manchester airport to Islamabad, much to the delight of my constituents. However, this route has now been suspended for months. Given that Ministers in this Government are always so keen to highlight their pursuit of levelling up, what support is being given to regional airports such as Manchester to reopen important routes for the benefit of local people?

Grant Shapps: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and he is absolutely right. Like me, he was very keen to get Pakistan back on to the list. After the previous review, when it was not successful, we did indeed set up an officials level working group intergovernmentally, and it has come to fruition, as I think we are all delighted to know.

The hon. Gentleman asked about support for airports. Obviously, we have effectively provided the rates free for most airports in this country over the period, except that this will not have covered the full costs of the very largest airports. We are also doing work through the future of aviation all-party parliamentary group, which my hon. Friend the Member for Witney is working on. I apologise to my hon. Friend for setting up a lot of meetings, but again, the hon. Gentleman may like to meet the aviation Minister to progress his ideas on that further.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): A few moments ago the Scottish National party spokesperson said while explaining the Scottish Government position that that was a welcome boost to tourism. That is the exact opposite to what we are hearing from tourism bodies today. The Scottish Tourism Alliance has said that the SNP plans to diverge from the UK plans just announced

“could destroy any hopes of recovery in 2022”,

and earlier today 40 tourism organisations, including the Scottish chambers of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland, wrote to the First Minister saying:

“Scotland has now become one of the most uncompetitive destinations globally.”

The decisions taken by the SNP in Holyrood are having a huge impact on our tourism industry and airports; what can the Secretary of State do to convince the Scottish Government to follow the lead of the UK Government and ensure these industries are not put at risk?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to express concerns. The SNP spokesman has set out its opening position—or maybe a couple of different positions. I encourage all parts of the UK to come together on this. It is incredibly confusing for passengers, who could now travel to Newcastle or Manchester according to an Edinburgh spokesman, and, as has been pointed out, that takes money out of the Scottish economy; it threatens jobs in Scotland and threatens airline capacity, and the faster we can get this resolved, the better.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain why my constituents suffered immeasurably from the punitive measures imposed by his Government? Many of them were unable to be with family members at their time of greatest need or to attend the funerals of their loved ones, and many could not afford the hotel quarantine rates and furthermore that was then increased. The criteria for keeping Pakistan and Bangladesh on the red list were made up on a daily basis, and the facilities in the hotels that many of my constituents returned to were abysmal. There was no justification for punishing the British Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, who lent their votes to the Conservative party at the last election. Will the Secretary of State now apologise to them for the punitive measures imposed on them unjustifiably?

Grant Shapps: I am really sorry the hon. Gentleman has gone down this route. I was following him at first, particularly when he talked about the sadness of not being able to see friends and close family in Pakistan, Bangladesh and elsewhere on the red list, but to come here and claim that the Joint Biosecurity Centre’s work is somehow based on politics dishonours his argument and I encourage him to consider whether that is appropriate. I know there has been a push to politicise this, but the JBC has to look at all the numbers; it has to look at the level of infection, the amount of vaccines administered and the capacity of different countries to carry out sequencing of the genome, and I have to say that is a disappointing argument to hear.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for everything he has done through this positive statement and his hard work, but I would ask him to clarify two points. Are the lateral flow tests

[Alec Shelbrooke]

to be taken now instead from day two to be administered at home or at the airport? I wasn't quite clear on that. Also, now that people can either go to another country or it is on the red list, what will be the lead time in turning a country into a red list country? That is important for the tourist industry.

Grant Shapps: On lateral flow tests, the Department of Health and Social Care will set out more details on what exactly will be required, how they will be taken and so forth. On red lists, I must repeat the general warning that we have always had to live with in terms of coronavirus that one never quite knows what is going to happen with the virus, but 18 months in we are now in a world where we know that vaccinations make a very big and sustained difference, and I hope we move away from a world in which instant changes are required. I cannot absolutely guarantee that, but I think we can see by the direction of movement that things are coming on to a more sustainable footing at the moment notwithstanding whatever the virus decides to do.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): A deterrent to international travel is the cost and conditions of the quarantine hotels. My constituents have talked about poor food, being held with poor mental health and being in grief from losing loved ones. My constituent who had rats in his room not just once but twice is still being charged the full cost for quarantine. Will the Secretary of State ensure that my constituent does not have to pay for that experience of sharing his room with rats?

Grant Shapps: I should say to the hon. Lady that the quarantine hotels are the same hotels that people would be staying in if they were on holiday, on business or anything else. There should never be rats in a room, regardless of anyone's reason to travel to that hotel. The local environmental health would certainly be interested, as would my colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care, who run the managed quarantine scheme. That is never acceptable under any circumstances. I should just point out to the House and to the hon. Lady that people should not be travelling from red-list countries without very good reason indeed. I am pleased that we have just taken eight more countries off the red list and I hope that that number will be able to continue to reduce, but people should try to avoid travelling from those countries at all.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Transport Secretary help me with two cases? The first concerns a family living in Kettering who were fully vaccinated in South Africa with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The second concerns a gentleman in Kettering who is a fully vaccinated participant in the Novavax vaccine trial. Will the people in these two cases be able to travel from the UK and if they do will they have to self-isolate on their return?

Grant Shapps: That is an excellent question from my hon. Friend. First, on other countries, South Africa being one, coming into the programme that 50 are already in, we will publish the criteria and are working with other countries to be able to recognise their vaccinations. On the trials, we are absolutely clear that people who

have volunteered for trials should not be in any way, shape or form disadvantaged by this policy. While I am mentioning them I want to mention people who cannot medically be vaccinated, who will not be disadvantaged by this policy. In both cases, they will be treated as if they are fully vaccinated travellers. I know that my hon. Friend the aviation Minister would welcome a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) to discuss the specifics of those cases.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Many people continue to feel that the decision to keep Pakistan and Bangladesh on the red list for longer was based on politics not science. If the Secretary of State denies that, let him bring forward the evidence.

The Secretary of State referred to quarantine hotels. Many of my constituents, including one with kidney failure, another who had suffered a heart attack and another who was at risk of miscarrying, along with others suffering from serious health issues, were denied exemptions against the medical evidence and professional opinion of their doctors. Will the Secretary of State therefore launch an urgent inquiry as to why those appalling decisions, which put many of my constituents lives at risk, were allowed to happen?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is effectively accusing the Joint Biosecurity Centre of politicising decisions over countries. It just isn't on. Fortunately, we live in a society in a country where these organisations are able to make decisions and recommendations based on the facts. Those facts were presented to Ministers, and Ministers acted on those facts. To do anything else would have been absolutely wrong, and although I do not suppose that he is going to, I invite the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the accusations that these institutions, made up of professionals, medical people and scientists, are somehow politically biased.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): The high costs of PCR tests have meant that many families in Wolverhampton North East will not have felt able to book a family holiday, so I welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend has announced today. Can he give those families an indication that the measures will be in place in time for the half-term holidays and any indication of how much lateral flow testing will cost for a family?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the crippling cost of a whole family going away during coronavirus, particularly before we had the protection of large-scale vaccinations at a high level throughout communities and countries. It really has been very punishing for families, and I recognise that. The cost of lateral flow tests is clearly much lower, and I believe that a competitive market will make them lower still. I know that our colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care will have heard what she had to say and I am sure that they will have had half-term in mind.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The aviation sector has significant concerns about its ability to survive the winter, particularly with furlough ending. In the August Eurocontrol figures, Gatwick, Manchester and Heathrow found themselves at the bottom of the league, with the biggest percentage declines versus 2019 in Europe. British Airways is flying fewer

flights as a percentage of that year than its German or French competitors, and easyJet fewer than its Irish or eastern European competitors. What steps is the Department considering to help the industry and its specialist workforce to take advantage of the winter to upskill and retrain, to ensure that the UK is ready to reclaim its place as a great trading nation served by a world-beating, environmentally leading and economy-serving aviation industry?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for the aviation sector, which was genuinely world-beating prior to the pandemic. That is exactly where we want to get it back to. That is why I am delighted by what has happened with the US route, which will reopen later this year, and the announcements that we have been able to make to simplify and reduce the cost of travel. I know that the hon. Lady is no longer part of the governing party in Scotland, but it would be very helpful if she could assist in bringing pressure to ensure that, throughout the UK, aviation companies are able to benefit from the massive advantage of the huge vaccination programme that Her Majesty's Government have managed to progress across the whole UK, and that the aviation sector is opened and allowed to get not just back on its feet but back in the air.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Many Aylesbury constituents were distressed about Pakistan's being on the red list for many months because of the delays that meant for their precious family reunions, but they welcomed the detailed scientific explanations that were provided for that, even if those brought unwelcome news. On their behalf, I thank my right hon. Friend for removing Pakistan from the red list. Does he agree that that reflects the efforts of Governments in both countries, working together to enable safe travel, which represents another important step in our return to normality?

Grant Shapps: That's how to do it, Mr Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend appreciates the science, he appreciates that when we were not able to move Pakistan on to the amber list, the level of vaccination was, from memory, about 20%, and he appreciates that we deliberately set up an intergovernmental working group so that officials could work together to overcome those issues. I would have thought that the whole House wants to welcome Pakistan's coming off the red list, as my hon. Friend has done.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As international travel resumes, a growing number of constituents who live or work abroad in places such as Australia and Zambia, to name just a couple, are having difficulty with travel if they received their vaccinations in those other countries. Obviously, that impacts not just their travel here but their ability to get on with their life when they are in the UK. I heard what the Secretary of State said earlier, but will he give more detail on the progress that the Government are making on recognising vaccines of a similar standard, strength and efficacy so that we can have more reciprocal agreements with other countries?

Grant Shapps: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that sensible question. There are already 50 countries using vaccines that we recognise through the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. From this point

forward, we will both assist other countries on the regulatory requirements to come on to our list—our requirements to on-board them—and look at how we can potentially recognise vaccines that we do not yet recognise. The MHRA is looking at that process the whole time, and I am sure it will have more to say about that type of thing in due course.

Jack Breerton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I welcome the decision to remove Pakistan from the red list on Wednesday. As the Secretary of State will know, I wrote to him about this issue. Many of my constituents have family links in Pakistan, and I know that he is well aware of how important those links are. It is shocking that Opposition Members have made this into some sort of political issue. I know that many of my constituents will see right through that. Will my right hon. Friend agree to work hard with the industry to restore those important links to Pakistan by restoring flights as soon as possible?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One feature of the coronavirus pandemic has been how this country and many others have been led by scientists and the evidence—chief medical officers and scientific officers—to do the right thing throughout. That has been the consensus on both sides of the House, more or less, so it is extremely disappointing to hear politics thrown in. No one—no one—wanted to see Pakistan added to the safe list of countries more than I did. That is why we set up inter-ministerial groups and why we brought it on board the moment the Joint Biosecurity Centre said it was safe to do so. The idea that we should have ignored all the science and done it some other way is, I am afraid, for the clouds.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his very welcome statement. Opening up the United States of America is particularly good news for my constituents. Some grandparents have not been able to see their grandchildren for over year, so it is good news. It could well provide the boost needed by the tourism sector. Will he confirm that vaccinated travellers will not have to go to the expense of a PCR test, and that if a test is needed, a lateral flow test will be sufficient?

Grant Shapps: I thank the hon. Gentleman and he is absolutely right about the USA route. I have had many conversations and a lot of communication with my opposite number, Pete Buttigieg, the US Secretary of Transportation, in the US Cabinet. We have all wanted to work towards this point. It makes a very big and notable difference to the entire aviation sector, because so many routes are dependent on the US transatlantic route. To answer his question about the non-PCR, this will reduce the cost of a confirmatory PCR. I should mention that it is a devolved matter, so it will depend on the Northern Ireland Administration, but I have every reason to believe that we will all move in line, more or less, on this issue.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I warmly welcome the simplification of international travel, which will help the industry to get back on its feet and protect jobs. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there is no way back to burdensome restrictions?

Grant Shapps: As I said a few moments ago, we have learnt so much in this last year and a half. We have vaccinated so much in this last year and a half. Even in the last week or so, we have seen new therapeutics become available to people in hospital. We know how things like dexamethasone, which my father was given when he was in hospital—it probably saved his life—have made such a big contribution. These were all things that we did not know 18 months ago when we went into this crisis. I very much hope that my hon. Friend is right that we are on an upwards path to a higher trajectory and that we will not be going back.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I listened to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) talk about the difference between the Scottish rules and our rules. My constituency is served by two nice north-eastern airports. I do not know whether to thank the Scottish for leaving things as they are, helping demand in our airports, or to complain because I do not want opportunities for our residents to be frustrated. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is so important that we remove any confusion where we can, and that the sooner the Scottish Government allow their residents to fly at the same time, the sooner we will all be in a better place?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Tempting as it would be, I am sure, for him to welcome all the extra business, in the end we are all better when we are together. As Edinburgh Airport said, the decision to diverge yet again and further curtail the recovery of Scotland's aviation and travel industries is incredibly regrettable.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and welcome this great news today: great news for people living in Runnymede and Weybridge; great news for businesses; great news for people who need to see their families; and great news on the reciprocal arrangements with the US. Of course, it is all about those reciprocal arrangements. I welcome his laying out a standard to go to other countries and say, "This is how we should do things." Will he be promoting that with his Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office colleagues as the best way, so that we can truly usher in international safety standards?

Grant Shapps: Yes, we absolutely will. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that what we need is international standards through the International Civil Aviation Organisation, so that we are all working off roughly the same playbook. That is part of what we have been doing, and the House will be interested to hear that I will chair a further meeting of G7 Ministers later in the autumn to try to ensure that we spread an international approach to launching international travel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for Transport for his statement and for responding to 20 questions. I am sure that I shall be booking my next flight to America in early November, or shortly.

Points of Order

5.25 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to raise a point of order about ministerial correspondence. Over the weekend, I received an email from Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon. It said:

"To date, we do not have any record of correspondence relating to Afghanistan from you or your office."

I seek your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, on what on earth I should do. My office has contacted the Foreign Office directly on four occasions regarding a constituent and his family; the first of those contacts was on 20 August, a month ago today. We have contacted the Home Office about the case on five occasions. We have contacted the Ministry of Defence about the case twice. The SNP's foreign affairs spokesperson also raised the case on my behalf with both the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary.

My constituent's family were visited by the Taliban on 17 August. They were warned, and they were threatened. My constituent is a Chevening scholar and his father is a public prosecutor. How can I ensure that I receive a response to my queries so that I can give my constituent and his family appropriate advice? As you can imagine, I am deeply concerned for their wellbeing. They are literally living with the threat of death hanging over them every day, as they have been for the entire month since I was first in touch with the Foreign Office about this.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This is an urgent matter, and I thank the hon. Lady for giving me forward notice of her point of order. I am sorry to hear about the stress that her constituent is now facing and the circumstances in which they find themselves. I am also concerned by the response that the hon. Lady has described from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Mr Speaker has said repeatedly from the Chair that responding in a timely and accurate way to Members' representations is of the utmost importance, especially in the case of Afghanistan, which, as I have said, is urgent and critical. The hon. Lady has put her point on the record and I trust and expect that Ministers will respond to it quickly. If not, I know that she will pursue the matter; I am sure that the Table Office will be able to help and to suggest ways in which she might be able to do so.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) delivered her point of order with all sincerity, but the letter from the Foreign Office also said that it had received more than 200,000 emails in a very short period of time. The letter from the Member of the House of Lords also gave MPs a direct email address to which to send any further information that might have been missed. For people watching these proceedings, I think it is important to explain the entire letter, not just the selected points from the hon. Lady.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is definitely not a matter for the Chair. The hon. Gentleman has put his point on the record, but in the case of Afghanistan, clearly these are life and death matters. The correspondence, irrespective of how it has come, has got to be addressed properly.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask your advice regarding the Elections Bill, which, as you know, is probably one of the most important Bills to come through Parliament in the past 50 years or more. I act as the Opposition Whip on the Bill, and it has been very difficult to sort things out with it, particularly now. The Bill Committee has already had four evidence sessions and we are due to start line-by-line scrutiny on Wednesday. We learned over the weekend not only that the Minister and the Government Whip have been moved to a different Department, but that the Cabinet Office will no longer have responsibility for the Bill. I ask what advice you can give me to ensure that we have the appropriate pieces of the jigsaw in place for the Bill Committee to sit on Wednesday and begin going through the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. Fortunately, the Chair has many powers, but determining which Minister responds to which piece of legislation happens not to be one of them. However, the hon. Lady has made an important point. I am certain that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard it, and will ensure that she is informed as quickly as possible of which ministerial team happens to be in place, so that some progress can be made on the Bill, and indeed so that the dialogue that takes place behind the Chair on many occasions can take place in this instance.

Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill: Business of the House

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill:

Timetable

(1)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8)(a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10)(a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1)(Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held at today's sitting shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19)(a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—
(*Dr Coffey.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Sir Peter Bottomley, the Father of the House.

5.30 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I seldom speak on these procedural motions. I do not think that they are always justified, but I think that this one is. It is not a time to go into the merits of the Bill, but I will say that many of us would like to use it as a Christmas tree. I am thinking of, for example, the frozen overseas pensions, while others may be thinking of universal credit. I consider that in this case it is justifiable to try to get a major and, in my view, necessary change through Parliament under a quick guillotine, and then get on with doing what we can to help pensioners in other ways.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill*Second Reading*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The reasoned amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) has been selected.

5.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Each year I am required to undertake a review of social security rates to consider whether benefits have kept pace with inflation or an increase in earnings. I will undertake that review shortly, and will report to Parliament in November. The Bill refers to how I will undertake the review.

As set out in the Social Security Administration Act 1992, there are four benefits for which there is a direct link with earnings: the basic state pension, the new state pension, the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit, and survivors' benefits in industrial death benefit. That last benefit is devolved to Scotland, and I can confirm that we have received the legislative consent motion that is necessary. I must emphasise that the Bill does not extend to other benefits, including universal credit, where the uprating review is linked to prices.

Normally, I have a specific reference period to consider earnings growth as part of my review. That same earnings reference period has been used for the last decade. In preparing for the review last year, with regard to that reference period, we anticipated and saw an unprecedented fall in average earnings as a result of the covid restrictions that we introduced to protect lives—especially those of the most vulnerable, including many pensioners—and to protect the NHS. That was why we changed the law for one year to set aside the earnings link. Otherwise, state pensions would have remain frozen. I then made the assessment, and awarded an uprating of 2.5%, which was higher than the then inflation rate of 0.5%.

As I prepare for this year's review, the economic context is very different from last year's, as our economy and businesses have reopened following our successful vaccination programme and unprecedented support for businesses and households. Millions of people have moved off furlough and back into work, and we are witnessing a surge in the labour market, with over a million job vacancies. The combination of those factors has resulted in a distorting effect on wages, with a statistical anomaly.

Confirmed figures will be published in October, but provisional figures from the Office for National Statistics show an increase in earnings of 8.3%, more than two percentage points higher than at any time over the last two decades. Given that this statistical spike in earnings is due to a covid-related distortion, I am seeking the agreement of Parliament to again set aside the earnings link for just one more year, 2022-23. I have put provision in the Bill to award the higher of inflation or 2.5%, applying in effect, again, a double-lock policy. The triple-lock policy will be applied in the usual way from next year for the remainder of the Parliament. This approach has been strongly recommended by external commentators, including Sir Steve Webb, who was the Liberal Democrat Pensions Minister for the lifetime of the coalition Government. While it has come as no surprise to most

of us in the House, I was disappointed by the amendment tabled by the Liberal Democrats, finding their latest bandwagon to jump on. They really should listen to Sir Steve, who probably knows more about pensions than anybody in the Liberal Democrats.

This Government are committed to ensuring that older people can enjoy their retirement with security, dignity and respect, and since 2010 the full yearly basic state pension has increased by more than £2,050 in cash terms. There are now 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty, both before and after housing costs, than in 2009-10. I am proud of our record on support for pensioners and of the action we took last year to ensure that pensioners' incomes continue to increase. This Bill will ensure that a temporary statistical anomaly in wages does not unfairly track across into pensions, while also preserving the spending power of pensioners and protecting them from increases in the cost of living. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.35 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): While this Bill seems to be a technical piece of legislation, it raises fundamental questions about this Government and the trust that they enjoy among people across the country. I want to address a number of issues today: the substance of the Bill; how it is part of a pattern of behaviour; the changes we would like to see to protect pensioners; and the context of wider Government policy towards the most vulnerable in our society.

Turning first to the substance of the Bill, we are being asked to vote today for a change in the law to suspend the earnings-related part of the triple lock for one year while retaining the link to prices and the commitment to raise the state pension by a minimum of 2.5%. This is an important issue that directly affects millions of people today as well as the value of state pensions for future generations. Labour supports the triple lock. Indeed, all the major parties committed to maintaining it in the 2019 general election. I should add that it was a Labour Government in 2002 who committed to raising the state pension by the higher of 2.5% and inflation. It is also important to note that, taking inflation into account, state pensions rose more on average under the last Labour Government than they have under the coalition or the Conservative Governments.

Of course, the covid-19 pandemic distorted the earnings growth figures for this year, and the impact of the furlough scheme and the distribution of jobs lost in the crisis has artificially inflated the headline earnings growth figure. The Government have said that they expect earnings to be above 8% as a result of this anomaly. We have been clear that the Government cannot be allowed to use the current crisis as a smokescreen to break their word to pensioners and to abolish the triple lock by the back door. We accept that the pandemic has distorted the earnings data, but we knew that this problem was coming and it was surely not beyond the wit of the Treasury to find a solution to the anomaly in wage data that maintained the link to earnings and offered certainty to pensioners.

I am afraid that the Government have failed to be open about the earnings data they are using. They have also failed to show that they are concerned about low-income pensioners. They are asking us to vote on trust alone, but that is something I am afraid this Government

[Matt Rodda]

do not enjoy much of. By downgrading the triple lock, they are breaking a manifesto promise. Trust in the Government has been badly damaged. I should not have to say this, but given the history of the Prime Minister and his Government, I want to set out what the House and the public have a right to expect. Over the last months we have seen a series of actions that show that the Government do not understand, and that in some cases they just do not seem to care. This should be obvious, but sadly it does not seem to be, to the Prime Minister and his Administration.

Today's broken promise is the third breach of trust in just a few months. This is starting to become a pattern of behaviour. First, there was the cut in overseas aid that the Government made despite a wide range of opposition. We are the only G7 country to cut aid, breaking a manifesto commitment to support the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, and this Conservative Government are retreating from our moral duty. This has already weakened the UK's position at the G7 summit and it will continue to do so at the upcoming summit on education and COP26. Parliament has repeatedly made it clear that it does not support aid cuts and that Britain must not turn its back on the world's poorest. I would add that a Labour Government will build partnerships with other Governments, civil society groups and communities to overcome global challenges by using the aid budget to tackle poverty and inequality.

Secondly, there was the breach of trust we saw last week when the Government broke their promise not to raise national insurance. The Government had already weakened social care and our NHS, cutting £8 billion and leaving us with long accident and emergency, cancer and mental health waiting lists even before the pandemic. Their solution, when finally pushed to act by the coronavirus pandemic, is an unfair tax on jobs—the biggest tax rise on families in over 50 years.

With a cut to universal credit in the Government's sights, it seems that they are going after the same people time and time again. A tax rise that hits less well-off areas—so much for levelling up. The CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce have all criticised the national insurance rise as illogical and harmful to businesses and our recovery.

Now we face the third broken promise, on the triple lock, which Ministers have consistently said they would protect. I repeat that the Government must not use this crisis to leave the door open to scrapping the triple lock altogether. We recognise that the pandemic has caused an anomaly in the earnings data and, crucially, we are not calling for an 8% rise in the state pension, but the Government must come clean and show why they cannot calculate underlying earnings growth over a longer period of time. They have not adequately made the case for why an earnings link, with this year's anomaly resolved, cannot be maintained.

At the very least, Ministers should maintain an earnings link, explain their decisions, offer binding commitments to protect the triple lock and protect the incomes of less well-off pensioners. There is nothing in the Bill that seeks to increase the uptake of tax credits or, indeed, to set out other steps the Government will take to protect low-income pensioners.

The public, and we as the Opposition, expect the Government to look at this thoroughly, to be diligent and to treat people fairly. When the Secretary of State first informed the House of her decision, my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) asked the Government to publish their reasons. That is the least pensioners could expect. Governments should explain the evidence used to make key policy decisions, as evidence-based policy making has been a central plank of good governance for a very long time. Sadly, no answers were forthcoming, but perhaps we will see some actual evidence in this debate. The Government's track record on the use of evidence, however, does not offer much hope.

Finally, I pay tribute to the right hon. Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and for Ashford (Damian Green) for tabling their amendment. Opposition Members are deeply concerned about the cut to universal credit and the devastating impact it could have. It will hit thousands of families and many people in work, including nurses, teaching assistants and supermarket workers. I know from experience that 9,000 people in my constituency will be affected. Like colleagues on both sides of the House, I have spoken to residents who are desperate and who do not know how they will cope.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Although the temporary increase in universal credit has come to an end, surely the hon. Gentleman would welcome the permanent increases to the local housing allowance and the work allowance, the above-inflation increase to the national living wage and the changes to income tax thresholds. Does he welcome those?

Matt Rodda: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, as I understood that the Government had frozen the housing allowance. I look forward to discussing that further in this debate.

The Government have left it late to do the right thing and end the cut, but it is not too late. There is clearly a strength of feeling on both sides of the House on the universal credit cut and the state pension uplift. I think we agree that trust is important and is the basis of good government. The Government will be letting down pensioners and the country if they plough on with these unfair changes without any explanation or reassurance about the future and without any assessment of the impact on many pensioners. We have now seen three successive breaches of trust in just a few weeks, and the last two were only days apart. Trust in this Government has fallen dramatically, and it will fall even further if they fail to listen.

We are making a very important decision today, but the Government can still correct some of their mistakes if they listen to their own Back Benchers as well as to the advice of the Opposition.

5.43 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful to be called so early in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am a huge admirer and supporter of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, as she knows.

I have some personal views on this subject, which I will explain. I tabled my amendment because I felt we needed to debate what the right level of investment in universal credit is. I have to say from the beginning that

I otherwise support the idea that the Government have to make changes to the triple lock. What goes missing in a lot of these debates is the fact that we have just suffered the biggest blow to the economy as a result of covid—I accept that fully. We debate these things without realising that, but I recognise it and it changes the terms of the debate. It also changes the terms of the debate on the manifesto, because no manifesto could have predicted the kind of crisis we have just been through.

