

**Thursday
28 October 2021**

**Volume 702
No. 62**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 28 October 2021

House of Commons

Thursday 28 October 2021

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Untreated Sewage: Discharge into Waterways

1. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that untreated sewage is not discharged into rivers and inland waterways. [903864]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I have been absolutely crystal clear that the amount of sewage discharged by water companies into our rivers is unacceptable. We have our Environment Bill and our strategic policy statement which, for the very first time by any Government, directs the regulator to ensure that water companies tackle sewage discharges, so we are right on it. We have strengthened the Environment Bill to get a new duty on water companies to progressively reduce discharges. Last week, we voted through six pages of measures to stop raw sewage going into our watercourses.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Despite bizarre assurances that the Government have been working on their U-turn for weeks, it was the public outcry about sewage being pumped into waterways that forced a change of mind by the Government. In Gower, the number of people enjoying the sea and swimming in Caswell bay and Langland bay has increased, as many Members know, especially during covid. What work is the Minister doing to work with devolved Governments to ensure that the whole United Kingdom is protected for people to swim and enjoy?

Rebecca Pow: Yes, it is a beautiful part of the world. We have to remember that water issues are devolved, so water companies are working in their own ways, but it is absolutely right that they need to work together across our borders. We are at pains to make that clear. Indeed, there were measures in the Environment Bill to highlight the fact that partnership working is so important. All the measures in the Bill will make a significant difference to any of this pollution going into the river. I remind her that a fifth of the pollution is from sewage, but four fifths is from agricultural pollution and waste treatment works. We are also working on very strong measures on this issue, not only through the Environment Bill, but through the farming rules for water.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister and Secretary of State for meeting me and concerned colleagues earlier this week on this issue. Only a few days ago, we had a discharge into the Walney channel. For the avoidance of doubt, can the

Minister please lay out the fact that the amendment we are putting forward to the Environment Bill will drive down discharges such as this and increase penalties and liabilities on water companies that are acting irresponsibly?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for coming to the meeting earlier this week to explain what is a very complicated picture. It has to be tackled from so many angles, which is why I mentioned agriculture just now—it is not just one source. We have the measures in the Bill and the six pages of measures we added to improve reporting, monitoring, duties and governance to check on the actions that water companies are taking. Those are in the Bill, but this overarching new duty to direct water companies to progressively reduce sewage will make the real difference. It puts into law what we have already directed Ofwat, the regulator, to do.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Days from COP26, I must tell the Minister that the episode with raw sewage has not done Britain's reputation going into that conference any good. The Government whipping their own MPs to vote against an amendment to end the routine discharge of raw sewage does nothing to build confidence and has rightly sparked a public outcry. Raw sewage is being routinely discharged today, right now and every single day throughout COP26. When the Minister talks about progressive reductions, can she say how much raw sewage will be progressively reduced each and every year? Importantly, when will this disgusting practice come to an end?

Rebecca Pow: I want to make it clear that a lot of what we have heard in the social media storm has been whipped up, and there are a great many untruths flying around. We all spoke last week, after all the tributes to dear Sir David Amess, about a better form of government that is more respectful. Actually, I would like us to pick that up, because a lot of people have not seen it over this issue. The amendment, as it was worded by the Duke of Edinburgh—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, I will correct that right now. The amendment of the Duke of Wellington, with whom I have had many meetings, would have legally bound Ministers to ensure that untreated sewage is not discharged from overflows, eliminating them. That would have involved the complete separation of the sewerage system. We have data, which I believe will be published today, that shows that that could cost between £300 billion and £600 billion. We had to be mindful of that. The hon. Gentleman asks when these things will start happening. They are happening already. Some £3 billion is already being spent by the water companies to stop sewage going into our rivers. The measures in the Bill will further add to that.

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the Minister that I recognise her passion, but we are 10 minutes in and we are on question 1. We are not going to get very far. If she can speed up her answers, it will help me. We now come to a question from Kate Osborne, who is not here, so I expect the Minister to reply on that basis, then I will go to Ian Byrne.

National Food Strategy: Government Response

2. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): When he plans to publish the Government's response to the National Food Strategy. [903866]

4. Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): When he plans to publish the Government's response to the National Food Strategy. [903869]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The food strategy will be published early next year. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to set out how we can create the food system that we want. It will identify ways to make our food healthier, more sustainable and, I hope, more accessible.

Ian Byrne: In April, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's report on "Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply" said that the Government should consult on a legal right to food and address that in their White Paper responding to the national food strategy, which was published in July. In the light of the horrific rise of food poverty in all our communities, with kids going hungry, as highlighted on Monday night in a harrowing "Dispatches" programme, will the Minister meet me to discuss the upcoming White Paper and the right to food?

Victoria Prentis: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, as I have many times to discuss the important issue of food poverty. I take the opportunity to commend him for his work with Fans Supporting Foodbanks, which is a great initiative. I thank all those involved.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): When people think of great British cheese, they think of Stilton, which was invented in my constituency. In the national food strategy, there are concerns that we will be forced to change that amazing national recipe to reduce the salt content. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that vital issue and my campaign to open a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs office in the rural capital of food, Melton Mowbray?

Victoria Prentis: I believe I am meeting my hon. Friend to discuss stilton and other important cheeses this afternoon.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The national food strategy is a weighty tome, but Henry Dimbleby, who the Government commissioned to write it, is not a happy man. Last week, following the New Zealand trade deal, he told the Soil Association conference that, "the Government has clearly rejected my advice." He also said:

"There is no point in creating a food and farming system here that looks after animals, sequesters carbon, and supports biodiversity, if overseas products on our shelves don't do the same."

I suspect that virtually everyone in the Chamber agrees with that—the Opposition certainly do. Can the Minister tell us her view and the Government's view?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman will be glad to hear that my view and the Government's view are entirely aligned. Henry Dimbleby's report was a useful step in the development of the Government's food strategy and we are grateful to him for the enormous amount of work that he put into it. As I said earlier, we will respond as a Government probably in the middle of January, which will be six months after the report was published. That is what we always said the timescale

would be. There is a lot of work to do and it is a really important piece of work. It is genuinely a once-in-a-generation chance to try to put our food strategy on the right track for the future. I cannot give Members any spoilers now.

Winter Air Quality

3. Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the impact of steps taken to improve winter air quality on the health of children and adults who are vulnerable to respiratory disease.

[903867]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): We know that air pollution is a particular threat to vulnerable groups. We continue to drive forward the ambitious actions in the clean air strategy, such as phasing out the sale of house coal for domestic burning. The Environment Bill also makes a clear commitment to set targets for fine particulate matter, which is the pollutant of most concern for human health. We are working across Government, including with the Department of Health and Social Care, which has overall responsibility for respiratory diseases, to address actions on air pollution.

Kate Osamor: Research in 2014 and 2016 by King's College London and Imperial College London recorded 1,000 hospital admissions a year among those with pre-existing respiratory conditions. In 2018, King's College London found that as many as 36,000 people a year die early due to air pollution. When will the Government stop tinkering around the edges and finally introduce legally binding limits to abide by the World Health Organisation's stricter clean air standards?

Jo Churchill: We need to get those targets right. In the Environment Bill, which should be back in this place shortly, we have committed to setting a target, but it is important that we get the evidence right to set the right targets. Those targets will be based on evidence. We are currently reviewing the air quality strategy. We will be looking at a revised strategy in 2023. The PM_{2.5} target is on a population basis. We also need the population exposure targets so that in areas such as hers, where we know that there are hotter spots, we can work directly with local authorities—we all own this challenge—to get the right targeted measure in the right areas. The overall target is important, but so are those targeted, individual approaches.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, in Newcastle-under-Lyme we suffer with poor air quality from the odorous emissions of Walleys Quarry, which have had a serious impact on respiratory disease. That includes the case of the five-year-old boy, Mathew Richards, who won his judicial review against the Environment Agency. Does the Minister share my concern that the Environment Agency has frustrated attempts by investigators to access the public register? Does she agree that it must be open to having the register inspected by those trying to get to the bottom of how this scandalous situation has been allowed to develop?

Jo Churchill: My hon. Friend and I have already had several discussions on this matter. I hope to have a further meeting with him next week and to visit the site shortly. As part of permitting the regular inspection process, the Environment Agency considers the existing concentration of relevant pollutants in the area surrounding such challenges and, if air quality levels are exceeded because of those impacts, a lower limit can be set by a local authority. We should try to be transparent, but, in these complex matters, we must try to take on board the needs of constituents while driving the right conclusions to sort out this difficult problem.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): City of York's Lib Dem/Green council—Oh, the irony of it—is instituting six new car parks in our city centre. As a result, there will be a further threat to people's lives, particularly with regard to respiratory conditions, given the already challenged air quality. What discussions is the Minister having with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that councils do not put new car parks in their planning?

Jo Churchill: There are many local initiatives going on. The nitrogen dioxide plan, which I spoke about earlier, is the key to driving down emissions, and we are working with the Department for Transport on that. People using their cars less in the city centre and the promotion of cycling and walking in a beautiful city such as York would obviously enhance the city for all its tourists. I am sure that the city of York, the tourist board and indeed everybody would be pleased to see that.

Sustainable Farming

5. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support sustainable farming. [903870]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): Environmental sustainability is fundamental to our new approach. Our new schemes will pay for regenerative farming practices, improvements to animal health and welfare, reductions in carbon emissions, cleaner water, and habitat renewal.

Andrew Selous: I recently visited Henry Hunt and other young Bedfordshire farmers who are already doing amazing work to significantly improve their soils. What more can we do to encourage other farmers to follow their example as brilliantly shown in the documentary "Kiss the Ground" and ensure that, when environmental land management payments start, there is not a gap with the basic payments scheme ending?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend has already told me about his great meeting with Henry Hunt—one of his farmers—recently. I accept that the change from area-based payments to public money for public goods is challenging for farmers. The new system is being brought in gradually over seven years, but I reassure him that there is much in the new system for soil health, including one of the first eight standards, which has already been published. The soil health action plan and the Environment Bill will help, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many of my constituency farmers have already diversified and have been successful in that. Has consideration been given to funding diversification projects such as milk and eggs vending machines to enable farmers to boost their incomes so that they can farm the land and pay the bills?

Victoria Prentis: It is slightly difficult to answer that question directly because this is a devolved issue. But, yes, grants are available for new pieces of technology that will help farmers with both diversification and making their businesses more sustainable.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In Harlow we have a serious problem with horses being tethered on the roadside and cruelly treated. Will my hon. Friend introduce restrictions or ban this barbaric practice once and for all?

Victoria Prentis: The tethering of horses is a serious issue about which I have spoken to my right hon. Friend many times in the past. I suggest we meet to discuss if there is more we can do to end unnecessary horse tethering. Occasionally this can be an appropriate practice.

Mr Speaker: I just say to Members that if they are bobbing to their feet then they should keep bobbing as otherwise I will think they have changed their mind about wishing to speak. Knowing who is standing and who is not helps me all the way through.

We now come to a more interesting matter: I call Neale Hanvey to ask Question 6. He is not here. If Members are not going to be present, they must let the Chair know. May I suggest once again that the Minister answers the question even though the Member is not here, although he was due to be?

UK Environmental Protections: COP26

6. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What steps he is taking to strengthen UK environmental protections ahead of COP26. [903871]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Our vanguard Environment Bill demonstrates how much we are doing on that—more than any other country. This will be groundbreaking legislation and as we build back greener from the pandemic it will transform how we protect our environment and will better protect our resources—our air, our water and, of course, our soil.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the policy on biodiversity net gain, which is due to come in in the next couple of years. I and many other Members have been pressing to accelerate the introduction of this wonderful policy. Can the Minister give any update on the Department's thoughts on whether we can bring forward implementation of biodiversity net gain?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his work on this, because it is going to be a very important part of how we increase our protections and protect more nature. We have the target to protect and halt the decline of species abundance by 2030. Local authorities will play a key part in delivering that through their planning services and it is important that we work with them to give them the time to get this under way.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): The UK is among the most nature-depleted countries in the world and the decline is not slowing. The Government have made a deliberate decision not to announce any concrete targets to reverse it until October next year, long after COP26, and are instead focusing on cutting the costs of internal flights rather than cutting rail fares. Does the Minister think this undermines the Government's credibility at the conference this weekend?

Rebecca Pow: No.

Freight Traffic: Navigable Waterways

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the use of navigable waterways for freight traffic; and if he will make a statement. [903872]

Mr Speaker: Does any Minister want it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Of course I want it, especially when it is from that particular Member; he is always at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and I thank him for that.

The Government are providing £20 million through the Department for Transport's mode shift freight grant schemes in 2021-22 to support rail and water freight services on routes where they deliver environment benefits over road haulage but are more expensive to operate. Responsibility for the operational matters and management of the inland waterways rests with the relevant navigation authority and Ministers have no role in that.

Michael Fabricant: I thank the Minister very much for her reply, and for her kind comments about me, which I thought were rather nice.

The all-party group on waterways, which I have the honour of chairing, has identified that about 1,500 miles of our 5,000 miles of navigable waterways are suitable for freight. In addition to the measures the Minister has just outlined, has her Department given any thought to reintroducing the freight facility grants for wharfs and handling facilities?

Rebecca Pow: I am genuinely interested in my hon. Friend's work. This area comes under Department for Transport responsibilities; it does not have any plans as such to reinstate the freight facilities grant in England, but the Government are of course very interested in the shift to getting freight transported in other ways. The fund I mentioned earlier has mostly gone to rail because the case has to be made for whether it is better to do it by water, so I recommend that my hon. Friend gets in there and makes that case, remembering of course the other great benefits of waterways, especially through cities, for health and wellbeing.

Agricultural Exports to the United States

8. Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the (a) Prime Minister and (b) US Administration on agricultural exports to the United States. [903873]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Recent discussions with the US have led to several positive outcomes for the UK. We have resolved the Airbus-Boeing dispute, leading to the suspension of the 25% tariff on Scotch whisky; for the first time in two decades, British beef is on US plates; and most recently, my officials spoke to their US counterparts, who confirmed their intention to enable the import of British lamb following the Prime Minister's discussions on that with President Biden.

Stephen Flynn: That is an incredibly important point. Of course, when the Prime Minister left the White House, he declared to Scottish and UK businesses that they would indeed once again be able to export their lamb to the United States of America, but we have seen from leaked memos from the Secretary of State's own Department that that was not necessarily the case. Perhaps he can shine a little more detail on that. When will Scottish producers be able to export their lamb to the United States?

George Eustice: I cannot put a timescale on precisely when that will happen, but as I said, the Prime Minister had very positive discussions on this very issue with President Biden, and my officials have been continuing that discussion with US officials, who have confirmed their intention to enable the import of British lamb to the United States.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I and my constituents in the beautiful island constituency of Ynys Môn are rightly passionate about the environment and keeping our waters free from sewage and agricultural pollution. Can Ministers reassure my Ynys Môn constituents that they will work with the Welsh Government to ensure that the waters of Anglesey will be enjoyed by generations to come?

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, that is not relevant. Let me explain: supplementary questions have to be linked to the substantive question that is asked. If you had put in something about the wonderful lamb that comes out of Ynys Môn, I could have allowed it. You have to make sure that there is a link to the question that is asked—I think the Whips have got some jobs on their hands.

Food and Drink Sector: Labour Supply

9. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of labour supply for the food and drink sector. [903874]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I regularly speak to Cabinet colleagues about the current state of the labour market in the food and drink sector. Working across Government, we have extended the seasonal workers pilot this year to 30,000 visas and introduced additional temporary visa routes for poultry workers, pig butchers and heavy goods vehicle drivers in the food sector.

Gerald Jones: Delays and shortages, whether of lorry drivers or butchers, are causing huge concern and anxiety to business owners and consumers alike. Dayle Evans, a landlord and business owner in my constituency, was unable to reopen his pub's kitchen for eight weeks due

to difficulties sourcing produce. As we approach the Christmas season, which is the busiest for hospitality, and given the issues of last Christmas, what further action can the Government take to ensure that the shortages are resolved before that busy period is upon us?

George Eustice: My Department has regular dialogue with all the supermarkets and the major food manufacturers. They had some anxiety around their ability to deliver for Christmas about a month ago. That is why we acted expeditiously to introduce those temporary visa schemes. I can say that confidence in the industry is now higher, and it is gearing its logistics chains to make sure that we have food on the shelves. It is an improving situation.

Biodiversity Loss

10. **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): What steps he is taking to prevent further biodiversity loss. [903876]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The powerful new measures in our world-leading Environment Bill, alongside substantial funding and incentives to protect and restore nature, represent a step change in our ambition. Our commitment to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030 while setting a historic legally binding target to halt the decline in species abundance underlines our intent on all this. Internationally, we are playing a leading role in developing an ambitious new global biodiversity framework under the convention on biological diversity, making nature a top priority for our COP26 presidency.

Claire Coutinho: Today is the memorial for Peter Ainsworth, my predecessor in East Surrey, who was Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee and on the board of the Environment Agency. I am sure that the Minister, like me, would like to pay tribute to all his work in this area.

Ahead of the Surrey-wide virtual COP summit tonight, will the Minister update the House on the work that has been conducted on the possibility of a new “wild belt” designation, which would protect biodiversity across the country?

Rebecca Pow: We, too, obviously pay tribute to all the great work that Peter Ainsworth did, particularly in this area.

I thank my hon. Friend for her question and wish her every success with her virtual Surrey-wide COP26 climate summit. Many other colleagues are doing similar, really great events. DEFRA is working very closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on how future planning reforms could make a really big difference to our environmental outcomes. Protections, including those in particular areas—urban areas and such—will all come under that microscope. The Government will publish their response to the planning White Paper in due course.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The marine environment can play a huge role in climate mitigation, with blue carbon held in native oyster reefs, kelp forests, seagrass, salt marshes and so on. What are the Government doing to scale up the rewilding of our seas for biodiversity and blue carbon, an issue on which we could show global leadership at COP26 and at the convention next year?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that really important point. Everything we are doing on protections relates to both land and sea, with the protection of 30% of the land and 30% of the sea. We are gathering more data on blue carbon. We do not have quite enough data yet to factor it into all our calculations, but we mean to do so. She is absolutely right that our kelp beds and salt marshes can make a great contribution, and a great deal of work is being done on that. Indeed, many of our flood resilience squads are linking in with such restoration projects.

Topical Questions

T1. [903909] **Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Next week, the UK will host COP26 in Glasgow. Climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing our planet. Both the COP President-designate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), and the Prime Minister have set out the areas where we hope to make progress. My noble Friend Lord Goldsmith and I have held many meetings with countries on the agenda the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been leading on, specifically in relation to forests and nature-based solutions to climate change. We will be seeking progress on that agenda in the weeks ahead.