We need to get a rational and stable debate about these things. It is important to recognise the huge amount we have done for pensioners since the arrival of the triple lock; increases for pensioners have been remarkable, and so many more pensioners have been lifted out of poverty. These are success stories the Government should be able to talk about and recognise that there has to be some flexibility, so I am not going to end up at odds with the Government on this—quite the contrary, as I recognise all that fully.

However, I want to speak to the amendment that I tabled alongside the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green). I do feel it is necessary for us to re-examine the investment levels in UC. I recognise that the Government made the right decision at the beginning of the pandemic to invest in universal credit to ensure that those who were naturally going to be falling unemployed as a result of the problems that came from the pandemic would receive a higher level of support.

When I resigned from the job that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State now holds, I did so on the basis of two or three things. My No. 1 basis was that the Treasury took a significant sum—much the same as the uplift—out of universal credit. I always made the point very early on that when we put money into universal credit we are investing in a dynamic process. It is one that by its very nature reduces the overall cost, because the more we get people into work, the lower the overall cost of the money we put in.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. You will remember that your amendment was not selected. A passing reference to it is fine, but please do not go into it in detail.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I understood that as the amendment is on the Order Paper, I have at least a right to speak to it, even though it was not selected.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, you have got that wrong. You are not allowed to speak to an amendment that has not been selected. You can make passing reference to it, in the generality, in a Second Reading debate—that is fine—but you cannot go into it in detail.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: In that case, I am going to make passing reference to it, and I will leave the Chair to decide whether or not that passing reference is more substantial. I shall pass through universal credit carefully and make full reference to the statement that has been made or the passing of this on Second Reading.

I want to make a simple point, and I am not going to hold the House up for too long. The point of the amendment I tabled but which was not selected and the purpose of today's debate is to ensure that those of working age who are receiving security, support and benefit from this Government get the right level of

support. We know that the changes made to the triple lock will ensure that a saving is made to the Exchequer against what was unpredictable at the time and resulting from the increase in pay that will happen as a result of the easing of the covid restrictions and the bounce back that is taking place. I also recognise that one problem we have as a result is that those of working age are going to have to pick up a bigger burden, which is why the universal credit uplift should be reviewed, and reviewed very quickly.

The point I simply make, in line with the idea that the pensioners are taking some of this burden, is about universal credit itself: if that money, or some of it, is moved towards the tapers, we will have a reality where more people move into work. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in her discussions with the Treasury on these matters, will make the point that it needs to make sure that those on universal credit are able to move through it faster and that therefore investment in the tapers would benefit both the Treasury and those who are seeking to get work, by making that pathway easier. That will complement what is being done for pensioners at the moment under the terms of ending of the triple lock for one year. Such a move will almost certainly be beneficial; this winter and into the spring, while we see the effects of the fall-out of moving from the furlough scheme and of the other difficulties on energy pricing and some food pricing, which is going to rise, it will protect those who are most vulnerable, while giving people an opportunity to work, with work being the very best way out of poverty.

I am going to finish by simply saying that this is an important matter and I hope my right hon. Friend will take our amendment, which was not selected, as justification in her negotiations with the Treasury to secure a better investment in the taper.

5.49 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith).

I rise to speak in favour of the reasoned amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), and commit the SNP to voting for it when the House divides this evening. As well as speaking to that amendment, I wish to comment on the broader principles of the Bill. I am conscious that those watching our proceedings will perhaps be unaware of the consequences of the passing of this legislation, and especially of rushing it all through in the space of a couple of hours.

In short, as we all know, the Bill facilitates this Tory Government's breaking yet another manifesto commitment—namely, by breaking the pensions triple lock, to which all parties in the House committed themselves at the election less than two years ago. The breaking of that manifesto pledge follows on from the Government's scrapping the commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on the world's poorest through our international aid budget, and now comes on top of the new Tory poll tax, which sees hard-working Scots having to endure a hike in national insurance to pay for the sorting out of the utter mess of England's health and social care system. The Prime Minister is not known for keeping his promises, and the decision to suspend the triple lock will have dire consequences for pensioners.

[David Linden]

As constituency MPs, we all know that the state pension is by far the largest source of income for UK pensioners, and the triple lock has kept it secure throughout the pandemic. To be blunt, the British Government's decision to break its triple-lock promise is a betrayal and an unacceptable attack on pensioners' incomes. What is more, this change will do nothing to stop recent indications that more pensioners are living in poverty. The proportion of pensioners on relative low income—that is, the percentage of pensioners in the UK living in households with net disposable income below 60% of the national median, after housing costs—rose from a historic low of 13% in 2011-12 to 18% in 2019-20.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise in his analysis that we took notice of pensioners' needs last year? The triple lock is reliant on earnings being positive, and last year they were negative, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State took the opportunity to raise pensions, despite the fact that the terms of the triple lock were not met at that time.

David Linden: If the hon. Lady pays attention to the rest of my speech, she will understand that I am developing my argument because the UK state pension is so pitiful. That is the point I am addressing and I am sure she will make it in her speech, too.

The rise in the proportion of pensioners on relative low income followed a period of more than a decade during which the measure had been trending downwards from a high of 29% in 1998-99. The passing of the Bill will undo all that work.

Although the state pension is the biggest source of income for pensioners, House of Commons Library analysis shows that UK state pensions are the lowest as a proportion of pre-retirement wages of all our European neighbours. Pensioners throughout these islands receive around just a quarter of the average wage when they retire, whereas pensioners in Luxembourg and Austria receive 90% of the average working wage. According to the OECD's latest analysis, the UK has an overall net replacement rate of 28.4% from mandatory pensions for an average earner. That is well below the OECD average of 58.6% and the EU average of 63.5%. It is simply not right that the UK devotes a smaller percentage of its GDP to state pensions and pensioner benefits than most other advanced economies.

The triple lock betrayal is yet another Tory-imposed austerity cut. The Commons Library briefing for this debate estimates that the British Government will take away £5 billion from pensioners in 2022-23 if the triple-lock elements of the state pension are uprated by 2.5% rather than 8.3%. Investment in the state pension is crucial, especially as many are still excluded from automatic enrolment in workplace pensions—although I acknowledge that some, but nowhere near enough, progress has been made on auto-enrolment.

Let me briefly develop that point a little further. The British Government's failure to extend automatic enrolment to low-income earners and young people disproportionately impacts women, thereby worsening the already massive gender pension gap on these islands. That is before we even come to the issue of the Department for Work and Pensions' maladministration with regard to 1950s-born

women who, quite rightly, await to see what stage 2 of the ombudsman's process will conclude. I very much hope it will do so soon.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I echo what my hon. Friend is saying about 1950s-born women. Is the decision to abandon the triple lock not a double injustice to those women—and to the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign—because not only are they now being denied the rise in their pension that they might have expected, but they were denied a pension at all at the time they originally expected their pension?

David Linden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and he is right. I am sure that, like me, he receives regular representations on that matter from Rosie Dickson from WASPI Scotland. I am glad that he has put that on the record on Rosie's behalf.

Before I move on, let me touch on frozen pensions, to which the Father of the House made reference when we were considering the business of the House motion. Members will be aware that the UK has a series of historical reciprocal arrangements to provide for the uprating of state pensions in certain countries. Most recently, the Government committed in the Brexit trade deal to uprating the state pensions of UK pensioners in the European economic area. UK pensioners in other countries such as the USA, Philippines, Israel and Jamaica continue to receive their full payments. However, the arbitrary system means that pensioners in other countries—and, indeed, even in British overseas territories such as the Falkland Islands—have their pensions frozen, despite their having paid in the same dues. More than 90% of affected pensioners live in Commonwealth countries with close cultural ties to the UK. The UK is the only country in the OECD to take this two-tier approach to state pensions; I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

There is opposition to the Bill from various parts of the House, but that opposition does not stop in this Chamber. TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady has said:

“The UK has one of the least generous state pensions in the developed world. The triple lock was introduced to close this gap and lift pensioners out of poverty. Suspending it will only halt our progress. This is a dangerous precedent. If the government is allowed to pick and choose when to apply the triple lock, the result will be lower state pensions for future generations and more pensioners experiencing hardship. This decision will hit old and young alike. A race to the bottom on pensions helps no one.”

She is absolutely right.

Let me finish with a quote from even closer to home: something I found on the Better Together website, which advocated Scotland voting against independence in 2014. The Better Together campaign said:

“Our pensions are safer as part of the UK...We are living longer and working longer than ever before. People want to know that their pensions are safe. The UK State Pension means that everyone in the UK can get the same basic State Pension. It is a great example of how we share good things across the UK.”

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: Not at the moment. The campaign went on:

“We all pay in when we are working, and we all benefit when we retire. This means we can support all our pensioners in the same way whether times are good or bad. Scotland's people are

getting older at a faster rate than the rest of the UK. This is good but it means that if we leave the UK we could have a difficult choice to make”,

including on “Cutting the state pension.” On that, I give way to the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross).

Douglas Ross: Can the hon. Gentleman tell us what the state pension would be in an independent Scotland and what currency it would be paid in?

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for finding the time to come to the House of Commons this evening; I know he will be balancing his obligations—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): No answers.

David Linden: The Minister chunters from a sedentary position. I outlined earlier in my speech that we want pensions much more in line with those of, for example, Austria and Luxembourg. I hope that that answers the question.

The SNP will vote to reject this legislation, but in the passing of this Bill tonight we will see yet another Better Together myth burst: that pensioners are somehow protected by Mother Britannia. To be blunt, to allow the Bill to proceed tonight will not only violate the contract offered to voters by the Prime Minister in 2019—and, indeed, by the hon. Member for Moray—which won a handsome majority in this place, but make a mockery of the no campaign’s claim that Scotland remaining in this broken Union is the best deal for UK pensioners when it is patently not.

The SNP will vote to reject this legislation, but in truth we all know that the democratic deficit throughout these islands means that Scotland’s MPs will be outvoted when we try to protect pensioners’ incomes. That is why the only way to truly tackle the plight of pensioner poverty is with Scottish independence, because Westminster is not working and we need to retire from this United Kingdom.

5.59 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Fundamentally, this is about fairness. When the triple lock was conceived, no one anticipated a pandemic that would lead to mass redundancies of people predominantly on lower pay, which, in turn, would lead to wage inflation, through those people losing their jobs, and a cash bonanza for pensioners. Most pensioners believe that having an 8% or more rise would be fundamentally unfair.

I want to respond to some of the points about trust. We earn trust by being open and straightforward about difficult decisions that have to be made. We need to explain where we are and why we are doing the things we are doing. Ploughing headlong into this and upholding our manifesto commitment would be clearly ludicrous in the face of the current situation. That would be the way to lose trust in the Government and to lose trust in their competent administration.

None the less, this should be the start of the debate on the broader utility of the earnings component in the triple lock. At the moment, this has been distorted twice now by earnings in the past year. We need to make sure that we are correctly measuring the cost of living and

tackling inequalities and pensioner poverty. While we cannot have that extensive debate today, a debate on that is sorely needed.

6 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House, while recognising the extraordinary circumstances of the covid-19 pandemic, declines to give a Second Reading to the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill because it represents a broken manifesto commitment made by the Government at the last General Election, fails to address the impact of the pandemic on the two million pensioners living in poverty and fails to increase key benefits, such as making permanent the uplift to Universal Credit.”

The Government are on track to break yet another of their manifesto promises. It is another example of how this Government are willing to turn their back on people living in poverty—now it is pensioners, but next month it will be those on universal credit.

The Liberal Democrats want Britain to be the best place in which to live and to retire, but, frankly, we all accept that it is far from that. People who have worked hard and paid taxes all their lives deserve a comfortable retirement when the time comes. It was our party that was instrumental in putting the triple lock in place, providing a lifeline to millions of pensioners who had seen increases as derisory and as low as 75p per year.

When pensions were only pegged to price inflation, their real value shrunk to one of the lowest in the developed world. We all deserve to live in dignity, to be able to afford food and heating, and to be able to live a life with some meaning or enjoyment, and reaching retirement age does not and should not change that.

There are more than 18,000 people in my constituency claiming the state pension, which is over 20% of the local population. They have worked, paid taxes, raised families, and built communities, and I want them to know that they are visible. The Conservative party clearly does not feel the same about their local pensioners, with the 20 hardest hit constituencies all being represented by Conservative Members. The Secretary of State’s own constituency is the fifth most affected by this broken manifesto commitment.

We all accept that we have lived in exceptional times over the past 18 months, and that earnings growth this year is out of the ordinary, but the big picture here is that this Government are refusing to take any action to lift any group out of poverty. The refusal to do so highlights the hollowness of the phrase “levelling up”. They are cutting universal credit, taking away vital income from 5.5 million households, and pushing thousands of families further into poverty. They have refused throughout to increase legacy benefits at all, ignoring the needs of recipients who are disproportionately disabled. Technical issues were given as the reason for this, but, 18 months on, a lack of appetite seems to be the more obvious case.

The decision to increase national insurance is a further tax on young people, on working people—those who have already been hit the hardest by the pandemic. We know that people are willing to make sacrifices when it is needed—we have seen that during the pandemic—but a part of that must be seeing that we all follow the same rules. There must be a fairness in what is being asked of us. There cannot be one rule for them and one rule for us, which, sadly, is what we see time and again from this Government.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

This Government's habit of breaking their promises makes me very wary of this Bill. We might be told that this change is just for one year, but they also promised no increase in tax in their manifesto and they have just increased national insurance.

Guy Opperman: I am listening with great interest to the hon. Lady's speech. I just want to know whether she agrees with Sir Steve Webb, the esteemed former Pensions Minister, who, for five years, represented her party in this House and who indicated on 16 June that he strongly supported the sort of change that the Government propose tonight, but that she opposes.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the Minister for his intervention. I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond to him, especially as the Secretary of State did not give me that opportunity.

I agree that we have seen extraordinary circumstances over the past 12 months, including significant increases in wages, causing this anomaly, but what this Bill fails to do—I will have this conversation with my friend, Steve Webb—is help those of working age in poverty through maintaining universal credit, or pensioners themselves.

The Bill has only two clauses and five subsections. It fails to address any of the problems with the state pension, or to assess the impact of suspending the triple lock. There are already 2 million pensioners living in poverty, the majority of whom are women and/or from black and Asian communities. This Bill ignores them and the disproportionate impact that suspending the triple lock will have on people already struggling. The promises made by a party in their manifesto matter. It is the essence of the mandate that they claim.

Just last week, during the urgent question on transport, the Transport Secretary welcomed increases in wages and hoped that they continued and were sustained. That is the whole point of the triple lock; it is about helping pensions to keep up with the cost of living.

Women have already been left behind when it comes to the state pension, with those born in the 1950s—the WASPI women—being unfairly penalised by the Department for Work and Pensions' failure to properly notify them about the change in pension age. Women who had worked hard and planned for retirement suddenly found themselves without either. With women more likely to rely on the state pension than men, this policy is another damaging blow.

Last year, I talked about the importance of the triple lock for intergenerational fairness. This Bill is not just of interest to those of state pension age. Unless we truly trust that this Government will keep their promise—and there is no evidence to show that this will be any different from the other broken promises over the past two years—this will impact everyone. Jobs for life and final salary pensions are a thing of the past. It is harder than it has been in recent memory to get on to the housing ladder. It is fair and right that young people today are able to look ahead to a state pension, but if we return to the days of minimal increases to pensions, they will be impacted, too.

I am asking the House to support the amendment tabled by the Liberal Democrats for all the reasons that I have outlined. While there is no doubt that the pandemic has required exceptional measures, this Bill was an opportunity for the Government to support poorer pensioners and to right previous wrongs, and it is an opportunity that they have ignored. Why is there no impact assessment on how this will affect groups already disadvantaged under the pension system? I hope the Minister will address that in his closing remarks. Why do the Government continue to ignore the needs and wants of ordinary people, and why do they think that anyone will trust their word given what has happened over the past few weeks?

The public deserve better than these broken promises, better than this Government, and the 2 million pensioners living in poverty certainly deserve better than this Bill.

6.7 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. May I start by paying a tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who is in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) who left the Department in the reshuffle last week? We may have had our robust scrutiny sessions, but all of us would recognise that both Ministers were fully on top of their brief, keen on the issues and very competent. We wish them both luck in the important jobs that they will have in future, and we welcome the two new Ministers, including my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley). I have enjoyed him being my Whip even more than he enjoyed being my Whip. [Interruption.] To be fair, I think I was the first person to make their Whip vote against the Government during the covid proxy period, so perhaps he really will be glad to have a different job, rather than having to go through that again. None the less, I wish both Ministers all the best in their new roles and look forward to seeing them soon.

I rise to support this Bill. I have been calling on the Government for about a year to fix what will obviously be a problem with the earnings blip due to the reductions at the start of the pandemic and then the hopeful rebound this year. I think it is right that the Government have taken this step and to do it with more than six months' notice, so that pensioners will not be expecting an 8% rise and then have their hopes dashed in March. Those pensioners now have plenty of warning that that huge rise will not be happening. I think that most people are clear about this given what we have seen over the pandemic, with people losing their jobs, being put on furlough, and losing their earnings. All that insecurity has hopefully passed, but with furlough ending in a few weeks' time, we may have a further round of that. The idea that a promise that was put in place to ensure the state pension kept pace with earnings would deliver an 8% rise in the state pension, on top of a 2.5% rise the previous year, is not remotely in the spirit of what this promise was meant to be. Most Members who, like me, strongly believe in the triple lock and want it to last a very long time, recognise that it needs to be sustainable and reasonable. Had the Government tried to plough ahead and retain the 8% rise, that would have been the biggest threat to the triple lock in the future. It would mean that the Treasury, with its eagle eye, would think that this was a promise that could not be sustained for

the long term. I hope we are now clear that this is a one-year suspension and that the triple lock will then be retained in its current form in the long term. That is the right policy and it is what we promised in our manifesto.

I was slightly confused by the Opposition's approach. They appeared to say that the Government are not being transparent and are breaking a promise, but then accepted that 8% is too high. They therefore seem to be suggesting that the Government should go away and try to find a new definition of earnings that is different from the one that has been used for the 10 years of the triple lock, and that they should come up with a number that is a bit lower than 8% and a bit higher than the 3% or so that inflation would probably give to pensioners. The Opposition seem to think that it would somehow be fairer, more transparent and more honest to say to pensioners, "We aren't breaking a promise; we've just contrived a new definition that gives us the answer that we think is acceptable." That is clearly nonsensical.

Either we say that we will stick with the 8% that the law puts in place, or we do what the Government are doing here and say, "Look, we can't stick to that measure. Let's do something reasonable and have inflation or 2.5%, whichever is higher this year." That is a clear policy. It is a calculation that we can all see and scrutinise, rather than asking the Government to contrive something that would necessarily be rather odd and artificial, and through which I suspect we would end up in a whole load of court cases while the Government tried to defend why they had picked one arbitrary earnings measure rather than another just to produce a number they were happy with in the first place. I do not see how we could produce a robust process in that situation.

I would have had some sympathy with the amendment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), had it been selected, because I believe that the Government should retain the universal credit increase, at least for the next six months until we can be sure that the pandemic is finished. That amendment was not selected, so I cannot face the quandary of voting for it. I will happily support the Government tonight in a sensible measure that saves the public finances an unsustainable increase in the state pension that was never in keeping with the spirit of the promise and which in the long term will preserve the triple lock as the right way of protecting state pensions.

6.11 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), who makes an important contribution to the work of the Work and Pensions Committee. I echo his words of appreciation and good wishes to the hon. Members for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and for Colchester (Will Quince).

The Bill reduces an increase in the state pension that the Government's triple lock policy would have delivered. I understand why it has been done, but let us not kid ourselves; we have a growing problem with pensioner poverty, after a quite long-sustained improvement following the introduction of pension credit 18 years ago. The charity Independent Age has analysed the Government's households below average income statistics. Its analysis shows that pensioner poverty has started to increase again since 2012, with 18% of pensioners—more than 2 million people—in 2020 living in poverty after paying

housing costs, of whom more than 1 million are in severe poverty. This is a significant challenge and it is getting worse. Of the English regions, the problem is particularly acute in London. There is no room for complacency about pensioner poverty.

The Bill will increase the standard minimum guarantee of pension credit by 2.5% or inflation—whichever is the greater—next April. When the Minister responds, will he tell us what the Department will do to increase take-up of pension credit so that more people can benefit from the increase? The most recent figures show that only six in 10 of those who are eligible for pension credit are claiming it, and that only 76% of the total amount of pension credit that could have been claimed is claimed. That is quite a significant reason why the problem of pensioner poverty is rising.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Member for making that important point. In preparation for this debate, I read an incredible stat: in Wales alone, about £214 million of pension credit is not claimed. Increasing take-up would be an easy way to deal with the growing tides of pensioner poverty, but the key thing with pension credit is that it is also a gateway to other support.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is why Independent Age has called on the Government properly to research who is not claiming pension credit, and to draw up a plan to increase take-up over five years.

Research by academics at Loughborough University found that maximising pension credit uptake could lift three in 10 pensioners out of poverty and reduce the number living in severe poverty by half. When the Secretary of State came to the Select Committee in July, I asked her whether the Department would bring forward an action plan. She replied that there had been a "media day of action" in June to encourage take-up of pension credit, and told the Committee:

"We will continue to advertise it in a different way but I am not anticipating a big action plan, no."

That is disappointing. Given that the Bill will deny pensioners an increase that the Government's policy appeared to promise, I ask the Minister to look again at further steps to increase pension credit take-up.

My name was also on the reasoned amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), which, as he reminded the House, was not selected. However, I want to comment on the reasoned amendment that was selected, which states that we should reject the Bill because it

"fails to increase key benefits, such as making permanent the uplift to Universal Credit."

Let me pick up that specific point. As the amendment drafted by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green pointed out, the money that the Bill will save the Government next year would almost deliver the £20 a week uplift to universal credit next year. Many Members across the House are deeply worried by the plan to remove the uplift next month. The Select Committee's call to at least postpone the removal of the uplift was unanimous. There are lots of different kinds of worry, which I will outline.

[Stephen Timms]

First, this is not the right time, because the furlough scheme is about to end. We are told that Ministers' intention in introducing the uplift was to protect people who were becoming newly unemployed, but there will be a surge of newly unemployed people when furlough ends. Ministers told the Select Committee last week that the Government have no estimate of the number of redundancies that will follow the end of the furlough scheme, but the most recent figures showed that 1.6 million people were furloughed at the end of July. Surely the consideration given to people who became unemployed at the start of the first lockdown should be given to those losing their livelihood next week as well. What justification could there be for treating them differently?

Secondly, since the decision to introduce the uplift—especially in the past month—we have seen a surge of price rises. September's inflation figure was a record, reflecting increased food prices in particular, and earlier this afternoon the House was considering the current steep increases in energy prices. This cannot be the right time to take £20 a week away from everyone receiving universal credit. The Select Committee recently heard evidence of people having to skip meals before the uplift was introduced. Well, their position will be a good deal worse if the uplift is taken away in a couple of weeks, because the prices they now face are so much higher, and have become so much higher in just the last few weeks.

Thirdly, what justification can there be for reducing universal credit to a historically low level? If the uplift is taken away, support for unemployed families will be the lowest in real terms for more than 30 years. The economy has grown by more than 50% in real terms over that period, but we are being asked to agree that support for unemployed families should be no higher at all in real terms than it was 30 years ago. As a proportion of average earnings, support for unemployed families will be the lowest since the modern welfare state was introduced in 1948. The Library tells me that it will be lower as a proportion of average earnings than it was when unemployment benefit was first introduced in 1911.

We are told that the Government's priority is levelling up. This policy is not levelling up; this is a policy of grinding down. Social security has a job to do—an important job that we all recognise needs to be done. Pushing it inexorably downwards when prices are surging upwards means that it cannot do that job. People cannot focus on getting a job if they are worrying about whether they can afford to eat their next meal.

Speaking to the Committee last week, Ministers from the Department could give no reason at all for the Government choosing to set the rate of universal credit so low, other than as a consequence of historical accidents. They said that the Government had made no assessment of the impact of ending the £20 a week uplift on people claiming, nor of how many people would be pushed into poverty as a result. The Legatum Institute has today published research suggesting that the number of people in poverty will go up by 840,000, including 290,000 children, if the uplift is removed. The Government have also made no new estimate of the annual cost of keeping the uplift.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that often in the briefings used there is a kind of mistake in that they talk about this as being an

unemployment benefit? It is not, because it combines tax credits, so putting investment into this is more likely to get people through and into work than taking it out. That is the point I was going to make but was not able to.

Stephen Timms: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point that I agree with. It is a vital fact, often not understood, that universal credit is an in-work benefit as well as an out-of-work benefit. I think that 40% of universal credit claimants are in work. We have taken evidence in the Select Committee from working parents receiving universal credit who are having quite a hard time at the moment and are going to have a very hard time indeed if they lose the £86 a month that they will if the uplift is removed.

The cost of keeping the uplift, the figure that we are given, is £6 billion a year, but—the hon. Member for Amber Valley drew attention to this in the Select Committee last week—that figure was calculated when lockdown was still in place and job vacancies were much lower, so presumably the cost would be less if the uplift was kept.

The Bill misses the chance—the Liberal Democrats' reasoned amendment gives us the opportunity to reflect on this—to address this very serious flaw in the Government's current intentions. We are heading into an extremely difficult period for both working families and unemployed families who depend on universal credit, because of price rises across the board.

6.21 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): The triple lock has been a successful policy that has seen the basic state pension increase by 35% since 2011—£2,050 in cash terms, and, importantly, the highest level of the basic state pension in relation to earnings for 34 years. My political interest and awareness about this grew when the last Labour Government were in power, because they came into power when I was 15. I well remember the outcry over the 75p a week increase in the basic state pension early on in their term and the outcry over the 25p a week increase for older pensioners towards the end of their term. So it is important that we get these things right, and the triple lock has been a considerable advance in how we support pensioners.

We are now faced with the interplay of two things: an anomaly in earnings, as has been touched on, where wages have fallen as a result of furlough and the economic conditions of the pandemic and then sharply risen; and over £400 billion spent on protecting people's jobs and livelihoods that will need to be paid back. On the triple lock, often, a lot of the commentary pits young against old. As someone whose pre-politics career was entirely spent supporting young people, one might expect me to take a particular side on that, but actually, on this, I think that it is the wrong characterisation, because pensioners are not a group of people who just sit there worrying solely about the value of their pensions. They will have children and grandchildren whose job prospects they are concerned about. They will have relatives who were furloughed who might have otherwise lost their jobs or who work in the public sector where unfortunately pay has been frozen. They will be concerned about international aid, where we have taken another difficult decision. Although I have had emails from people who are not happy about the decision that has been made

about the triple lock, I have had emails right up until this debate and from quite a while ago saying that, in the context of all the difficult decisions that have been made, it would not be right to make an increase to the basic state pension that is so far above what other people can expect.

It was right of the Government to introduce the triple lock in 2011, it was right to change the legislation last year so that instead of getting no increase pensioners still got a 2.5% increase, and it is right to move to a double lock for a year where in all likelihood pensions will still rise by at least 3% thanks to prices growth. Most people, including most pensioners, understand why we are making that decision, and I support the Government in doing so.

6.25 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Finally, in this Bill, it is official: the Government will break their triple-lock promise to pensioners. The state pension will not increase with earnings in 2022-23 after all. Well, well, well: we can hardly be surprised. The betrayal of the commitment to the triple lock can be filed under the same heading as the broken pledge not to raise national insurance and the pledge to maintain the commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on development.

Those broken pledges fly in the face of yet another pledge from the Prime Minister:

“to restore trust in our institutions and in how our democracy operates.”—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2020; Vol. 669, c. 1019.]

I wonder whether anybody on the Treasury Bench can tell me how that is going. We are discussing the Elections Bill later this evening, but we do not need to look at that to see what restoring trust is worth. With the contents of the Elections Bill, even the Government realised that the assault on democracy that that constitutes meant they could not call it the electoral integrity Bill any more, because that really would be taking the mickey.

This particular broken pledge of abandoning the triple lock is an attack on the largest source of income for UK pensioners, on which they rely. Recent indications show that the number of pensioners living in poverty is rising. I wonder whether those on the Government Benches can even begin to imagine the anger, fury and sense of betrayal of those women born in the 1950s, some of whom have only just qualified for their state pension after so many years of being robbed of it, only to find a new betrayal—the abandonment of the triple lock. That is why SNP Members seek to require the Secretary of State to assess and to be held accountable for the impact that this legislation will have on poverty among pensioners in each of our constituencies. I will stand up for pensioners in North Ayrshire and Arran, just as all of my SNP colleagues will stand up for pensioners in their respective constituencies. This is what we have committed to do and that is what we will do.

It is a cause for shame that this cut is taking place fully in the context of the fact that we in the UK have the lowest levels of proportion of pre-retirement wages of all our European neighbours. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) pointed out, UK pensioners receive about a quarter of the average working wage when they retire, whereas pensioners in Austria and Luxembourg receive 90% of the average

working wage. When will the UK Government devote a percentage of GDP to pensioner benefits that is similar to that in other advanced economies?

The other element to this scandal is that it takes place in the context of too many workers being excluded from automatic enrolment into workplace pensions. The failure to extend that impacts low earners and disproportionately impacts women, widening further the gender pensions gap. Why has that not been fully addressed?

The state pension remains an important source of income for pensioners living in or at risk of poverty because of the very low uptake of pension credit. I ask those on the Treasury Bench: what steps have been taken to increase uptake of pension credit—something I first raised four years ago? What has been done about that? I suspect—I fear—that nothing has been done about it. So much for levelling up.

The Government say they are breaking the triple-lock pledge because this year's earnings measure is “skewed and distorted”. Well, I have heard people say the same thing about this Government's priorities. Age UK has expressed real concern that this may not just be a one-off measure but a sneaky way of ditching the triple lock altogether. That might explain why there has been no impact assessment. Where is the impact assessment, given we have 2 million pensioners living in poverty and the triple lock is abandoned? That is a staggering oversight and complacency on stilts towards pensioner poverty.

For all those reasons, I support the reasoned amendment from the Scottish National party. This cut, falling on pensioners, will push more pensioners into poverty. The Government know that. The cut disadvantages women, who are more likely to be poorer in retirement. The Government know that. It is yet another kick in the teeth for WASPI women. Just like with the universal credit cut, this Government are imposing cuts that they know will cause real financial distress, but they go ahead anyway. What does that tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, about their vision of society? The only conclusion that can be drawn is that they do not care about the people they are supposed to serve. No other conclusion can be drawn. This Government have no interest in the greater good, only in sectional interests. That is why inequality is rising and will continue to rise. No wonder support for independence is rising. Increasingly, the people of Scotland want no more of this Government. Scotland needs a Government who govern for all the people with all the powers of an independent country. That is what the people of Scotland will choose.

6.31 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Across the country, the British people are waking up to the fact that a Tory promise is an empty promise. From tax hikes on the lowest earners to drastic reductions in our food and environmental standards, and now the triple lock on pensions, this Government have made it absolutely clear that their manifesto commitments just are not worth the paper they are written on.

This latest U-turn could hardly have come at a worse time. Having endured immense suffering during the pandemic, retired people are now being forced to grapple with the fallout of the Government's incompetence,

[Mick Whitley]

from rising inflation to food shortages, and now we have soaring energy prices just as we enter the coldest months of the year. Pensioners are being told they must survive on the lowest state pensions in all of Europe.

The last Labour Government proudly set themselves the goal of ending pensioner poverty in our country, and when they left office, the number of retired people in poverty was at a historic low. After more than a decade of Conservative Governments, nearly a fifth of pensioners are languishing in poverty, with women and black and minority ethnic pensioners disproportionately affected. As the nights draw in and temperatures begin to fall, many older people in my constituency of Birkenhead will be forced to choose between putting a hot meal on the table and heating their homes. As they do, they will undoubtedly be asking themselves how they can ever trust this Government again.

The Secretary of State has justified this measure as a temporary response to the extraordinary conditions created by the pandemic and said that it is impossible to accurately estimate underlying earnings growth. She must now commit to publishing the advice she has been given on this issue.

Millions of people across our country are filled with a sense of dread at the prospect of the coming winter, from overworked and underpaid healthcare workers to families struggling to get by on universal credit. Pensioners are not being and will not be spared from a cost of living crisis that is engulfing our poorest and most vulnerable communities, but that will be nothing compared with the suffering that will be inflicted on retired people in winters to come if the triple lock is not reinstated again in 2023.

As Age UK has warned, we have simply no hope of tackling pensioner poverty without an absolute commitment to the triple lock. As many of my retired constituents look fearfully to the future, I call on the Secretary of State to reaffirm her commitment to the triple lock and to guarantee to the House that this Bill will not be the first step in doing away with this vital safeguard altogether.

6.34 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said in his excellent speech from the Front Bench, the UK lags far behind most other industrialised countries when it comes to what its Government spend on its older people and their pensions. Most of the EU spends more. The US spends far more. The vast majority of OECD countries spend more.

It should be clear that that is not an accident of history or just an outcome of circumstances; it is the result of decades of deliberate policy decisions by Governments here, including the current Administration. I must ask the question: what exactly is the point of a triple lock, if at any time the Secretary of State and her Cabinet colleagues can jimmy it open and bust open promises that were made not just once, but multiple times over many years?

Just three months ago the Prime Minister's official spokesman told us,

“we are committed to the triple lock”,

when asked a direct question about its removal. That pledge existed only for as long as it actually meant anything—as soon as actual expenditure on pensions was involved, those promises disappeared quicker than a Prime Ministerial bridge.

This attack on pensioners' living standards should not be looked at in isolation. As the families of many pensioners are being hammered by rising energy prices, soaring food prices and shortages, regressive tax raids, the scrapping of free TV licences and the shameful cuts to universal credit, this Bill is just the latest attack on the social contract and the welfare state. Those rising energy prices threaten to put more pensioner households into fuel poverty, and removing the triple lock will magnify that impact. Already more than half of single pensioners live in fuel poverty, while 13% of older households live in extreme fuel poverty. Those numbers will undoubtedly grow if today's Bill is passed. In a wealthy, energy-rich country such as ours, that is an absolute disgrace.

The Bill is not only a betrayal of older people around the country, but economically illiterate. The Government are reducing the spending power available in our economy at the very time our industries need that consumer spending as part of the recovery from covid. The same argument can be said for the shameful cut in universal credit, which could be happening at scarcely a worse moment for all the reasons I have outlined. Moreover, we know that almost every penny of that uplift went directly into the economy, because people had to keep food on the table, clothe their children, keep the lights on and stay warm. The Government will look back on this moment with deep regret, I guarantee it. The political consequences will only be outweighed by the social and human consequences.

The £4.5 billion that the Government propose to keep from pensioners is money that could be circulating in our economy, supporting jobs and businesses on our high streets, stimulating demand in our producers and manufacturers and supporting the recovery. With this change, that money will be lost from our economy and from the job-creating cycle. Pensioners in this country, as has been outlined already, should know that what is offered by the UK Government, and the system they have created, is far below almost every EU country. This Bill is another attempt to decouple the UK from the European and global mainstream, in social security as in so many other areas of life.

Attacking the welfare state has been this Government's hallmark since the current Prime Minister came to office, since his predecessor came to office, and since her predecessor came to office. Indeed, one can look through the books of Tory Prime Ministers going back decades and pick out one ideological attack after another, not least the disgraceful way that successive UK Governments have treated the WASPI women. If this cut saw the money saved kept in the DWP budget, the Government could at least argue that they were diverting money to different priorities—I do not accept that that would be necessary, but it would at least have some logic to it. However, that is not what is happening. Instead, the Government's social security policies, combined with the more general havoc they are wreaking on the economy, will leave millions of pensioner households worse off.

In conclusion, the Bill is more evidence of how the UK's welfare state is becoming something for the history books, rather than a living system. We are a long, long way from the days of Beveridge and the five giants. It is not a route we in Scotland wish to continue down. The UK is sowing the seeds of its own demise by providing its own contrast between an island that forces pensioners and millions more into deeper and deeper poverty while the fat cats continue to collect the cream, with a Europe where security of retirement is a fundamental right supported by the state. In case you have not got the gist yet, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be voting for the amendment.

6.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow others who have made points very clearly. I support trying to get our finances on an even keel after the massive unexpected expenses of covid, yet something within me balks at what again seems to be a raid on pensioners' incomes. Is it not so that the Library statistics outline that the potential costs of uprating the triple-locked elements of the state pension by 2.5%, instead of 8.3%, saves £5 billion in state pension expenditure in 2022-23? That seems to be the greater consideration, rather than fairness and equity. Perhaps the Government should be giving more indications of the effect, especially on pensioners.

I spoke to the Minister before the debate. He was kind to come to confirm some matters with me. When he winds up the debate, will he confirm the impact, how this Bill will affect Northern Ireland and how the process will go forward? Northern Ireland pensioners are paying more for products due to the intransigence of the EU perhaps, and they need this additional funding to pay sharply rising costs. Items that cost £1 just a while ago now cost £1.29. We must address the deficit, but that cannot be done fairly through overly taxing those who have paid all their lives and having them shoulder more of the burden than those who can afford to pay more.

I endorse the comment of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on the WASPI women; my constituency very much falls into the category of others. I think her words were "poorer in retirement", and I see some of my constituents in that same place.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I want to raise the plight of the 4% of UK pensioners who are excluded from the Bill and have had their state pensions frozen because they happen to live in the wrong country. All pensioners who have paid their dues should be entitled to the full uprated state pension, yet half a million British pensioners living around the world have been left behind year on year. Does the hon. Member agree that it is disgraceful to be leaving our pensioners in that situation without dignity, financial security and respect and that the Government must address those frozen pensions?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly endorse that. It is always good to have these debates to which others bring their knowledge and information, and the hon. Lady highlights something that clearly needs to be addressed. Perhaps the Minister can give us an indication on that when he concludes the debate.

We should be cementing, investing and encouraging business growth that pays into the Treasury in a natural manner. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) referred to her reasoned amendment, which I think shows what those of us on the Opposition Benches are thinking. This is a difficult topic, and I am aware of the pressure of covid-19 on the economy and how my grandchildren—and perhaps their children—may be paying for it throughout their lifetimes. However, I am concerned about how we recoup the money. It cannot be through overly taxing those who have paid all their lives and seeing them shoulder the burden more than those who can afford to pay more. We need—this seems to be a slogan—to stop squeezing the middle class. We should be investing in and encouraging business growth.

Others have referred to pension credit. When I am on the doorstep or at a social occasion, there is not an occasion when I do not speak to someone in that bracket and ask them, "Are you getting all your benefits? Are you getting your tenant's allowance? Are you getting your pension credit?" Unfortunately, more often than not, many of those people are not getting their benefits. The Government have a role to play in ensuring that those who are not aware of a benefit know that they should be getting it. Will the Minister remind us of where we stand on that?

The figures for Northern Ireland are quite scary: 15% of pensioners—some 43,000 people—are in fuel poverty and overall poverty. That concerns me. Perhaps the Minister can address that. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) when referring to universal credit mentioned in passing his reasoned amendment, which was not selected. He also said that, whenever furlough ends, many families will find themselves in a difficult position. I subscribe to that view, as does probably everyone on the Opposition Benches. In Northern Ireland, we are facing gas bill rises of some 35% as winter comes in hard, and those who live in Housing Executive or housing association accommodation that has been converted to gas heating face the double whammy of not just how their pensions are affected but by the cut to universal credit, and they will be squeezed more than ever. Pensioners will therefore be impacted unfairly. This winter will see increasing pressure on pensioners and many more than the 15% will fall into that category.

The right hon. Member for East Ham also referred to those in work, and I will give one quick example from a constituent. This lady said:

"You make a third of your money when you do overtime for the benefit you lose, so I am paid £3 an hour in real terms. While I do take the overtime offered to me if I am able to do it, I can also understand why others don't. Making up £20 a week is not as easy as many would have us believe today."

I have long opposed the cut to universal credit, especially as we are coming into winter, when there are additional costs. For the sake of working families in my constituency, I must add my voice to those calling for the money saved by this uprating change and other methods to be factored into the ability of families to afford the gas price increase. We are thinking of capping the pension increase for the most vulnerable sector of people without a real review of how their living costs will increase this year. I do not feel that we can comfortably do that with the limited information provided. Given the increase in the cost of living, as I think the right hon. Member for

[Jim Shannon]

East Ham said, many will face the stark choice of whether they have a meal or turn the heat on. Those are cold realities for many people.

As we see rises in the cost of living in Northern Ireland, with 20% rises in the cost of food and fuel in the next few weeks, I say with great respect to the Minister and the Government that I must support my pensioners and stand with them. I will support the reasoned amendment and oppose the Bill. The Bill is not right, so I cannot support it.

6.46 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to close the Bill's Second Reading for the Opposition. We have heard many good speeches, but, before I turn to them, I want first to deal with the central case that the Government have made for the legislation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) set out in opening for Labour, Opposition Members accept that there has been an anomaly in the earnings data due to the pandemic, and we recognise that a solution is required. I have listened carefully to passionate speeches from colleagues across the House, but I simply do not believe that anyone in the UK believes that wages are rising at 8.3% in real terms across the board. If I were to put that case to my constituents, I think they would very much question my judgment. However, as we said since the announcement was made, the duty is on the Government to explain why their preferred solution—a move to uprating by inflation or 2.5%—is the right one. That duty is particularly important because the triple lock was a Conservative manifesto commitment and, as many hon. Members pointed out, the announcement to break it has come after a series of decisions to break other Conservative manifesto commitments. It is therefore reasonable that the burden of proof lies on the Government and that the threshold for support should be high.

We have had some valuable contributions. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) was right to highlight the trust in the Government stemming from the decisions of the last few months. He was also right to point out figures that show that the number of pensioners living in poverty taken by the measurement that he indicated—those living with an income below 60% of the median after their housing costs—is rising. Given that we know overall spending on pensions is going up every year by quite considerable numbers, why are we also seeing that rise in poverty? That is a question for us all and one on which we may need more time in future.

The hon. Member favours auto-enrolment, and I very much agree. The question is about how to do that in a post-pandemic environment. He will understand, however, that I cannot agree when he posits that Scottish independence might be the solution to some of those problems, because an independent Scotland would clearly face some difficult economic decisions in its own right. I do not think it is necessarily helpful to put that across.

David Linden: Yes, an independent Scotland would face difficult economic decisions, but does the hon. Member accept that the central point of independence is about people in Scotland—the people who live and work there—making those economic decisions?

Jonathan Reynolds: I understand the basis of any nationalist claim for any sense of self-determination, but—this debate may be taking us a little away from the pensions uprating discussion, Madam Deputy Speaker—we all live on these islands together and, when we look at difficult economic decisions, the strength that we have by being a Union is of benefit to us all. [Interruption.] I will come to the speech by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), but I do not think there is time for a debate on Scottish independence as part of our discussion of pension upratings.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) made a brave case that the Government might actually lose trust if they held to their manifesto commitments, and I admired the style in which he did it. He wanted a wider debate on the earnings lock, but I would respectfully have to disagree with him on that. I do believe there is a need to maintain the value of the state pension and the objectives of the triple lock are ones we should keep to—many of the reforms in Parliament since I have been here have been based on a provision for the triple lock to take place—but I did appreciate his speech.

The hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) made, as ever, a thoughtful contribution. He questioned the ability—my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East raised this in his opening remarks—to analyse the underlying wage trend taking away the impact of the pandemic. The hon. Member for Amber Valley will know that that has been an open question, and several organisations have tried to do a piece of work on it. Ultimately, I do agree that it is challenging to do so in a way that is unchallengeable, and that is a fair point to make when looking at possible alternatives.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Select Committee, pointed out that pensioner poverty is rising, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East did, and I think that has to be central to our discussions. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham made the point repeatedly that the question must be how we can increase the take-up of pension credit. He has raised this point consistently, and I know there has been some engagement with the Government Front Bench on it, but I think there is strong support for his words from all sides whenever he raises it. Of course, I believe he was absolutely right to raise the juxtaposition of the decision today with the cut to universal credit, and I believe the case is getting stronger every single day not to proceed with the Government's cut.

The hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) raised pension upratings in the past. He will not, I think, mind my saying that if we look at the position say in 1997, when the Labour Government came to power, we see that a third of all pensioners back then lived in poverty. There was a very strong correlation in those days between growing old and being in poverty, and that was reduced to record low levels by the end of that Labour Government, so the record has to be considered in the round. However, I do agree with him, and I have said this myself, that I reject discussion of pension uprating as an issue of intergenerational conflict. I think it is very much about the value of the state pension when today's workers do retire, and we should never forget that.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran also highlighted the lack of trust stemming from recent Government decisions to break successive manifesto commitments. She obviously strongly opposes this measure. I think what is required is more engagement with the issue of whether the data we have before us is a true and accurate reflection of what we believe is happening in our constituencies. I have said very clearly to her that I do not believe that level of wage growth is the real picture, certainly in a constituency such as mine. Where I do agree with her is that coming, as this decision has, after other manifesto commitments have been broken, that is the context in which our constituents will look at what is happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) also reflected on the run of broken promises and how this has come across to the public. He is absolutely right on pensioner poverty and absolutely right to demand transparency from the Government on this decision and commitments to reassure his constituents.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) raised the cost of living, and I think that case is getting stronger every day. Again, we will not dwell on it, but I do not believe his analysis of independence as the answer to that is the right way forward.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was not convinced of the Government's case either. He was also right to raise particular issues in Northern Ireland about the post-Brexit trading situation and the impact on his people as a result—something about which I think all the House shares concerns. Of course, he is again absolutely right about the impact of the universal credit cut.

However, there is no doubt that the most valuable contribution and perhaps the one of most interest was from the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). Again, we have heard in the debate, and it is something I have said myself, that the triple lock is not a straightforward question of an intergenerational clash, and I know some people have concerns about linking the two issues together. However, I do believe he was right to raise—and to attempt to have his own amendment on—the impact of that universal credit cut, which we discussed in depth last week. I believe that the case against it gets stronger with every single day, and I would appeal to noble Lords in the other place to give this matter the due consideration that has not quite been possible today, but is still very valid.

On the reasoned amendment moved by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), this is an opportunity to discuss the wider context in which this decision has been taken and it makes reference to the universal credit cut that is imminent. However, while the amendment makes passing reference to that, its main argument is that there has been no anomaly, which is not the position of the Labour Front Bench. I can tell the House that I have had my own discussions with the Office for National Statistics, and I am very satisfied that the case for the 8.3% figure is, frankly, unsound.

I know there is an argument for simply insisting on a rise of 8.3%, but I do not believe that that is a responsible course of action. We make the case for the Government to change course on the universal credit cut, but that is

because the Government can do so, it is the right decision and it is very much in the national interest, but I do not think, frankly, that the same factors apply to the decision before us today. Again, it goes back to whether we ultimately believe that that is the correct rate of wage growth or earnings growth across the economy as a whole.

For that reason, I will not be supporting the reasoned amendment, and I do not see much merit in dividing the House on Second Reading. However, we will be seeking to interrogate the Minister during future stages of the Bill, and we will be looking for the reassurances and that transparency we have sought since the original decision and announcement were made. Therefore, we look forward to the remaining stages of the Bill.

6.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I thank the 13 colleagues who have contributed to a wide-ranging debate. The Bill makes technical changes to set aside the earnings link for 2022-23. We will instead increase the relevant pensions and benefits by at least the higher of inflation or 2.5%. This approach will ensure that pensioners' spending power is preserved and that they are protected from the higher cost of living, but it will also take into account the difficult decisions elsewhere across public spending.

The practical reality is that many issues were raised tonight, not least pensioner poverty. I would respectfully remind the House that pensioner poverty is going down, not up. As a result of the triple lock since 2010, the full yearly basic state pension has increased by £2,050 in cash terms. There are 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty, both before and after housing costs, as compared with 2009-10, and material deprivation—an alternative way of measuring poverty—is at an all-time low of 6% of pensioners.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: One second.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the spending on state pension used to be £99 per person, and less than £60 billion in total—when in fact the right hon. Gentleman was the Pensions Minister under the Labour Government. Those figures are now up to £137 or to £179, and to £105 billion.

Stephen Timms: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I am delighted he is still in his post. He talked about pensioner poverty, but rather idiosyncratically, he is using the absolute measure. The much more widely used measure is the relative measure of poverty, on which the analysis of Independent Age is based, and on that much more widely used measure, pensioner poverty is of course going up.

Guy Opperman: I am not going to repeat the points I have made, but I manifestly disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. I would point out that we could add on the £24 billion of top-ups that this Government put forward over and above the £105 billion of state pension, so with respect we are in disagreement. There is also a significant degree of support for winter fuel, NHS prescriptions, free eye tests, the over-75s free TV licence and a variety of other matters.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: No, not for the moment.

SNP Members raised many points, and I want to address them. No mention was made, surprisingly, of the powers under sections 24, 26 and 28 of the Scotland Act 2016, which give the Scottish Government the ability to intervene on such matters, should they wish to do so, including the WASPI matters. No mention was made in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who asked what currency an independent Scottish pension would be paid in. No mention was made of the ability to pay Scottish pensions upon independence, because of course answer there is none.

Reference was made to pension credit take-up, and I want to address the points made.

Patricia Gibson *rose*—

Guy Opperman: I am about to answer the points the hon. Lady raised specifically, if she will bear with me.

Pension credit take-up was raised. We are doing a variety of things on that, including the pension credit awareness day in June, the engagement with the BBC—I met its chief executive only last week—the stakeholder roundtable in May, and the working group established with all the key partners in this matter, let alone the various other ways in which we have changed things and the over 11 million communications to pensioners up and down the country. The Government are proud of their record.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Guy Opperman: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman for the last time, because I respect him so much.

Jim Shannon: I appreciate the Minister's response tonight in relation to pension credit, but in Northern Ireland 15% of pensioners are consistently in fuel poverty and poverty overall. Is the Minister prepared to give extra emphasis to Northern Ireland and help us beat that pensioner poverty?

Guy Opperman: I am reminded by the Secretary of State that that is a transferred matter, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that pension credit take-up is increasing, as is the amount of pension credit going to individuals.

I must turn briefly to the reasoned amendment, which was put forward by a solitary Lib Dem—admittedly, there are not many of them in 2021 so I understand that. It used to be a serious party—a party that understood the fiscal pressures facing Government. Now, to be blunt, it is being reduced to a party of protest, with, it seemed to me, about 15% of its MPs conducting their party conference in the backroom of a Travelodge somewhere on a business park. The practical reality is that the party of Asquith, Gladstone, even Ashdown, is now putting forward something devoid of ideas. It is a party of protest. and we do not agree with it in any way.

We are proud of the fact that last year, when we had no obligation to do so, we took the dramatic and important decision to raise the state pension by 2.5%. We will be raising the state pension by prices or 2.5% when this Bill passes, and pensioners will be protected on an ongoing basis, so I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 59, Noes 303.