Stephen Farry: The current focus in addressing the sanitary and phytosanitary issues in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol now seems to be on a bespoke, specific arrangement for Northern Ireland. I and many others believe that, overall, a UK-EU veterinary agreement would be the best way forward for not only Northern Ireland but the entire UK. Is that objective still the position of the UK Government?

George Eustice: The position of the UK Government was set out very clearly and comprehensively in the Command Paper we published earlier this summer. We also have specialised committees working with EU and UK officials to resolve some of the technical and veterinary issues. We are clear, however, that we want goods to be able to travel from Great Britain to Northern Ireland without unnecessary barriers in the way.

T3. [903915] **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): May I confirm that the Secretary of State and his team are aware of the Isle of Wight’s achievement of UNESCO biosphere reserve status and of our desire to work with the Government on new landscape designations that recognise the Island’s unique sea life, landscape, rare flora, fauna, birds, butterflies and animal species?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): My hon. Friend is such a great champion for the Isle of Wight. He never ceases to collar me in the corridor to talk about it. He is right that it is an amazing biosphere. He will know that Natural England has started to develop an England-wide assessment to identify further landscape conservation enhancement needs, looking at potential areas of outstanding natural beauty and so on. I urge him to keep that dialogue open.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The fishing dispute with France is very troubling, and the facts need to be established. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the Marine Management Organisation has issued an external waters licence to the Scottish scalloper currently detained in Le Havre, as its name does not appear on the MMO website? Is that an oversight?

George Eustice: My officials are investigating the circumstances around the vessel that has been detained in France. It is too early to be able to identify precisely what happened, but I have seen reports that it was on a list originally and then appeared not to be on a list. I have asked our officials to investigate urgently.

T4. [903916] **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to restoring peat bogs. What support, financial and otherwise, will be given to Lindow Moss in my constituency?

Rebecca Pow: We are providing £15 million for peatland restoration through our nature for climate fund. A lot of that money has already started to be dispensed to projects. We announced £16 million for projects between Cornwall and Northumberland. It is competitive and one has to put a good case, but if my right hon. Friend wants to consider making applications for Lindow Moss it would be well worth looking at.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I will return to the fishing dispute in my urgent question that you have kindly granted, Mr Speaker.

There are significant concerns that any introduction of gene editing to the Scottish food chain could be a huge nail in the coffin for sales to the EU, with the divergence of standards leading to further loss of the European market and the risk of Scotland's reputation for high-quality food and drink production being tainted by association. What recent impact assessment has been conducted on changing trading standards in Scotland and the ability to trade with the EU in future?

George Eustice: The approach that we take is that decisions on whether to cultivate gene-edited crops or, indeed, genetically modified crops would be for the devolved Administrations, but in line with the provisions of the internal market, there would be access for goods. That mirrors what exists at the moment in the European Union. As the hon. Lady will know, the vast majority of animal feed sold in the EU is genetically modified.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Increased exports are the path to prosperity for our food and drink sector and the route back to profitability for many of our farmers. With that in mind, what is the Minister's assessment of the bounce back package for agriculture, food and drink that was announced last year?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The bounce back package provided effective and targeted support to exporters. We will continue to strengthen our export capability by launching the "Open Doors" campaign, creating an export council and increasing the number of superb agrifood counsellors.

T2. [903914] **Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Marine Scotland's sea fisheries statistics have recently shown that the value of landings right across Scotland has fallen. In Aberdeen alone, it has fallen by some 34%, so I ask the Secretary of State: where is the sea of opportunity?

George Eustice: The truth is that the impacts of covid have had an impact on fish prices over the last 18 months. They have gone from a historic high down to quite low levels; they have now recovered. It is also the case that some North sea stocks, notably cod, have been in a difficult place over the last couple of years, so fisheries administrations have taken the right and necessary decision to reduce some of those quotas.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): One of the Secretary of State's responsibilities is the provision of an adequate supply of domestically produced fruit and vegetables. Much of this year's harvest has been lost as a result of a lack of labour. Contrary to popular belief, there is not a queue of domestic labour waiting to harvest apples and tomatoes. Having lost this year's harvest, what will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that there is adequate labour supply for next year?

Victoria Prentis: I visited the Kent agricultural showground last week for the very impressive national fruit show, and I was able to talk to many growers about the very tight labour market that we are suffering from at the moment. As my right hon. Friend knows, we have a seasonal workers pilot with 30,000 visas. Growers can also continue to recruit workers under the EU settlement scheme. For the longer term, we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to encourage the recruitment of more UK workers and undertaking a review of how automation will help with this issue.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Every weekend, people are out fishing, rowing, kayaking and paddleboarding, enjoying the rivers and canals in Nottingham. They are horrified to learn that there have been hundreds of thousands of sewage discharges into England's waterways and that, under this Government, the Environment Agency has suffered huge cuts to funding for monitoring water quality and prosecuting polluters. What resources will the Secretary of State's Department commit to addressing the dirty water crisis?

George Eustice: We have doubled the size of the catchment sensitive farming scheme, which supports farmers to reduce pollution on their farms, and we have increased resources to the Environment Agency and put additional inspectors on this task.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): With adverse weather and flooding again affecting Cumbria and other areas in the north, will the Secretary of State join me in thanking everyone on the ground from the Environment Agency, local government, emergency services and volunteers? Can he reassure my constituents in Penrith and The Border that the Environment Agency will continue to have the funding and support that it needs to help, protect and support communities vulnerable to flooding?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is right. There has been an amber warning in his area and we are keeping a very close eye on it. All the systems are in place through

the Environment Agency; I hope he will agree that it gives a really professional service. We thank all its staff, and all the people in the area, for what they are doing. Please will he ensure that his constituents are all involved in the alert systems and have all the warnings available? It is really important to bring communities on board with us.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I will take two more questions if they are really quick; if they are not, I will stop you.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Recently, the children of Stocksfield Avenue Primary School wrote to me to express their dismay at the plastic pollution in the rivers, the seas and their environment. That follows similar appeals from the children of Mountfield Primary School, Hilton school—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That was not quick enough. We have got the question—I call the Minister.

Rebecca Pow: What was the question? [*Laughter.*]

George Eustice: I, too, am regularly contacted by schools in my constituency raising concerns around plastics. We have banned certain single-use plastics, we have introduced levies on carrier bags, and our extended producer responsibility scheme will reduce plastics further.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Team Stroud is setting up the all-party parliamentary group for wetlands with WWT Slimbridge. Will the Minister join me in supporting the investment in nature and the importance of blue carbon habitat creation?

Rebecca Pow: I am so pleased to hear about the project; I absolutely support it and would love to visit. Wetlands are so important, on so many grounds. The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust does superb work: carbon capture, flood storage, biodiversity, nature—it does it all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before we come to the next group of questions, I point out that in the absence of the spokesperson for the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) will answer on the Committee's behalf. I am grateful to her for doing so. I emphasise to the House that she will be answering on behalf of the Speaker's Committee, rather than undertaking her Front-Bench responsibilities.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Refugees from Afghanistan

1. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church Commissioners have taken to support refugees from Afghanistan. [903897]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Churches up and down the country have been co-ordinating gifts of cash, clothing, toys, prams and other items to Afghan refugees. Church members have taken Afghan families to buy shoes and other items and have offered them houses and flats.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Member for his answer. However, the biggest issue that we need to address is the provision of housing. Clearly the Church of England has a significant estate; I am grateful for the discussions that we are having in York about how we can use excess estate to support Afghan refugees. Will he ensure that across the Church of England, the estate is maximised so that we can home as many Afghan refugees as possible?

Andrew Selous: I can tell the hon. Lady that lowest income communities funding from the Church Commissioners helps dioceses to support parishes such as St Mary's, Scarborough, that have been at the forefront of our effort to help Afghan refugees. I can also tell her that in the diocese of Chelmsford, five vacant vicarages have been allocated to refugee households, including to Afghan refugees.

Number of Ordinands

2. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What progress the Church of England has made on increasing the number of ordinands by 50%. [903898]

Andrew Selous: In 2020, despite the pandemic, 591 people were recommended for training for ordained ministry—the highest figure for 13 years. Ordinations to stipendiary ministry have increased by 43% since 2013, reflecting our commitment to the long-term resourcing of the Church of England.

Scott Benton: What assurances can my hon. Friend provide the House that the Church of England remains fully committed to parish ministry? I have seen how important it has been during the pandemic at a range of churches in Blackpool, such as Holy Cross.

Andrew Selous: I am delighted to learn of the good work of Holy Cross and other churches in my hon. Friend's constituency. I can reassure him, because the Archbishop of York said in July that "the means whereby we will serve and reach our nation...is a parish system revitalised for mission."

Over the past year and a half, we have seen the very best of the parish system, finding creative ways to proclaim the unchanging love of Jesus in meeting the needs of those suffering in the pandemic, in quite extraordinary ways.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that response. Has consideration been given to offering bursaries to cover not simply the cost of fees but the cost of living for older ordinands with families who want to go into the ministry but have family obligations that need funding?

Andrew Selous: I will certainly take that suggestion back to the Church Commissioners, and we will look at it seriously. I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a serious interest in these matters, and we will get back to him.

Electoral Commission Committee

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Voter ID: Electoral Participation

3. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the potential effect of the proposal in the Elections Bill to introduce voter ID on electoral participation. [903899]

7. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the potential effect of the proposal in the Elections Bill to introduce voter ID on electoral participation. [903903]

9. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the potential effect of the proposal in the Elections Bill to introduce voter ID on electoral participation. [903906]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The commission's independent evaluation of the Government's pilots, held in 2018 and 2019, found no evidence that turnout was significantly affected by the trialled introduction of an ID requirement at polling stations. However, it was not able to draw definitive conclusions, particularly on the likely impact at a national poll with higher levels of turnout. The commission has recommended that any ID requirement should be secure, accessible and realistically deliverable. The detail of the Government's proposals for a free, locally issued voter ID card will be key to ensuring accessibility.

Martyn Day: Inclusion Scotland believes that one in 10 disabled people do not have the required voter ID. What steps should the Government take to ensure that a million disabled people maintain their franchise and their ability to vote in coming elections?

Cat Smith: The proportion of people without ID is higher among certain demographic groups, including those with disabilities. Research published by the Cabinet Office in May 2021 found that 96% of the public held some form of photo ID that respondents thought was recognisable, including ID that had expired. The commission has provided independent advice to parliamentarians on how the measures in the Elections Bill would affect the accessibility of the electoral process, and it will continue to highlight changes in the electoral system that could support increased participation—for example, better use of existing public data to modernise the electoral registration system.

Richard Thomson: Given the scant evidence of electoral fraud by members of the public trying to cast votes to which they are not entitled, do the commissioners share my concern that attempting to introduce voter ID is an attempt to solve a problem which, in reality, simply does not exist?

Cat Smith: The commission has made no detailed assessment of the number of fraudulent votes that could be prevented as a result of the Government's proposed policy to introduce a voter ID requirement. While levels of reported electoral fraud in the UK are consistently low, they do vary, and there is no reliable

methodology for forecasting instances of electoral fraud. The commission has highlighted the lack of an ID requirement as a vulnerability in polling stations across Great Britain, and public opinion research shows that this is an issue that concerns voters.

Deidre Brock: The Elections Bill not only requires Scottish voters to show ID at UK general elections, but gives the Westminster Government powers to set the Electoral Commission's strategy and policy statement. Given that the Scottish Parliament also pays towards the commission, is this not another case of a grubby Westminster power grab and an attack on our devolution settlement?

Cat Smith: The Elections Bill covers the whole of the UK, but some provisions would apply differently to elections in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The commission's view is that as drafted, the proposals for a strategy and policy statement are not consistent with its role as an independent regulator. The scope and power is significantly broader than is the case with similar mechanisms in place for other regulators, such as Ofcom, Ofgem and Ofwat, which do not include giving guidance about specific matters.

The existence of an independent regulator is fundamental to maintaining confidence in our electoral system. It is vital that there is no actual or perceived Government involvement in the commission's operational functions or decision making.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

England's Historic Cathedrals: Cost of Maintenance

4. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What estimate the Commissioners have made of the annual cost of maintaining England's historic cathedrals; and if he will make a statement. [903900]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): I should like to start by commending my hon. Friend for the consistent way in which he sticks up for his cathedral in Lichfield. Other Members could follow his example, if I may say so. In 2019, England's 42 Anglican cathedrals estimated that they required £140 million for repairs and maintenance over the next five years. The Church Commissioners are providing from the cathedral sustainability fund £20 million between 2020 and 2022, which is double the original planned figure.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments and for his answer. Lichfield cathedral costs around £2 million a year to run. In good years, it is able to set aside a few hundred thousand pounds each year to try to repair the damage being done to an 800-year-old building by the usual environmental impacts. It is not making the £2 million, because we are still recovering from covid, so is there any chance of the recovery fund continuing?

Andrew Selous: The Church is very grateful to the Government for the culture recovery fund allocation for cathedrals of £29.4 million, of which £264,000 has been

allocated to Lichfield cathedral. I would like to commend Gloucester cathedral's Beacon of Hope appeal, which has raised more than £1 million. There has been a £3.1 million investment in craft training between the Cathedrals Workshop Fellowship and the Hamish Ogston Foundation, and cathedral gins have been launched at Blackburn, Portsmouth, Ripon and Bristol cathedrals in order to raise further funds. These are all examples that other cathedrals could follow.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Apprenticeship Programme

5. **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What steps the Commission is taking to improve the apprenticeship programme in the House of Commons. [903901]

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): We have recently appointed a dedicated apprenticeships and early career manager in our in-house resourcing team to focus on building, developing and improving the current apprenticeships scheme. An example of work already under way is the development of our apprenticeships strategy. We are looking at various potential streams of apprentices, including school leavers, targeted external new starters and the upskilling or reskilling of existing staff. We have set a target of 100 apprentices across a variety of disciplines, and we are working to build awareness among existing staff of the career development opportunities available to them.

Robert Halfon: It is very welcome news that 100 apprentices are being employed across the House of Commons. What is my hon. Friend doing to ensure that we employ apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that they have a chance to climb the House of Commons ladder of opportunity?

Sir Charles Walker: My right hon. Friend is respected across the House for the work he has done on behalf of apprenticeships, so I shall say to him that he is going to join me in a meeting with the apprenticeship and early careers manager at the earliest opportunity, so that we can drive forward this House's shared agenda to get more people from disadvantaged backgrounds working in this place and enjoying this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I apologise to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and to the Second Church Estates Commissioner, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), because I have made a mistake. Having called the hon. Member for Lichfield to ask his question, I did not then give the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire the opportunity to answer it. I do apologise. Perhaps the hon. Member for Lichfield could remind us of the gist of his question.

Michael Fabricant: A double showing! This is marvellous, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thought I had already asked my question, but anyway. I was asking whether the recovery fund might be continued, but I think that my hon. Friend answered the question.

Andrew Selous: As you have invited me to answer, Madam Deputy Speaker, I can say that the Church of England will absolutely carry on pressing the Government to continue with that funding, because it has been so important.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Danny Kruger is not here. I call John Lamont.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

COP26

8. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help ensure tangible outcomes for COP26. [903904]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Archbishop of Canterbury will be attending COP26 with Anglican Communion colleagues. Last month, he joined Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to pray that world leaders, individuals and businesses will take the right

John Lamont: The Church has tremendous influence both here and across the world. How is the Church of England encouraging its members to support successful outcomes from COP26?

Andrew Selous: Churches are signing up to be eco-churches in increasing numbers, and 38 of our 42 dioceses have signed up to be eco-dioceses. In addition, the Church of England started the transition pathway initiative, whose membership now comprises funds of \$40 trillion. The transition pathway initiative has partnered with the Grantham research institute at the London School of Economics to track 10,000 companies to make sure they are on a timely path to net zero.

Level of Financial Donations to the Church: Covid-19

10. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What assessment the Commissioners have made of the impact of the covid-19 outbreak on trends in the level of financial donations to the Church. [903907]

Andrew Selous: In 2020 the amount of parish share received by dioceses was 7% below 2019 levels, and in the year to date it is running at 10% less than in the same period of 2019. Parish income has also been badly affected by the loss of hall letting and other events income.

Dr Hudson: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I am sure he agrees that churches across the land have done an amazing job throughout the pandemic in terms of pastoral care, community support and delivering services virtually and now physically again. It is important that they have a secure financial future. Can he give the House an assessment of the progress and impact of the electronic giving system being piloted in Cumbria by the diocese of Carlisle?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. St Patrick's church in Patterdale and Lanercost priory are among the 110 churches in the Carlisle diocese that have been given contactless units, not all of which require connectivity to take donations. Since June this year, £30,000 has been given through these units, which is 30% more than we budgeted for. The average contactless donation is almost three times more than the average cash donation, and the average online donation is 10 times more. Where Cumbria leads, the Church of England should follow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is noticeable that several Members on the Order Paper are not present in the Chamber. We have therefore answered—

Andrew Selous: I note that at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions Mr Speaker allowed Ministers to answer questions from Members who were not here. As the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) may be of interest to other colleagues, who may wish to come in on the subject, would you be gracious enough to allow me to answer it briefly, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I would be delighted if he answered that question.

Church of England Payroll Budget Allocations

6. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): How much and what proportion of the Church of England's payroll budget is allocated to (a) ordained ministers in parishes, (b) staff in Diocesan offices and (c) National Church Institutions. [903902]

Andrew Selous: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is an important question, and I am grateful to get the answer on the record.

The Church of England is not a single institution, so it does not have a single payroll budget. In 2019, £255 million was spent on stipends and pension contributions for ordained ministers in parishes and a further £124 million was spent on clergy housing and working costs, £65 million was spent on staff in dioceses and £30 million was spent on staff in the National Church Institutions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have now allowed the hon. Gentleman to answer an unanswered question and to give two answers to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). This is extraordinary and it will not happen again. I do not want to set a precedent, but I am grateful to the Second Church Estates Commissioner for all his thorough answers, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), too.

UK-French Trading Dispute

10.29 am

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): Brexit-induced exporting changes have resulted in an escalating trading dispute with France that, if not resolved, may result in British boats being banned from French ports and Scottish salmon removed from French menus. France may go further and cut—

Hon. Members: Ask the question.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady has only to ask the basic urgent question; I will come back to her for a supplementary question after the Secretary of State has answered.

Deidre Brock: Excuse me, Madam Deputy Speaker; this is my first urgent question.

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, if he will make a statement on how the UK will work with French officials to mitigate a trading dispute.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The UK's and the Crown dependencies' approach throughout this year has been to implement the new access requirements of the trade and co-operation agreement in good faith and in a reasonable and evidence-based way, recognising some of the sensitivities and the importance of the arrangements for both parties. Since 31 December last year, the UK has issued licences to fish in our exclusive economic zone to 1,673 EU vessels, including 736 French vessels. One hundred and twenty-one vessels have been licensed to fish in the UK six-to-12-nautical-mile zone, of which 103 are French, and 18 of those vessels are under 12 metres. The UK has licensed 98% of the EU vessels that applied for access.