Division No. 76]

[7.1 pm

AYES

Black, Mhairi	Hosie, rh Stewart
Blackford, rh Ian	Jardine, Christine
Blackman, Kirsty	Lake, Ben
Bonnar, Steven	Law, Chris
Brock, Deidre	Linden, David
Brown, Alan	Lockhart, Carla
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Lucas, Caroline
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Chamberlain, Wendy	McDonald, Stuart C.
Cherry, Joanna	McLaughlin, Anne
Cooper, Daisy	Monaghan, Carol
Cowan, Ronnie	Moran, Layla
Crawley, Angela	Newlands, Gavin
Davey, rh Ed	Nicolson, John
Day, Martyn	O'Hara, Brendan
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Oswald, Kirsten
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Qaisar-Javed, Anum
Doogan, Dave	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Dorans, Allan	Shannon, Jim
Eastwood, Colum	Smith, Alyn
Edwards, Jonathan	Stephens, Chris
Farron, Tim	Stone, Jamie
Fellows, Marion	Thewliss, Alison
Ferrier, Margaret	Thompson, Owen
Flynn, Stephen	Thomson, Richard
Gibson, Patricia	Wilson, Munira
Girvan, Paul	Wilson, rh Sammy
Grady, Patrick	Wishart, Pete
Green, Sarah	
Hanvey, Neale	Tellers for the Ayes:
Hobhouse, Wera	Sarah Olney and
	Hywel Williams

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel	Brine, Steve
Afolami, Bim	Bristow, Paul
Afriyie, Adam	Brokenshire, rh James
Aiken, Nickie	Browne, Anthony
Aldous, Peter	Bruce, Fiona
Allan, Lucy	Buchan, Felicity
Amess, Sir David	Buckland, rh Robert
Anderson, Lee	Burghart, Alex
Anderson, Stuart	Burns, rh Conor
Ansell, Caroline	Butler, Rob
Argar, Edward	Cairns, rh Alun
Atherton, Sarah	Carter, Andy
Atkins, Victoria	Cartledge, James
Bacon, Gareth	Cash, Sir William
Bacon, Mr Richard	Cates, Miriam
Badenoch, Kemi	Caulfield, Maria
Bailey, Shaun	Chalk, Alex
Baillie, Siobhan	Chishty, Rehman
Baker, Duncan	Chope, Sir Christopher
Baker, Mr Steve	Churchill, Jo
Baldwin, Harriett	Clark, rh Greg
Barclay, rh Steve	Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Baron, Mr John	Clarke, Theo
Baynes, Simon	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Bell, Aaron	Clarkson, Chris
Beresford, Sir Paul	Cleverly, rh James
Blunt, Crispin	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Colburn, Elliot
Bradley, Ben	Collins, Damian
Bradley, rh Karen	Costa, Alberto
Brady, Sir Graham	Courts, Robert
Braverman, rh Suella	Coutinho, Claire
Brereton, Jack	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bridgen, Andrew	Crosbie, Virginia

Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lagan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryl
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert

Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Noes:
 Alan Mak and
 Scott Mann

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 55.

Division No. 77]

[7.17 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack

Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark

Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon

Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas

Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Alan Mak and
Scott Mann

NOES

Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cowan, Ronnie

Crawley, Angela
 Davey, rh Ed
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Eastwood, Colum
 Farron, Tim
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Girvan, Paul
 Grady, Patrick
 Green, Sarah
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 Lockhart, Carla

Lucas, Caroline
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Qaisar-Javed, Anum
 Shannon, Jim
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
 Marion Fellows and
 Richard Thomson

*Question accordingly agreed to.
 Bill read a Second time.*

Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[DAME ELEANOR LAING *in the Chair*]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I ask the Clerk to read the title of the Bill, I should explain that although the Chair of the Committee would normally sit in the Clerk's chair during a Committee stage, I will remain in the Speaker's chair while we still have the screens around the Table. I will be carrying out the role not of Deputy Speaker, but Chairman of the Committee. The occupant of the chair during the Committee stage should be addressed as the Chair of the Committee, rather than as Deputy Speaker.

Clause 1

UP-RATING OF STATE PENSION AND CERTAIN OTHER
 BENEFITS FOLLOWING REVIEW IN TAX YEAR 2021-22

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

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

Clause 2 stand part.

New Clause 1—*Review of public health and poverty effects—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must review the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the day on which this Act is passed.

(2) A review under this section must consider—

- (a) the effects of the provisions of this Act on the levels of relative and absolute poverty in the UK,
- (b) the effects of the provisions of this Act on socioeconomic inequalities and on population groups with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010,
- (c) the effect of uprating benefits in line with price inflation instead of earnings growth under this Act on inter-generational income distribution and fairness,
- (d) the effects of the provisions of this Act on life expectancy and healthy life expectancy in the UK, and
- (e) the implications for the public finances of the public health effects of the provisions of this Act.”

This new clause would require a review of the impact of temporarily linking the state pension and other benefits covered by this Bill with price inflation rather than earnings growth.

New clause 2—*Review—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must, no later than 6 months after the date on which this Act is passed, lay before Parliament a report containing an assessment of the impact of this Act on levels of poverty among pensioners in—

- (a) Scotland,
- (b) Wales, and
- (c) England.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an assessment of the impact of the uprating next year by price inflation instead of earnings growth on levels of pensioner poverty in Scotland, Wales and England (the Bill does not extend to Northern Ireland).

7.31 pm

Guy Opperman: This is a short, two-clause Bill that sets out the way in which we will go from a triple lock to a double lock. I have set this matter out on Second Reading in great detail and I respectfully beg to move.

Matt Rodda: I want to speak to the new clauses tabled in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden).

As we heard on Second Reading, there are a number of important areas that the Government seem to have overlooked. Those failures and omissions are part of a pattern of behaviour by the Prime Minister and his Government. They show a casual approach to their responsibilities. As a result of that behaviour, they are undermining trust in the Government. The Government's approach could have a damaging effect on millions of pensioners and indeed on the public as a whole.

Before turning to the amendments, it is worth considering the fact that the Government have still not offered any reassurance on their commitment to the triple lock in the long term. It is still not clear whether Ministers are leaving the door open to scrapping this important policy. I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State to set out a meaningful commitment to the triple lock, justify the decision to remove the earnings link, and explain why the Government have not found a way to keep the link, such as by providing a link to earnings over a longer period of time. With three broken promises in just a few short weeks, the Government have little credibility left and they now need to rebuild trust in this important area of policy, and in their work as a whole.

On the new clauses, colleagues from across the House are right to raise concerns about pensioners, particularly those on lower incomes. Recent research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reiterates this. While there was a "dramatic reduction" in pensioner poverty between 1997 and 2012, the last few years have seen that progress "unravel". House of Commons Library research shows that before housing costs, 19% of pensioners were living in poverty. After taking housing costs away, 18% were living in poverty. The problem is much worse for women than for men. Women make up—

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): On a point of order, Dame Eleanor. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I am just a little puzzled. I understood, looking at the Annunciator, that we were discussing clause 1 stand part, rather than amendments to clause 1. I just wondered precisely what we are doing here.

The Chairman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very reasonable point of order. Although each part of the Committee stage stands separately, I have decided that, as laid out in the selection list which should be available in the Lobby, we will discuss all matters in one group, especially as this is a short Bill with only four separate matters for discussion. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) is therefore absolutely in order to refer to any part of the Bill during this part of the proceedings.

Matt Rodda: In conclusion, these are sensible amendments which recognise the risks in the approach being taken by the Government. They offer a way of

providing important information to Ministers and they could indeed alert them to potential problems with the Government's approach. The new clauses also offer important safeguards for pensioners, and I hope the Government will consider them thoroughly. Given the Government's dreadful record of playing fast and loose with manifesto commitments, it is the very least we can expect from them.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I rise to speak to new clause 1 in my name and on behalf of my colleagues.

New clause 1 compels the Secretary of State to assess the impact of the Bill on poverty, inequality and, subsequently, our health. In particular, I request that a report be laid before the House within six months of the passing of the Act, and that the effects of the provisions in the Act on socioeconomic inequalities and population groups with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010 are considered.

We have heard a lot in recent months—it seems like many years—about levelling up and building back better. We even heard from the Prime Minister himself that he supports Professor Sir Michael Marmot's call to build back fairer. To do that, however, we need the Government to be able to assess whether their policies will actually do that. We heard, in the Work and Pensions Committee, that that is difficult to do. I argue very strongly that that is not the case and I know there are many others who would argue similarly.

The House will recall that, in February 2020, Sir Michael published his review of health equity in England 10 years after his initial study. In it, he revealed that instead of narrowing, health inequalities, including how long we are going to live and how long we will live in good health, have actually got worse. Most significantly, his analysis showed that, unlike the majority of other high income countries, our life expectancy was flatlining. For the poorest 10% of the country it was declining and women were particularly badly affected. We heard earlier that 2 million pensioners live in relative poverty today; among women of state pension age it is one in five. For women of colour, the figure is even higher. Black and Asian pensioners are also twice as likely to be living in poverty as white pensioners.

Sir Michael also emphasised that it is predominantly the socioeconomic conditions that people are exposed to, not the NHS, that will determine their health status and how long they live. Analysing the abundant evidence available, he attributed the shorter lives of people in poorer areas, including in parts of my constituency in Oldham and in the north-west as a whole, to the disproportional Government cuts to local public services, including cuts in social security support that they have experienced since 2010.

And then the pandemic hit. As a former public health consultant, I can say this with absolute certainty: it was always a question of when, not if there was going to be a pandemic. The lack of pandemic preparedness, going back to the Cygnus report and before, as well as the woeful pandemic management, laid bare the pre-pandemic structural inequalities that are rife across the country.

Many believe that the structural inequalities driven by the Government cuts that I have referred to, including social security cuts, will be found responsible for the

UK's high and unequal covid death toll, with the fifth worst covid mortality rate in the world and the worst in the EU. In an early analysis of the reasons for that, Sir Michael's Covid review last December summarised four key pre-pandemic factors.

The first was pre-existing and widening inequalities in social and economic conditions, particularly in power, money and resources; Sir Michael stated that those inequalities in life had led to inequalities in health. The second was our governance and political culture, not just before the pandemic but during it, which he described as divisive, damaging social cohesion and de-emphasising the importance of the common good. The third was Government austerity over the last 10-plus years; he referred particularly to cuts to social security and local authority budgets, including in adult and children's social care, public health and education. The final factor was our pre-existing poor and declining health.

Sir Michael makes a number of recommendations to build back fairer, including increasing the adequacy of social security spending. Our focus in this debate has been on state pensions, but the cuts of £36 billion to working-age social security support over the past 11 years and the impact that they will have on increasing poverty rates—including as a result of the universal credit cut that we are expecting—must not be underestimated.

Improving our health and wellbeing must be a priority for this Government and an outcome of all our policies, including our economic and public spending and social security. My new clause is about ensuring that the Secretary of State recognises that and publishes a review of the impact of social security spending on poverty, inequality and, ultimately, our health. Given that the Prime Minister and Health Secretary have already stated that they support Sir Michael's recommendations and that this is a means to implement levelling up, I hope that the Secretary of State will adopt my new clause in the Bill.

David Linden: I do not seek to detain the Committee for long, not least because I spoke on Second Reading and because there are only two amendments before us.

In speaking to my new clause 2, which stands in my name and that of my hon. Friends, I also offer support to new clause 1, which stands in the name of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). In truth, the two new clauses, although worded differently, seek to do much the same thing: hold the Tory Government's feet to the fire, not simply allow them to stick their head in the sand when it comes to pensioner poverty.

I bitterly regret that the Bill got a Second Reading, particularly with the help of Scottish Tory MPs, but as the Bill will soon be an Act, it is now incumbent on us to ensure that at least Ministers fully understand the sheer impact of such bad legislation on our constituents and the consequences of this Government's ditching yet another manifesto pledge to pensioners about the triple lock.

Patricia Gibson: Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment with the Minister, who talked earlier about how the Scottish Government should top up the income that pensioners would be deprived of? The Minister knows full well—if he does not, it is worrying—

that section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 forbids the Scottish Government from topping up pensioners' benefits except

“by reason of old age.”

I am sure that the Minister is well aware of that.

Does my hon. Friend also share my view that rather than expecting the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to continually clean up the injustices of this Government, we would be far better off having all the powers to prevent injustices in the first place?

David Linden: I would caution the Minister that my hon. Friend, a former teacher, is not someone whose office or classroom he would want to be summoned to for a telling off. She has quite eloquently set him right on what I am sure was inadvertent misleading of the Committee.

I will return to new clause 2, because I would not want to stray too far from matters before the Committee. My new clause would require the Secretary of State to lay before the House an assessment of the impact on levels of poverty of the uprating of state pensions next year by price inflation instead of earnings growth.

During the Brexit referendum, we were repeatedly told that Parliament would be taking back control. My new clause would merely require Ministers to be transparent and lay before Parliament an impact assessment of poverty, which I am sure any responsible Government would undertake. If indeed Parliament is taking back control, I am sure that agreeing to the new clause will be no problem at all for the Minister; I therefore hope that he will not oppose it. I commend new clause 2 to the Committee.

7.45 pm

Guy Opperman: The answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is that this is a one-year-only Bill and that the triple lock will resume after its duration. In respect of the requirement for a report, he and the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) should be aware that the Department already collects and publishes a wide range of data in this policy area, which is published annually in the HBAI—households below average income—series of reports. In fact, I have a copy here, which is available on gov.uk; the most recent report is dated 25 March 2021. I can assure the Committee that the Government will continue to publish actual data on public health and poverty as it becomes available, but no specific data would be available by May 2022, as is sought.

I will not go into what the powers are under sections 24, 26 and 28 of the Scotland Act 2016, but I can assure the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) that I disagree with her view. I maintain that the powers are there under the Act.

In the circumstances, I ask hon. Members not to press their new clauses.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 2

REVIEW

“(1) The Secretary of State must, no later than 6 months after the date on which this Act is passed, lay before Parliament a report containing an assessment of the impact of this Act on levels of poverty among pensioners in—

- (a) Scotland,
- (b) Wales, and
- (c) England.”—(*David Linden.*)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an assessment of the impact of the uprating next year by price inflation instead of earnings growth on levels of pensioner poverty in Scotland, Wales and England (the Bill does not extend to Northern Ireland).

Brought up, and read the First time.

David Linden: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time. I know that the hon. Members who suspended proxy voting and brought back in-person voting will be very keen to vote tonight, so I would like to divide the Committee on the new clause, which stands in my name and in that of my hon. Friends.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The Committee divided: Ayes 58, Noes 304.

Division No. 78]

[7.46 pm

AYES

Black, Mhairi	Lake, Ben
Blackford, rh Ian	Law, Chris
Blackman, Kirsty	Linden, David
Bonnar, Steven	Lockhart, Carla
Brock, Deidre	Lucas, Caroline
Brown, Alan	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Cameron, Dr Lisa	McDonald, Stuart C.
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	McLaughlin, Anne
Chamberlain, Wendy	Monaghan, Carol
Cherry, Joanna	Newlands, Gavin
Cooper, Daisy	Nicolson, John
Crawley, Angela	O'Hara, Brendan
Davey, rh Ed	Olney, Sarah
Day, Martyn	Oswald, Kirsten
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Qaisar-Javed, Anum
Doogan, Dave	Qureshi, Yasmin
Dorans, Allan	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Eastwood, Colum	Shannon, Jim
Edwards, Jonathan	Smith, Alyn
Farron, Tim	Stephens, Chris
Fellows, Marion	Stone, Jamie
Ferrier, Margaret	Thewliss, Alison
Flynn, Stephen	Thompson, Owen
Gibson, Patricia	Williams, Hywel
Girvan, Paul	Wilson, Munira
Grady, Patrick	Wilson, rh Sammy
Green, Sarah	Wishart, Pete
Hanvey, Neale	
Hobhouse, Wera	
Hosie, rh Stewart	
Jardine, Christine	

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Richard Thomson and
Ronnie Cowan**

NOES

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

Baker, Duncan	Dunne, rh Philip
Baker, Mr Steve	Eastwood, Mark
Baldwin, Harriett	Edwards, Ruth
Barclay, rh Steve	Ellis, rh Michael
Baynes, Simon	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Bell, Aaron	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Beresford, Sir Paul	Eustice, rh George
Bhatti, Saqib	Evennett, rh Sir David
Blackman, Bob	Everitt, Ben
Blunt, Crispin	Farris, Laura
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Fell, Simon
Bradley, Ben	Fletcher, Katherine
Bradley, rh Karen	Fletcher, Nick
Brady, Sir Graham	Ford, Vicky
Braverman, rh Suella	Foster, Kevin
Brereton, Jack	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Bridgen, Andrew	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Brine, Steve	Frazer, rh Lucy
Bristow, Paul	Freeman, George
Brokenshire, rh James	Freer, Mike
Browne, Anthony	Fuller, Richard
Bruce, Fiona	Fysh, Mr Marcus
Buchan, Felicity	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Buckland, rh Robert	Garnier, Mark
Burghart, Alex	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Burns, rh Conor	Gibson, Peter
Butler, Rob	Gideon, Jo
Cairns, rh Alun	Gove, rh Michael
Carter, Andy	Graham, Richard
Cartlidge, James	Gray, James
Cash, Sir William	Green, Chris
Cates, Miriam	Green, rh Damian
Caulfield, Maria	Griffith, Andrew
Chalk, Alex	Griffiths, Kate
Chishti, Rehman	Grundy, James
Chope, Sir Christopher	Gullis, Jonathan
Churchill, Jo	Halfon, rh Robert
Clark, rh Greg	Hall, Luke
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Hammond, Stephen
Clarke, Theo	Hancock, rh Matt
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Harris, Rebecca
Clarkson, Chris	Harrison, Trudy
Cleverly, rh James	Hart, Sally-Ann
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hart, rh Simon
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Hayes, rh Sir John
Colburn, Elliot	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Collins, Damian	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Costa, Alberto	Henderson, Gordon
Courts, Robert	Henry, Darren
Coutinho, Claire	Higginbotham, Antony
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hinds, rh Damian
Crosbie, Virginia	Holden, Mr Richard
Daly, James	Hollinrake, Kevin
Davies, David T. C.	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Davies, Gareth	Holloway, Adam
Davies, Dr James	Holmes, Paul
Davies, Mims	Howell, John
Davis, rh Mr David	Howell, Paul
Davison, Dehenna	Huddleston, Nigel
Dinenage, Caroline	Hudson, Dr Neil
Dines, Miss Sarah	Hughes, Eddie
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Docherty, Leo	Hunt, Tom
Donelan, rh Michelle	Jack, rh Mr Alister
Dorries, rh Ms Nadine	Javid, rh Sajid
Double, Steve	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Drax, Richard	Jenkinson, Mark
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jenkyns, Andrea
Duddridge, James	Jenrick, rh Robert
Duguid, David	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Johnson, Gareth

Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Mills, Nigel
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John

Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggan, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Scott Mann and
 Alan Mak

Question accordingly negatived.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.—(Guy Opperman.)

7.59 pm

Matt Rodda: As we start this debate on Third Reading, I want to reflect on what we have discussed so far in this important piece of legislation. The House has considered a number of issues relating to the Bill, and we will soon pass it over to the other place. Before we do so, we still have an opportunity to improve the legislation and to stand up for the interests of pensioners. Even at this late stage, I would like to ask the Government to consider a series of sensible, helpful points made from across the House. Taken together, these measures could make a substantial difference to the Bill.

The Government are breaking a manifesto promise. Parties across the House supported the triple lock in their manifestos in 2019, and this is a question of trust. Breaking their promise on the triple lock is the third time the Government have broken a manifesto commitment in just a few weeks. Trust in this Government has fallen dramatically, and I am afraid to say that their reputation is in tatters. We understand the difficult situation with the anomaly in earnings. However, it is down to the Government to find a way to protect the triple lock and deal with the anomaly in the earnings data.

We have asked Ministers to take a few simple steps to address the issue. First, we have asked them to be honest about the data showing a temporary increase in earnings. Secondly, we have asked them to find a way to address it while maintaining the earnings link. We have suggested using an average rising earnings over a longer period of time. Thirdly, if the Government are to address the anomaly, will they report back on the impact on pensioners' incomes and take a real interest in the difficulties faced by millions of pensioners on low incomes? Those are all sensible measures that should be part of the good governance of this country.

We have discussed this issue in some detail today, and the Government must be clearer with pensioners. However, there is no need to take it further today and we would not want to divide the House on Third Reading. I remind Conservative Members that trust in the Government is wearing very thin, so let us hope that they will now listen to the House and to the public and show that they are concerned about such important matters.

8.2 pm

David Linden: I have already outlined my view of the Bill on Second Reading. I am disappointed that the Government chose to reject our new clause 2 in Committee, but in the interests of brevity I will not go over old ground, not least because I am conscious that we have more legislation to consider this evening.

As is customary, I want to thank all hon. and right hon. Members for the good-natured if robust debate that we have had during proceedings on the Bill. I also want to thank and pay tribute to the ever helpful Clerk of Legislation for their support and advice to me and our lead researcher on the Bill, Zoe Carre, who will be

[David Linden]

leaving Westminster for pastures new next month. I hope you will indulge me for a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, when I say that Zoe has been a pleasure to work with on the inclusion and wellbeing team and will be sorely missed by all of us in the SNP group in this place.

By passing this Bill unamended tonight, the House will be agreeing with the very legislation that allows the Government to break their promise to our constituents that there would be a triple lock on pensions. The SNP will continue to stand firm against this Tory Government's attack on the pensions triple lock, because we believe that an adequate state pension is essential to ensuring dignity and fairness in retirement. It is clear that the British Government will continue to ride roughshod over our pensioners and that the only way to protect Scotland's pensioners from more Tory austerity is with the full powers of independence. I look forward to making that case during the upcoming referendum, which we all know is on the horizon. I just wonder whether those in the no campaign will be as misleading this time when it comes to pensions, because if they are, they will need plenty of polish for their brass necks.

8.3 pm

Guy Opperman: I want to put on record my thanks to my private office and the policy teams at the Department for Work and Pensions. I also want to make it very clear that this is a one-year Bill, by reason of the pandemic, and that the triple lock will resume after the Bill's duration. We increased the state pension by 2.5% last year and we will increase it by 2.5% on prices this year. We spend £129 billion on pensioners—that is £105 billion on the state pension and £24 billion on the top-up benefits—and this Government will continue to support pensioners now and on an ongoing basis. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 52.

Division No. 79]

[8.4 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Barclay, rh Steve
Afolami, Bim	Baron, Mr John
Afriyie, Adam	Baynes, Simon
Aiken, Nickie	Bell, Aaron
Aldous, Peter	Beresford, Sir Paul
Allan, Lucy	Bhatti, Saqib
Amess, Sir David	Blackman, Bob
Anderson, Lee	Blunt, Crispin
Anderson, Stuart	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Ansell, Caroline	Bradley, Ben
Argar, Edward	Bradley, rh Karen
Atherton, Sarah	Brady, Sir Graham
Atkins, Victoria	Braverman, rh Suella
Bacon, Gareth	Brereton, Jack
Bacon, Mr Richard	Bridgen, Andrew
Badenoch, Kemi	Brine, Steve
Bailey, Shaun	Bristow, Paul
Baillie, Siobhan	Brokenshire, rh James
Baker, Duncan	Browne, Anthony
Baker, Mr Steve	Bruce, Fiona
Baldwin, Harriett	Buchan, Felicity

Buckland, rh Robert	Garnier, Mark
Burghart, Alex	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Burns, rh Conor	Gibson, Peter
Butler, Rob	Gideon, Jo
Cairns, rh Alun	Gove, rh Michael
Carter, Andy	Graham, Richard
Cartlidge, James	Gray, James
Cash, Sir William	Green, Chris
Cates, Miriam	Green, rh Damian
Caulfield, Maria	Griffith, Andrew
Chalk, Alex	Griffiths, Kate
Chishti, Rehman	Grundy, James
Chope, Sir Christopher	Gullis, Jonathan
Churchill, Jo	Halfon, rh Robert
Clark, rh Greg	Hall, Luke
Clarke, Mr Simon	Hammond, Stephen
Clarke, Theo	Hancock, rh Matt
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Clarkson, Chris	Harrison, Trudy
Cleverly, rh James	Hart, Sally-Ann
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hart, rh Simon
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Hayes, rh Sir John
Colburn, Elliot	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Collins, Damian	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Costa, Alberto	Henderson, Gordon
Courts, Robert	Henry, Darren
Coutinho, Claire	Higginbotham, Antony
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hinds, rh Damian
Crosbie, Virginia	Holden, Mr Richard
Daly, James	Hollinrake, Kevin
Davies, David T. C.	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Davies, Gareth	Holloway, Adam
Davies, Dr James	Holmes, Paul
Davies, Mims	Howell, John
Davis, rh Mr David	Howell, Paul
Davison, Dehenna	Huddleston, Nigel
Dinenage, Caroline	Hughes, Eddie
Dines, Miss Sarah	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hunt, Tom
Docherty, Leo	Jack, rh Mr Alister
Donelan, Michelle	Javide, rh Sajid
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Double, Steve	Jenkinson, Mark
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Jenkyns, Andrea
Drax, Richard	Jenrick, rh Robert
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Duddridge, James	Johnson, Gareth
Duguid, David	Johnston, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Jones, Andrew
Dunne, rh Philip	Jones, rh Mr David
Eastwood, Mark	Jones, Mr Marcus
Edwards, Ruth	Jupp, Simon
Ellis, rh Michael	Kawczynski, Daniel
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Kearns, Alicia
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Keegan, Gillian
Eustice, rh George	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Evennett, rh Sir David	Knight, Julian
Everitt, Ben	Kruger, Danny
Farris, Laura	Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Fell, Simon	Largan, Robert
Fletcher, Katherine	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Fletcher, Nick	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Ford, Vicky	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Foster, Kevin	Lewer, Andrew
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Lewis, rh Brandon
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Frazer, rh Lucy	Loder, Chris
Freeman, George	Logan, Mark
Freer, Mike	Longhi, Marco
Fuller, Richard	Lopez, Julia
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Lopresti, Jack
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Mills, Nigel
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob

Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian

Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John

Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Davey, rh Ed
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Eastwood, Colum
 Farron, Tim
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Girvan, Paul
 Grady, Patrick
 Green, Sarah
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hosie, rh Stewart

Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Scott Mann and
Alan Mak

NOES

Jardine, Christine
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lucas, Caroline
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Qaisar-Javed, Anum
 Shannon, Jim
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Marion Fellows and
Richard Thomson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Elections Bill (Instruction)

8.17 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the Minister to move the motion, I should confirm that the amendment has not been selected.

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Christopher Pincher): I beg to move,

That it be an instruction to the Elections Bill Committee that it has power to make provision in the Bill about the use of the simple majority voting system in elections for the return of—

- (a) the Mayor of London;
- (b) an elected mayor of a local authority in England;
- (c) a mayor of a combined authority area; and
- (d) a police and crime commissioner.

The motion seeks to widen the scope of the Bill to provide for these measures to be introduced. I do not intend to outline the purpose and effect of the proposed amendments in detail, because the House will be well versed in parliamentary procedure and will doubtless remind us that this debate focuses on the motion before us. If the motion is agreed tonight, we will have the opportunity to debate the substantive issues fully as the Bill progresses through Committee and its other remaining stages.

However, it may help hon. Members if I briefly set out the Government's reasons for the change, without prejudice, of course, to the outcome of any substantive debate we may subsequently have on the amendments themselves.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the Minister on his achievement in arriving at the Dispatch Box to move this instruction motion. Will those of us who are on the Committee enjoy the pleasure of his company as we seek to scrutinise the Bill, or will one of his hon. or right hon. Friends be taking that spot?

Christopher Pincher: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman thinks my eloquence, or otherwise, would be of benefit to the Committee. I assure him that the Committee will have sufficient expertise to properly scrutinise the Bill, not least because he is also on the Committee. Her Majesty's Government speak with one voice.

Supporting first past the post is a long-standing Conservative commitment. It is in our manifesto and it reflects the view of the British people, as expressed in the 2011 referendum, when 67% of them voted for first past the post. The House will of course want to know that in my constituency of Tamworth 77% of electors voted for it. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced in March that the Government intended to introduce legislation to change the voting system for all combined authority Mayors, the Mayor of London and police and crime commissioners to first past the post, as soon as parliamentary time allowed. We now have before us an opportunity to consider and make this change in its proper context—the wider electoral law system. The amendment I propose to make to the Elections Bill will, for consistency, also extend the change to include directly elected mayors of local authorities in England. I am therefore today inviting the House to

agree that parliamentary time be allowed for this important measure and by agreeing to the instruction before us, that it may make provision in the Bill about the use of the simple majority voting system in elections for the return of the Mayor of London, an elected mayor of a local authority in England, a mayor of a combined authority area and a police and crime commissioner. I commend the instruction to the House.

8.21 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Minister is telling us that we will have time to scrutinise and debate the amendment he is proposing tonight, but he might not be aware that this Bill has already started; we have already had Second Reading, where all Members of the House were able to debate the merits or otherwise of the contents of the Bill, and the Bill Committee has already met four times. We have already finished our evidence taking. I say to the Minister that on page 114 of the transcript of the Committee he can see that, as a member of that Committee, I made a point of order to the Chair, asking whether or not we could take evidence from witnesses on the issue of electoral systems. The Chair was very clear in saying that that was out of the scope of the Bill and so Committee members were not able to take evidence on electoral systems. So I have to question why this was not included already in the legislation. On 16 March, the Home Secretary announced that the Government planned to change the voting system for all PCCs, combined authority mayors and the Mayor of London from the supplementary vote system to first past the post. If the Government had wanted this to be in the Elections Bill, surely they should have put it in the Bill from the beginning, allowing Members to scrutinise it on Second Reading and in Committee.

The supplementary voting system that is used for all those different types of elections—

Patrick Grady: Does the hon. Lady agree that we should find a way, through the usual channels, to make sure that the Bill Committee can take some supplementary evidence and we can schedule in some additional sessions so that, assuming the instruction is passed tonight, the Committee can have that level of scrutiny that has so far been denied to the House on Second Reading?

Cat Smith: I find myself in agreement with my fellow Bill Committee member; I hope that the usual channels will find time for extra evidence sessions so that the Committee can be informed on the different types of electoral systems.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On PCC elections, is my hon. Friend as staggered as I am to learn that the Conservative party's PCC for Cleveland, Steve Turner, who was elected earlier this year, was sacked in the early 2000s for systematic theft of merchandise from his then employer, Safeway supermarket, at its Norton store? Does she agree that it is totally untenable for someone who was engaged in such criminal behaviour to hold the position of PCC and that he must resign from his role with immediate effect?

Cat Smith: I am as staggered as my hon. Friend to learn that the Conservative party's PCC for Cleveland was sacked for theft from a Safeway supermarket. I would certainly agree that it is totally untenable for a criminal to hold the position of PCC, and if what my

hon. Friend has shared with the House tonight is true, I would expect a resignation and some kind of by-election for that PCC role with immediate effect.

Turning back to the instruction, the supplementary vote system has been used to elect the Mayor of London since 2000, so it is certainly not a new system of voting. The instruction on the Order Paper suggests that it is somehow something that has come to light since the Bill has been published, but if we have been using this system of voting for the London Mayor for well over two decades, it seems inconsistent for the Government not to have been able to see fit to put this in the Bill before this late stage.

The Minister said that this measure was in his party's manifesto, and indeed the 2017 manifesto stated:

"We will retain the first past the post system of voting for parliamentary elections and extend this system to police and crime commissioner...elections."

However, if he reads his party's 2019 manifesto, as I have done, he will not see it anywhere there. So this was not in the last manifesto and it has not been in the Bill since the beginning. Is this not just another example of Tory arrogance and some kind of apparent allergy to scrutiny and accountability? This Bill has been utterly chaotic and it seems increasingly likely that we are going to get a new Minister on the Bill Committee, although we do not yet know who it will be, and a new Government Whip mid-Committee. To top it all off, we are now not entirely sure whether the Bill sits within the Cabinet Office or the newly renamed "Department for Levelling Up". So let me level with the Minister tonight: this instruction motion stinks of gerrymandering and we will vote against it.

8.26 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Minister and welcome him to his place, temporarily or otherwise. I was incredibly surprised by the length of the introduction he gave on this important change to this Bill. During my time in this Parliament, the first occasion we have had an instruction motion was last week, when the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) moved one. To his enormous credit, he was thorough, considered and detailed, and he gave a lengthy explanation as to why he wanted his instruction to take place. The Minister has absolutely failed to do that this evening. It is astonishing. Just when we thought the Government could not be any more obvious or blatantly self-serving or go further than what is already contained in the Elections Bill, here they are trying to change the rules for their own electoral advantage. Not content with silencing judges, stripping power from the Electoral Commission, privatising critical media, banning public protests and cleansing the register, the Government now want to do away with an electoral system that promotes plurality of voice, encourages participation and, more importantly, delivers a fair result. It is pretty obvious that the Conservative party has absolutely no interest in fairness, plurality or the extension of participation; the Conservatives seem interested only in retaining power, and they are prepared to change the rules and game the system to make that happen. In short, the Conservative party is quickly becoming a danger to democracy.

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend says that the Conservatives are prepared to game the system; they are gaming the system not only by changing the electoral

system but by using this instruction to change the way the House is supposed to scrutinise the Bill. It is totally outrageous that they are changing the scope of the Bill once we have already begun its consideration.

Brendan O'Hara: I absolutely agree. If this was a casino, we would demand that it be shut down and the owners arrested for loading the dice, marking the cards and allowing the croupiers or whoever to have an ace hidden up their sleeve. Why should we accept that a party in power can get away with giving itself every conceivable unfair advantage to remain in power, including by changing the voting system on a whim? The Tories are undermining the electoral watchdog and introducing barriers to voting, particularly among folk who would see hell freeze over before they would vote Tory. Throughout our discussions of the Bill, we have been told, "It was in our manifesto—that's why we're obliged to do it." It is remarkable that Government Members can ignore the absurdity of that argument, given the manifesto commitments we voted on earlier.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The voter ID pilots suggested that 0.16% of people who tried to vote were sent back to get identification, but in the London mayoral elections 5% of ballots were rejected because of confusion. Is that not the loss of franchise?

Brendan O'Hara: I share the confusion of the 5%, because I have absolutely no idea what the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Confused on what point—that they could not understand how to use proportional representation? Just because people cannot get it right the first time round does not mean that we should bin an entire system. Elections have to be fair and people have to trust the election system in place. This instruction is a retrograde step. It is about turning the clock back to an outdated, past-its-sell-by-date voting system.

As the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) asked, where was this proposal when all the experts spoke to the Bill Committee? For four sessions over two days, countless experts came and talked to us about the Bill. The Government must have known that, like the dodgy croupier, they had this idea up their sleeve, waiting to come out; where was it? Why was it not presented before now? Why was the Bill Committee not allowed to investigate this topic and question experts on it? The Government had ample opportunity to float the idea but decided to wait until the Committee had started to sit and not allow a single opportunity for us to question expert witnesses on why it was appropriate. I would love to say I am shocked by this behaviour, but let us be honest, none of us are shocked by it. It has become par for the course.

Are Conservative Members really going to allow this to happen? Is a healthy, robust democracy really worth sacrificing on some vague promise of achieving short-term personal electoral gain? Are Conservative Members really going to meekly acquiesce and turn another blind eye to another full-on attack on our democracy? If they do, it will confirm what many of us on the Opposition Benches have suspected for quite some time: that in its deal with the devil, the Conservative party has given itself over completely to the UK Independence party and retained only the naming rights. Unfortunately, the rest of us will have to live with the consequences of that Faustian pact.

[Brendan O'Hara]

Dr Jess Garland, director of policy and research at the Electoral Reform Society, has said that this is a backward step, and she is of course correct. Is anyone surprised? Everything that this Government do is a backward step. It is like they are indulging in a desperate search for a better yesterday, to the extent that on the same day as they introduced this piece of ridiculous jiggery-pokery they announced that we would all be able to buy our spuds by the stone—assuming, that is, that we can find a supermarket with any tatties left. If it was not so dangerous, it would be laughable. This is opportunistic populism: give the punters what you have told them they want and you can pick their pockets and rob them of their democracy at the same time.

Let us be in no doubt that to resurrect a regressive and antiquated electoral system that belongs in the dustbin of history is nakedly and brazenly partisan. This motion to allow the Committee the powers to introduce first past the post has not been parachuted in because the Government think it will make democracy better or elections fairer, or be more representative—no chance. The only reason it is before us is because it will make it much easier for the Tories to win, while at the same time shutting out small parties on those few occasions when they can make an electoral impact.

Let us not pretend that this instruction to the Bill Committee is anything other than a tawdry attempt by this Government to ensure that, even if they fall out of favour with the public, the Tories will not fall out of power. When the Minister gets to his feet, I hope that he explains when it was decided that this provision would be put in the Bill. Who decided that? At what point and at what level was it decided, after the Committee had met and after the experts had been dismissed, that it was appropriate to parachute this in? How does he expect the Committee to be able to function under the circumstances in which it now finds itself when a colossally important piece of the Bill and an addition to the scope of the Bill has been introduced at this stage after the experts have gone?

Quite remarkably, this makes a thoroughly rotten Bill even worse—something that I never thought possible. I look forward to the Minister's explanation of exactly how and why this was allowed to happen.

8.35 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara).

Today, we are faced with yet another example of a Government with absolutely no respect for democracy, demonstrated both by this process and by the use of it in relation to a policy change of such huge electoral importance.

Ironically, the Minister who tabled this instruction—the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith)—was the very Minister who recently criticised the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for using this little-used mechanism himself. The irony is compounded not least because the hon. Gentleman used it as a Back Bencher, with few other options at his disposal, faced with a Government blatantly leaving the issue of suspending Parliament out of a Bill that should have included it. By contrast, in this case, the Government of the day are

abusing parliamentary process in two ways: first, they did not give notice of this extension of the scope of the Bill; and secondly, there is no good reason for using this instruction mechanism in the first place.

That raises questions as to why this attempt to foist the undemocratic and unfair first-past-the-post electoral system on mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections was slipped in as quietly as possible. For example, why was this silently published on the day of the reshuffle? More substantively, why did the Government not include this issue in the Bill in the first place so that the principle could have been debated on Second Reading?

Frankly, the disrespectful nature of this instruction is compounded by the fact that this is an Elections Bill—a Bill of constitutional importance, which requires those in power to behave with the highest respect for due process in order to protect our democracy and trust in Government. Anything else looks like rigging the system to the Government's own electoral advantage. Extending the use of first past the post, and stripping out the proportional aspects of mayoral and police commissioner elections are not changes that should be bounced on MPs of other parties with no pre-legislative scrutiny or discussion.

Since 1997, every new representative body in the UK has been elected using an electoral system other than first past the post. We have had two decades of experience with PR systems in devolved Assemblies, mayoralities and local government. Now, suddenly, we have this blatant abuse of parliamentary procedure to allow the Government to scrap the PR systems that we have. Instead of the surreptitious use of this last-minute instruction, we should have had pre-legislative scrutiny so that we could properly explore on a cross-party basis the serious concerns that first past the post is unfair, unrepresentative and undemocratic. It is unfair and unrepresentative because it regularly delivers powers to those who win only a minority of the popular vote, ignoring the number of votes cast for smaller parties, and undemocratic because it promotes voter inequality, giving disproportionate power to swing voters in marginal seats and encouraging the belief that voting never changes anything, which is dangerous for participation in our democracy.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady, my friend and neighbour, is making a very good set of points around why we need a more proportional, not less proportional, system in our voting system more broadly. Does she share my concern that Ministers have been grilled, questioned and interrogated over a number of years on the clauses in the Bill in the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee, on which I sit, and the fact that this has been brought in without PACAC being able to consider the issue beforehand with the Minister is an example of this Government undermining the Committee system as well?

Caroline Lucas: Of course, I absolutely agree with my constituency neighbour; this just smacks of deceitfully slipping it out so that the provision cannot have the proper scrutiny that it deserves.

When we teach young people about what the suffragettes went through to get the vote for women and how important it was to vote, it really would help if we could tell them that we had a system now where their vote

actually counted. That means that the Government of the day should be treating any change in the law on our voting systems with the respect that it deserves. The fact that the Government are not going to through the normal due legislative process with this change rings major alarm bells. Second Reading debates exist for good reason; they are a high-profile part of the scrutiny process, and I can see no good reason why we were not allowed to scrutinise this outrageous proposal then. How different it would feel if we had a Government who were pluralist, open, willing to engage in dialogue with all people and parties, and willing to improve our democracy with a commitment to fairness and to increasing wellbeing for all citizens.

In May, the Tories lost 11 of 13 mayoral elections, all under the supplementary vote system, which allows voters to express their top two preferences. Now they want to change these elections to first past the post, but without any normal scrutiny. We can only conclude that they are seeking to do this unfair thing in an unfair way because they understand that when elections are fair, they tend to lose.

8.40 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a generally accepted truth—and, indeed, a fundamental truth of politics—that just because a Government can do something does not necessarily mean that they should. It is quite a while since we saw such a clear and clamant example of that truth as we have before the House tonight.

The Government appear to have been caught on the hop, suddenly noticing, after 20 years, that the Mayor of London is elected using a second vote. I think we have to have some sympathy for them—we know that there are some on the Government Benches who would never claim to be speedy learners—but it is still quite important that this House should be allowed to do the job that we are all sent here to do. I remind the Government that the day will come when hon. and right hon. Members currently sitting on the Government side of the Chamber will be sat on the Opposition side, and they will then find the truth of the way in which they seek to treat this House today; and that is a fairly tawdry truth, I have to say.

There is a lot more to the various devolved offices mentioned in the instruction than simply the electoral system. One reason why these offices were to be elected using a proportional or semi-proportional system was that it was felt necessary to have proper protections because significant powers were being devolved. Indeed, had it been known at the time that these offices would later be elected by first past the post rather than an alternative system, the House may have taken a different view at that time. Due to the way in which the Government have gone about this, it will not be open to the House to take a different view, because instead of re-examining and reopening the powers of these offices as a whole, we will be looking only at the manner in which they are elected. It is for that reason that the road the Government have gone down tonight is ill advised and will ultimately provide the citizens with poorer representation as a consequence, which is why my hon. and right hon. Friends and I will be opposing the motion tonight.

8.43 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think there has been some grumbling on the Conservative Back Benches that the House has been detained by this motion and

there have been all kinds of Divisions this evening. Well, we on the Opposition Benches wanted to keep reforms such as call lists, remote voting, remote participation and proxy voting. The Government were the ones who were determined to bring all of this back and to have the House in its full glory, so they are not really in any position to complain about that kind of thing.

We wait ages for a cognate motion to appear and then two come along at once. As the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, it was just last week that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) tabled one of these motions, but he did it before Second Reading—right at the start of the scrutiny process of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill, which we considered that day.

In this case, the Government were already well out of the traps. The Elections Bill is on its way. The House has approved the principles of the Bill on Second Reading, but that did not include what the Government are now trying to shoehorn into it. This is a further demonstration of what we warned of on Second Reading; it is significant and radical constitutional reform that is generally undermining the democratic principles that are supposedly enjoyed on these islands, and it is being done in a very sleekit and piecemeal fashion in the hope that nobody will notice. Well, we are noticing it and we will call it out.

I would be grateful if the Minister could reply to the various points that have been made by my hon. Friends and in my own interventions about precisely how this will work. Who will lead for the Government on the Bill now that the Department has changed? How do we pronounce the name of the Department, by the way? Maybe he can tell us how the new acronym is supposed to be pronounced, because no one else seems to understand. How will the Government bring forward amendments? Are they going to table amendments in Committee and then we have to table amendments to the amendments in order to try to achieve some kind of scrutiny? Are they going to bounce it through the House on Report, because according to the current programme motion we only have up to an hour before the moment of interruption on whatever day it comes forward? Or maybe they will just put it all through in the House of Lords, because frankly that would be about as democratic as everything else they are trying to do.

This is yet another power-grab by this Conservative Executive and people can see absolutely right through it. While they are going backwards with their introduction of first past the post for local elections in England and Wales, the devolved institutions, of Scotland in particular, will continue to increase democratic participation by increasing the franchise and increasing the accountability and proportionality of the representation in the electoral systems that we have. The Minister asked in a sedentary intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) what system elected us. Well, yes, we were all elected under first past the post, and the first thing that our leader at the time, Angus Robertson, said when he got up in this House was to recognise the disproportionate result that was achieved in Scotland in 2015, 2017 and 2019. Our amendment has not been selected, but I will tell the Government this: if they want to introduce proportional representation for election to the House of Commons, bring it on.

8.46 pm

Christopher Pincher: With the leave of the House, I will respond briefly to some of the points that right hon. and hon. Members have made.

I remind the House that this motion to instruct is to make a technical change to the Elections Bill Committee to allow it to consider the options before it. It is for Members of the House, across the House if they so wish, to bring forward amendments to the Committee that it can consider. I have no doubt that there is sufficient expertise on the Committee to consider these questions, which are pretty well-aired: they have been in the Conservative party manifesto, one way or another, over three consecutive elections. I think the Committee is properly disposed and well able to consider these matters, and if it feels it is not, there are other parts of parliamentary procedure that the House can employ. We will have Report stage. We will have Third Reading. There will be ample opportunity for the House to consider these matters.

It is rather rich for the SNP, the Greens, the Liberal Democrats and Labour to say that we are abusing democracy. I might remind them that in 2011 the country voted for first past the post by 67%, and yet the Greens seem to want to ignore that. I remind them that in 2016 the country voted to leave the European Union, but the Opposition parties tried every trick in the book to undermine the decisions of the British people. We will support the view of the British people that a simplified first-past-the-post election system is best, and we want the House to consider it. The House and the Committee will be able to consider it in the normal way. It is for the usual channels to determine whether further time might be given to the Committee for consideration. However, I am confident that when all is said and done, this House will have the opportunity to debate these matters frankly and fully, recognising what the Home Affairs Committee said in 2016—that first past the post is the best way to elect police and crime commissioners. With respect to the Opposition, I commend this simple technical motion to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 186.

Division No. 80]

[8.49 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Baldwin, Harriett
Afolami, Bim	Barclay, rh Steve
Afriyie, Adam	Baron, Mr John
Aiken, Nickie	Baynes, Simon
Aldous, Peter	Bell, Aaron
Allan, Lucy	Beresford, Sir Paul
Amess, Sir David	Bhatti, Saqib
Anderson, Lee	Blackman, Bob
Anderson, Stuart	Blunt, Crispin
Ansell, Caroline	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Argar, Edward	Bradley, Ben
Atherton, Sarah	Bradley, rh Karen
Atkins, Victoria	Brady, Sir Graham
Bacon, Gareth	Braverman, rh Suella
Bacon, Mr Richard	Brereton, Jack
Badenoch, Kemi	Bridgen, Andrew
Bailey, Shaun	Brine, Steve
Baillie, Siobhan	Bristow, Paul
Baker, Duncan	Brokenshire, rh James
Baker, Mr Steve	Bruce, Fiona

Buchan, Felicity	Gibson, Peter
Buckland, rh Robert	Gideon, Jo
Burghart, Alex	Girvan, Paul
Burns, rh Conor	Gove, rh Michael
Butler, Rob	Graham, Richard
Cairns, rh Alun	Green, Chris
Carter, Andy	Green, rh Damian
Cartlidge, James	Griffith, Andrew
Cash, Sir William	Griffiths, Kate
Cates, Miriam	Grundy, James
Caulfield, Maria	Gullis, Jonathan
Chalk, Alex	Halfon, rh Robert
Chishti, Rehman	Hall, Luke
Chope, Sir Christopher	Hammond, Stephen
Churchill, Jo	Hancock, rh Matt
Clark, rh Greg	Hands, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Clarke, Theo	Harris, Rebecca
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Harrison, Trudy
Clarkson, Chris	Hart, Sally-Ann
Cleverly, rh James	Hart, rh Simon
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hayes, rh Sir John
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Colburn, Elliot	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Collins, Damian	Henderson, Gordon
Costa, Alberto	Henry, Darren
Courts, Robert	Higginbotham, Antony
Coutinho, Claire	Hinds, rh Damian
Crosbie, Virginia	Holden, Mr Richard
Daly, James	Hollinrake, Kevin
Davies, David T. C.	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Davies, Gareth	Holloway, Adam
Davies, Dr James	Holmes, Paul
Davies, Mims	Howell, John
Davis, rh Mr David	Howell, Paul
Davison, Dehenna	Huddleston, Nigel
Dinenage, Caroline	Hudson, Dr Neil
Dines, Miss Sarah	Hughes, Eddie
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Docherty, Leo	Hunt, Tom
Donelan, rh Michelle	Jack, rh Mr Alister
Double, Steve	Javid, rh Sajid
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Drax, Richard	Jenkinson, Mark
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jenkyns, Andrea
Duddridge, James	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Duguid, David	Johnson, Gareth
Dunne, rh Philip	Johnston, David
Eastwood, Mark	Jones, Andrew
Edwards, Ruth	Jones, rh Mr David
Ellis, rh Michael	Jones, Mr Marcus
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jupp, Simon
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Kawczynski, Daniel
Eustice, rh George	Kearns, Alicia
Evennett, rh Sir David	Keegan, Gillian
Everitt, Ben	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Farris, Laura	Knight, Julian
Fell, Simon	Kruger, Danny
Fletcher, Katherine	Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Fletcher, Nick	Largan, Robert
Ford, Vicky	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Foster, Kevin	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Lewer, Andrew
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Lewis, rh Brandon
Frazer, rh Lucy	Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Freeman, George	Lockhart, Carla
Freer, Mike	Loder, Chris
Fuller, Richard	Logan, Mark
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Longhi, Marco
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Lopez, Julia
Garnier, Mark	Lopresti, Jack
Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul

Seely, Bob
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Scott Mann and
Alan Mak

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia

Ashworth, rh Jonathan
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi

Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flynn, Stephen
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glendon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lucas, Caroline
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar-Javed, Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra

Sheppard, Tommy
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Stephens, Chris
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick

Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Timms, rh Stephen
Twigg, Derek
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jessica Morden and
Liz Twist

Question accordingly agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With the leave of the House, I will take motions 4 and 5 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

MARINE POLLUTION

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 6 July, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Capital Requirements Regulation (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 12 July, be approved.—(*Steve Double.*)

Question agreed to.

Tram Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Steve Double.)

9.2 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): At about 6.7 am on 9 November 2016, a tram travelling from New Addington in my constituency towards East Croydon station overturned as it approached the Sandilands tram stop. The tram was travelling too fast as it approached a notoriously sharp bend on the track. Sixty-nine people were in the tram, most on their way to work. They had no idea what was about to happen, although many people have subsequently said they felt trams often went round that corner too fast.

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch report sets out what happened: the tram

“reached the maximum permitted speed of 80 km/h as it entered the first of three closely spaced tunnels, which together extended for about 500 metres. When leaving the tunnels, the tram should have been reducing speed significantly as it was approaching the sharp curve round to Sandilands junction, where there is a 20 km/h limit. This was marked by a speed limit sign at the start of the curve. On the day of the accident, the tram was travelling at 73 kilometres per hour when it reached this sign.

The excessive speed caused the tram to overturn as it passed through the curve. Passengers were thrown around inside the tram and the tram slid along the ground on its side.”

The horrific crash took the lives of seven people: Dane Chinnery, Donald Collett, Robert Huxley, Phil Logan, Dorota Rynkiewicz, Phil Seary and Mark Smith. They were mothers, daughters, fathers and sons, and the loss to their families is insurmountable.

The tram crash at Sandilands junction was the worst tram accident in a century and the worst rail tragedy in 17 years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. In this staycation year when many people from across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are having holidays here, it is important that the trams are safe for both the hon. Lady’s constituents and all the tourists; does she agree that there is an onus on Government to make sure they are safe for everyone?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. One lesson from the tram crash is that we must make sure that all tram networks across the country are safe. Trams are an in-between mode of transport; they are not quite railway and not quite road, so they often miss out on national safeguarding measures that might exist for other forms of transport.

Our community was completely devastated by the accident, and Croydon will forever mourn the loss of our loved ones. I want to pay tribute to the families, who have been so strong in the face of such pain. I want to pay tribute to all those who were the first responders on the scene—the British Transport police, the police, the firefighters, the paramedics and the ambulance service—and I want to pay tribute to those in the Rail Accident Investigation Branch who arrived on the scene that morning to start their investigation. I also pay tribute to the legal team that has worked hand in hand with the families throughout the process of the inquest, some of whom are here tonight.

On 7 December 2017, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch published a detailed 180-page report into the crash, which made 15 important recommendations to improve tram safety across the country's tram networks. The Rail Accident Investigation Branch was established 15 years ago following the terrible accident at Ladbrooke Grove in 1999 that led to the deaths of 31 people. Its job is to independently investigate accidents, improve railway safety, and inform the industry and the public. Its investigations are focused solely on improving safety. As its website says:

“We are not a prosecuting body and do not apportion blame or liability. Possible breaches of legislation are dealt with by other organisations, usually the police and safety authorities.”