Constructive discussions continue with the Commission on a methodology for allowing vessels to be replaced; once that is finalised, more vessels will be licensed. Over the past two weeks, the Government have issued four further licences, after the Commission was able to provide new and additional evidence. We remain committed and willing to consider new information. Following the receipt of more information over the past couple of weeks, we have been able to issue more licences. As I have said repeatedly to the French and to the European Commission, our door remains ever open.

In that context, it was disappointing to see the comments from France yesterday. We believe they are disappointing, disproportionate and not what we would expect from a close ally and partner. The measures that are being threatened do not appear to be compatible with the trade and co-operation agreement or wider international law and, if they are carried through, will be met with an appropriate and calibrated response.

Yesterday, I spoke to Commissioner Sinkevičius regarding the comments that French officials had made. The UK stands by its commitments in the trade and co-operation agreement and, as I have said, has already granted 98% of licence applications from EU vessels to fish in our waters. All our decisions have been fully in line with that commitment. We support Jersey and Guernsey's

handling of the fisheries licensing decisions and have remained in close contact with them throughout. Their approach has also been entirely in line with the provisions of the trade and co-operation agreement.

Finally, I am aware of reports of enforcement activity being undertaken by the French authorities in respect of two vessels and we are looking into those matters urgently.

Deidre Brock: I apologise again, Madam Deputy Speaker, for my over-enthusiastic start.

Brexit-induced exporting changes have, as we have heard, resulted in an escalating trading dispute with France that, if not resolved, may result in British boats being banned from French ports and Scottish salmon being removed from French menus. France may go further and cut electricity supplies to the Channel Islands and delay French customs checks on goods arriving from the UK, thereby further disrupting our economy.

I have to say that there is a considerable difference between the number of licences that the Secretary of State just mentioned and the number that the French claim have been issued. French officials claim that the process for obtaining a licence to fish in UK waters is too slow and laborious, while Lord Frost has said that these are only teething issues. France says that, under the Brexit agreement, 175 French fishing vessels have the right to fish between six and 12 nautical miles from the British coast, but that the UK has delivered only 100 licences. Paris also says that only 105 licences to fish off Jersey have been delivered, when French trawlersmen have a right to 216.

Today, as we have heard, French authorities are to announce a sanction regime that will come into effect on 2 November. This follows news this morning of a Scottish trawler detained for fishing without a licence in French waters, according to France's Sea Minister, Annick Girardin, who announced this overnight. Can the Secretary of State confirm what consular assistance the Government have been offering to the British fishing vessel crew currently arrested and detained by the French authorities? What support is his Department giving to the vessel and its owners?

In response to a topical question from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the Minister mentioned that the UK Government could not confirm whether an external waters licence was issued by the Marine Management Organisation. Why does it not appear on the list? It is too early to know what has happened. It appears that it may have been on the list. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has had 12 hours to get to the bottom of this. We have a skipper of a Scottish scalloping vessel due in court in Le Havre this morning. It is simply not good enough that the Secretary of State does not have answers to those questions.

What assurances can the Secretary of State give the House that appropriate documents were in place for the vessel that has now been seized, such as whether the vessel was issued with a licence to fish in French waters by the MMO? If so, when? If other UK vessels encounter French authorities, what is his advice? What is the permitted time that French authorities are allowed to take to inspect seafood goods arriving from the UK via HGV? What advice would he offer to seafood exporters who are concerned about more stringent and additional

[Deidre Brock]

checks the French are permitted to make? They have stated that they will, from 2 November, take longer to clear HGVs, while still keeping to permitted inspection rules, which could create significant delays.

George Eustice: It is important to note that, although the hon. Lady refers to this being a trade dispute over trading arrangements, what is actually happening is that the French are threatening to take a particular approach to trade, but linked to, as they see it, issues that they have over the issuing of fishing licences. I am afraid that we completely reject that caricature. The hon. Lady says that France has claimed that this has been too slow. That is not true. Indeed, the vast majority of those 1,700 or so vessels that we have already licensed received their licence on 31 December. The only vessels that did not have a licence immediately were those that struggled to marshal the data to support their application, but as soon as data has been provided, those vessels have been granted their access. As I said earlier, many of those vessels are indeed French vessels.

The hon. Lady mentioned the issue of the two vessels that have been initially detained. We understand that one of them may still be detained. She raised the issue about whether a licence had been issued. What I have been able to establish so far is that, in respect of that vessel, it was on the list that was provided by the MMO initially to the European Union. The European Union therefore did grant a licence. We are seeing some reports that, for some reason, it was subsequently withdrawn from the list. It is unclear at the moment why that might have been.

The hon. Lady asked why I have not been able to establish this morning in the course of events why that has not been the case. I can say that the relevant data for this is held by Marine Scotland. I have been asking my officials to get to the bottom of this issue. We have been told that Marine Scotland hopes to get back to us within the next hour or so. My officials will work very constructively with the Scottish Government and with their agencies, such as Marine Scotland, to understand what happened in the case of this particular vessel.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Given the escalation and “more forceful” language—I think that those are the words used—coming not from the French fishing industry, which we are kind of used to by now, but from the French Government, can my right hon. Friend confirm that the licensing process currently under dispute is entirely in line not just with the UK Fisheries Act 2020, but with the trade and co-operation agreement itself, which was signed by all sides? Can he also commit that this Government will not grant any further concession beyond that which is already granted to the French and other EU countries through the trade and co-operation agreement?

George Eustice: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on his new role as our fisheries envoy in the Government? I can think of no one better to be a champion for the interests of fishing. He raises a very important point, which is that everything we have done is entirely consistent with what was agreed in the trade and co-operation agreement. The reason that some vessels inevitably will not receive the licence that they

might have had previously is that the trade and co-operation agreement is different from both the Granville Bay agreement that we had in respect of Jersey, and, of course, the previous provisions of the common fisheries policy, in that access is now determined by a reference period. There will be some vessels that might have had the right to access but that nevertheless never used that access during the reference period, and which will therefore—under the terms of the agreement, which all sides understood—no longer be entitled to access.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The threats and actions from France are completely wrong and unacceptable. There is a real need to ensure that everyone involved uses language to de-escalate the situation in order not to risk the lives of either British or French fishers in any clashes at sea, and to ensure that there is uninterrupted trade between the United Kingdom and France. It is really important to set that out.

It seems to me that the situation is a result of the Government, at some point along the way, losing control of some of the negotiations and positions that keep our fishers safe. Will the Secretary of State set out whether the crew are okay and what support is being given to them? Will he also set out clearly that we expect our British fishing boats to be able to fish legally, sustainably and uninterrupted in French waters, as French boats can expect to fish legally, uninterrupted and sustainably in British waters, as per the agreement that has been set out?

There is a real concern that the botched Brexit deal will lead to more clashes between UK and European fishers. Will the Secretary of State set out what steps he is taking to ensure that there are no further clashes and there is no risk of escalation? What steps is he taking to support our industry to ensure that this important trading period, in which UK seafood exports provide a huge part of the annual income for fishing businesses, is uninterrupted, because there is a risk that the situation could erode the confidence of European suppliers in buying from British companies?

May I further ask the Secretary of State whether—after having investigated whether the licence for this boat, having been granted by UK authorities, was subsequently removed from an MMO or Marine Scotland register—he will come back to the House to report on what has happened and what lessons can be learned to ensure that this does not happen again? I ask him sincerely to use his offices in Government to ensure that there are no voices that seek to escalate and churn up distrust between ourselves and our colleagues in Europe, because in the risk of escalation is the risk of lives being put at risk at sea, and we must ensure that everyone who goes to sea to catch fish is safe.

George Eustice: I welcome the tone with which the hon. Gentleman has approached the issue. He is absolutely right that it is important that we remain calm and try to de-escalate the situation. The UK Government, and the authorities in Jersey and Guernsey, have implemented the provisions of the trade and co-operation agreement. We have licensed many vessels. In the case of Jersey, for instance, although it has 65 of its own vessels in its waters, it will have granted access to its waters to well over 100 EU vessels; it has not been unreasonable.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the crew. This morning, I asked my officials to check on that point. We do not think that there are any issues with the crew. The vessel was asked to go into port in the usual way, as part of a routine inspection, so we do not think that there are any issues of that sort to be concerned about. He is also right that UK vessels, with their licence to fish in EU waters, should be allowed to do so uninterrupted. The UK will continue to implement and enforce things in good faith in our exclusive economic zone as well. We are not going to get into any sort of retaliatory tit for tat on this kind of thing. It is important that everybody remains calm.

On what the French have said they will do regarding borders, obviously France, as an EU member state, is bound by the official control regime. There will be a role for the European Commission to ensure that France does not break EU law in any approach that it takes. That is why our principal port of call is talking to the European Commission, which negotiates on behalf of France on these matters. We will also, of course, speak to French Ministers and officials.

Finally, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's caricature—that is, that the situation has happened because we have lost control of a negotiation. The reason that we have these tensions is that what we secured in the trade and co-operation agreement means that there will be some EU vessels that previously had access that will not enjoy access in future. That is obviously causing a bit of tension; we do understand. Even though those vessels probably never accessed our waters and never took up the right that they had, it is an option that they would like to retain, but, put simply, that is not what the trade and co-operation agreement provided for. So it is by adhering, calmly but resolutely, to the terms that were agreed in the trade and co-operation agreement that we have some of these tensions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I do find it extraordinary that the SNP seems to be racing to take the side of the French rather than standing up for British interests. The boat that has been detained is a Scottish-owned boat that operates out of Shoreham—the largest port for scallops, which is what this boat was involved with, in the country. It is a very important trade through the port of Shoreham that has always been done within the rules. My fishermen are more concerned about the infringement into our waters of French fishing boats that appeared not to be following the rules. Can the Secretary of State assure us that he will do everything he can to make sure that the fishing boat from Shoreham is properly looked after, and to make sure that there is proper enforcement action against infringements by French fishermen and women that are happening in our waters?

George Eustice: If fishermen in my hon. Friend's constituency have some specific points around specific vessels that they would like to feed into me, I would be more than happy to refer that on to the MMO, which leads for enforcement of vessels in our waters. We have significantly increased our enforcement capacity with additional vessels and some aerial surveillance in order to be able to enforce activities in our waters properly. As I said, if there are particular instances that he is aware of, I would be happy to follow them up.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): As the shadow Secretary of State said, the next few weeks will be absolutely critical for fish exporters in this country. If the French do what they are threatening—which is only, as I understand it, what is allowed by the trade and co-operation agreement—then they risk damaging the confidence and the reliability of supply from this country. The Secretary of State has given the number of licences that he has issued. He should also be aware that a number of those are for super-trawlers over 100 metres and fly-shooters, that he has given away access to non-quota species without limit, and that this is on top of a TCA that allowed access to the six to 12-mile limits, which is not what was promised. When he has given away so much already, why is he risking this over such a small number of small boats that we must always have known would struggle to get the data to justify the creation of track records?

George Eustice: I think what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, in a nutshell, is, “Shouldn't we just roll over and accept these vessels even though they don't qualify?” The position of the Government is that there were very clearly agreed terms in the trade and co-operation agreement. Any vessel that qualified has been granted access, and that includes many vessels—close to 1,700—in our exclusive economic zone. I do not agree that we should take an approach that says, “We should just let in these people for an easy life.” The reality is that these vessels did not have a track record in our waters. This is not just about data. We have been open to considering data. We have looked at the VALPENA chart data that has come from the European Commission. Because the French were struggling at one point to provide the data, the UK Government went into the commercial market and bought AIS—automatic identification system—data for some of the French vessels so that we could understand their applications better. The data is available, in many cases. We have sought to be as helpful as we can to assist the EU in providing that data, but if it is unable to do so, there comes a point when we must assume that it probably did not have access during the reference period.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his actions. I urge him to hold fast and ensure that we and the French obey the rule of law. If the French Government—they are clearly doing this under Monsieur Macron's need to get re-elected and to attack us as part of that—keep threatening us and, frankly, abusing their power, I do not understand why we cannot be gently encouraging our exporters to use non-French ports and to move our supply lines potentially to people who will not play politics with the economies of the European Union and the United Kingdom.

George Eustice: Obviously if the French did carry through that threat, individual businesses would make decisions about how best to get their goods to market. The important thing is that we very much hope they will not. We do not think it is consistent with the trade and co-operation agreement. It probably is not consistent with the official control regime under EU law. The official control regime exists to manage risks—it is a risk-based regime—and it is not there to be used for retaliation, as it is being described.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Is it not really time to get rid of Lord Frost? [*Interruption.*] He obviously has a lot of friends. Presumably that is why he is there.

[Karin Smyth]

He continues to damage the relationship with Ireland, our nearest neighbours. The Falkland Islanders have still not had agreement about their tariffs, because of a lack of agreement with the Spanish. Now, this long-running and long-brewing dispute with the French continues. The Secretary of State talks about constructive discussions, but clearly with Lord Frost at the helm continuing to destroy these relationships, that is not possible.

George Eustice: What the hon. Lady says is an absolute nonsense. I work closely with Lord Frost, who is a very able negotiator and stands up for the interests of our country in these discussions. I can assure her that he has very good relations with the negotiators that he deals with from the European Union.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I commend to the House an excellent history book called “1000 Years of Annoying the French”? This is nothing new; this has been going on for hundreds of years, if not 1,000 years. My right hon. Friend has mentioned the role of the European Union, which always claims that it is an organisation based on rules. What conversations has he had with the Commission or Commissioners regarding this dispute?

George Eustice: I spoke to Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius yesterday to discuss this issue and the general licensing issue. I asked him whether what was being suggested was consistent with EU law under the official control regime and the trade and co-operation agreement. I expressed our view that we felt it was not consistent with either. At that point, obviously, he had not had the chance to discuss the matter with the French, but he undertook to do so.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I hope that in your recent visit to Lancashire for the G7 Speakers’ conference, Madam Deputy Speaker, you got to enjoy our Morecambe Bay potted shrimps and Fleetwood fish. Indeed, much of the UK fishing industry is made up of small-scale fishers and fish processors. Can I ask the Secretary of State whether the mechanisms proposed in the EU trade and co-operation agreement to resolve these kinds of disputes are being used to resolve this dispute?

George Eustice: The answer at the moment is that we are applying what was agreed, so there do not need to be further technical groups. We have very close relations with the European Commission. At official level, we are sharing all our methodology with them. For the vessels that we have not so far been able to grant a licence to, we have shown precisely the data that we have—or do not have—that means that is the case. We continue to work closely with the European Commission to identify vessels that might qualify.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): One of the threats that we have heard from the French this week has been about the electricity supply to the people of Jersey. I am glad that the Secretary of State is speaking to the European Union. Will he confirm that he will make clear that threatening the electricity supply in this kind of dispute is wholly outside the terms of the TCA and wholly unacceptable from a close and trusted ally?

George Eustice: The UK Government will stand squarely behind Jersey on this matter. As I said, we have worked closely with it on the methodology for issuing licences. We believe that Jersey has been entirely consistent with the trade and co-operation agreement, and it has been reasonable throughout. As I said earlier, the threats that France has made are disappointing, disproportionate and not what we would expect from an ally, and we also believe that they are not compatible with the trade and co-operation agreement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Secretary of State for his fortitude and his strong, firm stance. What steps will he take to ensure that British fleets can fish in British waters without being concerned that they may stray marginally into French waters and be detained, while watching copious numbers of the French fleet fish at will in British waters with no similar harsh justice?

George Eustice: Under the terms of the trade and co-operation agreement, I think that is unlikely. Vessels can enter one another’s exclusive economic zone and licences have been issued for that. Most of the remaining issues pertain to the six to 12-mile zone in English waters only, not Scottish waters. In my experience, vessels mostly know where they are, as they have pretty accurate chartplotter data.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I wish the Secretary of State and his officials well as they grapple with a fast-evolving and complicated situation. Does he agree that the mask slipped for the Scottish national party today? When it comes to a choice between working with us to stand up for the interests and rights of Scottish fishermen and scoring cheap political points, they choose cheap political points and pointing the finger every time.

George Eustice: All I can say is that the UK Government stand squarely behind the Scottish fishing industry and always have done. That is why we supported its wish to leave the common fisheries policy. We will always continue to support Scottish fishing interests.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is clearly an extremely worrying time for the UK fishing fleet, especially small fishers who cannot afford a disruption in trade. What are the Government doing to encourage people to buy home-grown seafood and to support fishers trying to sell directly to consumers?

George Eustice: During the pandemic, there was a fall in the price of many fish species as restaurants and the catering trade closed. With things reopening again, the price of fish has bounded back and is in a strong position. During the pandemic, we ran a number of schemes in conjunction with Seafish to promote the greater consumption of fish at home.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The non-enforcement of total allowable catches for non-quota species in UK waters this year has not only undermined our inshore fleet but may have sent a signal that the UK will not enforce rules designed to promote sustainable fishing and our domestic industry. That might have played a contributory role in the lead-up to these incidents. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that those TACs will be enforced in the coming year?

George Eustice: I do not think that there is a connection between the approach taken on non-quota stocks, for which there was specific provision in the trade and co-operation agreement, and the specific issue about certain vessels that do not qualify for access to our waters. On my hon. Friend's other point, we will be discussing that again with the European Commission at the next annual UK-EU bilateral negotiations. It remains our position that some limits must be set on non-quota stock species. We will seek to progress that next year.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The chairman of the Regional Maritime Fisheries Committee in northern France has indicated that his members could block UK products being exported through the Calais port and channel tunnel. We have seen how strained our supply chains are already, so what discussions has the Secretary of State had with his Cabinet colleagues about the potential impact of that move? What steps will be taken to mitigate that?

George Eustice: That situation arose yesterday but has been brewing probably for the last fortnight. I have had regular discussions with some of my Cabinet colleagues on the matter, notably Lord Frost because of his position in the wider negotiations. I point out, however, as I said earlier, that 736 French vessels have been licensed to fish in our waters. We have behaved very reasonably on the issue throughout.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): May I reassure the Secretary of State that Conservative Members have absolute confidence in Lord Frost? I welcome his reassurance that we have acted at all times within the TCA. Having met the Jersey Government and seen at first hand the GPS data, I echo their pleas for the French Government and the Commission to publish publicly anything that they disagree with. Given that France gave up sovereignty in this policy area to the European Commission, will the Secretary of State reassure us that the Commission will not support any breaking of the law or the TCA from France unilaterally?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As France is an EU member state, it is for the European Commission to speak for France on such matters. That is why our first port of call in the discussions is the European Commission, which has the legal vires to represent France on fisheries matters. As we all know, the European Union takes its laws very seriously, so I hope that it will ensure that its member states abide by them.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the predictably disproportionate and unreasonable behaviour of the French authorities is inexorably linked to President Macron facing difficult elections next year, that we should expect matters to get worse before they get better, and that history shows us that this House and our great nation's interests are best served by standing up to the threats of little Napoleons clinging on to power?