The RAIB investigations were very thorough. Among many other things, it talked to everyone who was on the train and survived, and surveyed the 146 drivers who work on the Croydon trams. Recommendations were broad and included the following measures. One was having technology such as automatic braking, which no tram system had—the Croydon tram now does—and systems to improve driver alertness. It also recommended having a better understanding of the risks associated with tramway operations; there was a woeful lack of a proper risk approach to when accidents might occur and how to prevent them. It recommended improving the strength of doors and windows—one of the horrific outcomes in the crash was that the windows all shattered so people were literally dragged under the tram because the windows were not as strong as those on trains. It recommended improving safety management systems, particularly encouraging a culture in which everyone feels able to report their own mistakes—if someone feels tired or has done something wrong, there is a culture that encourages reporting that. It recommended improvements to the tram operator safety management arrangements to encourage staff to bring up safety measures, and a dedicated safety body for UK tramways. The Government have set that up, to their credit, and it is funded, but there is not enough funding and we would like to make sure it is long term. That is a really important body to make sure the lessons apply in Blackpool and all the other places around the country, as well as in Croydon. So I am extremely grateful to RAIB for its investigation and thank it for its work.

There has been significant progress, as I have outlined, and changes continue to be made. In the year ending March 2020, there were 28 injuries on trams, metros and other non-Network Rail networks in the UK, compared with 45 injuries in the year ending March 2019. That is the lowest number of injuries since the first data were published in the year ending March 2006. All the Transport for London-specific recommendations have now been completed, including better signage and warning systems, additional speed restrictions, and the automated braking system that I talked about. An in-cab driver protection device has also been fitted. That sounds peculiar, but basically it monitors the driver's eyes and if they close them, they get a jolt to make sure they do not fall asleep. That sounds slightly alarming when we first hear about it, but it has worked in the system and is helping. The only question I have for the Government on the RAIB recommendations is to ask them to commit to continuing the work RAIB is doing and to ensure that those improvements carry on across the country, not just in Croydon.

I want to focus the rest of my remarks on two key issues. They are entirely non-political and quite complicated, so I hope that the House will forgive me. I will try to be as brief as I can. The first is about the legal precedent set by the inquest into the tram crash, which the legal team, the families and I believe will have far-reaching policy implications for inquests in the future. The second is the loophole in the law that restricts what the British Transport police were able to consider when it came to charging anybody in their investigations.

Let me turn to the inquest first. After the RAIB review and the British Transport police investigation that concluded that a charge of manslaughter could not be brought, a date for the inquest into the tram crash was set. It was delayed several times, largely because of covid, which caused more trauma for the families as they expected it to start only for it not to do so. They felt that as the Grenfell inquiry went ahead during the covid period, theirs should have too.

In July this year, the inquest into the crash ruled that the deaths of seven passengers in the Croydon tram crash were accidental. I want to set out what happened. The inquest took evidence at length from RAIB, and it also took three days of evidence from the British Transport police. As Members know, an inquest has a coroner and a jury, and I am grateful to the jury of people of Croydon who gave their time to this very difficult inquest.

None of the evidence in the first few weeks, from RAIB or the British Transport police, involved hearing from anyone who was there at the crash, or from anyone who was involved—witnesses, people who train tram drivers, the people who ran the tram operating company or TfL, which is responsible for the tracks. RAIB did a brilliant job and had spoken to many people as part of its investigation, but no one was named. The way that the body is set up means that it does not name who has said what; it just publishes its conclusions. Everything was at second hand. The same applies to the British Transport police—everything reported in the inquest was at second hand.

The coroner then adjourned for three weeks to consider whether or not to take any further evidence, which they would normally be expected to do. The coroner concluded that no further evidence would be taken, based on what is called the Norfolk ruling. The Norfolk ruling concerns the inquest into the deaths of four men killed in a helicopter crash in Norfolk in 2014. There was a dispute as to whether the Air Accidents Investigation Branch should reveal the contents of the black box. The judge added three paragraphs to the end of the ruling, saying:

“Unless there is credible evidence that the independent investigation”—

in this case by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch, and in our case by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch—

“is ‘incomplete, flawed or deficient’, the better approach is”,

and it goes through a series of options. They include:

“To treat the findings and conclusions of the independent body as ‘the evidence as to the cause of the accident’ supplemented, if necessary by, short additional evidence from the inspector.”

The ruling is effectively saying that unless what RAIB or the AAIB had concluded was “incomplete, flawed or deficient”, the inquest should just take its evidence and no one else's.

[Sarah Jones]

After three weeks of talking to people, the coroner decided to apply the ruling to the Croydon tram inquest, so the accident investigating body was the only one, apart from the British Transport police, to give evidence. This took away the opportunity for the jury to hear from people who were there, or people who worked for Tram Operations Limited, which runs the trams, or TfL, which runs the network.

After three weeks of being away, the jury were brought back and told they had to retire to make a verdict. The implications in a policy sense are very significant. There is now case law, given Norfolk and its interpretation by Croydon, that in any similar inquest into significant accidents where we see deaths—on trains, or on aeroplanes, helicopters, buses, or trams—a jury of ordinary people will never get to hear evidence from people who have first-hand experience or are experts in their field and can help the jury come to a sensible rounded decision based on their conclusions of the facts.

Ben Posford from Osbornes Law, who is here today, is lead solicitor for five of the seven families. After the verdict, Ben said that the ruling was “far too broad,” meaning future inquests into public transport accidents will be

“rubber-stamping exercises...which renders the inquest an expensive farce...The families feel deeply let down by the inquest process and can see no point in having such an inquiry and then calling none of those responsible to give evidence to the jury.”

Jean Smith, the mother of Mark Smith, who died in the crash, said after the verdict:

“I am bitterly disappointed as justice has not been done today. It has been a total farce as we have only heard half of the evidence and no one who could potentially have been responsible for the crash has been called as a witness.

It’s morally wrong that we haven’t been able to hear from anybody from TfL, TOL or the driver during the proceedings...It feels like they have been able to hide from giving evidence and it simply isn’t fair or just.”

It is really important to say that we do not know whether the outcome would have been any different if evidence had been taken from other people, but the principle is crucial when we look at our legal system. Inquests are a vital public function. When something so horrific happens, people want to know how it happened, and they want to hear directly from those involved. If the accident investigation branch gives evidence but the families and the jury do not get to hear from the individuals involved, they do not get the same sense of what actually happened.

Those potentially responsible need to have their say; without that, families are left with a sense of cover-up. It was incredibly important for the families to hear from the company directors, other drivers and trainers. I will give an example. The dashboard in front of the tram driver, as hon. Members might imagine, is very complex, and there is something on it telling him where he is going. For people trying to understand what happened, it would be useful to hear evidence from someone who trains tram drivers about how that dashboard is looked at, how it works, and how likely the driver might have been to have seen it, to understand the context in which the jury are being asked to make a decision.

I want to place on the record, as I have already, my thanks to RAIB. It did a brilliant job, and its witnesses did their best at the inquest. However, the families of

the victims do not feel it was sufficient to hear from RAIB instead of the individuals present. Similarly, Detective Superintendent Gary Richardson, the excellent senior investigating officer for the British Transport police who led the investigation, gave evidence for three days, but again, he had to summarise the witness statements that he had received. He did that very well, and he managed to include very many of them, but it was his decision what to include and what not to include; the inquest did not hear directly from the witnesses.

RAIB is prevented by statute from expressing an opinion about wrongdoing. The jury in Croydon were being asked to make a ruling on unlawful killing, which inherently includes wrongdoing, but the RAIB witnesses, the only people the jury heard from, were prevented from expressing an opinion on that. How can a jury possibly ever make a verdict of unlawful killing when they have heard only from a body that is not allowed, by law, to express an opinion? The jury are the arbiter. They clearly needed to be able to go further and ask individuals for other evidence. It is not for human behaviour experts at RAIB, excellent though they are, to determine what is right and wrong.

It is hard for the families to feel a sense of justice. As I said, we do not know whether the outcome would have been different, but the policy implications of this case are significant, and the Government should look at it. The families have a real sense of unease. I know that this is a complex issue, but it is genuinely important. If this decision stands, the accident investigation boards are now all-powerful. They are the all-seeing experts, dispensers of justice, determiners of fact, and curtains behind which defaulters will be kept from the public eye. Inquests and juries are made irrelevant.

I would love for the Minister to agree to meet me and the families, and perhaps the legal team, to talk about this situation. The Norfolk ruling could be overturned by judicial review—that is possibly a route that the families could go down—but it could also be clarified by legislation. We have the power in this place to set this muddle, which I think has wide-ranging implications, straight.

The second point that I want to make, more briefly, is about a loophole in the law that needs changing. The offence of causing death by dangerous driving is committed, under section 1 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, when the suspect’s driving is a cause or factor in the death of another person and the driving was dangerous. By “dangerous” we mean within the meaning of section 2A of the 1988 Act, so the standard of driving

“falls far below what would be expected of a competent and careful driver, and...it would be obvious to a competent and careful driver that driving in that way would be dangerous.”

The offence of causing death by careless driving is in section 2B of the 1988 Act, and it is committed when the manner of the suspect’s driving causes the death of another person. The definition of that offence is linked to the provisions of section 3ZA of the Act, which specifies:

“A person is to be regarded as driving without due care and attention”

if the way he or she drives

“falls below what would be expected of a competent and careful driver.”

For causing death by dangerous driving, the standard of driving must fall far below what would be expected of a competent driver, whereas for death by careless

driving the standard of driving must merely fall below what would be expected of a competent and careful driver.

This is the key point: the law on death by dangerous driving and death by careless driving does not apply if the tram is off-road. It applies if a tram is going along a road, but it does not apply if a tram is off the road. Some 97% of the Croydon tram network is off-road, on old railway lines. The British Transport police were therefore unable to charge someone in this case, as the charges did not exist. The Road Traffic Act sets out that causing death by reckless driving or death without due care must happen in a mechanically propelled motor vehicle on a road or other public place. Safety legislation relating to roads may sometimes apply to trams, but the stretch of track on which the Croydon tram crash occurred was a dedicated tramway, not a road.

This is a very small but really obvious loophole in the law, and it would apply again if the same thing happened. We therefore want to bring the law on trams in line with the law for other vehicles for which offences of death by dangerous driving apply. I have had positive conversations about this with the British Transport police, who are very keen, as one would imagine, and Transport for London, which wrote to me and said it would in principle support such a law.

I need to stress that if British Transport police had been able to charge someone with death by dangerous driving, it does not mean that they would have done. It does not mean that the tram driver would have been charged with anything at all. It means that the British Transport police would have had that as an option. The only option they had was manslaughter, and the criteria for manslaughter are much higher—the threshold was too high. As I say, we do not know whether it would have applied or not, but that is a loophole in the law. I hope the Minister can meet us to talk about it. We would only need a tiny piece of law—I could draft it—but it would need Government support to get through.

Britain's tramways have a proud history. The first horse-drawn tram was the Swansea and Mumbles Railways in Wales in 1804. Trams still help to connect our greatest cities and regions. A report out today on how we level up the country calls for more trams, because they are environmentally very clean and they help people to get from A to B very quickly. They are very efficient, and I would love them to be extended in Croydon. Our community in Croydon absolutely loves the trams and we were completely devastated by the crash. Ever since, we have been very keen to make sure that nothing like it can ever happen again. The Government must do everything possible to implement all the safety recommendations for tram systems across the country. They should look to fix the loophole in the law on dangerous driving on tramways and ensure that the families of those who die in any such dreadful situation know they have the justice they need and deserve.

Passengers on our tram networks across the UK deserve to feel safe and to know that the right systems are in place. I hope tonight that the Government will help me to make that a reality.

9.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) on securing this very

important debate on tram safety and on her speech this evening. She is absolutely right to pay tribute to those who assisted at the scene and thereafter. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contribution.

What happened at Sandilands was truly tragic. I know that this accident has particular significance to the hon. Lady and her constituents, as well as to those in the tram sector. The recent inquest must also have brought back painful memories for many people. Our thoughts remain with those who lost their lives or were injured in the tragedy at Sandilands, and with their families and friends. I am absolutely confident that Baroness Vere, the Minister with responsibility for light rail, will be very happy to meet the families.

After the incident, the rail accident investigation branch carried out an independent investigation to establish the causes, making a total of 15 recommendations in December 2017, with an addendum published in October 2018. The recommendations included setting up a new joint industry body to enable UK-wide co-operation on safety matters; developing tram standards and good practice; and providing authoritative, impartial advice for the industry to better understand, identify and foresee risk.

Subsequently, the Government provided funding to set up the Light Rail Safety and Standards Board, which the hon. Member for Croydon Central referred to, to ensure safer journeys for tram passengers and to help implement the recommendations of the RAIB's investigation report across the industry. To date, the Government have provided more than £3 million of funding to the board to spearhead sustainable improvements in the management of safety risk in the industry and to allow more effective UK-wide co-operation.

I concur with the hon. Member's comments that the tram industry and the LRSSB have made good progress in implementing the recommendations. I would like to cover several areas of that progress. First, the board set up an industry risk model, as well as the tram accident and incident reporting database, which is now implemented and embedded across the UK tram network. It has developed an assessment tool that helps the sector to understand risks relevant to individual networks and identifies potential gaps in design, processes and people. I am pleased to say that the research and development programmes run by the board have been able to identify potential sector-wide solutions to elements in the Sandilands report, and that those programmes have been recognised internationally.

Importantly, the tramway principles and guidance are now under the custodianship of the board. Previously administered by the Office of Rail and Road, they are now the cornerstone of the new digital reference library and are continually updated online with the latest best practice. Finally, the board continues to explore new and emerging technologies to bolster tram safety, drawing from different industries both nationally and internationally.

I understand that there are some recommendations that need to be fully implemented across the whole system, but I assure the House that the board will continue to update the Office of Rail and Road on its progress and that my Department will continue to monitor that progress and push for the recommendations to be implemented as soon as possible.

[Trudy Harrison]

To address the specific points that the hon. Member raised, I am desperately sorry to hear that some of the families are distressed by the senior coroner's verdict, and I have listened carefully to the potential implications of the Norfolk precedent. I know that the hon. Member understands that coroners and inquests are rightly independent of Government, and given that families are preparing for a potential judicial review, it is not appropriate for me to comment any further. However, I reiterate the offer of a meeting with Baroness Vere; it is absolutely right and proper for the hon. Member to call for that, and I am sure that it will happen.

I thank the hon. Member for bringing to my attention the potential loophole in transport legislation. My Department will investigate it thoroughly.

Safety on our tramways is paramount for the Government. That is why we have provided more than £200 million in emergency funding to allow trams to

keep running during the pandemic so that key workers could travel, and why we build on the vital work of the independent Office of Rail and Road, the Light Rail Safety and Standards Board and all tram systems across the UK to ensure that we have the very highest standards of public safety on our public transport systems.

Let me end by reiterating that light rail systems have an integral role to play in the economic and social recovery of this country post pandemic. Light rail boosts connectivity, improving access to jobs, healthcare and local services, all while improving air quality, but the tramways should also be as safe as possible. I hope that the actions that I have highlighted today reassure Members across the House that the Government are taking tram safety extremely seriously. The Sandilands incident should never be allowed to happen again.

Question put and agreed to.

9.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 20 September 2021

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

Ethnicity Pay Gap

[Relevant documents: Correspondence between the Petitions Committee and the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets relating to ethnicity pay gap reporting, reported to the House on 27 July and 14 September.]

4.30 pm

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Before we begin, may I encourage hon. Members to wear masks when they are not speaking? This is in line with the current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. Please also give one another and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 300105, relating to ethnicity pay gap reporting.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for expressing an interest in this afternoon's Petitions Committee debate. The e-petition is entitled "Introduce Mandatory Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting". Let me begin with the text of this petition, which states:

"Much like the existing mandatory requirement for employers with 250 or more employees must publish their gender pay gap. We call upon the government to introduce the ethnicity pay gap reporting. To shine a light on race/ethnicity based inequality in the workplace so that they can be addressed.

Currently there is a lack of data available in gauging the ethnicity pay gap in the workplace. Introducing these measures will allow employers to be held accountable in closing the gap where there is disparity. In order to achieve a fairer workplace publishing this data is one of the next steps to knowing how extensive the issues are from a race and ethnicity perspective and not just through the lens of gender."

The petition closed with 130,567 signatures, including 355 from my Carshalton and Wallington constituency. At the outset of today's debate, I thank the petition creator for taking the time to talk to me about why they started the petition. I also thank organisations such as NatWest, Lloyds and Barclays, which took the time to speak to me about their experience of ethnicity pay gap reporting in their own organisations—I will talk about that later. I also thank the independent statistician Nigel Marriott for his very helpful briefing note and his thoughts, which Members can view on his website.

There have been many calls in support of ethnicity pay gap reporting, and that request is not something new or born out of this petition; it has been around for some time. Reporting in March 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities also found that pay gap reporting is a potentially useful tool. But if we cast our minds back to 2018, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was Prime Minister, she launched a consultation on this issue, and the stated aim of the consultation at that time was to help employers to identify barriers and enable a fairer and more diverse workplace. That move was welcomed at the time by

both the CBI and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, along with businesses, charities, academics and others.

All of these, including the petition creator and those who briefed me prior to today's debate, made the case that ethnicity pay gap reporting, much like gender pay gap reporting, could help businesses to understand their workforce better, identify barriers to equality and create action plans to tackle those barriers. And of course it would help to inform Government as to the reality of pay gaps and enable them to consider the actions that they can take if needed.

I am sure that colleagues from across the Chamber will go into greater detail about the benefits of pay gap reporting throughout their contributions, so I will not steal everyone's material in my opening speech, but I would like just to draw attention to an example of an existing system of pay gap reporting in the UK, which of course relates to gender. In a blog post published by the London School of Economics in March of this year, it was found that gender pay gap reporting has been effective in its aim of narrowing the gap. The difference between men's and women's pay had shrunk by just under a fifth during the relevant time. It has affected employers because, according to the blog post, female workers

"show a strong aversion to high pay-gap employers, suggesting that organisations have felt compelled to make changes in order to attract and retain workers."

One would hope that the same would apply in the case of ethnicity pay gaps. When speaking to some of these organisations, such as the three large banks that I mentioned in my opening remarks, it is very clear that this reporting has taught their businesses a lot and has helped to inform their action plans to create more equal workplaces. However, as the Government identified in their response to this petition, it is true that there are some complications to the reporting that will need to be overcome before proposals can be brought forward. Those have been very ably explained by Nigel Marriott in his briefing note, and I will touch on a few of them. I must stress that they are not arguments against ethnicity pay gap reporting, but an identification of what the Government will have to consider before making any proposals.

The first thing to mention is that, while it might seem easy to go straight to gender pay gap reporting as the template for ethnicity pay gap reporting, it is not as simple as replicating that, for several reasons. Gender pay gap reporting is supported by the fact that it is largely binary—not exclusively so, but given how big that discussion is, we will save it for another day—and more or less evenly distributed across the country, whereas the ethnicity breakdown in the population can alter drastically depending on where someone lives and can be made up of a much larger number of categories. That then presents a number of data protection issues, because data of that kind must never inadvertently reveal the identity of the person it reports on. For example, a small business in a predominantly white community could inadvertently reveal information about employees' pay for just one of their employees.

Then there is the difficulty of how to disaggregate the data in the first place: what categories or descriptions should be used, and how do people truly reflect their employees' wishes and how they prefer to be identified?

[Elliot Colburn]

That is made all the more difficult when we consider the issue of disclosure, as it is estimated that something between 5% and 40% of employees do not disclose their ethnicity.

Again, these are not arguments against ethnicity pay gap reporting, but it is important to raise these problems here and consider how we can overcome them in order to bring forward proposals. It may be that we look only to businesses with more than a certain number of employees, or report on an industry rather than at individual employer level. As my hon. Friend the Minister and I are both London MPs, I might suggest to him that London is the perfect place to trial such a scheme before rolling it out countrywide.

Either way, I hope the Government are considering this matter carefully. I note from their written response that they will look to publish their analysis of the 2018 consultation later this year, so any further information on the date of that publication and any plans to bring forward proposals would be very welcome. I will end my remarks there, Mr Hosie, and hand over to the rest of my colleagues.

4.37 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and to follow the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn).

It saddens me to say that structural racism still pervades and permeates our society. Over the decades, progress in addressing racial inequalities has been too slow, and we continue to see the impact of that in inequality in the jobs market, particularly towards those groups from minority communities. It should shame all of us to know that ethnic minorities in the UK are less likely to find career-type, sustainable work than their white counterparts, even when born and educated right here in the very same United Kingdom.

While we know that ethnic discrimination in hiring is pervasive and enduring, it is not clear how much of the labour market disadvantage experienced by ethnic minorities can be attributed to employer discrimination. Overall, just two thirds of black, Asian and minority ethnic people are in work in the UK—68%, compared with 78%, or nearly four fifths, of their white counterparts.

Once fortunate enough to be in work, black, Asian and minority ethnic people are also more likely to be in lower paid employment than their white counterparts, which largely reflects long-standing occupational segregation and often intersects with other characteristics such as gender and class. People from minority ethnic groups are over-represented in a range of lower paid jobs such as care workers, security, hospitality, customer services and taxi drivers.

Racial inequality in the labour market has persisted for decades. We all must play our part in addressing it, especially those of us in Government, and this Government can do more. For an example of the employment inequality divide, we need look no further than this city of London. Data gathered by the Office for National Statistics shows that minority ethnic employees in the capital earn 24% less than their white counterparts—quite a shocking statistic in the 21st century, in which we are to

believe we live in an equal society. That statistic will only continue to increase without swift action by this Government.

We must introduce a mandatory reporting requirement, modelled on the 2017 gender pay disclosure requirement. That would be one of the most transformative steps a company could take to address racial inequality at work and overcome practical difficulties in the workplace. We have a Government with a very large majority, that have indicated their desire to build

“a fairer economy...ensuring the UK’s organisations reflect the nation’s diversity.”

Why, then, has it taken so painfully long for this Government to respond to a report that was commissioned in 2018, more than two years after they released their consultations on the plans? No further developments have materialised.

In Scotland, on the other hand, we have made great progress. In March 2020, a commitment was made by the Scottish Government to implement the key findings of the Scottish Parliament’s Equalities and Human Rights Committee. In doing so, the Scottish Government will take responsibility for assessing the prevalence of institutional racism, and proactively challenge and change practices that disadvantage minority ethnic communities and, more importantly, ensure those communities are involved in shaping that change. The Scottish Government of course recognise that taking these recommendations on board in no way represents a final step, but it is a step in the right direction and a step more than has been taken by this UK Government, or that they seem willing to take.

Pressure is now increasing on the Government, and an agenda for change was already set out in 2018 by the independent McGregor-Smith review of race relations in the workplace. That report showed a lack of access to training and promotion opportunities for black and ethnic minority employees. It also showed low numbers of top-paid black and minority ethnic employees, and high proportions of black and minority ethnic people in poorly paid jobs. We currently lack data with which we can gauge the ethnicity pay gap in the workplace. Introducing a mandatory reporting requirement will enable employers to be held accountable for closing that gap where there is disparity. Publishing that data is one of the next steps we can take to achieve a fairer workplace—something we all wish for—in order to know how extensive the issues are from a race and ethnicity perspective, not just through the lens of gender.

The Prime Minister has already faced criticism for saying:

“What I want to do as prime minister is change the narrative so we stop the sense of victimhood and discrimination”.

Perhaps if he had paid attention to the tragic and brutal killing of George Floyd, which led to widespread outrage and protest across the globe, he would realise that Governments are now facing increased pressure to remove the societal injustice faced by blacks, Asians and minority ethnic communities. In October last year in this place, I advocated for mandatory gender pay gap reporting. I am now asking the same thing of this Government: to deliver what they have already promised in their 2017 manifesto, and implement compulsory ethnicity pay monitoring.

4.43 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on having opened today's debate. This is a really important issue, and I stand here in a somewhat privileged position as chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, because I have the opportunity to talk on a regular basis with those who seek to champion the rights of people with protected characteristics across the country.

Going back to when I was very newly in post, I remember a fantastic meeting that I had with a group of black female entrepreneurs. The first thing that they said to me was, "We must have mandatory pay gap reporting." There was a very good reason why they wanted it to be mandatory: they had spoken to over 100 FTSE companies that all wanted to report, but were nervous about how. They were nervous about the metrics they should use and whether their ethnicity pay gap reporting would be comparing like with like with other comparable organisations, which is why those entrepreneurs said to me, "We need you to put pressure on Government. Unless it is mandatory, it will not happen in a coherent way, or in a way against which companies can be measured."

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is making some excellent points. Does she agree that, as well as an obvious equality imperative for the reporting, there is a really strong business imperative, and that the Government would do well to acknowledge that?

Caroline Nokes: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington, some of the leading banks already do such reporting, but we wish to see other organisations doing more. Earlier this year, I was pleased to receive an email from Zurich, one of the country's biggest insurers and the first insurance company to introduce ethnicity pay gap reporting.

There are no good reasons not to do such reporting, but there are reasons why it is complex. One of those reasons is the size of the business. With gender pay gap reporting, that is dealt with by making only the larger companies report, and I would argue that exactly the same should be instituted for ethnicity pay gap reporting: make only the larger companies do it.

My hon. Friend was right to point out that we do not want individual employees to be identifiable, so we need to find a way for the reporting to be done on an aggregated basis so that those employees do not have their personal salary details revealed. Just because something is difficult or complicated, that does not mean that we should not do it.

Gender pay gap reporting has shone a light, and as a result, that pay gap has been reduced inch by inch—perhaps I should say centimetre by centimetre, as that is all very topical at the moment. It has been reduced not as much as I would like—I would like to see it at zero—but we know there are also challenges around intersectionality. A woman in this world, in the 21st century, is still stuffed. A disabled person—or, heaven forbid, a disabled woman—has additional challenges. A black woman will have more challenges. It is time that we were honest about that.

As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) said, reporting needs to be data-driven and with granular data. We need massive amounts of detail to see which groups are the most adversely affected because, guess what, until we have accurately identified that, we cannot put in place the measures that will most help them and give them the equity that we all want.

The hon. Gentleman also highlighted something that my Select Committee looked at: the way that BAME people were affected by covid pandemic. We saw from evidence that they were disproportionately represented in public-facing roles in the care sector, in transport and in the NHS, for example. They had to interact with people daily, which put them at more risk. Those roles—particularly in care and transport—are poorly paid and insecure. Intersectionality is something that we have to scrutinise closely.

Ethnicity pay gap reporting is something that companies are crying out for. They want it to happen, but on a mandatory basis. I made that point to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) in her capacity as Minister for Women and Equalities, before she became Foreign Secretary. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will tell us whether we can expect an employment Bill in this Session, despite the fact that it was missing from the Queen's Speech, because that strikes me as an ideal opportunity to introduce legislation on the ethnicity pay gap reporting that we are all calling for.

I recognise the challenges for small business when it comes to additional requirements from Government. I will not describe the reporting as a burden, because I do not think it is one. It will enable companies to look more closely at their own employment practices, and at leading organisations that have done it regardless of the lack of framework—although they would prefer it if there were a framework. I think it is an opportunity for us to look forward and drive down some of the basic structural inequalities that we still see in our country. I look forward to the Minister saying something positive in his speech.

4.49 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate with you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the petitioners on bringing the important issue of ethnicity pay gaps to this Chamber so that we can have a good debate about it. I have listened carefully, and thoughtful contributions have already been made. It is not easy, but we are all in politics—I include the Minister in this—not to do the easy thing but to put our minds to the more difficult stuff. Anybody can do the easy thing. I hope we hear a positive reply from the Minister.

Saturday marked the UN's International Equal Pay Day. In the UK, women make 87p for every £1 earned by men. I mention the gender pay gap because all too often the gaps within the gap are overlooked. We must recognise how financial inequalities disproportionately affect some women in our society, including LGBT+ women and women with disabilities. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) mentioned intersectionality and the fact that one disadvantage plus another disadvantage increases the problems that people face. While women in the UK

[Wera Hobhouse]

earn 12.5% less than men, ethnic minority women earn an average of 2.1% less than white women. We must ensure that women from all parts of our society are included in our efforts to close the pay gap.

I mention the gender pay gap because we have seen the effectiveness of mandatory gender pay gap reporting. I echo the right hon. Lady's words about the importance of making it mandatory. Some companies are already doing it voluntarily, of course, but the real need is for it to become mandatory.

I am proud of the Liberal Democrats' role in introducing that legislation in 2015, and of our first female leader, who fought hard to get it on the agenda in her time as Business Secretary. Before that legislation was introduced, only six companies published their pay gap data under the voluntary initiative. There is no doubt that the policy has driven greater transparency and accelerated progress towards workplace equality.

In contrast, statistics show that the ethnicity pay gap has not significantly improved over that time. Given that recent reports suggest that ethnic minority workers have been worst hit by job cuts during the pandemic, there could be no more pressing time for action. The McGregor-Smith report identifies a lack of transparency in corporate Britain as a key barrier to progress. Without data, how can employers identify the disparities within their own companies and make informed decisions that will improve their recruitment, promotion and management policies? Research shows that most employers believe that ensuring workplace diversity is a priority, but little more than a third actually collect and analyse data to identify differences in pay and progression for employees from different ethnic groups.

The voluntary approach has driven, at best, slow and inconsistent progress. Currently, only 13 FTSE 100 companies report their ethnicity data publicly. Government action is needed if we are serious about tackling the pay gap, its causes and its effects. As with gender pay gap reporting, there is a clear case for introducing mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting. I ask the Government to set out a timetable for getting that into law.

Equality monitoring of the workforce is also an essential step to carrying out ethnicity pay gap reporting. I ask the Minister, when will the Government introduce legislation to ensure that all listed companies and businesses employing more than 50 people publish workplace data broken down by race and pay band? I have listened carefully to the difficulties, but let us tackle them, because the end result will be so much more positive for employers and businesses.

It is four years since the McGregor-Smith review, four years since the Government committed in their manifesto to ask large employers to publish information on their ethnicity pay gaps, and three years since the Government launched a consultation on ethnicity pay gap reporting. We are still waiting for the results of that consultation. The Government must stop dragging their feet. Only once businesses begin to publicly report the diversity of their workforces will we see the start of real change. As the Black Lives Matter movement showed, action is needed now to build a more inclusive and more equal society. Addressing race equality at all levels in the workplace can no longer be optional.

4.54 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to the petitioners for allowing us to have this debate.

As someone with a background in human resource management, I fully support the introduction of ethnicity pay gap reporting as part of the measures we need to tackle pay discrimination. Transparency is essential when we expect organisations to deliver a particular outcome. The Chartered Management Institute confirmed that 80% of managers surveyed agree on the need for mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting for large organisations.

Fifty years of sustained effort to deliver gender pay equality demonstrate the importance of transparency. The Equal Pay Act 1970 decreed that men and women in the same employment, doing equal work, must receive the same pay. In 1993, the Pay Equity Project highlighted that women's earnings remained significantly lower than those of male colleagues, due to factors such as undervaluing occupations with a largely female workforce and the effects of women's generally greater caring responsibilities. Those factors were reinforced by institutionalised discrimination, such as by Glasgow City Council, which, after a decade-long battle by women workers and a change in administration, paid out more than half a billion pounds in compensation.

Even if direct discrimination is addressed, other factors will drive the ethnicity pay gap, and those can only be properly understood if the data is captured and analysed. The Office for National Statistics recently reported that in some circumstances, among recently recruited full-time employees, women might now be paid more than men. However, across the whole workforce and the employment cycle, women's earnings remain below those of male counterparts. We have some way to go.

Despite that, the forces of reaction pounced. Bright Blue, which is backed by the new Secretary of State for what used to be the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—I am not sure of the Department's new name—and others, says that the policy job on gender pay is done and we should now leave it to business. However, as with other things said by supporters of this Government, that is far from the case. The call for inaction in the face of continued inequality is all too predictable. In fact, the lesson to learn from half a century of pursuing gender pay equality is how enduring entrenched inequality can be.

We can also see the variety of tools and arguments deployed by those who defend the status quo or, as with this Government, wish to drag us back to an earlier age. I was disappointed, although not surprised, to see the findings on ethnicity pay reporting from the Cabinet Office's hand-picked Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. The commission hid behind data complexity to make recommendations only for organisations that choose to publish figures—"If you think you are doing well, then tell us. If you are doing badly, you can keep that quiet." The Government have seized on those findings, which stand in stark contrast to the meticulous work and recommendations of Lady McGregor-Smith, one of the few women of colour to head a FTSE 100 company, who got it bang on when she said:

"Until we know where we stand and how we are performing today, it is impossible to define and deliver real progress."

She has been backed by Peter Cheese, the chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, who said:

“We know that gender pay gap reporting has driven greater transparency and accelerated progress, and we believe the same is needed for ethnicity pay reporting.”

That is why the Government’s delay on this issue—including their failure to publish the responses to their 2019 consultation—is so disappointing.

The combination of Brexit and the pandemic has massively disrupted the world of work and there is more to come, including a likely spate of redundancies when furlough ends. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that ethnicity has been a major factor in the adverse economic impact of the pandemic. Unless we act now, it may also be a hidden factor in the distribution of reward during the recovery and beyond.

We already know that many on the frontline during the pandemic were among the lowest paid. Ministers have banded the word “hero” about a lot, at the same time as presiding over the creation of a multi-tiered employment market where many more people stand to lose their status and rights as employees and be treated as freelancers choosing to work fewer hours. Others are simply under-employed and at the beck and call of zero-hours paymasters.

That multi-tiered workers’ rights policy is being used to argue that the labour market is too complex for ethnicity pay gap reporting to be effective—how convenient. Of course, if the Government brought forward their persistently delayed employment Bill, they could sweep away some of these anomalies and return to workers the rights enjoyed by previous generations. They will not, of course, because in addition to returning us to imperial measurements, Ministers want to see the rights of workers across large swathes of the economy revert to the 19th century. Instead of standing in line waiting to be picked for a day’s work, workers now anxiously wait for an email or text to say whether they have a shift.

Even before the pandemic, the CBI, the TUC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission were calling for ethnicity pay gap reporting to help us better understand and address pay inequality. Even the Investment Association recognises the benefits of mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting as a means of helping businesses to demonstrate that they are generating sustainable long-term value. It also identifies lack of transparency as a barrier to change, highlighting that only 27% of FTSE 100 companies publish even the ethnic diversity of their board. That reinforces Lady McGregor-Smith’s comments on the lack of information from FTSE 100 companies available to her inquiry, and really it should end any pretence that significant progress can be made on a voluntary basis.

If we are to tackle the ethnicity pay gap, we need to do so from the root cause of much of the gap, which is continued discrimination. The UK Government need to take a leaf from the books of: Zara Mohammed, the general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, who has a laser-like focus on employment inequality; or the team led by Peter Hopkins of Newcastle University, who examined the experiences and perceptions of young Muslims in Scotland, some from my constituency—most young people from black and minority ethnic communities are proud of their Scottish identity, but that report left no doubt about the extra challenges they face, including in the workplace—or perhaps the Young Women Lead

committee, supported by the Scottish Parliament, which examined the transition from education to employment of young ethnic minority women. Those are some of the voices that we need to hear on the issue.

We also need to see action. The difficulty, however, is that many of the powers to act on the issue are held not in Scotland, but here in Westminster. The Scottish Government are doing what they can to provide leadership, in stark contrast to the inaction of the UK Government. The Scottish Government will extend the requirement for Scotland’s public authorities to publish gender pay gap information to include disability and ethnicity reporting, and will ensure that the equal pay statement covers those issues. They are also developing an ethnicity pay gap strategy, supporting employers in Scotland to evidence how different communities are represented in an organisation across different pay bands. They will soon launch an immediate priorities plan setting out actions to tackle structural disadvantages faced by BAME communities, to act as a foundation for a long-term anti-racism programme.

Those are welcome actions, but I will draw to a close by repeating the words of Lady McGregor-Smith:

“Until we know where we stand and how we are performing today, it is impossible to define and deliver real progress.”

That is why we need the UK Government to step up to the plate, to deliver mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting and to do so with the maximum possible coverage. Either that or they should get out of the way and pass the powers to the Scottish Government and let them make progress on delivering the fairer Scotland that we know is possible.

5.3 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie. I thank the Petitions Committee for making the time for this important debate, and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for introducing it. I also thank the organisers of the petition. As the hon. Gentleman said, 130,000 people signed it, including 470 from my constituency.

I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) talked about structural racism and its impact on society. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) talked about how reporting will not really happen unless it is made mandatory, and about her work on the Select Committee on how BAME individuals have been affected during the pandemic. That work shows issues of inequality. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about the effectiveness of mandatory reporting and gender pay gap reporting, and about how that has made a significant difference.

The past 18 months have brought a welcome focus on issues of race and ethnicity in this country and around the world, which is something I am particularly passionate about. In the context of the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter protests, we saw the petition take off. I mention that because ethnicity pay disparities do not exist in isolation; they exist within broader structures of racism that affect black and Asian minority people in every part of their lives. I have experienced it myself.

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

I have previously called for the Government to implement a race equality strategy and an action plan covering areas such as education, health and employment. I feel that would address the structural inequalities that exist. At the centre of that, I believe there must be action to tackle discrimination in the workplace, unequal access to training, finance and opportunities, and the ethnicity pay gap, which brings me specifically to this petition.

The petition calls for the introduction of mandatory ethnicity gap pay reporting. As the Minister will know, this is not a new suggestion or a new demand; people have been calling for it for some time. Can the Minister outline the Government's proposals to address the suggestion? As the hon. Member for Bath said, the 2018 McGregor-Smith review into race in the workplace said:

"The Government must...legislate to make larger businesses publish their ethnicity data by salary band to show progress."

We all know that the Government launched a consultation on this issue, which ran from October 2018 to January 2019. I am extremely concerned that we are yet to see anything published about that consultation some two years later. Can the Minister tell us what message that sends to black and ethnic minority people in this country? To me, it comes across that the Government do not particularly care about these individuals, because the consultation has been done and nothing has materialised from it.

I want to talk about issues with mandatory reporting that have been identified and how they can be overcome, but the delay is not about the practicalities of introducing mandatory reporting. Instead, the Government have gone cold on the idea. Despite the prolonged delay, this issue will not simply go away. We cannot settle for voluntary reporting. I hope that the Minister hears loud and clear that voluntary reporting is totally inadequate, and I will tell him why.

Just this week it was reported that only 13 of the largest 100 employers in this country have published their ethnicity pay gaps. As the hon. Member for Bath mentioned, this situation is similar to what happened before mandatory gender pay gap reporting was introduced in 2017. Prior to it becoming mandatory, a voluntary initiative led to only six companies publishing gender pay gap data, yet consultation shows that employers were generally supportive of mandatory reporting because it meant that all organisations would have to use consistent methods and be able to benchmark against each other. In this case too, only mandatory ethnicity pay reporting will deliver meaningful data from a wide range of businesses. This echoes conversations mentioned by hon. Members about the fact that we need to get the data.

A lot of businesses back mandatory reporting and conversations have been had. The CBI has joined the TUC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission in calling on the Government to go beyond the recommendations of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities and bring in mandatory reporting without delay.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that, without mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting, we do not truly know the full scale of the problem. At the moment people say the gap is about

2.3%, but when we look at individual ethnic groups we see there is a gap of 16% for Pakistani groups and 8% for black groups. Does she agree that until this is made mandatory not only will we not know the scale of the problem, but companies will not take steps forward to address these inequalities?

Abena Oppong-Asare: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Unless we get mandatory reporting, we will not know the full scale of this issue. That is shown by the fact that very few organisations, given the opportunity to do the reporting voluntarily, have taken it up. That leads me to something that I will discuss later—the stats that have been collated, which are quite alarming. We need to make reporting mandatory in order to be able to address the issues that are there—the inequalities that exist.

I want to address the report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which called only for voluntary reporting, and some of the practical issues that the Government have highlighted. The commission stated that

"many employers around the country simply do not have enough ethnic minorities for the recording sample to be valid."

That is something I have heard in this debate, but leading experts in this field—including the Chartered Management Institute and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development—have set out practical ways to overcome it. Other concerns, such as the legal basis for collecting ethnicity information or low declaration rates, can simply be overcome with clear guidance from Government. Those practical issues are what the Government have been working on over the past two years, so the information is there for us to be able to do this, rather than kicking the issue into the long grass.

I want to end by saying something about why ethnicity pay gap reporting is so important. We know that, at national level, significant disparities exist between people of different ethnicities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) mentioned. In 2019, the Office for National Statistics found that median hourly pay was £12.49 for white people, £11.50 for black people and just £10.55 for people of Pakistani origin. The ONS study also found that people of Chinese origin earned on average £15.38 an hour and people of Indian origin earned £14.43. That really should lead us to caution against making sweeping statements about ethnic minorities as a whole, but there is clear evidence that people's race and ethnic background determines how much they earn, and I have seen that at first hand. Sadly, for many people, the colour of their skin, along with their gender and class, determine the opportunities that are open to them. That is something that we really need to change.

I wanted to mention the interaction between race and other characteristics such as gender. A report was done recently by the Fawcett Society, which found that ethnic-minority women are

"almost invisible from positions of power across both public and private sectors"

in the UK. We see that around us. We know that a range of connected factors determine pay disparities. They include age, location and, of course, gender and race. It is for precisely that reason that we need to build up more data on those disparities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham mentioned. Company-specific

reporting is important, because it obliges employers to examine their data and to work out why disparities might exist. It does not assume that discrimination takes place, but rather provides information so that employers can make informed decisions to improve recruitment, promotion and pay policies. Without it, we will not be able to see what progress has already been made and where there is more to do.

Let me conclude. To fight discrimination, we must first see it and understand it. The Government have dragged their feet on this issue for far too long. The consensus for mandatory ethnicity pay-gap reporting is broad and the arguments for it are compelling, so I would be grateful if, when the Minister responds to the debate, he would tell us what the Government will do to bring forward legislation to implement this vital measure.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and the Petitions Committee on securing this debate on a really important issue. I am sure that we can all agree that it has been an interesting and informative debate, and I am really grateful to everyone who has contributed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington did an excellent job of opening the debate, as one would expect of him and of a member of the Petitions Committee. As you may know, Mr Hosie, I served on the Petitions Committee for a number of years, and I know from personal experience how important and valuable its work is. My hon. Friend set the scene in a very balanced and comprehensive way and demonstrated the complexity of the issue, showing that it is not simply a binary one. There are a lot of concerns and possible unintended consequences, which I will explore in a second, and we need to put those into the mix in order to make sure we get our consideration of this subject right.

Petitions are a great way to ensure that we do not overlook issues, and that we in Parliament, in Government, and in my Department consider the matters that are of most concern to the people we represent. Today's debate is no exception to that: the petition was signed by over 130,000 people, including 322 people in my own constituency of Sutton and Cheam, which is testament to the interest there is in ethnicity pay reporting as a means of achieving a fair workplace. I understand that the petitioner, who is here today, the many people who signed the petition, and the MPs who spoke today and others are really concerned that the Government have yet to publish their response to the 2019 consultation on mandatory ethnicity pay reporting. Clearly, the past 18 months have not been what any of us were expecting, but I want quickly to set out the journey we are on in regard to ethnicity pay reporting, giving some background and explaining some of the issues we are juggling as we consider how best to take things forward.

First, I should make it absolutely clear that the Government are committed to building back better from the pandemic, and building back fairer in doing so. People from all backgrounds must have the opportunity to achieve their potential, and a key part of building a fairer economy is ensuring that our businesses and

other organisations reflect the nation's diversity from factory floor to boardroom. That is essential to our levelling-up ambitions.

We know that we face challenges in ensuring equal access and fair representation for people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the workplace, and that we need to do so much better. Although they are improving, employment rates for ethnic minorities continue to be lower than they are for white people. The evidence also shows that once in work, people from ethnic minorities progress less and earn less money than their white counterparts, but the picture is complex, and outcomes vary substantially between ethnicities and by gender within ethnic groups. For instance, over two in five Pakistani or Bangladeshi workers are in the three lowest-skilled occupations, but Indian people are the most likely of any ethnic group to work in the highest-skilled occupations and have the highest average hourly pay.

I said that I would set out the journey that we are on. In 2016, as has been mentioned, the Government asked Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith to examine the barriers faced by people from ethnic minorities in the workplace, and to consider what we might do to address them. One of her recommendations was that the Government should legislate for mandatory reporting and ethnicity pay data by £20,000 pay band. The Government's response said that they were persuaded by the case for reporting. Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith's report highlighted the fact that equal participation and progression across ethnicities could be worth an additional £24 billion to the UK economy annually, but that we expected businesses to take the lead in reporting voluntarily.

In 2018, the Government commissioned a "one year on" report, which showed that, disappointingly, limited progress had been made. Just 11% of employees reported that their organisations collected data on ethnicity pay. Given that fact, we consulted on mandatory pay reporting in the same year. That consultation sought views on the benefits of monitoring and publishing ethnicity data; what might be reported; and what contextual information should be provided, such as narrative, action plans and ethnicity data classifications. The responses to that consultation raised a series of issues, showing that establishing a standard ethnicity pay reporting framework would be considerably more challenging than was the case even for gender pay gap reporting. There are genuine difficulties in designing a methodology that provides accurate figures and allows for interpretation and meaningful action by employers, employees and the wider public.

To give Members one example, we would expect the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to be leading from the front when it comes to all things relating to workers' rights in business. The Government website talks about civil service pay and says that

"of civil servants whose ethnicity was known, Asian and White staff had the lowest average annual pay (£27,200), followed by Black staff (£28,400), staff with Chinese ethnicity (£29,500), and staff from the Mixed ethnic group (£29,600), with staff from the Other ethnic group having the highest (£30,000)".

The problem is that the average median annual pay for all of the civil service was £27,100—£100 lower.

Anyone with a basic grasp of statistics would say, "It's not possible to have every ethnic group that is recorded above the average median pay for the entire civil service". That is because 22% of the civil service

[Paul Scully]

did not identify, which is clearly skewing the figures. That is just one of the anomalies, or unintended consequences. It is not something that we cannot get around, but it is illustrative of how statistics can be misread and a problem misdiagnosed.

Caroline Nokes: It is interesting to note that Zurich commented that 87% of its workforce had identified which ethnicity they were from, so why is BEIS doing so much worse than a private sector company?

Paul Scully: This is the civil service as a whole. What I am saying to my right hon. Friend is that the figures are clearly skewed by that 22%. We want to get accurate reporting, but everybody, according to this, is above the average median pay. That cannot be the case; that is not possible. If the figures have been skewed, we cannot diagnose the problem from them, so we must work through those figures and work through a methodology, so that we can ensure that we have robust figures.

Kirsten Oswald: I am interested in what the Minister is saying. Can he clarify something: are the Government working through that methodology? What specifically are they doing, and when do they expect to have a system in place that does take account of the complexity that we all acknowledge but which absolutely must not get in the way of our making progress?

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for letting me progress with my speech, because that is exactly the point that I was coming to.

We have continued to work with businesses and other organisations better to understand the complexities identified through the consultation. More recently, we have been working with the Business in the Community app and race at work charter members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) spoke about people and businesses crying out for reporting. The number of charter members is currently 700, which is up from 300 this time last year, so there is clearly a big push of people signing up to the charter. One of the points in the charter is to collect data on ethnicity and the ethnicity pay gap. This work has looked particularly at action planning and what participating organisations believe to be the key drivers of the ethnicity pay gap: culture and leadership; recruitment; retention; and progression.

In parallel, earlier this year, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published its report, setting out a road map to racial fairness in the UK, which made an important contribution both to the national conversation about race and to the Government's efforts to level up and unite the whole country. In the report, the commission pointed to the statistical and data issues that could affect ethnicity pay reporting and suggested a voluntary approach. It made a further recommendation:

“The Commission recommends that all employers that choose to publish their ethnicity pay figures should also publish a diagnosis and action plan to lay out the reasons for and the strategy to improve any disparities. Reported ethnicity pay data should also be disaggregated by different ethnicities to provide the best information possible to facilitate change. Account should also be taken of small sample sizes in particular regions and smaller organisations.

To support employers undertaking this exercise, the Commission recommends that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) is tasked with producing guidance for employers to draw on.”

Abena Opong-Asare: The information that the Minister has provided is very helpful, particularly on the work that Business in the Community has done and also his quoting the report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. I would be grateful if he clarified exactly what the Government have done since they conducted the survey and consultation in October 2018. I have heard what organisations have been working on, which is fantastic, but I would really like to hear what the Government have been working on to address this issue.

Paul Scully: The Government are clearly working towards this and I will continue developing that journey in my speech. What we want to do is to make sure that we are delivering on something that is possible. What I do not want to do is what the Leader of the Opposition did last week, by talking about setting a £10 minimum wage, then this week advertising for stewards for the Labour party conference and paying £9.75 an hour. Politics is the art of the possible. We must ensure we get this right and that we diagnose and solve the problem correctly.

Abena Opong-Asare: I am still not clear what the Government have done since October 2018. I would be grateful if the Minister would clarify and set out what the Government have done since then to address this issue.

Paul Scully: As I said at the beginning of my response, I am developing that journey covering the last two years' worth of work if the hon. Lady will remain patient. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) talked about racism, and clearly we need to ensure that we tackle racism in all its forms. However, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities found that most of the disparities when tackling ethnicity pay do not have their origins in racism. There are other factors that may be at play, such as geography, class, sex and age. However, whatever the cause of the pay gap, it is essential that we get organisations to tackle this.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The Minister said the issue is not about racism. He also conceded that the data that has been received is not very clear, because a number of different groups are not actually reporting. How can he be so sure that the issue is not racism when the small amount of data he does have shows there is a difference between the pay of ethnic people and their white counterparts?

Paul Scully: I think the hon. Lady is mixing up two things, because the data I talked about was specific to the civil service. It was specifically to make the point that we can read different things out of statistics. What I was quoting about racism is not my view necessarily; it is the view of the report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which was tasked with looking at this and other issues. We are committed to taking action on ethnicity pay reporting, but we want to ensure we are doing the right things to genuinely help move

things forward. Determining what it makes sense to report on and what use that data may be put to is key. It is far from straightforward.

The commission's report and our post-consultation work with businesses and other organisations identify a wide range of technical and data challenges that ethnicity pay reporting brings. First, there is the challenge of statistical robustness. In 2019, the Royal Statistical Society argued for a minimum sample size per category of at least 100 to draw valid conclusions. Its purpose was to ensure that the calculation of a pay-gap statistic would be reasonably reliable when interpreted by non-statisticians, who would not likely be able to appreciate or measure the extent to which the statistic is affected by random chance.

The second challenge, as we have heard by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington, is anonymity. It should never be possible to identify any individual from ethnicity pay-gap analysis. That means a sample size must be large enough so that it is not possible to link a number of individuals of the same ethnicity to a particular pay band. The third challenge is data collection and business burdens. A study of more than 100 organisations by PwC in August 2020 found that almost 35% did not collect any ethnicity data, with half identifying legal and GDPR requirements as barriers to collecting the data. Among the organisations that did collect data, around half said they would be unable to publish their ethnicity pay data due to poor or insufficient data driven by low response rates.

Fourthly, there is reporting on a binary basis. One way to mitigate low employee declaration rates is to combine all individuals from an ethnic minority background into a single group for reporting purposes. However, such an approach risks masking the significant variations in labour market outcomes between groups and therefore the relevance of any action plan. Finally, there is the challenge of skewed results. Reporting at a more granular level risks results being skewed by particularly large or small pay values because of low numbers of particular ethnic groups. If an employer with 300 people employs black individuals in the same proportion as the wider population—3% of England and Wales' working population is black according to the Office for National Statistics—then their average pay would be calculated from just 9 individuals, and that assumes 100% declaration rates.

The uneven geographical distribution of specific ethnic groups complicates the issues further. In Wales, only 0.7% of the working-age population is black. It is therefore much harder to produce reliable and actionable statistics from relatively few data points. All this create

complex challenges when deciding how best to take forward ethnicity pay reporting, but the Government are determined to take steps to help employers tackle race and ethnic disparities in the workplace. I think we would all agree that key to this endeavour is obtaining a good understanding of the issues that may be driving the disparities and, most importantly, developing meaningful action plans, based on that understanding. The Ruby McGregor-Smith report, the Government's consultation on ethnicity pay reporting, and the commission's work all make an important contribution to both the national conversation about race and the Government's efforts to level up and unite the whole country.

The Government are now considering in detail what we have learned from the consultation on ethnicity and pay, our further work and the commission's report. We are assessing the next steps for future Government policy, and we will set out a response in due course. Once again, I thank hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. It has been a valuable discussion.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I call Elliott Colburn for a brief winding-up speech.