George Eustice: I note what my hon. Friend says. I am a bit more optimistic. In this job, we always have to hope that things will get better, and do so now, rather than get worse before they get better.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It may be fair or unfair, but for the last 50 years—probably more—fishing communities around the UK have lacked confidence that successive Governments would be robust enough in defending their interests. While I understand that my right hon. Friend does not want to escalate the present situation, will he give an assurance that we will be extremely robust in defending the interests of fishing communities around the UK?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. However, it is also important to point out that, over the last 50 years, no UK Government have had the legal right to defend their interests in fisheries properly, since the common fisheries policy meant that the policy area was ceded to the European Union. The UK Government believe passionately in our fishing industry, which is one of the great opportunities that we have from leaving the European Union, and that is why we will support our fishermen during this difficult time.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): As the Secretary of State said, the situation is extremely disappointing, but if I were to describe my constituents' response when I talk to them about it with an emoji, it would be the rolling eyes one because, sadly, we expect nothing else from French politicians. It is extremely concerning in Grimsby not only for the trawlers but for our fish processors who export. We must ensure that we are balanced in what we do and, as colleagues have said, robust. Will he assure me that he will say to the EU and France that we will not be bullied and that it is about time that they started working with us as allies, not enemies?

George Eustice: We have been clear with the European Commission that we are abiding by the terms of the trade and co-operation agreement, and we expect it to do the same.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Further to my right hon. Friend's comments on the threat to cut electricity to Jersey, will he reassure people throughout the Channel Islands, who are understandably somewhat concerned, that the UK will stand solidly with the Crown dependencies in the face of any intimidation from France, whether on fishing or any other topic?

George Eustice: Yes, of course.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): The British people do not take kindly to provocation and intensely dislike threats from other nations. If the French are so keen on impounding boats, perhaps they could focus on the real issue: the hundreds of migrants illegally crossing the channel day in, day out on small dinghies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that France's threats are disproportionate and not at all what we would expect from a close ally and partner?

George Eustice: I agree that it is disproportionate and not what we would expect of a close ally, as I said in my opening remarks; I am glad my hon. Friend was listening.

Business of the House

11.5 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 1 November will include:

MONDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 2 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 3 NOVEMBER—Motion relating to the third report of Session 2021-22 from the Committee on Standards, followed by Second Reading of the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill, followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

THURSDAY 4 NOVEMBER—General debate on a proposal for an inquiry into the UK's involvement in the NATO-led mission to Afghanistan, followed by a general debate on the use of medical cannabis for the alleviation of health conditions. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 5 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 8 November will include:

MONDAY 8 NOVEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Environment Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Telecommunications (Security) Bill, followed by an Opposition day (7th allotted day—second part). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 9 NOVEMBER—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

At the conclusion of business on Tuesday 9 November, the House will rise for the November recess and return on Monday 15 November.

If I may, I would like to take this opportunity to correct a figure I gave last week that was out of date, for which I apologise. I said to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who is in her place, that 650,000 fewer children were living in workless households than in 2010; the latest figure, from 29 September, which I apologise for having missed, is 580,000. I am glad the hon. Lady is in her place and I have therefore had the opportunity to correct the information I gave her.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for giving the forthcoming business. On behalf of the many staff as well as colleagues who have asked to be able to plan for next year, will the Leader of the House please next week give the recess dates for 2022?

I am relieved that the motion on the report from the Standards Committee that was published this week into the conduct of a Member is in the business statement. If any Members have not yet read it, I urge them to keep an open mind and to read it before the motion is debated.

It was good to see that yesterday almost all the Cabinet took the Health Secretary's advice to wear masks, but I note that the Leader of the House did not; he still appears to think that a "convivial, fraternal spirit" will protect him from covid. Meanwhile, in the

real world covid rates are still high, and apparently largely unhindered by the £37 billion that the Government spent on their Test and Trace programme. According to the Public Accounts Committee report published yesterday, this was "muddled" and "overstated" and the expense "eye watering". It failed on its main objective to prevent lockdowns and get normality back, and just 14% of 691 million tests have been registered. So much for world-beating. Will the Leader of the House ask the Health Secretary, not a junior Minister, to come here and explain why the Government are wasting our constituents' money with crony contracts filling mates' pockets?

Yesterday, we had what I can only describe as the remainder of the Budget, given that we had had five days of Treasury announcements—we cannot really call them leaks—in the press. The Chancellor seems to have forgotten that the Government's own ministerial code says:

"When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament."

I know the Leader of the House has a very strong commitment to the primacy of Parliament, so will he—once again, I am afraid—please remind his colleagues that Parliament, not the press, is the place for policy announcements?

While I am on the subject of the ministerial code, Lord Geidt was appointed in April as the independent adviser on Ministers' interests, but six months later we still do not have an updated code, which we were expecting. Will the Leader of the House please confirm when that will be published?

We are days—hours now, really—away from what should and could be the most important environmental summit in history. As host nation in Glasgow, we have an incredible, one-time chance to change the course of history. To make the summit a success, the Government need to lead by example. They should be demonstrating ambition for a more hopeful future, a clean environment, warm homes, good jobs and protection for nature. Politicians from around the world are watching this Government's deeds and words and calibrating their ambitions accordingly, but unfortunately it seems that the Government are treating COP26 as nothing more than a photo opportunity.

Just last week, politicians from around the world will have seen the uninspiring sight of this Government voting for feeble legal limits on air pollution and less regulation for bee-killing pesticides, and just yesterday the Chancellor announced that he was slashing air passenger duty to incentivise short-haul domestic flights. That is embarrassing as we go into COP26. We should be projecting an open, optimistic, global vision to the world, yet the Government—working with the SNP Scottish Government, I am afraid to say—seem to be supporting new oilfields in the North sea. Will the Leader of the House ask the Business Secretary to come to the House and explain why the Government are saying that we must move beyond fossil fuels but meanwhile opening the new Cambo oilfield?

Finally, on COP26, I make this urgent plea, via the Leader of the House, to the Prime Minister and other world leaders in Glasgow: please, get this right. We cannot waste this opportunity to save our climate and save our planet.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The recess dates will be announced in the normal way, subject to the progress of Government business, but I am well aware that it is convenient for Members and staff to know as soon as possible.

I am grateful for the hon. Lady's approval of the standards debate. I, too, encourage Members to read the report; I think that is always essential. It is quite a long report, but the weekend is looming and that will be an opportunity to read it.

As regards masks, I remind the hon. Lady about the *Daily Mirror* party at the socialists' conference, which I have heard more about since last week. Not only was it a maskless-fest, where alcoholic beverages, which will probably be cheaper in the future thanks to the marvellous Budget yesterday, were imbibed, but Mr Speaker, I hear there was dancing—maskless dancing. Now, can you think? We are not doing that in here, are we, Mr Speaker? No dancing, I am glad to say, on the Floor of the House of Commons.

However, I would say that the Government guidance is absolutely clear: masks are not compulsory in workplaces, and masks are not compulsory when we are with people whom we regularly meet. It is a matter of personal choice. I would also, if I may, give a reassurance to the hon. Lady that there is the lateral flow test, which she was rather disobliging about. Having taken one—having taken more than one over the weeks and months that have gone past—I can assure her that I am negative and therefore I am not going to be spewing covid around the Chamber, because I have taken a negative lateral flow test. I do have a concern, obviously, as all of us do, to limit the spread of this disease. I think that that is just as safe a procedure to take.

As regards the contracts, it was of the utmost importance that things were rolled out swiftly. They were not given to mates; indeed, even Labour supporters, or companies associated with Labour supporters, got contracts. It had to be done quickly. Every criticism that is made of Test and Trace should be applied equally to the vaccine process; we see that the success of the vaccine process was dependent upon exactly the same processes, to do things quickly—to make decisions fast, to award contracts urgently—to ensure that we had a response to the crisis. That is what the Government did, it is what any wise Government would have done, and it is fortunate that the do-nothing socialists—the Captain Hindsights of socialism—were not in charge during the course of the pandemic.

The hon. Lady raises an important point, as you have Mr Speaker and as has the Chairman of Ways and Means, about information not being given to this House first. The “Ministerial Code” is absolutely clear that important announcements must be made to the House first. We have a right to expect that, as representatives of our constituents, and that is why we here: to hold the Government to account. There is sometimes a debate about what is important and occasionally, Mr Speaker, you and I have not taken the same view on importance. However, I can assure the House that after every business questions I write to every Secretary of State and other Cabinet Members on the issues that have been raised, so the point the hon. Lady makes will be raised with the Chancellor, as, I believe, Mr Speaker, it has been raised by you. It is a fundamental constitutional right that this House should be told things first, although I would note that there was lots in the Budget yesterday, including

the most important announcement of the cut in the withdrawal rate from 63p in the pound to 55p in the pound, which had not been whispered abroad before it was announced here.

The hon. Lady finished on the question of COP26. I set out once again what the Government's targets are, which I think the hon. Lady will find agreement with: to secure global net zero by the middle of the century and keep 1.5°C, or 2.7°F, within reach; adapt to protect communities and natural habitats; mobilise finance, whereby developed countries must make good on their promise to mobilise at least \$100 billion in climate finance per year by 2020; work together to finalise the Paris rulebook; and accelerate action to tackle the climate crisis through collaboration between Governments, businesses and civil society.

The Government's vision is one based on improving people's standards of living. That is what the Budget was about yesterday and it is what the green policy is about. It is not about cave dwelling. It is not hairshirt greenery. We are not becoming Adullamites. What we are in favour of is having higher standards of living based on the new technologies. All sorts of exciting things are happening, including with hydrogen, which will make that possible. There is not, I think, a market for going back to the stone age—some hon. Members may think I have never really emerged from the stone age—but we want to ensure that the standard of living of our constituents improves.

The hon. Lady rightly mentions air pollution. One of the great scandals of recent decades is that we promoted diesel in this country. The Labour Government, then in charge, promoted diesel, which led to tens of thousands of early deaths because of particulates. That was done on the encouragement of the European Union in support of German car manufacturers. It is one of the great scandals that has been put right by this Government. We have seen air quality improve since 2010.

As regards air passenger duty, it has gone up on the longest, greatest emitting flights, but of course we should be free to travel around our own United Kingdom, our own country. That is a perfectly right thing to do. We have to remember that the target for net zero is by 2050. We are going to need to use fossil fuels in the interim and it is fanciful to think otherwise. If we are going to use them, we want them to be economic. We need to ensure our constituents have a rising standard of living.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Yesterday, the Chancellor announced £300 million of support for children in the first 1,001 days of their lives. May we have a debate on the meaning of that phrase, bearing in mind that the excellent report by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), which informed the Chancellor's decision, refers to the first 1,001 days as being from conception to aged two?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by thanking my hon. Friend for the tremendous work she has done since her election in 2010 to support the family and all life from the point of conception through to the point of natural death? She is heroic in what she has done. The first 1,001 days is a very important staging post. The work of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire has brought that to people's attention. She has campaigned for and succeeded in making the

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

funding available. In terms of a debate, I am going to slightly cop out and point to the Budget debate that is carrying on later today, which will be a great opportunity to raise the issue further.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Leader of the House should be thoroughly embarrassed about his ridiculous comments from business questions last week, when he suggested that Tory MPs are protected from covid because they have

“a more convivial, fraternal spirit”. —[*Official Report*, 21 October 2021; Vol. 701, c. 945.]

It is so convivial that several of them are now off having caught covid, along with the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Whip of the Scottish National party.

Tory MPs are not immune. Staff and visitors are now obliged to wear face masks but MPs are not in a “Do as we say” edict. But progress has been made and my campaign to get them to mask up is beginning to bear fruit. More of them are actually starting to care about colleagues and members of staff by wearing a face mask, and I welcome that, but I note that the Leader of the House’s fizzog remains unadorned from this modest, disease-stopping piece of cloth. He has a perfectly good Union Jack face covering; for goodness’ sake, man, put it on! Be the Leader of the House, not the libertarian of the House.

I want to support you, Mr Speaker, in your campaign to make sure that important announcements are made in this House first. The pre-announcing of the Budget was an absolute disgrace, designed to soften up the press and the public. I like the idea of Ministers being forced to resign if they break the trust of Parliament. I suggested bringing them to the Bar of the House last week, but let us maybe have a debate and see what we could do. We could have a prize for the most creative and inventive sanction that could be applied to Ministers that break the trust of the House.

Lastly, COP comes to Scotland next week and our beautiful country will be on show to the world. Scotland leads the UK in renewables and climate change legislation and we will be a good host of the summit. The world will also see a nation ready to take its own place in the world. The Leader of the House knows that debate is coming soon. He knows it is coming. Let us get on with it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: One does like to think sometimes of what dinner must be like in the household of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), because everything is “a disgrace”, it is “an outrage”, it is “shocking”. The sound and fury that enthuses him whenever he gets to the Chamber allows no time for nuance, for things being degrees of acceptableness or not being favourable. It is always this absolute outrage, which fortunately, I answered entirely in my answer to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the shadow Leader of the House.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Following the recent conviction of the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) and the strong possibility of a by-election in the seat, the rumours are swirling in the fair county of Leicestershire that the previous incumbent may seek a return to this place. Given that he received a

six-month ban from the House of Commons in 2019 following the cocaine and rent boys scandal, which he avoided by standing down, will the Leader of the House give a statement to the House where, hopefully, he will confirm that if Mr Vaz were to return to this place, he would have to serve his punishment outstanding in full?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will confirm the precise opposite. The House agreed to a six-month suspension for Mr Vaz on 31 October 2019, but Parliament was then dissolved on 6 November for a general election. A suspension cannot carry across into a new Parliament, so that ended Mr Vaz’s suspension. The recall petition process was also terminated by the election, as provided for under section 13 of the Recall of MPs Act 2015. But this is right, because we are here by virtue of our electorate, and the electorate is free to send here whomsoever they choose. I know my hon. Friend will not be happy with that answer, but I remind him about John Wilkes and the Middlesex election. It has not always been the case that this House has acted wisely in whom it has sought to expel, but the electors have had a right to send that person back. Although this may be a difficult case and although this may be disagreeable to my hon. Friend, these constitutional principles are fundamentally important and should not be changed for individual cases.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the reference to a debate on 4 November about Afghanistan, but is he aware of reports that journalists in Afghanistan who have previously worked for the BBC are now subject to grave risks? A number of examples have been highlighted by the National Union of Journalists. One such example, Abdul Malik Asem, survived an attack after armed men opened fire on him at his sister’s home just a few days ago, injuring his 20-year-old nephew, who is seriously ill in hospital. Can we therefore have a debate in Government time to discuss what actions can be taken urgently to ensure that such journalists can be safely evacuated?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are doing what we can to help refugees from Afghanistan. I recently visited the RAF base at Brize Norton, whose staff have worked incredibly hard around the clock to evacuate people. People who are now able to get out of Afghanistan into other countries do have a route through. In the first year, the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme will welcome to the UK up to 5,000 vulnerable Afghans who have been forced to flee their country, with up to a total of 20,000 over a five-year period. The scheme will provide protection for vulnerable people and those identified as at risk, including women and girls and members of minority groups. The Government are doing what we can; there is a programme, and there is funding behind it.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Ystradgynlais Community Welfare Ground Association is working hard to raise £100,000 to secure a 50-year lease on the playing fields in Ystradgynlais, so that the rugby club and other community groups can continue to use the facility and grassroots Welsh rugby can continue to thrive. I will be submitting a bid to the UK Government’s community ownership fund and will urge Powys County Council to step in as well.

With Wales set to start its Autumn Internationals campaign on Saturday, will the Leader of the House, who I know has Welsh connections, wish Wales good luck against New Zealand? Will he consider granting time for a debate on how we can secure the future of Ystradgynlais Community Welfare Ground Association's playing fields?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted to wish Wales luck against New Zealand. I am looking forward to an heroic victory of our fellow countrymen that will inspire many across the country.

I also wish my hon. Friend every success in her campaign for funding for her rugby club, which I know is an important community facility. There are opportunities to apply for money, and she is very good at working out which ones to pursue. I cannot commit Her Majesty's Treasury, but I encourage my hon. Friend to keep on pushing. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, in your benignity, you might grant an Adjournment debate so that the issue may be discussed further.

Mr Speaker: Especially if they play rugby league as well.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In recent weeks, Bath and North East Somerset have had some of the highest covid rates in England, as the Leader of the House, my constituency neighbour, will know. Despite No. 10's claims to the contrary, experts have linked the rise in cases to the month-long error at the Immensa lab in Wolverhampton, which caused false negative test results. It has now been reported that the lab is still processing and profiting from travel PCR tests.

This is nothing short of a scandal. We need a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to explain why the Government are using these private companies to profit from testing our communities, when they operate with virtually no oversight and their failures could mean an increase in deaths.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There was obviously a failure in a testing centre; that is a serious matter, and it is something that the Department of Health and Social Care acted on. Buying in services is a perfectly normal and sensible thing for the health service to do, and has allowed the enormous amount of testing that has taken place. Right hon. and hon. Members may remember my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), the then Health Secretary, saying that we needed to get to 100,000 tests a day. We can now do far more than that—the availability is enormous. It is important, of course, that they be right, but where something went wrong, the Department of Health and Social Care has intervened.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, I raised the plight of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh. I thank my right hon. Friend for raising the matter with the Foreign Secretary.

This week, I refer to the notorious hate preacher Mizanur Rahman Azhari. Unbelievably, having been banned in Bangladesh and having fled for his safety, he has been invited to address the London Islamic conference this Sunday at the Royal Regency. I understand that he is in Qatar right now, attempting to gain entry to the

UK. Alternatively, he may be invited to stream online to people in this country his message of hatred against Jews and Hindus. Will the Leader of the House take action with the Home Secretary to make sure that that is not allowed to happen? Can we have a debate in Government time on what we can do to prevent these hate preachers from misinforming the vast majority of Muslims in this country, who are actually peaceful people?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point. It is crucial that the law is enforced. Stirring up hatred is, in certain circumstances, an offence for which people can be prosecuted, and it is right that that should happen. We do not want to allow into this country people who will stir up hatred. I will not comment on the individual case, because it is not for me to do so, but as a general rule we want to ensure that there is a sensible tone of debate and discussion, and that those who stir up hatred are fully deterred. I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last night many young women in Nottingham were having a "girls' night in" as part of the national protest against the epidemic of male violence that they face in bars and nightclubs. In particular, there are extremely worrying reports of spiking by injection. The issue was raised with the Leader of the House last week, and with the Prime Minister yesterday. Is it not time that we had a statement from the Home Secretary about what she is now doing to ensure that young women can live their lives without fear?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to raise this, because it is an issue of the greatest concern. Everyone should be able to go out and go about their lawful business feeling safe, and the fact that young women do not feel safe is a blot on the safety that we expect in this nation.