5.30 pm

Elliott Colburn: I think I have half an hour, Mr Hosie, but you will be relieved to know that I will not take it all.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): I will be the judge of that.

Elliott Colburn: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this Petitions Committee debate, and I thank the petitioners for allowing us the opportunity to discuss this important topic this afternoon. The key theme in a lot of Members' contributions was the importance of getting good data and creating evidence-based policy as a result, which is absolutely what we want to see. Of course, skin colour should not be a predeterminate of pay, and that is what we all want to see tackled in this country. I look forward to hearing more from the Department about the response to the consultation and the next steps, as I am sure the petitioners do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 300105, relating to ethnicity pay gap reporting.

5.32 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Vaccinations

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: e-petition 586017, Do not vaccinate children against COVID-19 until Phase 3 trials are complete, e-petition 587380, Reform the VDPA 1979 to improve support for those harmed by covid-19 vaccines, and e-petition 593410, Do not make Covid-19 vaccination a requirement to physically attend university.]

6 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Before we begin, I encourage Members to wear masks when not speaking, in 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 entering and leaving the room.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 575801 and 577842, relating to Covid-19 vaccination.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I am glad that we have another opportunity to discuss vaccinations in this House. I thank the NHS, pharmacists and volunteers in Carshalton and Wallington, and across the UK, for making our vaccination programme such a huge success. I particularly thank Reena from SG Barai Pharmacy in Carshalton and Wallington for administering my covid-19 vaccinations.

I welcome the Minister to her place; I believe this is the first debate she is responding to as Minister. I have always found her to be nothing but courteous and friendly, so I wish her all the very best in her new role.

I draw the House's attention to the Government's responses to the petitions, which set out clearly that they are thinking carefully about such matters as certification and vaccine status, and are considering all issues prior to making a decision. I am sure the Minister will want to elaborate on them in her response to the debate, so I will not steal all her material. This debate gives us the opportunity to discuss vaccinations once again, so I want to use it to urge everyone to book their slot for vaccinations as soon as they possibly can. I particularly welcome the news today that we are beginning our booster jabs programme, which I am sure the Minister will want to touch on.

Covid has not gone away. Although we are unlocking and rediscovering many of the freedoms that we have sacrificed over the past 18 months, people are still being hospitalised and dying from coronavirus. The data speaks for itself: the majority of those hospitalised and dying from covid-19 have not been fully vaccinated. It is clear that by getting vaccinated, we are protecting not only ourselves but others, and are playing our part in bringing an end to this pandemic.

Vaccines truly are a marvel of modern medicine. We can be proud that they were discovered by a Brit, Edward Jenner, who demonstrated that a mild infection with a cowpox virus conferred immunity against the deadly smallpox virus. Cowpox served as the natural vaccine for smallpox until more modern vaccines were brought out in the 19th century, which laid the groundwork for the system of vaccinations that we know today. Smallpox remains the only virus considered to be eradicated internationally since 1980.

Since Jenner's discovery of vaccines as we know them today, vaccines have been developed and have helped to offer immunity to a whole range of virus, such as measles, mumps, rubella, influenza, tetanus, polio, diphtheria, yellow fever, rabies, hepatitis, poliomyelitis, meningitis, and so many more. It is easy, therefore, to take vaccines for granted, but I invite the House to consider how much of an impact they have had on the world. Those illnesses would once have struck dread, fear and anguish into the hearts of the patients who were diagnosed with them, yet today our lives are quietly unaffected by those horrors. We go about our day unworried by them, thanks to the seemingly simple concept of a jab that is over in a matter of seconds, which allows us to carry on our lives, protected and healthy.

These miraculous vaccines must pass extremely rigorous testing before they are licensed for use in the United Kingdom. According to the Oxford Vaccine Group, the following are just some of the stages that a vaccine has to go through before use: a literature review to look at what has been done before; a theoretical development or innovation, coming up with a new idea or varying an existing one; and laboratory testing and development, involving in vitro testing using individual cells and in vivo testing, which often uses mice. A vaccine must then go through three stages of human trials before licensing and reviews, and then continue to be monitored after their approval for wider use to take note of any new developments.

Covid 19 vaccines have been no different. They have had to meet the same testing criteria. Yes, there have been questions about speed, but Dr June Raine, chief executive of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, has explained perfectly clearly how the UK has been particularly able to approve this vaccine so quickly. So my message to anyone who still has apprehensions about getting their covid-19 vaccine is this: please, please speak to your GP or pharmacist to get the facts. That is an important point: speak to the professionals with the years of knowledge and training.

We have all had a bit of a laugh over the past week and a half about Nicki Minaj and swollen testicles—something that I never thought I would say in the House of Commons—but that story raises a very serious issue. Rates of vaccination drop as we go down the age groups, and it is important that the Government find ways to reach younger people and encourage them to protect not only themselves, but others around them, by getting the vaccine. That is especially the case when they are being fed misinformation, downright lies, and mad conspiracy theories by people with hidden agendas who are in the pockets of well-funded and well-organised anti-vax movements. I agree with Professor Chris Whitty that those people are preventing others from getting their potentially life-saving vaccine, and they should be utterly ashamed of themselves. My message today is to urge everyone to speak to their doctor and get themselves vaccinated in order to protect themselves and those around them, and help to bring an end to this awful pandemic.

6.6 pm

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I begin by commending all those across the four nations who have signed these two petitions: by signing, they

have made their voice heard and are participating directly in democracy. E-petition 577842, entitled “Do not require health and social care workers to take covid-19 vaccination”, has been signed by 59 individuals in my constituency, and e-petition 575801, entitled “Outlaw discrimination against those who do not get a Covid-19 vaccination”, has been signed by 275 individuals in my constituency.

I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for opening the debate. I join him in thanking the NHS, including those across my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts who have been involved in the vaccine roll-out, not just those administering the jab but those in the background who are working equally hard. I also take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) on her recent appointment as Vaccines Minister. There will no doubt be matters on which we disagree, but I extend a warm hand to her in that role.

Evidence clearly shows that the vaccination programme has gone well across the four nations of the UK. Scientists and many politicians from across the political spectrum are in agreement that a strong vaccination programme is the safest way out of the pandemic. Around the UK, on average, 80% of those eligible have been double vaccinated, and 90% have received their first vaccination. Recent statistics demonstrate that the vaccine has had a significant impact on driving down death rates: only 1.2% of deaths in England from covid between January and July were among those who were fully vaccinated. Now, the general plan to save lives and avoid disruption includes vaccination of those aged 12 to 15, alongside the plan for booster jags for people over 50 and NHS staff—because I am Scottish, I say “jag”, not “jab”, in case any Members were confused. However, there remain a million people over the age of 60 in the UK who are not double vaccinated. The number of vaccinated must be increased to minimise further deaths and hospitalisations from coronavirus.

The vaccines used in the UK have been extensively studied and have been proven safe for use. Over 2 billion people around the world have now been vaccinated against covid-19, and the evidence shows us that the benefits of vaccination significantly outweigh the potential risks. It is therefore time to encourage the remainder of the population, who have not yet been vaccinated, to get the jag.

We in the SNP have a position of not voting on issues that do not relate to Scotland. As such, the SNP did not participate in the vote on regulations relating to mandatory vaccinations for English care staff. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) spoke in the debate on behalf of our party. She spoke against mandatory vaccination in that debate and highlighted the impact of vaccine hesitancy. She also highlighted that Scotland has a higher rate of vaccination among care home staff, without the need for mandating vaccination.

Vaccine uptake is vital. The Scottish Government believe in encouraging uptake by informing people about the medical facts and explaining the advantages that vaccination offers them and their loved ones. Requiring the mandatory vaccination of care home workers will not support the vaccine rollout, but it could undermine it. That is why the SNP spoke out against the proposals and supports an informed vaccine roll-out.

The Scottish Government are aware of the ethical concerns around vaccine passports, but accept that they are likely to play a role in keeping the pandemic under control. Scotland’s vaccine passport will be required in nightclubs, live events—with more than 500 attendees unseated indoors or more than 4,000 unseated outdoors—and at any event with more than 10,000 people. The Welsh Government have announced a near-identical plan beginning mid-October. The UK Government have shelved their plans for vaccine passports—for now, but who knows what they will say tomorrow? The Northern Irish Executive have said that they have no plans to implement a similar scheme. The latest estimate for unvaccinated 18 to 29-year-olds in Scotland stands at 25.6%. It is hoped that such schemes will encourage youth uptake of the vaccine.

Proof of vaccination will be important in the post-pandemic world to facilitate travel and tourism, which is of course vital to our economy. It has been used by many countries for various vaccine-preventable diseases for decades. As someone from a Pakistani heritage, I remember being dragged to the doctors to get my vaccines in order to visit my grandparents. Growing up, I was very frightful of vaccines, but I persevered and went with it so I could visit them. This is not something new.

It is important to note that the proposals in Scotland and Wales both fall short of the requirements in place in European countries such as France or Italy, which require the EU green pass or equivalent for trains, cultural attractions, or any indoor hospitality settings. Italy is now even requiring proof of vaccination in the workplace.

Both Labour and the Tories opposed vaccine passports in Scotland, allegedly on the grounds of how it is being implemented, rather than as a principled position against the proposal. The Lib Dems in Scotland have opposed vaccine passports throughout the UK. It is important to say that the Scottish Government have no plans to introduce the requirements for public settings that people need to visit, such as shops or public transport. Individuals will continue to have the right to work, shop and meet people without vaccination.

I conclude by stating an important point, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington in his opening remarks: people have the right to refuse vaccination—yes—but they do not have the right to spread dangerous misinformation. Violence and intimidation are not acceptable. I highlight the case of Marianna Spring, who covers disinformation and social media for the BBC. At the weekend, she shared online a video in which it appears that an anti-vaxxer protestor is calling for her to be tried for war crimes. Marianna explains that she has received death threats and rape threats.

As elected Members, tackling misinformation is a responsibility for all of us. I welcome any advice that the Minister can provide to ensure that people have the full facts and are making an informed decision when deciding to take the jab.

6.15 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, and I welcome the Minister to her position in Government and here today. One of the welcome innovations of

[Jack Dromey]

parliamentary democracy in recent years has been the notion that the public can trigger debates by way of e-petitions, and we are here to debate two e-petitions that commanded significant public support.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) was absolutely right to talk about the development of the vaccines as a remarkable triumph of British science, and all those who have been involved deserve huge credit—not least because the consequence has been to save the lives of tens of thousands of people who would have otherwise have died. We in the Labour party are committed to following the science and, as has been said eloquently, we can see that vaccination is having a dramatic impact, reducing hospitalisation and preventing people from becoming very ill with covid. As the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed) rightly said, it is absolutely vital that everyone who can get the vaccines should do so. We therefore need to send an unmistakable and united message from Parliament: by keeping uptake rates high, we can beat the virus. Anyone who is worried about the vaccine—there are many—should speak to health professionals about their concerns and receive proper advice. They should not be influenced by anti-vaxxer fantasists, whose advice is not just wrong, but dangerous to health and wellbeing.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I agree with the point that my hon. Friend is making. I was talking to a 14-year-old over the weekend, and she said that she had seen on the internet a magnet that was attracted to somebody's arm because they had been vaccinated. Does my hon. Friend agree that the internet companies and the Government should get such nonsense taken down as soon as they can?

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Some of the propaganda that we have seen, including on the internet, is positively pernicious. If anyone is seduced into believing it and, as a consequence, catches covid and dies because they are not vaccinated, those responsible bear should bear a heavy burden for what they are doing. Everyone with power, including the internet companies, needs to be more proactive and dynamic in ensuring that shameful propaganda is not propagated on social media.

Over the past year, we have seen the tragic impact of coronavirus on our communities. I stress once again that it is absolutely vital that the importance of taking the vaccine is constantly emphasised. I think of Jane Roche in my constituency, who lost her father and, five days later, her sister to covid. Jane remains distraught to this day, one year on. People such as Jane know all too well just how important it is that vaccine uptake remains high, so that no one should suffer the grief that she has suffered. Like other hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, I therefore strongly encourage everyone to get vaccinated for their own protection, but also for that of the wider community.

The Labour party calls on the Government to make a more direct effort to vaccinate those from communities in which vaccination rates are low, particularly young people. I hope that in her response, the Minister will be able to update us on the Government's efforts to tackle the problems of low uptake.

On vaccine passports, in relation to the petitions before us, we understand why the public might be confused or anxious about perceived discrimination against those that are not vaccinated. I have to say that the Government's approach to covid passports has been chaotic at times. There has not been consistent clarity from Ministers about what vaccine passports are supposed to achieve, how they would work and what would be expected from the public, businesses and workers, and that meant we had a degree of chaos over the summer and no real preparation before the winter. Two weeks ago, the then vaccines Minister, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), stood before Parliament to confirm the introduction of covid passports and stress their importance; days later, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that they had been scrapped. No matter the measures being introduced, businesses, workers and consumers need clarity from the Government, not conflicting messages and rapid U-turns. We have therefore repeated many times that we would not accept any certification or passport scheme that was vaccine-only.

The Welsh Labour Government have made some interesting progress on this very issue. They followed the data and applied a mandatory risk assessment that takes into consideration the full risk posed, and then recommends a range of mitigations on that basis. For large venues, crowded events and close-contact businesses, such as nightclubs, the NHS covid pass application is mandated for use; that means using familiar mitigations such as masks, social distancing and ventilation in most business settings, based on the risk level. Use of the NHS covid pass gives people the option to present a negative test result as an alternative to full vaccination.

We do not support the introduction of any scheme that provides access to a service for only fully vaccinated people. Free testing should therefore remain widely available so that we can identify and isolate the virus. The approach in Wales has been welcome in other respects, as it makes a clear distinction between venues such as local cafés on one hand and Wembley stadium on the other, where different mitigations for covid are needed.

We also do not support any potential covid pass scheme for access to essential services that does not get the balance right. That includes, but is not limited to, access to doctors and dentists, supermarkets and other essential retailers. We do not agree that vaccine passports should be used for day-to-day, routine access to the office, health services, dentistry or food.

On health and social care workers, we want everyone working in care homes to take up the vaccine—that is absolutely essential. The vaccine is safe and effective. I stress again: do not believe the sometimes poisonous propaganda of the anti-vaxxers. However, we do not support the case for compulsory vaccination. There are serious warnings from the care sector that the Government's plan could lead to staff shortages in already understaffed care homes, which would have disastrous consequences for the quality of care.

Again, the UK Government should learn from the work done in Wales, which is running the fastest vaccination programme in the world, and has vaccinated a far greater proportion of its care staff than England. The Welsh Government have rejected compulsory vaccinations and have instead chosen to work closely with the care sector to drive up uptake, as well as valuing the workforce, including a proper pay rise. The Government should

focus on driving up standards and retention of staff by treating care workers as the professionals they are, with improved pay, terms and conditions and training. We need all care homes and care workers to have proper personal protective equipment, regular testing and good training.

We are now approaching what is likely to be one of the most challenging winters that the national health service has ever faced, and the top priority must be to protect it. We urgently need a plan from Government that sets out the direction of travel in the next stages. Any plan for the winter period must, first, get vaccination rates up in areas where uptake is low; secondly, outline how and by when vaccinations for children will be rolled out; thirdly, finally fix the issues of self-isolation and sick pay; fourthly, provide proper ventilation in schools and public buildings; and, fifthly, provide a clear plan for businesses, workers and consumers. Those are significant steps the Government could take to greatly improve the country's response to coronavirus. I hope that when the Minister responds, she will be able to outline in more detail the Government's plan to fix those problems.

Once again, as other hon. Members have done cross party, I emphasise the importance of vaccine take-up. Covid-19 vaccines have saved thousands of lives and been crucial in protecting the national health service. It is critical that we maintain the protection the vaccine affords and send a clear and unambiguous message to all that vaccines work, and that anyone who can, should receive the vaccine.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): I now call on Minister Maggie Throup to respond, and welcome her to the Front Bench; I wish her well.

6.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): Thank you, Ms Ghani.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for introducing this debate on these important topics, and I commend him for setting out the importance of vaccines in combating so many diseases. When we look at the history of vaccination programmes in previous eras, we realise just what impact they have had on people's lives.

We know that the covid vaccination programme is the nation's best line of defence against covid-19. Vaccinated people are far less likely to face severe disease from covid-19, to be admitted to hospital or to die from it. They are also less likely to pass the virus to others. More than 93 million covid-19 vaccinations have already been administered, and the latest estimates from Public Health England indicate that the programme has saved more than 112,300 lives and prevented more than 24 million cases.

As other hon. Members have done, I pay tribute to everyone who has played a crucial role in the success of the vaccine roll-out—our brilliant scientists, clinical trial participants, the armed forces, NHS England, frontline healthcare workers, vaccine volunteers and local and central Government. Their life-saving efforts have helped to maintain the rapid pace of the roll-out across the entire country. I also recognise the brilliant work of the former

Minister for vaccines, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). I know that I have very big shoes to fill.

The public's continued willingness to get vaccinated, to test, to self-isolate if they have symptoms and to follow behaviours and actions that mitigate all methods of transmission has played a key role in the lifting of restrictions. Over autumn and winter, the Government will aim to sustain the progress made and prepare the country for future challenges, while ensuring that the national health service does not come under unsustainable pressure.

In my first debate as Minister with responsibility for vaccines, I join the plea of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington and other hon. Members for those not yet vaccinated to take up their vaccine offer and join the around 89% of the UK who have had at least their first dose. I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking them for playing their part in helping us all to live safely.

We will continue to make vaccines easily available to everybody, to maximise uptake among those who are eligible but to date have not taken up the offer. In England, 11.3% of people ages 16 and older—more than 5.5 million people—remain unvaccinated, which heightens the risk of rising hospitalisations, particularly when prevalence is high. Take-up so far varies by ethnicity, age and deprivation, with some groups recording lower rates of vaccine uptake than others.

Building on lessons learned through phases 1 and 2 of the vaccine roll-out, the Government continue to work closely with the NHS to make it as easy as possible to get a vaccine, including through "Grab a Jab" in England, pop-up vaccine sites across the country and easy-to-use walk-in sites found on the NHS website. Pop-up sites include those at football stadiums and shopping centres, reaching out to the whole community. The Government have partnered with transport providers, such as Uber and FREE NOW to ensure access to vaccine sites is easier than ever before.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) asked how the Government have reached out to people who are hesitant to take part in the vaccination programme. Despite having been in post for only a matter of days, I reassure him that the Government and the NHS are working closely together to ensure that we reach out and get the extra 5.5 million jabs into the arms that need them, and fill the gap that is in the community. I reassure him that that is one of my key priorities in my role as vaccine Minister.

The last 18 months have shown that the pandemic can change course rapidly and unexpectedly. It remains hard to predict with certainty what will happen. There are a number of variables, including the levels of vaccination, the extent to which immunity wanes over time, how quickly and how widely social contact returns to pre-pandemic levels, which is partly to do with the return to schools and as offices reopen, and whether a new variant emerges that fundamentally changes the Government's assessment of the risk. That is why the autumn and winter plan sets out our plan B.

Vaccine status certification is part of the Government's plan B if the data suggests action is required to prevent unsustainable pressure on the NHS. For venues, certification could allow settings that have experienced long periods

[Maggie Throup]

of closure to remain open, compared to more stringent measures that may severely reduce capacity or cause them to close entirely. The autumn-winter plan committed to publishing further details shortly on the proposed certification regime that would be introduced as part of plan B.

In this scenario, certification would be introduced in a limited number of venues. Communal worship, wedding ceremonies, funerals and other commemorative events and protests would also not fall under the certification regime. Exemptions would continue to apply for those who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons, those on covid vaccine clinical trials and for under-18s.

The NHS covid pass would continue to certify individuals based on vaccination, testing or natural immunity status, with more than 200 events and venues already introducing voluntary certification and the NHS covid pass as a condition of entry.

Care home staff provide a critical role in supporting the health and wellbeing of some of the most clinically vulnerable to the effects of covid-19 in society, and have maintained their dedication and professionalism through highly challenging conditions. Since the start of the pandemic, the Government have committed over £6 billion to local authorities through non-ringfenced grants to tackle the impact of covid-19 on their services, including adult social care. We continue to be committed to supporting the social care sector.

To prevent individual susceptibility to covid-19, from 11 November it will be a condition of deployment for anyone working or volunteering in Care Quality Commission regulated care homes that provide accommodation for persons who require nursing and personal care to be fully vaccinated. Thanks to the incredible efforts of people across the sector, over 1.2 million social care workers in England have now been vaccinated. This is a fantastic achievement and an important step for staff to protect themselves, their loved ones and the people they care for from becoming seriously ill or dying from covid-19.

Graham Stringer: Can the Minister answer the question that her predecessor failed to answer on the Floor of the House on Second Reading of the Bill? Everybody agrees that it would be a good idea if all care workers were vaccinated, but why will it be effective to force reluctant care workers to either have it or lose their employment, when other people entering care homes—hairdressers, musicians and entertainers and such—would not be forced to? How is that an effective policy?

Maggie Throup: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the question. If he will excuse me, I have obviously been in post a short time. As I am led to believe, it is people who regularly go into care homes that will need this. It is not just restricted to the actual carers. If anybody needs to go into a care home in an emergency situation, that is a different scenario. If I may, however, I will clarify that after the debate.

Vaccine uptake nationally in the care home workforce is high, at 85.6% for first doses. This is in line with vaccine uptake in the general population. There is, however, significant variation at a regional, local and individual care home level. Vaccine requirements are designed to level up uptake in the care home workforce. While the majority of care home workers have been vaccinated, the latest published data as of 12 September highlighted that only 81.3% of older adult care homes in England were meeting the SAGE advice that 80% uptake of first doses among staff is the minimum needed to reduce the risk of outbreaks in these high-risk care settings.

While residents in care homes are some of the most at risk from covid-19, the responses to this initial consultation on care homes made a clear case for extending this policy to other settings where vulnerable people receive care and treatments. The Government are therefore seeking views on whether to extend vaccination requirements to other frontline health and care workers—those with face-to-face contact with patients and clients through the delivery of services, as part of a CQC regulated activity. Recent research has shown that people infected with both flu and covid-19 are more than twice as likely to die as someone with covid-19 alone and nearly six times more likely than those with neither flu nor covid-19, so vaccination requirements for both flu and covid-19 are being considered.

I trust that the debate will have helped to dispel some of the myths that hon. Members have raised about vaccinations, and will really reach out to the public to ask them, as colleagues have done, to go and get vaccinated to protect themselves and others. To conclude, I reassure the House that we are doing everything we can to widen and deepen our wall of defence that the vaccine provides. The ask of our NHS colleagues is challenging and complex, yet they have risen to this challenge and do it every day. Once again, I thank them for their dedication.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister, and well done on your first time speaking from the Front Bench.

6.38 pm

Elliot Colburn: I thank the petitioners, especially those in Carshalton and Wallington, for allowing us to have this discussion about vaccinations. I thank all Members for coming along to participate. I know that the Government are considering certification and vaccination status carefully before making their decisions, and we have heard some of the concerns about those expressed eloquently today, but I would like to end by repeating the message that all of us have sent out today—for people to please get vaccinated to protect themselves and others.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 575801 and 577842, relating to Covid-19 vaccination.

6.39 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 20 September 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Draft Revised Energy National Policy Statements

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): Today I am laying before Parliament the draft revised energy national policy statements.

The energy national policy statements were first designated in 2011. They set out the Government's policy for the delivery of energy infrastructure and provide the legal framework for planning decisions, in key energy policy areas: fossil fuels (EN-2); renewables (EN-3); gas supply and gas and oil pipelines (EN-4); electricity networks (EN-5); and nuclear (EN-6). They each sit below an overarching energy NPS (EN-1) which sets out the need for new energy infrastructure.

The Government announced a review of the current suite of energy national policy statements (NPS) in the energy White Paper: "Powering our net zero future" in December 2020.

The energy White Paper builds on the Prime Minister's 10-point plan to set a long-term strategic vision for our energy system, consistent with net zero emissions by 2050. It establishes our goal of a decisive shift from fossil fuels to clean energy, in power, buildings and industry, while creating jobs and growing the economy and keeping energy bills affordable. It addresses how and why our energy system needs to evolve to deliver this goal whilst retaining a secure and operable energy system.

We have reviewed all the national policy statements for energy infrastructure and determined that the existing EN-1 to EN-5 documents should be amended to reflect the policies set out in the White Paper and support the investment required to build the infrastructure needed for transition to net zero.

A review of EN-6 has concluded that it will not be amended and therefore it is not part of this consultation. A new technology specific NPS for nuclear electricity generation deployable after 2025 is proposed and will be developed to reflect the changing policy and technology landscape for nuclear and support the transition to net zero.

On 6 September 2021 I launched a public consultation on the draft revised energy national policy statements, supporting habitats and sustainability reports and associated appendices. These are subject to a 12-week public consultation and are all available on gov.uk.

I will place copies of the public consultation "Planning for new energy infrastructure: review of energy national policy statements", the "Appraisal of sustainability and its appendices: Appendices supporting evidence volumes I and II", and the "Habitats regulation assessment" in the Libraries of both Houses. The public consultation will close on 29 November 2021. The relevant period for parliamentary scrutiny will be from 20 September 2021 to 28 February 2022.

[HCWS295]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Personal Independence Payments

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I would like to update the House on the Department's implementation of the Supreme Court judgment from July 2019 in the case of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions v. MM, known as MM. The judgment concerned the way we assess the help that someone might need to engage with other people face to face and whether that help is considered "prompting" or "social support" under the PIP assessment.

The Department set out to the House on 17 September 2020 that, following this judgment, the Department had made changes to the way PIP is assessed for all new claims, award reviews and mandatory reconsiderations.

We have now started an administrative exercise, looking at PIP claims since 6 April 2016 to check whether claimants may be eligible for more support under PIP.

This is a complex exercise that will take some time to complete. We will be contacting claimants who may be affected by this change and will be writing to those we review. If claimants are eligible for more PIP, we will make backdated payments.

It is important to stress that not everyone we contact will be eligible for more PIP, however, I hope this reassures the House that we are committed to treating people fairly and ensuring that they are fully supported.

[HCWS294]

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