I assure the hon. Lady that these matters are taken extremely seriously by the Home Office and by the Home Secretary, who has asked the police for an update. The police are now conducting inquiries. Criminal offences must be investigated, and offenders must be charged and prosecuted. People who spike women's drinks should find themselves facing the full force of the law, women going out for drinks should feel safe, and bars have a strong responsibility to ensure the safety of their own premises.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): As everyone in the House will know, next week is Parliament Week, and I am very pleased and excited to be talking to my local Guides and Scouts and to pupils at Strand Primary Academy in Strand Street and Littlecoates Primary Academy. Great Grimsby sent two burgesses to the new model Parliament in 1295. Would the Leader of the House like to talk a little bit to young people in Great Grimsby, and across the UK, about the importance of our Parliament and our democracy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was not at the Parliament in 1295, I am sorry to say. I clearly missed a treat.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she is doing in Great Grimsby to highlight Parliament during Parliament week, which follows Hallowe'en. I do not know whether we should read anything into that; perhaps people will be tucking into pumpkin soup made from the leftover pumpkins.

It is so important that we engage everyone with Parliament and the work that we do. One thing that should always concern us, as hon. and right hon. Members, is who does not come to see us, and who does not know that they can seek redress of grievance through their Member of Parliament. Most of the time when something has gone wrong and we take it up on behalf of a constituent, it can be put right. We want to ensure that more people know that, and we want to encourage, for instance, the brilliant pupils in my hon. Friend's constituency to stand for Parliament so that they can go forth and become involved in the democratic process.

I shall certainly be active during Parliament Week, but although it is no competition, Mr Speaker, I have a feeling that you will be even more active than me.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Some important amendments have been tabled to the Elections Bill, which is due to come back to us on Report. They include new clause 1, which would give the House the chance to decide on lowering the voting age to 16. Will the Leader of the House revisit the programme motion to ensure that there is proper, protected time rather than a risk of the debate being squeezed and finishing at the moment of interruption? I think it important for the Bill, given its constitutional significance, to be given a full airing on the Floor of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think that one of our main tasks here—indeed, our main main task—is the scrutiny of legislation. Unfortunately, the House does not always seem to agree with me. I was slightly surprised that the Second Reading of the Judicial Review and Courts Bill fell slightly short, even though it had lost time because of the earlier debate on the remaining stages of the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill.

It ends up being a balance, depending on what Members want—how many urgent questions they ask for earlier in the day, for instance, and what statements are called. This goes back to the issue of making announcements to the Chamber first. We must strike a balance between the legislative business carried out by the House and the other important matters that are brought to it. So I am not unsympathetic, but I think that this is one of those things that are simply a question of balance, and for the House to decide for itself.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Can we have a debate on which is the true workers' party of the United Kingdom, given the Budget yesterday with the huge increase in the living wage of 6.6%, the reduction in the taper rate that in essence gives a tax cut to millions of lower earners, the fuel duty freeze and the 42% increase in the skills budget? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is the party on this side of the House that represents the workers of the United Kingdom?

Mr Rees-Mogg: For once, I am going to have to disappoint my right hon. Friend. We could not possibly have a debate on that, because there is nothing to debate. This is clearly the party that supports the workers and that has taken steps to improve their living standards, whereas all that the Opposition do is support the trade unions and the union barons. Labour is the party of the barons; we are the party of the workers. My right hon. Friend's campaigns over the years to save motorists billions of pounds through a freeze in fuel duty have put more money into people's pockets year in, year out and continue to do so. People may say that it has cost the Treasury money, but actually it has helped the economy to grow, boom and flourish and has allowed us our motoring freedom. I commend my right hon. Friend for what he does, and yes, we are the workers' party. There is nothing to debate.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Following on from the Leader of the House's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), is he aware that many Afghanis who supported our armed forces and who have fled to the UK under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and other schemes are facing long waits for biometric residency permits? Family members of my constituents are finding themselves stuck in bridging hotels for months because local authorities are unable to see whether they have any funding to house them. Please can we press Ministers on this, because those people have suffered enough already?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am more than willing to take up individual cases, as I have done, of people who do not seem to be getting the answers that they should get. That is one of the roles of this House. There is a big programme, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Easington earlier, and that will continue. It is also important to ensure that the right information is gathered and the right processes are followed, but if the hon. Lady would like to point out any particular cases to my office, I will take them up with the Home Office for her.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), I met representatives of UK Fisheries. They expressed a number of concerns regarding the work of the Marine Management Organisation, the amount of red tape they have to deal with and the ongoing trade negotiations with Greenland and other nations. Could my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate on the work of the Marine Management Organisation and on the wider interests of the fishing industry?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There has already been an urgent question on fishing, and it ranged quite widely. This is a matter of concern to the Government, and we are keen to support the fishing industry. This tempts me to say that this is obviously the right "place" for such a debate because we are the "sole" of democratic engagement in this House—[Interruption.] Somebody got it, slowly but surely! Although I cannot promise a debate in Government time, I think that raising the issue in a Backbench Business debate would command widespread support.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Two community councils in my constituency, Cambuslang and Halfway, have created the Cambuslang

COP26 campaign. It encourages pupils from local schools to pick up 26 bags of litter for 26 days in the run-up to COP26. It has been a great initiative, and it tackles one of my biggest bugbears: litter. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating them and schedule a debate in Government time to celebrate these community-led initiatives and their positive impact?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What a brilliant thing for the schools in the hon. Lady's constituency to be doing. Yes, I congratulate them wholeheartedly. To pick up 26 bags of litter is a real effort, and to do it on 26 days is a consistent effort. It is clearly not just been done for a quick photo opportunity; it is being done as a real effort to beautify a beautiful country. I wish them well on that, and I hope that other schools will follow in their footsteps.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Although bonfire night is fast approaching, many of my constituents are plagued by fireworks being let off at all hours of the night throughout the calendar year. I have even had it reiterated to me that fireworks are often used as a signal for drugs being dropped. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the licensing provisions on the sale of fireworks and to have a frank discussion on how local enforcement can clamp down on this antisocial behaviour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Unfortunately I find myself in a degree of disagreement with my hon. Friend. I think fireworks are a little bit of harmless fun. People enjoy them, and we should not take every enjoyment out of people's lives with endless licensing and regulation. Conservatives are meant to be cautious about excessive regulation and giving power to bureaucracies. I am afraid I am unsympathetic to his request.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Can we have a debate on the Government's environmental illiteracy and the impact on people in Bristol South and indeed Somerset? This morning people can buy a flight from Bristol to Edinburgh for £29.99, but the train journey is £97.20. Individuals in Bristol South are making their contribution towards COP26, but the Government are not making theirs. Reducing air passenger duty and the delays to the Portishead line mean the Government are not helping, and that is something we need to debate.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will continue my disagreeable line, as I disagree with the hon. Lady, too. I sometimes find myself in a surprising degree of agreement with her on local matters but, no, this Government want to keep the cost of living down. We want people to enjoy travelling around our great country. If it is £29.99 to fly from Bristol to Edinburgh or Glasgow, that is great for our constituents, and I hope they enjoy their trip.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): May I suggest that resilience is an issue for the Leader of the House to consider? We have considerable resilience issues in this country, as we have seen with personal protective equipment and vaccines. We are now seeing it with energy supply, and we see it all the time with flooding and coastal defence issues on the Isle of Wight. Although it is not a specific departmental responsibility, resilience is a key overall responsibility of the Government. I will be

talking to the Backbench Business Committee about a resilience debate but, given the work being done by the Government on resilience, will the Leader of the House also keep an eye on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a very important point. The civil contingencies secretariat in the Cabinet Office makes preparations for the unexpected. The difficulty is that the unexpected we expect sometimes turns out not to be the unexpected that eventually happens, and therefore the planning does not always directly answer the difficulty that arises. The more one thinks about it, the more one debates it and the more one works out what the risks are, the better prepared one is likely to be.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This weekend will mark 140,000 people dying from covid. Every public health measure taken helps save lives. As a result, it is crucial that face masks are worn, social distancing is maintained and high hygiene standards are met, in addition to testing. Will the Leader of the House talk to his director of public health to learn more about public health measures so that he can model them? Can we also have an urgent statement on Monday so that we can discuss the tragedy that is still unfurling?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Nobody denies the great tragedy of 140,000 deaths from covid and the sadness for every single one of those families and for the friends of those who have died. There is a plan B, which includes going back to masks, but we also have to get back to normal. That is what the vaccines and lateral flow tests have allowed us to do. We have to ensure that life returns to normal and that we carry on with our business.

We also have to deal with the other consequences of the various lockdowns: the mental health issues, the disruption to children's health and the economic consequences. Lower economic growth has health consequences, too, as is well known and well established. Plan B is there if things get worse during the winter, but we should stick to plan A. That is the right thing to do. Normalisation is where we want to get to.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): We all know that the production of single-use plastics produces a variety of toxic emissions that pollute our environment. To combat this, Rowena Academy in my constituency has stopped using single-use plastics. I hope schools across the country will follow that move. Following the "Panorama" episode on the 100 billion plastic bottle problem, and with COP26 just around the corner, does the Leader of the House believe that we should follow the lead set by Rowena Academy and stop using single-use plastics in the Chamber?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important issue and congratulate Rowena Academy on the work it is doing. His specific request is a matter for the House authorities, but it is important to limit single-use plastics. I have never been a great one for plastic coffee cups; I think a nice china cup, preferably with a saucer underneath it, is infinitely preferable, and I encourage other right hon. and hon. Members to think the same. Thinking of Hallowe'en, we should all say to our children that when they go round trick or treating, they should use a paper bag, rather than a

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

plastic bag, to collect their Haribos—although I sometimes think that the quantities and the generosity of neighbours are such that they will need hessian mail sacks to carry the booty away.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Across my constituency in North Ayrshire and Arran, and indeed throughout Scotland, many householders are living in dread of bonfire night, as it means fireworks causing widespread disruption and distress to communities, the elderly and pets. While the use of fireworks is a devolved matter, control of the regulation of the sale of fireworks is reserved to the UK Government. The Leader of the House indicated earlier today that he is opposed to tighter regulation of fireworks; will he make a statement setting out why he believes the Scottish Parliament is apparently unfit to regulate the sale of fireworks in Scotland, so we can properly deal with the safety hazards and antisocial misuse of fireworks in Scotland at source, by restricting their sale?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I say to the hon. Lady: don't be such a killjoy. It is fun having bonfire night. We will be having fireworks in West Harptree; we will even have a Guy put on a bonfire and it will go up in flame. It will be fun for the children and even for the adults, who may sip a glass of mulled cider while watching this going on. We do not want to be a Parliament of the kind that Oliver Cromwell would have enjoyed, cracking down on every possible bit of fun that people have, so no, let us keep on enjoying our fireworks and have a jolly time on 5 November. Madam Deputy Speaker:

“Remember, remember, the Fifth of November
Gunpowder treason and plot
I see no reason why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.”

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): As a Member new to the House, I did not know Sir David Amess for as long as others, but when we worked together on the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, I got to experience the warmth and kindness that others have talked about. After his tragic killing, I saw that he used to hold an annual tea party for 100-year-olds in his constituency; I am going to try to do the same, as my way of honouring his kindness to me. Will the Leader of the House, and perhaps the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), meet me to discuss how we could support Members throughout the country to do the same to honour Sir David?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That would be a very fine tribute to our late hon. Friend, and I thank my hon. Friend for his tribute to Sir David. I would very much enjoy having a meeting with my hon. Friend, because that would be a good thing to do. It is beneficial to involve the elderly in society more, and to have a tea party for centenarians who have probably done so much for their country is a noble cause.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House consider providing time for a debate on the terrible situation facing refugees fleeing Afghanistan? The resettlement scheme must be opened as soon as possible, with the relevant mechanisms in place to ensure

that religious or belief minorities who live in fear of their lives after the Taliban takeover receive adequate assistance, support and priority in the scheme, and Government aid for other countries to assist with the influx of refugees from Afghanistan should be given when our Government are certain that such assistance will reach those who are at risk.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As so often, the hon. Gentleman raises an issue of concern across the House, which fits in with concerns expressed by several other Members. I have already mentioned the fact that the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme will welcome more than 20,000 people over a five-year period. The scheme will provide protection for vulnerable people. The Home Office will announce further details, including eligibility criteria, in due course. I will of course take the matter up with the Home Secretary after this session. The amount of humanitarian aid is being doubled to £286 million this year, plus £30 million of life-saving aid for Afghanistan's neighbouring countries to support new and existing refugees and host communities, as part of the Government's effort to support regional stability. Things are being done, then, but I understand that there is a feeling that they should be done more urgently.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): This weekend, we will be unveiling a plaque to commemorate Cuthbert Taylor, a boxer from Merthyr Tydfil, who was a victim of the British Boxing Board of Control's colour bar rule, which prevented boxers from competing for professional titles because of the colour of their skin. This blatantly racist, discriminatory and shameful policy prevented many people from achieving their potential and, unbelievably, the British Boxing Board of Control has yet to apologise. Will the Leader of the House encourage the British Boxing Board of Control to apologise and finally expunge this racist stain from British boxing, and will he find Government time to debate this historical wrong?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I find myself in complete agreement with the hon. Gentleman. It is not something that I was aware of. I was not aware of Cuthbert Taylor, but that he should have been banned for his colour at any point in our history is simply monstrous, and any organisation that was involved with that ought to try to right a wrong. As it is a very specific issue, it is very suitable for an Adjournment debate, but as it is a very serious issue I hope it will be an Adjournment debate in the Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The prize for perseverance and patience goes to Olivia Blake.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Parents and carers up and down the country will be really worried about what climate catastrophe will mean for young people. Ahead of COP26, will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the great work of Voices for Action, a group of mums and children from Hallam Primary School who have recorded a song to celebrate COP26 and to highlight the issues that worry mums?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What a pleasure it is to congratulate Voices for Action and mothers and children getting together to develop a song. I do not know the song. I think it was St Winifred's school choir that sang, “There's

No One Quite Like Grandma”, and we know the power that song can have, particularly when it involves small children. May I suggest that the hon. Lady intervenes on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who, because of his responsibilities, knows a great deal more than I do about environmental matters, and who may be able to give her more information?

Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 27 October).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2022-23.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

11.52 am

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I will begin, if I may, by congratulating the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as it is the first time that we have faced each other across the Dispatch Box since the birth of his new baby. Many congratulations to him. If he needs some representation to make sure that he gets his paternity leave, I am available to help.

I will begin this debate on a point of consensus. We have a Government who have been in power for 11 years. They have been 11 years of low growth, stagnant wages and falling living standards. I am old enough to remember when this characterisation of our economy was seen as controversial, but at his party conference, the Prime Minister said:

“We have had...10 years of flatlining wages”.

The question at the heart of this debate is whether the Government truly recognise the error of their ways. Does the Budget help to tackle the deep inequalities we face, including the immediate cost of living crisis? Does it support our businesses so that they can deliver the good jobs and decent wages that we need? And does it create the long-term partnership between the public and private sectors to create the jobs of the future, in particular in zero carbon? I am afraid that the answer on all three counts is no.

Let me start with the immediate cost of living crisis facing so many families. Less than 24 hours since the Budget was delivered, it is unravelling because of the chasm between the claims of Ministers and the reality faced by working people. Listening to the Chancellor yesterday, it was clear that he is living on a totally different planet. He told us that he would deliver an age of optimism, but when we take off the Instagram filter, all he offers is an age of stagnation: low wages, low growth, high taxes—more lost Tory years. These are the facts that the Chancellor did not tell us yesterday, but they have emerged this morning.

This morning, the Resolution Foundation said:

“Real wages are set to fall again next year”.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies tells us that, over the next year, a median earner will find their take-home pay falling by £180 a year in real terms. Paul Johnson, the director of the IFS, says that the outlook for living standards is

“awful... High inflation, rising taxes, poor growth keeping living standards virtually stagnant for another half a decade.”

[Edward Miliband]

In fact, the IFS estimates that, on the numbers published yesterday, real wages in 2026 will still be lower than they were in 2008. For all the boasts of the Chancellor, the Prime Minister and others, all that the British people are facing under their Government is squeezed wages and living standards, as far as the eye can see.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that, on top of the trend of low wages, it is doubly hurtful that working families will be faced with increasing electricity and gas bills, with no relief on that, rising food prices, and potentially a difficult Christmas, with possible supply shortages and a lack of supply of Christmas presents?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend is completely right and I will come to that point in a moment. The Government will no doubt have all kinds of excuses, but this is a sin of commission, not just omission, in the sense that the Government are actually doing things to make the problem worse.

The problem is that the Chancellor could not bring himself to admit any of this yesterday. Here is the issue: it is not just that he did not say any of this, but it is like the Government actually believe their own rhetoric, and the Budget is the result. Yesterday we saw raid upon raid on the living standards of working people: council tax hikes, hidden in the Budget document—not announced by the Chancellor; a stealth raid on the self-employed worth £1.7 billion over the coming five years—not announced by the Chancellor; and of course the national insurance hike on ordinary families confirmed.

Maybe I am a bit old fashioned in this respect, but let us remember that this is a direct breach of the promise that every Conservative Member made to their constituents at the general election. What did they call it in their manifesto? Alongside a picture of the Prime Minister—drawing on his long and unblemished record of truth telling and candour—it said:

“My Guarantee... We will not raise the rate of income tax, VAT or National Insurance.”

I look forward to them all explaining at the next general election why they have broken that promise. The hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) is nodding. Perhaps he would like to explain why they have broken their promise.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I have been goaded into intervening by the right hon. Gentleman, who asks a very direct question. I think the honesty will be that we will say that we wanted to protect the public finances, and that post covid, given the choice of either borrowing more money or asking those with the broadest shoulders to bear the burden to cover those costs, we decided that we should do the latter.

Edward Miliband: It is certainly not those with the broadest shoulders who are being affected, and I thought the reason that the Government raised taxes was for social care. It is yet another guarantee from the Prime Minister that is not worth the paper that it is written on.

The IFS tells us this morning that taxes will be £3,000 more per household than when the Prime Minister came to power. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said in her excellent speech yesterday, this is about the choices that the Government are making. Also buried in the Red Book is that the Chancellor saw fit to cut taxes on the banks by more than £1 billion because he was so worried about the burden they were facing, just like last year when he made the choice to cut stamp duty for second home owners because he was so worried about them. He was obviously less concerned about the burden of higher energy prices facing millions of British people, because he refused to cut VAT on fuel as he should have done.

In a way, the most shameful part of the Budget is the Chancellor's refusal to reverse his £1,000 cut to universal credit, which hit 6 million families. For all the smoke and mirrors, this morning we know the truth about universal credit. According to the Resolution Foundation, three quarters of families on universal credit will be worse off, even after the changes to the taper. It says that the taper changes

“will be overshadowed by last month's £6 billion cut to entitlement: three-quarters of families on UC will lose more from the £20 cut than they gain from the Budget changes. Even if we also take into account the... National Living Wage, the poorest fifth of households will still be an average of £280 a year worse off overall.”

The fact that Conservative Members were wildly cheering a policy yesterday that sees millions of working families far worse off shows, I am afraid, that they do not get it either.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): When I wander down Stockton High Street, I see the signs of poverty everywhere. I see young people with no hope on their faces and no hope of getting a job. I see people who probably have to shop in the charity shops because it is pretty obvious that they have not been able to buy any new clothes for a while. I see families going from discount store to discount store to buy one item because it happens to be a couple of pence cheaper than it is elsewhere. Did my right hon. Friend see anything in the Budget to correct that?

Edward Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. That is why the boosterism of the Chancellor saying that it is an age of optimism will ring so hollow for so many people in our country.

You cannot build a new economy when you are hitting working families with a triple whammy of higher national insurance, higher prices and cuts to universal credit. That is more of the same. It is the Conservative economic model—year upon year upon year of stagnation for the British people.

Let me next come to the question of support for business in the Budget—the direct responsibility of the Business Secretary. Our businesses have been heroic during the covid crisis, closing their doors when asked and stepping up when they needed to. But while the economy may have reopened, the crisis is not over for so many of them. They face debts incurred during covid. They face the costs of the supply chain crisis. The Office for Budget Responsibility is very interesting on that, because of course there is a global dimension to it but there is definitely a British dimension too. They face the

failure to plan for the changes arising as a result of Brexit—the OBR is very informative on this—and they face the energy price crisis.

Against this backdrop, I say gently to the Business Secretary that, as he will know, many of our businesses feel that the Government are engaged in finger pointing rather than finding solutions, with haulage firms told it is all their fault, when they warned the Government for months about the impending HGV crisis; those in the manufacturing industry—briefed against, not, to be fair, by him but by the Treasury—told that they are running their businesses badly because energy costs are soaring; and exporters tearing their hair out about the red tape of the trade agreement with the EU but told they just need to get their act together. What businesses want most of all, as he will know, is not to have a war with the Government but for their voice to be heard.

To be fair to the Business Secretary, a few weeks ago he did try to act to hear the voice of those facing the most acute short-term challenge—energy-intensive industries facing the energy price crisis. He knows that this is no ordinary situation. Our industries are facing not just the normal differential of price with our competitors but differentials far, far higher. I have met the Steel Council; he has met the Steel Council. He knows how tough it is. We know that he knows how tough it is because, to be fair, he told us two weeks ago how bad things were and said that he was talking to the Treasury. The Treasury was not very polite in return. He is chuckling from a sedentary position; I am on his side on this one. The next day, having obviously decided that he did not like being briefed against, he announced—I had my dealings with the Treasury when I was in government but I do not remember ever quite doing this—that he had made a formal request to the Treasury for support for energy-intensive industries. He was taking a stand.

That was on Monday 12 October, more than two weeks ago. On that day, a source told the BBC, rather encouragingly, that

“everyone in government understands the importance of this situation. We need to solve this quickly.”

It might have been the Prime Minister, who was on holiday at the time, or somebody else. That created a real expectation that this Budget would take action on this pressing issue that the Business Secretary has been publicly championing. So where is the help for our glass industry, our steel industry, our chemicals industry and our ceramics industry? These are some of the most important jobs in our country, valued in communities across all regions and nations of the UK. Does this not speak volumes about the Treasury’s—and, I am afraid, the Government’s—wanton disregard for some of the most foundational industries in our country?

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is also important that the House remembers that 3 million people have still been completely excluded and forgotten by this Government since March last year. There was nothing for them in yesterday’s Budget. They have been neglected yet again.

Edward Miliband: That is a very important point. The championing of ExcludedUK is a very important issue, and my hon. Friend is right to point it out.

This is about choices. Amazon gets help from the super-deduction, but our energy intensives are left out in the cold. I hope that in his reply, the Business

Secretary will tell us where things stand for the energy-intensive industries, because they have been in touch with me saying, “What is going on? What is happening?” There is just complete silence from the Chancellor.

Let me talk about our high street businesses, because they face higher national insurance and business rates. I welcome some of the short-term measures in yesterday’s Budget, but it is not unfair to say that fundamental reform has been ducked yet again. The CBI said this in its Budget response yesterday:

“But the hard truth is that wholesale reform to unlock investment was rejected today. The Government missed the opportunity to truly reform a business rates system that diminishes Britain’s high streets and factories.”

I was quite mystified yesterday, because the Chancellor attacked the idea of fundamental reform of business rates, a system with a genuinely level playing field between traditional high streets and internet businesses. Four successive Tory manifestos have promised precisely that reform: 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019.

When the Business Secretary was a humble Back Bencher—I think he was writing “Britannia Unchained” at this point—he was pamphleteering. I am not against pamphleteering; I have done some of it myself. He was a Back Bencher with his ideas, and he said we need

“a system that is fair for both traditional and internet companies.”

He is now the Business Secretary. Why does he not deliver it? He knows, because he talks to the business community a lot, that this is a massive issue for our high street businesses. They rightly say, “Look at the burden on us and look at the burden on tech businesses. Look at the unfairness.” That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West is so right to champion this issue.

The longer-term issue we face is how to create the growing economy that we need. Not for the first time, the Government talk a good game. We have the branding of the Budget. We know that the Chancellor is incredibly keen on branding, and his own personal branding more than anything. The Government are a bit of a sideline. It is more Rishi branding than Government branding, I think it is fair to say. There are some knowing looks from Members on the Government Benches. The Rishi branding of the Budget is the “plan for growth”. I have to say that a plan for growth that has growth of 1.3% at the end of the Parliament is not much of a plan. Growth will be just 1.7% when the economy returns to trend. That is woeful by historical standards. It is the biggest challenge we face as a country. This is an important point, because when people wonder how the Government manage to combine the highest taxes for 60 years and public services that are creaking, the terrible growth performance of our economy is a significant part of the answer.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Did the right hon. Gentleman, like me, also miss any announcement that points to the transformation to the green economy and green jobs?

Edward Miliband: The hon. Lady is completely right about that. She anticipates my next point brilliantly; it is a useful segue. If we want to understand why growth is so anaemic, she is right that we need look no further than the Chancellor’s failure to seize the opportunities for green growth. This is an important point: the prudent

[Edward Miliband]

and responsible economic call—I suspect the Business Secretary agrees—for economic growth is to invest at scale in the transition to a zero-carbon economy. Let us be honest, it is now a completely open secret that the problem is that the Chancellor is not a believer, and it showed yesterday. As we prepare to host the most important international summit ever on climate change, as delegates gather from all around the world, and as the eyes are on Britain, what did he unveil as his flagship measure yesterday? To cut air passenger duty for domestic flights. You literally could not make it up. People want good and affordable rail services, but the plan for rail seems to have been postponed again, and instead there will be 400,000 more domestic flights as a result of that decision. Once again, that shows that the Treasury is not signed up to the agenda.

I am such a nerd that I was reading the OBR report last night and there is an interesting and illuminating bit on, I think, page 176—Members can check—which says, in OBR language:

“the...costs involved in getting the rest of the way”—

to net zero—

“remain significant and their apportionment between businesses, households, and government...remains largely unclear. This leaves the costs associated with the transition to net zero as a major source of longer-term fiscal risk.”

Let me underline that point for the House. The July 2021 OBR report, which for the nerds among us is brilliant, and which I strongly recommend to Members as bedtime reading—Madam Deputy Speaker is laughing at me, or perhaps with me—warned of the danger of not acting on the climate and of debt climbing to eye-watering levels as a result. When my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West said yesterday that debt would rise to 300%, I noticed a Conservative Member at the back look at his hon. Friend and say, “Oh that can’t be right,” but that is what it says. The interesting thing about that report is that it warns not just about the danger of not acting, but about the danger of delay. It says that delaying action on the climate by a decade will double the cost of the transition as we lock in high-carbon choices.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman share my disappointment that the Budget had so little for the potentially huge industry for the UK of offshore floating wind energy? He talks about delay. If we delay, we will lose out to other countries in that race, and they will not show any mercy on that front.

Edward Miliband: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We have been successful in offshore wind generation, and it is right to acknowledge that. The ground was laid by the last Labour Government, but I will leave that to one side. We have been successful at generating the wind energy, but not the jobs. He is completely right that we have not delivered for many people when it comes to jobs.

As I was saying, not acting increases the cost, so the prudent responsible choice is to invest. I will mention some key sectors, because again, there has been a deafening silence. I come back to the steel industry, which is such a litmus test. It needs about £6 billion of investment to get to net zero by 2035. The view is shared on both sides

of the House that it needs to get to net zero and that it is a foundational industry that we need and that is incredibly important to communities across the country. There are 20 demonstration projects around Europe but none here at the moment. It requires a partnership of the public and private sectors and needs both sides to invest. There is a crucial role for the Government in that.

We have set out a commitment of up to £3 billion over a decade to create that partnership with the steel industry so it can make the transition and we can keep those good jobs with good wages that are vital to many communities. It is a test of us as a House of Commons.

The Government talk about a £250 million clean steel fund, but even that has still not been delivered. I hope that it is still Government policy, but it seems to be in the balance and might have been got rid of. That is not good enough. The Treasury has to understand that unless we invest in steel, automotive and hydrogen, we will fall behind in the global race, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): You are clearly talking about the tension between the costs of going too late or too soon in terms of efficiencies. Do you agree that you might have more credibility—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman please refer to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) as the right hon. Gentleman, not “you”? When someone says “you” in this House, they mean the Chair. We have to start getting that right; it is unprofessional not to.

Dr Mullan: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that he would have more credibility on the issue if he had not backed Labour’s 2030 net zero target, which even his own unions did not support? He has no credibility on that point.

Edward Miliband: That is definitely the Whips Office’s talking point. The reality is—[*Interruption.*] I will tell them: our last manifesto said that

“the substantial majority of our emissions reductions”

should happen by 2030, and that is absolutely right. We should be going faster and we should not be delaying. The interesting point is that delay is wrong not just for the climate, but economically. That is the brilliant platform on which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West, the green shadow Chancellor, is standing. We will fall behind if we do not act, and I suspect that, in his heart of hearts, the Business Secretary knows it.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): On the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about credibility, I have sat on two north-east Labour councils, Darlington Borough Council and Durham County Council. When the Conservatives were in charge in Darlington, Labour wanted the target to be 2030. When Labour was in charge in Durham, it wanted the target to be 2050. Is there consistency in Labour party policy or not?

Edward Miliband: It is completely consistent, yes.

Let me turn from industry to retrofit and insulation. Of all the things that were missing from the Budget and that I thought the Treasury would have been persuaded about, the one that is as close as we can get to a fiscal, economic, climate no-brainer is a proper 10-year retrofit and insulation plan. If we invest, we cut bills and carbon emissions, make ourselves less exposed to the international gas market, and create tens of thousands of jobs. I do not get why it has not happened. All we get are piecemeal schemes and no proper plan. I will not even go into the fiasco of the green homes grant—emissions from buildings are higher than they were in 2015.

Alex Cunningham: My right hon. Friend will recollect our discussions about the tremendous success of the warm zones project at the turn of the century. We went door to door, day in, day out, to install thousands of measures that saved consumers a tremendous amount as well as reducing emissions. Does he agree that we need that systematic approach if we are going to crack the problem?

Edward Miliband: I completely agree. I actually take a crumb of comfort from the Business Secretary, when he defends the sorry saga of the green homes grant, pointing to some of the money given to local authorities and what they did. That is what we need at scale—locally led, house by house, street by street. We are miles behind other countries.

On green investment, a philosophical difference is emerging. I worry that the Government will increasingly leave individuals and industries on their own to face the costs. I do not think that is true of the whole of Government, but the Treasury remains a fundamental block to the green investment that we need. There was a whole saga about its net zero review and the fact that it emphasises short-term costs rather than long-term gains. Frankly, that is a big problem for our country.

Jamie Stone *rose*—

Edward Miliband: I will make some progress and finish.

Labour would deliver a climate investment pledge of £28 billion extra every year for the rest of the decade. That is an investment in bringing down energy bills; delivering affordable public transport and cleaner air; and backing British industries with a real plan for jobs and wages. That is what real action on the climate emergency and industrial strategy looks like.

Given the cost of living crisis, the immediate issues facing business, and the need for longer-term investment, this is not the Budget we require. It does not make choices to help working people; it hits working people. It cuts taxes for the banks but raises taxes for workers. It deserts key British industries and it fails to invest, as we need to, in the green transition. If the big challenge of the future is how we build an economic model that rights the wrongs of the past, this Government cannot be the answer and nor was this Budget.

12.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): It is great to see you in the Chair again, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband)

for his congratulations on my becoming a father for the first time at the youthful age of—well, I will not say what my age is. I am pleased that that has happened.

I am also pleased to see the right hon. Member, in his usual way, give a comprehensive speech that lasted for nearly half an hour. The downside was that I had heard it all before. I was particularly gratified to see him at Prime Minister's questions. It was great: a trip down memory lane. I remember being a humble Back Bencher, as he put it, when he did that same thing at PMQs. There was that same litany of doom and gloom, and it will prove no more effectual in 2021 than it did in 2015, when many of my hon. Friends were returned with enhanced majorities.

The Budget was an extremely successful occasion. It demonstrated clearly that there is continuing support for the economy. It demonstrated the immense, unusual and unprecedented interventions in the economy because of the dangers we faced from the global pandemic. The right hon. Member will remember that only a year ago people were prophesising that we would have record unemployment or early-1980s levels of unemployment. What happened? Because of the Chancellor's interventions, well-crafted policy and the plan for growth, there was no employment disaster. Unemployment is very low by historical standards. The economy is growing faster than it has done for decades, and none other than the OECD says that the UK will be the fastest growing country among the G20 next year.

Catherine West: May I congratulate the Secretary of State on the happy news in his family? How many businesses does he think will go out of business this autumn because they owe the Government money from covid loans, cannot pay their energy costs and are worried about the weight that the increase in wages from the national minimum wage and national insurance contributions will put on their 12-month forecasts?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I thank the hon. Lady for her congratulations. However, I am surprised that she should express concern about the increase in the national living wage. I never thought I would live to see a Labour MP denigrate and decry that. We want to see a higher-wage, higher-productivity-based economy, and we are working hard to ensure that.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Let me make some progress. To intervene so soon after an intervention is unusual. I will come back to the hon. Member.

During the pandemic, people and businesses have demonstrated remarkable levels of resilience. I fully agree with the right hon. Member for Doncaster North when he says that business has been heroic and people have been heroic. I am also immensely proud of the work done by the British Business Bank, for which my Department is responsible. Its schemes supported people and our economy to the tune of £80 billion, with Government-backed finance for 1.7 million businesses. That comes to the point made by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). When it comes to the fundamentals of the economy, the Government are securing our economy and getting Britain back to work.

[Kwasi Kwarteng]

Contrary to all the prophecies of doom and gloom that recently came from Opposition Members, the Office for Budget Responsibility now expects our recovery to be quicker and the economy to return to its pre-covid level at the turn of this coming year. As the OECD and the International Monetary Fund show, there is considerable expectation that the UK will rebound strongly. In that context, our task turns to ensuring that our people and our businesses have ability and opportunity. They will not simply look back and complain about the situation that we have come through. They are positive and forward-looking. They believe in their country—unlike many Opposition Members, dare I say. We will achieve a strong rebound not by splashing cash indiscriminately as a number of Labour Chancellors did, dare I say, but by spending taxpayers' money wisely to foster an environment that encourages innovation and growth.

I turn to the net zero agenda. I fully appreciate that many years ago the right hon. Member for Doncaster North was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change—I do not think I was in the House at that time—and I know that he shares the view that net zero is absolutely one of the most important strategic objectives of any Government.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If the climate emergency really is the most important thing for the Government, why did the Budget not mention it once?

Kwasi Kwarteng: It did mention a huge amount of investment in the net zero agenda. The hon. Member should know by heart the Prime Minister's 10-point plan, and that was 100% backed by yesterday's Budget.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Will the Chancellor say in his speech at COP next week that, in his Budget, he made high-carbon domestic flights cheaper?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I gently suggest that the hon. Member looks at the work of the Jet Zero Council, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I have been pushing. We want the UK to be the head of very low carbon emission flying. I am very enthusiastic about that. We will be leaders in that technology, and I do not think it makes sense simply to penalise and turn our backs on aviation. We should be trying to enhance aviation and decarbonise it, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I have to make progress. I know that hon. Members are springing up and down because they wish to make interventions, but I am sure they will be making speeches later in the debate.

We on the Government Benches understand what has sadly eluded the grasp of Opposition Members: we must create competition. We must back business and incentivise innovation in a free-market economy, not go back to a state-run, Soviet-style command economy.

The Labour party manifesto has been mentioned. I remember reading it. Like the right hon. Member for Doncaster North, I am somewhat of an insomniac—more so now, I dare say—so sometimes I have to read lots of these things. It said that we should get to net zero by 2030. As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and

Nantwich (Dr Mullan) observed, even the unions that Labour is supposed to represent and that bankrolled it, rejected that proposal as completely unrealistic and destructive to our economy. That manifesto said not only that we should get to net zero by 2030, which is completely unrealistic, but that the state would own 51% of offshore wind farms. Imagine that. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said that, as Chancellor, he would nationalise 51% of offshore wind. I remember speaking to the industry, and it said, "Why on earth would we want to own 49% of what the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington owns 51%?" It was a completely absurd and unrealistic policy. On the green agenda and the net zero agenda, the Government have far more to offer the country than a souped-up, half-heated, Soviet-style approach to solving what is a fundamentally difficult problem.

For one year—so far—businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors will get a 50% discount on business rates. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor decided that the business rates system should be more responsive and agile, with more frequent revaluations taking place every three years. That is a good, positive step that will give much more flexibility to the system.

I am also delighted to reflect on how the Budget told a great story about innovation. Innovation is a huge driver of productivity and progress, and unleashing innovation is a fundamental duty for my Department and for me as Secretary of State. We have launched Help to Grow, which will drive small and medium-sized enterprise productivity. We have also started a new co-investment venture capital fund that will be used to drive innovation and provide scale-up capital for businesses in need of that. The Budget confirms the eligibility criteria for our new scale-up visa, which all businesses I speak to, and small businesses in particular, say they need help in pursuing. We will unlock greater private sector innovation. We are reforming research and development tax reliefs to support modern research methods and to focus our minds specifically on the problem and challenge of innovation. Increasing R&D investment to £22 billion will confirm the UK as a science and technology superpower. We must make sure our small businesses, which after all are the heart of the British economy, have the support they need, which is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor strengthened the British Business Bank in yesterday's Budget, increasing its regional financing programmes to £1.6 billion and expanding its coverage, helping innovative businesses across the country get greater access to the finance that they need.

Catherine West: I welcome the British Business Bank and the fact that it has a regional focus, but what advice does the right hon. Gentleman have for businesses that are still in debt due to the covid loans they are struggling to pay back and therefore do not want to take on any more debt?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady makes a sensitive point. Nobody engaged in business wants to take on unsustainable levels of debt, but she will appreciate that the credit was offered in totally unusual circumstances; my right hon. Friend the Chancellor had to make decisions very quickly and we used the BBB to distribute that credit. No one is suggesting—not even anyone in

the hon. Lady's party—that the interventions and credit that was provided on good terms should not have been offered to many businesspeople. I am fully aware of the nature of the debt overhang and I am engaged with trying to think of ways of softening that, but the intervention was absolutely the right thing at the time. I must remind the House that many predictions of doom and catastrophe were mercifully avoided thanks to the timely and wise interventions of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

As well as supporting businesses, the Budget will protect the health, wealth and livelihoods of the British public. Under this Government, the proportion of people in low-paid work has fallen to its lowest level in 30 years. That is why I was so surprised to hear the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) suggest that an increase in the national living wage was something to be regretted.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves the business part of his speech, will he update the House on the latest provision of support for energy-intensive industries?

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a very direct question and, as I have said, conversations are ongoing. I speak to the CEO of Ofgem on a daily basis and we are always looking at the situation in terms of gas and electricity prices and how we can mitigate those risks.

Edward Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman was asked a very direct question, as he said, by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). The right hon. Gentleman acknowledged two weeks ago the very difficult situation of the energy-intensive industries and said that he had submitted a formal request to the Treasury. What has happened?

Hon. Members: They are ignoring it.

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are not ignoring anything. We are in active conversations, as we always are, on dealing with the situation. *[Interruption.]* Absolutely, we are completely as one on this, and we feel that, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said, we cannot simply bail out every single company—but we can provide a general context in which risks are mitigated.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): We are not going to nationalise anything.

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are not going to nationalise anything; that is very true.

Edward Miliband: It is hard to follow that response from the Secretary of State; he said, “a general context in which...something, something.” Can he just answer the question: when are we going to know what help is available for energy-intensive industries, if any, and what kind of help is it going to be?

Kwasi Kwarteng: All I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is watch this space and let's see what happens.

Alex Cunningham: Jam tomorrow.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman chunters from a sedentary position. I have visited his constituency—I have seen Teesside—and the picture of gloom, misery

and devastation he paints is a total rejection of the optimism, dynamism and enthusiasm I see in Teesside. His negative attitude shows precisely why my friend the Mayor of the Tees Valley got 73% of the vote in the last election. *[Interruption.]* I am being told I am speaking loudly, but I am outraged that the hon. Gentleman should characterise his constituency in such poor and uninspiring terms; it is a disgrace.

Alex Cunningham *rose*—

Kwasi Kwarteng: As well as supporting the Budget—

Alex Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman makes an attack then will not give way.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He talks absolute nonsense: I have spent 11 years championing energy-intensive industries in my constituency, trying to ensure people keep their jobs. He knows that, because I have met him and talked about it time and again, and what do I see? I see very little action. It is about time he got on the right horse, got down to Ofgem and started talking seriously about how we can put things right for energy-intensive industries in my constituency.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I was not making a personal attack on the hon. Gentleman's role. If he had listened to what I said, he would know I was not commenting on his record as an MP; I was simply saying that the tone and negativity he expressed in that particular intervention in this debate did a disservice to his constituents. I was making a specific point.

Richard Fuller: To bring my right hon. Friend back to what the Opposition spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) was saying about the haste with which money can go to support my right hon. Friend's plan for energy-intensive industries, is this not the same Labour Front Bench that was urging my right hon. Friend to give money to a business that is now under review by the Serious Fraud Office? Is my right hon. Friend's prudence not therefore wiser than the rashness of the Opposition Front Bench?

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a very good intervention. Labour Front Benchers were urging that £170 million from the UK taxpayer be given to a business that we now know has been recapitalised, has money from private creditors and is still operating. It would have been a disaster to sign away £170 million directly in the way they urged.

In conclusion, the Budget is a blueprint for a stronger Britain: a country where those with innovative ideas will get the support they need to turn them from dream to reality; a country where those whose talent is nurtured and whose skills are honed will get support, ongoing interest and strong engagement from the Government; a country where those who do an honest day's work will receive a decent wage. We have every right to be confident about our future. We have listened to the litany of woe and despair for too long and, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said yesterday, we are optimistic and excited about the future of our country. Only a week ago at the global investment summit, people from across

[Kwasi Kwarteng]

the world were desperate to invest in the UK; they believe in their bones that the UK is a great place to do business.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and I hope to have a meeting with you shortly on hydrogen and how it can be used to advance this great United Kingdom. Can you confirm exactly how it will benefit every part of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he cannot address the Minister as “Minister”; he has to address him as “the right hon. Gentleman” or say “would the Minister?”, because when he says “Minister” that is second person, vocative case. He cannot say “Minister.” Other Members might know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I have been having this conversation now for several years and it is my ambition that he will get it right, and one day he will.

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are very grateful for the long-forgotten grammar lessons administered from the Chair.

Hydrogen is important, and we have had debates on it in Westminster Hall and this place. I look forward to engaging with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on this; I am due to visit Northern Ireland and I am sure we will have very constructive conversations.

The global investment summit was a huge success, and it was proof that, contrary to the picture of devastation, gloom and pessimism painted by Opposition Members, we are open for business as a country and attracting investment to a degree we have never seen before. It showed in the Budget yesterday that, as we race towards a new and brighter future, the Government will make driving economic recovery through private investment—that is central to this—a top priority. That is something I certainly commend to the House.

12.40 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This Budget may have fallen a few days short of Hallowe'en, but for many of my constituents and people across these islands, it represents a real horror show. The past 18 months have been difficult for many people, but yesterday we saw that this Government are prepared to continue to heap misery upon misery by balancing their spending on the backs of the most vulnerable. Not even the most cynical among us could have imagined tax breaks on sparkling wine and short flights just weeks after universal credit payments were cut.

We have all seen the headlines over the last few weeks about monetary tightening, but the self-enforced fiscal tightening in this Budget is much more worrying. The Chancellor tried to fend off criticism and evade proper scrutiny by trailing Budget announcements in the press before presenting them to this House—and his sleight of hand did not stop there. He instructed the independent Office for Budget Responsibility to produce its Budget forecasts using out-of-date figures to increase his chances of being able to cut taxes before the next election. That is a cheap trick, and people should not fall for it.

It was an illusion, too, to try to make out that the Chancellor's actions yesterday do not come on the back of 11 years of Tory austerity—11 years of the same Government on those Benches, albeit in different guises—of cuts to public spending that this Budget does not come close to reinstating, and of assumptions predicated on some iffy figures peppered through the Budget Red Book. On this Chancellor's watch, the public are facing a Tory cost of living crisis—an energy crisis, a poverty crisis, an inflation crisis—and the people who can afford it the least are bearing the brunt of it.

The furlough scheme has now ended, and while we do not yet know the full impact of the withdrawal of that support, economists expect that there will be a rise in under-employment and a subsequent squeeze on wages. When the UK Government should be stepping up to tackle the challenge of this cost of living crisis, they are compounding matters with this spending review. It is difficult to remember a bleaker outlook.

IFS director Paul Johnson said on Twitter:

“This is actually awful. Yet more years of real incomes barely growing. High inflation, rising taxes, poor growth keeping living standards virtually stagnant for another half a decade”.

The OBR has said that since it closed its forecast, its analysis is consistent with

“inflation peaking at close to 5% next year,”

even higher than the 4% the Chancellor alluded to yesterday. That is further evidence that high inflation may not be temporary, as the Prime Minister has previously said, and that even those families who are relatively well off will feel the impact of it.

We must not be misled by this UK Tory Government. When the Tories talk of a living wage, it is not a real living wage, determined by the Living Wage Foundation; it is a pretend living wage, and it is not enough to live on. The Government may claim that the increase to £9.50 matches the real living wage as it stands today, but in reality that is yet a further deceit, because the increase in the minimum wage will not match the real living wage by the time it is implemented. We are three weeks away from Living Wage Week, which will see the most up-to-date real living wage for the UK announced. It will almost certainly increase from £9.50, because the real cost of living pressures we face are taken into account and folded into that figure.

That pretend living wage has age discrimination baked in, with workers who start the same job on the same day legally entitled to less if they just so happen to be younger. There is a £5,000 gap between an 18-year-old and a 25-year-old. House of Commons Library figures lay bare the difference between the wage paid to the youngest and that paid to older workers, which has grown from 20% at the establishment of the minimum wage to a staggering 97.5% in this Budget. There is absolutely no justification for that. Rent is not cheaper for young people, electricity is not cheaper, childcare is not cheaper, nor is food and nor is travel, so why have this Government decided that their labour should be?

I commend the more than 2,000 real living wage employers in Scotland and I hope that many more will join them. Of course, the minimum wage increase will be gobbled up by the Chancellor's other monstrous policy choices—the £20 cut to universal credit and the increase in national insurance. People who are out of work or not earning very much will see no overall

benefit to these changes, and those on legacy benefits, including people with disabilities and carers, are again forgotten about altogether by this UK Tory Government. Of course, some people are not even entitled to support in the first place, including those with no recourse to public funds—and the many who were excluded from support schemes completely during the course of the pandemic found that they were not entitled to support either.

Those out of work are a big and varied group, including people who have cancer; people who have disabilities; people who care for their children who have disabilities; veterans; people who have been injured at work, and people who are struggling to find a job. All of them are now flung into the Chancellor's pile of "undeserving" universal credit claimants. That is not good enough, and he should hang his head in shame. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has estimated that that particular group of people—those the Government think are undeserving—now has the lowest main rate of out-of-work support in real terms since 1990.

Let us look in a little more detail at the situation for those who are working. The Chancellor said that the annual increase resulting from the minimum wage increase is £1,000, but overnight analysis from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation puts that figure at an absolute maximum of £364 when the taper rate and cost of living increases are factored in. Some people on universal credit will be nearly £700 worse off. On top of that, every person on universal credit is, of course, £1,000 worse off from the scrapping of the uplift. My back-of-a-Twix-wrapper calculation says that these measures mean that the Chancellor is cutting incomes for those on universal credit by between £600 and £1,700 a year. And it is clear from page 136 of the Red Book that the Chancellor's giveaways are being funded from the pockets of pensioners, who have lost their protections under the triple lock.

These are policy choices. They are not an inevitability of the situation in which we find ourselves. This spending review is a chance to show the UK Government's priorities, and unfortunately, it seems that their priority is to give their friends in the City a tax cut, paid for by ravaging universal credit. It is a political choice to cut the tax surcharge on bank profits from 8% to 3%. It is a political choice for the Chancellor to tie his own hands with fiscal rules while our economy is still reeling from a pandemic that has not yet ended. It is a political choice to take food out of the mouths of children by removing the £20-a-week universal credit lifeline, to keep the appalling two-child limit and the rape clause and to maintain a five-week wait for new claimants. It is a political choice to refuse to increase statutory sick pay in line with international standards. And it has been a political choice to press ahead with Brexit in the middle of a pandemic, in the face of all reason.

The Chancellor barely mentioned Brexit in his speech yesterday, even though it is the single biggest policy change the UK has made for generations. Scotland did not vote for Brexit, yet our businesses are having to adjust and absorb the costs of this Government's mistakes. The OBR says that the evidence so far shows that the impact of Brexit will be a 4% hit to GDP, with knock-on effects on living standards. That is bigger than the expected long-run effect of the pandemic. The OBR's own analysis cites migration and trading issues as driving factors of the supply chain issues currently hitting our

businesses, on top of debt through covid and soaring energy prices that businesses also face and will pass on to consumers.

While the EU is giving Ireland €1.05 billion to mitigate the damage of Brexit, Scotland has yet to receive a single penny piece from Westminster. We need urgent clarity that the £4.6 billion annual increase to the Scottish Budget will be new money, rather than giving with one hand and taking away with the other, as this Government so often do. The £150 million small business fund for Scotland, like the rest of the funding, should be disbursed by the Scottish Government and their agencies, not by Westminster—or, in this case, the British Business Bank, whose good work should not be politicised through this brazen Tory power grab. It is little wonder that more and more people are coming to believe that Scotland's future will be best served by its becoming an independent European country.

The OBR also said in its outlook report that labour supply constraints are likely to suppress productivity, and it cited constraints on immigration as an example of that. It is very likely that the Government's restrictive and arbitrary immigration rules are having a long-term negative fiscal impact. That will be of no surprise to Members across the House who proudly represent, as I do, communities with high levels of immigration. As MPs, we see daily the impact of the hostile environment—the widespread misery and harm that it causes, but also the economic impact—and it is only going to get worse. The Refugee Council, for example, says it will cost the Government £400 million more in prison costs to implement the provisions of the new Nationality and Borders Bill. That is an awful lot of taxpayers' money to treat people so badly. Removing the right of people to work as they wait, sometimes for years, for the outcome of an asylum claim is as dehumanising as it is senseless. My constituent, Sandra, is studying adult nursing at university and is on track for first class honours. She desperately wants to work and contribute to the NHS in Scotland, but has been waiting over a year for contact from the Home Office. She does not have any faith that it will happen before she graduates. That is a shameful waste of her talent and skills, and there are many, many more like her.

Members of this Government will stand and applaud the NHS, but they fail public sector workers at every opportunity. The Chancellor talked about unfreezing public sector pay, but that is a previously announced change that will not generate Barnett consequentials and so will have no impact on the Scottish budget. It is also worth noting that ending the freeze during this period of high inflation does not go far enough. It is effectively a pay cut. If the Government are serious about levelling up, they should commit to public spending and pay public sector workers a fair wage.

The Chancellor should take a leaf out of Scotland's book and deliver a national care service, creating jobs and increasing the quality of public services for years to come. This Government should stop talking about care as if it is a burden. The Women's Budget Group says that a high-quality care service requires investment of £28 billion per year over and above current spending, but that that would produce 2.7 times as many jobs as an equivalent investment in construction.

The Tories promised £500 million for family hubs in England to support parents and children, including breastfeeding and mental health advice. That is welcome,

[Alison Thewliss]

no doubt, but the anti-poverty campaigner Jack Monroe perhaps put it best when she said:

“for every £1 the Tories have taken out of local council funding...in the last decade, Sunak’s budget announcement is putting 0.5p of it back and expecting us to all jump for joy at his largesse and conveniently forget about that 99.5%”.

Now, I try not to get too deeply into matters relating to England and I do not intend to do so, but in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities, I congratulate the Secretary of State on his new arrival. I hope the services his family needs have been there for him. Health visiting and support services in England were lost in the pandemic in many areas, with new parents left unsupported. I urge him to put a figure on breastfeeding support specifically. An expert in this field, Dr Natalie Shenker, suggests a figure of at least £30 million to be truly transformational, covering: additional training, Baby Feeding Initiative community service accreditation, ramped up peer support, integrated specialist lactation support, and comprehensive hospital-only milk bank services. I look forward to engaging with Ministers on that and invite them to present their detailed plans to the all-party group.

In the run up to the spending review, I met business representatives from all sorts of industries, as I am sure the Treasury team did. I was impressed by the well thought out proportionate policy ideas that would have genuinely helped both individual firms and the wider economy in this difficult time, such as: the call from the Federation of Small Businesses to increase the employment allowance to encourage firms to hire more staff and to take action on increasing energy prices; the Finance and Leasing Association’s call to extend the super deduction to those who lease equipment, which is particularly important as firms face increased costs and increased debt repayments in the coming year; the call from Scope and employers such as 4ICG in my constituency to expand the restrictive eligibility to the Kickstart scheme to support more disabled and young people to apply, because at the moment many lose out to their great loss and frustration; and an online sales tax to encourage people back to the high street.

This UK Government chose none of those things. Instead, they chose: an increase to national insurance, which is a tax on jobs; yet more Brexit red tape; and an industrial strategy that was scrapped before it could be implemented, leaving creative industries in particular without any clarity on the support they are entitled to. There is a lot of talk about science, but there is much that comes from the arts and they have been lost in that conversation. For example, the Glasgow School of Art produces exceptional graduates who should be a part of the strategy, but they do not see their place within it. The Chancellor will say that he has offered cuts to business rates, but, of course, that does not apply to businesses in Scotland, who have already benefited from the Scottish Government’s action. The Scottish Government offer 100% rates relief to retail and hospitality for a full year, the only part of the UK to do so. That was done without consequential funding from the UK Government.

I welcome the review of alcohol duty and hope it will lead to better outcomes on public health. I am concerned, however, that the measures trumpeted yesterday fail to

support hospitality and tourism more widely. A few pence off a pint, soaked up by the large breweries, does nothing to support a sector hard hit by the pandemic. Retaining the reduced 12.5% VAT rate for the hospitality industry would make a significant difference as supply chain costs and prices for fuel and labour increase, and it would increase the sector’s attractiveness and global competitiveness. It baffles me that the Chancellor would ignore that call from UK Hospitality. I urge those on the Treasury Bench to reconsider and see what more they can do in that regard.

All eyes are on my constituency of Glasgow Central this month for COP26. This Budget and spending review fell woefully short of the ambition required to tackle the global climate challenge: nothing for carbon capture in Scotland and nothing on our need to grow and scale up the renewables industry in Scotland, not just wind farms but tidal and wave.

Jamie Stone: Further to my intervention on the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), it is all about delay. One of the terrifying aspects of delay is that we have the skills in Scotland—welders, fabricators, pipe fitters—but the people with those skills are ageing. Every year that goes by, we are missing the opportunity to educate the next generation, the young people who came to the reception on UK renewables in the Commons yesterday. That is another reason why we cannot countenance delay at any price.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. This is an industry with a future. Climate change is the most significant challenge we face and investing in those industries now will set us up for the future. Carbon capture and storage in Scotland would have employed 20,000 people, a pipeline of jobs in an area that much needs it and a transition from the old to the new. The Government ought to be investing in that or giving us the powers in Scotland to do it in our own right.

There should have been measures to tackle energy inefficiency, such as cutting VAT on insulation and solar panels for houses. Such measures encourage people to play their own part in that effort. What do we have instead? We are cutting air passenger duty on internal flights. Manchester United were roundly condemned for taking a 10-minute flight to Leicester recently, but the Chancellor wants to encourage this! He wants more climate profligacy and that is utterly irresponsible. He could have put the money from the scrapped £20 billion Boris bridge through the Beaufort’s Dyke munitions dump into green infrastructure, but he has failed to do so.

The Tories have cut Scotland’s budget when we need to be investing more to stimulate the economy and have undercut the devolution settlement, taking powers from the democratically elected Parliaments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Budget is great news for the 1%, but bad news for equality, inclusive growth and the environment. Time and time again, the people of Scotland are seeing a tale of two Governments with divergent priorities: this Westminster Tory Government providing tax cuts for short-haul flights, sparkling wine and their pals at the banks; and a Holyrood SNP Government determined to stand up for people and businesses, and deliver a fairer, greener Scotland.

I look forward to the day when we do not have to live with the choices made by a UK Government that Scotland did not elect, but have a Government chosen by the people of Scotland with our people's priorities at their heart.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House will be aware that everybody wants to speak. We have plenty of time for the debate this afternoon, but I hope to manage it without a time limit. If everybody takes around seven to eight minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have an opportunity to do so and we will manage without a time limit. If that does not work, later in the debate I will put on a time limit, but it is so much more dignified if we manage without one.

12.58 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng).

I have to say that only one of those speeches was remotely optimistic and captured the positive nature of yesterday's Budget. If we think back to the data we were given at the start of the Chancellor's Budget speech, it is clearly excellent news that we are recovering from the pandemic faster than expected. We return to pre-pandemic levels in the economy by the end of this year. Considering the decline 300 years ago after the Great Frost, that is a remarkable achievement. Unemployment was predicted to be 12%. It is now 5.2%, which is a huge difference—that is 2 million more people in work. On the impact of the Budget on Harrogate and Knaresborough, I think it will be very helpful and very well received. I will focus on just a few areas, if I may—I am conscious of your point about time, Madam Deputy Speaker—the first of which is low-paid work.

The change to the universal credit taper is extremely positive and very significant. Not everybody knows what it is, but we in this Chamber do because we discuss it regularly. Moving from 63% to 55% simply means that people will be able to keep more of their money by not losing benefits if they earn more. That directly incentivises work and is a tax cut, and if we combine it with the increase in the work allowance, it represents a tax cut of £2.2 billion. It is easy to bandy around very big numbers, but I am more conscious about what that means to individual households: basically, it makes people £1,000 a year better off in their pockets. That is a significant figure.

Universal credit has been part of Harrogate for a considerable period. We were one of its development locations and we are the location for the managed migration pilot. I have been following it very closely during that period. I have met those implementing it at the jobcentre, those receiving it and employers, and I have absolutely no doubt that it has helped more people into work.

On the national living wage, it is very positive that we have moved to £9.50 an hour. That is a 6.6% increase and a big pay rise for 2 million people. Some sectors of the economy will be more exposed to this than others.

Harrogate and Knaresborough has a large hospitality, retail and care sector, which will benefit disproportionately from the increase in the national living wage, and I welcome that.

Cutting business rates by 50% for 90% of the businesses in hospitality, retail and leisure is also significant for Harrogate and Knaresborough. We are one of the top 50 constituencies in the country for the hospitality sector. North Yorkshire will be particularly affected by this measure; in the top 10%, we also have Thirsk and Malton, Scarborough and Whitby and York Central. To use figures from UK Hospitality from the 2019 general election—in other words, before the pandemic—nearly 9,500 people in Harrogate and Knaresborough worked in the hospitality sector. They have had a very tough time. This measure will help those businesses continue to invest and stay strong and will therefore be very welcome in the sectors affected. We have a strong, high-quality retail offer—not just in Harrogate and Knaresborough, but in much of the north—with a large number of independents across a number of different sectors, so I welcome these measures, as it has been a tough time.

On business rates more broadly, I welcome the points made about the frequency of revaluations, but business rates need reform in the longer term. This is an analogue tax in a digital economy. It is still clumsy and it does not reflect how the economy works, but the measures that are being taken are positive and I welcome them.

Turning to alcohol duty, in Harrogate and Knaresborough we have one vineyard, two distilleries and five breweries—we are obviously very thirsty—and just outside the area we have many more. The number of businesses involved is therefore high, as is the number of workers in those companies as a result. We have quality producers. Yorkshire beer is famous, and rightly so. It is positive that we are seeing the 3p cut in duty for draft beers. Pubs have also had a grim time over the past few years. They have a social function in our communities that is not easy to quantify, but we all know that pubs are at the heart of village and town life. The cut is therefore helpful for the on-trade.

The small brewers relief, which has been a feature of the industry for a while, is being extended to cider. Let me give a slight hint of a warning: the small brewers relief has had a disincentivising effect on investment and growth in the beer industry. I discovered that early on in my time in the Treasury. I clearly saw businesses that had stopped growing—in fact, they directly told me that—because they had reached the top of the tax breaks. That is clearly disincentivising. When we have a tax structure that disincentivises growth, it needs to be reformed. The Treasury has been doing that. I started the review—I have been followed by many others since—but we now need to press on with that. I am absolutely sure that we have the correct policy, with a tapered effect, but we need to implement it. We need to make sure that as the relief is extended to cider, we do not delay implementation or make the mistakes that we have seen with beer.

I am conscious of the time, Madam Deputy Speaker, but let me say a few words on levelling up. Communities have been left behind in our country for far too long. We in this House have often talked about things such as the north-south divide or the northern powerhouse, but this issue is far broader in scale than just north-south.

[Andrew Jones]

There are communities all over the UK that have been left behind, even in the most affluent areas. I like the focus on levelling up, but we must also recognise that this is a long-term issue and that the situation is hard to change. Governments of all colours over many years have tried to make progress on that and not succeeded sufficiently. There are a number of different elements that can make a real difference, such as infrastructure, skills and devolution.

The Budget is strong on investment in infrastructure, with £35 billion for rail infrastructure, which includes opening some of the closed lines, and £31 billion for roads, to remove bottlenecks. We can add to that the investment in broadband, so infrastructure will clearly get a significant benefit. One issue that does not get quite so much coverage is bus networks, to which we are seeing big changes around the UK. In implementing the Bus Services Act 2017, we are seeing people move towards enhanced partnerships or possibly franchising. We have seen Budget funding go towards zero-emission buses. These are very positive developments. They are about connecting people to jobs, making it much easier for larger cities in particular to develop sustainable transport plans, which we all know is the right thing to do, and making it easier overall to move people and goods around the UK.

The infrastructure provisions are positive. However, having spent much of my time here talking about infrastructure and being at the Department for Transport, I actually think that skills policy is the most significant thing that we can use to improve the levelling up around this country. That is how we will improve the productivity of our nation. Big changes will be required in the skills environment. Our economy is going digital, and that trend has been compounded by the pandemic. We are transforming our economy as we go to net zero. The number of jobs required in new industries will be fantastic, so this is a transforming moment. It is also clear that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Chancellor clearly recognise that, which is why we are seeing a 26% overall increase in the skills budget across this Parliament. Other areas matter for levelling up—we have discussed the levelling-up funds—but all these measures add up to a strong performance on a difficult issue.

There are other areas of interest in the Budget, but let me highlight what I consider to be a risk: we are very exposed to changes in interest rates on our public borrowing. Yesterday, the Chancellor quantified that by saying that a 1% increase would lead to a £23 billion cost, so we are exposed, and we are greatly sensitised to change. That means two things: the pressure must be kept up to keep inflation down, and we must make every effort to reduce our borrowing. I thought the positive words from the Chancellor about fiscal conservatism at the end of his speech yesterday did that very well. The good management of our economy has meant that we will also meet the criteria for returning to spending 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid in 2024. I was very pleased to see that.

Overall, this Budget is positive. It is optimistic. It is a direct contrast to the messages from the Opposition parties, giving us their customary mixture of unfunded spending promises and, “Vote for us—the future’s gloomy”.

That strategy has not worked for them, but they have not learned. This is about making our country better. The prospects are brighter. The Budget showed that in the data that the Chancellor highlighted, and it will only make the situation even better.

1.8 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and a pleasant surprise to be called so early, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It appears that this Budget is more notable for what is not included than what is. In February last year, in reply to me at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister pledged that money would “be passported through” to Wales to deal with the unprecedented damage caused by flooding as a result of Storm Dennis. Despite the estimated cost of alleviation work across Wales, which is upwards of £150 million, the Government have been reluctant to engage meaningfully with the Welsh Government. Instead they have tried to brush it aside as a “devolved matter”, and there is no signal in the Budget that they are serious about dealing with the issue.

I am also deeply disappointed that despite calls from the Welsh Government in preparation for the Budget, the UK Government seem unwilling to work with them to resolve the remediation work required to make Wales coal tips safe. Last Thursday, I attended a service with families and local residents in my constituency to mark the 55th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster. I believe that there is no greater example of the failure to address coal tip safety.

It is simply unacceptable and breathtakingly arrogant for the Government and the Treasury to ignore the very real concerns on the issue. In Merthyr Tydfil alone, we have 59 tips in the most serious categories, D and C—a cause of concern to many residents. In Caerphilly county borough, too, there are far too many examples of blights on our communities from the legacy of an industry long gone.

The legacy of the coal tips predates devolution. The export of coal from the south Wales valleys and elsewhere helped to create the wealth that built this country, and indeed what was the British empire. Responsibility for the issue therefore transcends the devolution arrangements. Wales is affected disproportionately by the legacy of coal mining in the UK, but the existing devolution settlement and broader legal arrangements fail to recognise that.

The Welsh Labour Government have set in train a wide programme of work to improve the safety of coal tips in Wales, including by changing the law, but they cannot do it alone. They need the UK Government to share responsibility for the legacy of coal mining in the UK and provide a long-term funding settlement to make the tips safe and prevent another tragedy. However, the UK Government have so far refused to fund the long-term costs, washing their hands of their coalmining past and of their responsibility to clean up after their industrial past.

As I said, the Welsh Government have offered to work with the UK Government on the issue, so my question today for the Treasury is why it has not stepped up and stood by its responsibilities. The shadow Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), has raised the issue with the

Secretary of State, but unsurprisingly she has received no response. The Government's current stance is simply appalling.

Applications to the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund were submitted in mid-June. Now, four and a half months later, approvals are being issued. I hope that grants from the community renewal fund will be out the door very soon, because they have to be spent by 31 March 2022—a totally unsatisfactory timescale. The failure to deal with initial applications in a timely fashion demonstrates that the Treasury simply does not have the capacity to deal with such a level of applications. How, then, will it be able to manage the levelling-up fund applications? It is clear that decisions about managing the funding should be devolved to the Welsh Government and to other nations and regions of the UK. The top-down approach from Whitehall simply will not work.

It would be good if the Government provided more clarity on the shared prosperity fund. The House has been waiting since 2018 for clarity on the fund, which is meant to match the significant EU structural funds that have been lost. Shared prosperity funding was meant to be in the region of £1.5 billion, to match EU funds, yet the figure in the Budget for next year is just £400 million.

If the Government are already struggling to manage the levelling-up fund, how can we believe that they will manage applications to the shared prosperity fund, let alone the project monitoring and evaluation that will inevitably be needed? The UK Government are keen to allocate funding through those funds in areas of the Welsh Government's responsibility, but they will not fund areas that predate devolution, such as responsibility for coal tips.

The Government and the Chancellor have talked in recent weeks about strengthening the Union. I have some sympathy with that, but in my view they are going the wrong way about it. It is clear that HS2 primarily benefits England; as a north-south spinal scheme it will clearly benefit Scotland, too—much more than Wales. The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs recently recommended that Wales receive the same Barnett consequential share of HS2 as Scotland. Simply put, as a proportion of population, Scotland gets 91.7% of its share of the costs of HS2. If Wales got 91.7% of our 5% share of the total cost—let us call it £100 billion, for argument's sake—we would get something in the region of £4.6 billion. I would be grateful if the Treasury outlined whether it is willing to consider the Welsh Affairs Committee's recommendations.

The rising cost of fuel is crippling many families who were already struggling under this Government. Yesterday, Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that the outlook for living standards is

“actually awful... High inflation, rising taxes, poor growth keeping living standards virtually stagnant for another half a decade”.

In-work poverty has reached record levels under the Tories, with 2 million more people in working households living in poverty now than in 2010.

It is clear that the Government are out of touch with ordinary people across the UK. The Budget did not address the huge inequalities in our country. After taking £6 billion out of the pockets of some of the poorest people, the Government are expecting them to cheer for £2 billion in compensation. You really could not make it up.

1.15 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): We are clearly in very difficult and unprecedented times. It is a therefore a huge challenge for any Government, of any political persuasion, to decide exactly how to deal with the economy. We do not have a crystal ball and we cannot foresee what will be. It has been difficult for the Treasury to take a decision to increase taxes, but that is what it has done. It is not something that I am in favour of—I believe that productivity and boosting business are not helped by increasing taxes—but, as I say, these are challenging and difficult times.

The key for me is that to the extent that we raise taxes, there must be a clear plan of action. I do not believe in money for money's sake, which is why when the Government brought forward a plan to increase national insurance, I did not support it. It is not that I think that the health service and social care do not need the money; they absolutely do, but I want to see a specific plan, particularly for social care. I do not believe that social care can wait three years for an injection of cash, although I am pleased that this Budget includes a contribution in that direction. Overall, I think the measures are balanced in these difficult times. As a non-economist, I do not think I can advise how we might have done it better.

From my constituents' perspective, much of what the Chancellor said yesterday is very positive. My constituency in the heart of Devon is very rural and heavily dependent on tourism, and wage levels are very low. Much of what the Chancellor announced will help tourism and help people on some of the lowest wages in the country. On balance, I think people in Newton Abbot, Teignmouth, Dawlish, Kingsteignton and the 30-plus villages and hamlets that I represent will see it as a win.

Business rates have always been the biggest issue that my local businesses bend my ear about. Other hon. Members have said that business rates need proper reform, and the case is well made; it needs to be a priority for the Chancellor and his team. Too many Governments have consulted and too few have actually acted, but I am pleased with the creativity that has been demonstrated, at least for the short term. The 50% business rate cut for leisure and tourism is extremely welcome, but I ask that it come sooner, not later, and that it be for more than a year. The multiplier being frozen is brilliant; it will make a huge difference overall, along with the revaluation changes.

It is no surprise that my wonderful area has lots of village pubs, and indeed some vineyards. Much of what we have, including the small producer relief, will therefore be very welcome. Ashcombe, as it crushes its apples, will be absolutely delighted, and as the tax on English sparkling wine falls, the vineyard in Bishopsteignton will be smiling. As for draught relief, goodness me! It is great for the pubs, but it is also great for the village community, where the pub is at the heart of it all.

It may not surprise the House to learn that my constituency area is also a great centre of culture. I am sure that the tax relief extensions for museums and galleries will be welcomed by Newton Abbot Museum, among others, and the Teignmouth theatre will definitely enjoy the double tax relief for orchestras, theatres and museums.

Of course, at the heart of any community are its families, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom)

[Anne Marie Morris]

and her diligent work to persuade the Government to consider more support for the very young at the very start of life, which is an extremely challenging time for parents. The start for life programme is one of the best things to come out of the Budget. The new network of family hubs is welcome, as is increased funding to allow more childcare provision and more training for those who provide childcare. I have always felt passionate about the supported families programme; funding for it has ebbed and flowed over the years, so I am pleased that this year there will be more.

Support for young people does not stop there; it goes on at schools, where the rise in the pupil premium is welcome, and the tripling of special educational needs places is a particular benefit. May I suggest, however, that we not only provide money and create places, but consider how to use them better? I have a wonderful SEN institution in Dawlish, Orchard Manor School, which currently has places unfilled because of all the challenges, debates and arguments about who should take up those places within Devon County Council. That cannot be right.

The catch-up fund is fabulous news, but one of the comments I heard from my local schools was that while the money is very welcome, the fact that there are so many constraints on how it can be used is not so welcome. The support for lifelong learning, with a 26% increase in skills spending, is also fabulous, but could we focus not just on colleges but on sixth forms? A number of headteachers have told me that funding for sixth forms, as opposed to colleges, has been going down rather than up, so I hope that some of the funding will be going in their direction. Of course I welcome the news of more T-levels, more traineeships and more apprenticeships, but can we have more degree-level apprenticeships? At present, there are too many aspiring young people coming out of the grammar schools just outside my constituency who leave, because there is no opportunity to do more.

The rise in the national living wage is particularly good news for working people in my constituency who are on very low wages, and the reduction in the universal credit taper rate is very welcome. Of course, in rural areas people have to travel to work, so reducing their burden by freezing fuel duty and providing more money for roads and dealing with potholes, as well as more money for buses, is absolutely what rural constituencies need. In addition, there is to be a proper public sector pay review.

It is good that there is £150 billion more, before 2024, for the public services that have served us so well during the pandemic, but local government has borne much of the brunt. The £1.6 billion is very welcome, but can we ensure that it is given flexibly, so that local authorities can use it in the way that best meets local need rather than simply being told, "This must be spent in this way by centrally produced providers"? As for housing, I was pleased to receive a letter yesterday saying that my constituents would be given a piece of the brownfield land release fund.

I look forward to working with the Government, Devon County Council, Teignbridge District Council and the community, and discussing how we can increase productivity and improve the quality of life across Teignbridge.

1.24 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris).

Today my husband Ray would have been 75, and he would have been glued to the Parliament channel, not only looking out for me on the green Benches—hopefully—but, more importantly, following the Budget debate and scrutinising the Chancellor's announcements, because as cabinet member for finance on North Tyneside Council, he would have wanted to work out just what the Budget meant for our borough and the people of his Camperdown ward. I know that his successor, cabinet member Councillor Martin Rankin, will be doing just the same.

Having missed out on freeport status in March, I hoped to hear of some direct benefit for our green industries and other businesses on the Tyne in the Chancellor's statement, but once again it seems that for some—known—reason, Teesside has the Chancellor's favour. The Chancellor can be sure that I will keep banging on his door and those of his Cabinet colleagues asking for help for the Tyne's industries to compete on a fair playing field, nationally and internationally, until we get what we need.

I congratulate those involved in the North East Homeless hub and the Whitley Bay Big Local community building, which have been granted £300,000 each from the community ownership fund. The North East chamber of commerce has commented that the Budget contains some welcome announcement for businesses in the north-east, but

"substantial longer-term strategies like the levelling up White Paper, the integrated rail plan and details on how the Shared Prosperity Fund will work, have yet to see the light of day. Without these plans it is difficult to judge how much of a long-term impact the levelling up agenda will have on our economy".

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It has taken me a while to dig out the quotation with which I wanted to intervene when my hon. Friend mentioned freeports. Bristol's freeport bid was also rejected. According to the OBR's document, published yesterday, the primary function of freeports is

"to alter the location rather than the volume of economic activity. So the costs have been estimated on the basis of activity being displaced from elsewhere."

That feeds into our biggest concern about freeports—that they do not boost economic growth and performance overall. It is just a case of taking those from one area to another, and it means that areas like ours will miss out even more.

Mary Glendon: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That was one of the biggest fears about freeports, and it is why we so desperately needed them to be close to each other.

With inflation set to rise, taxes being increased and the cost of living soaring, there is little comfort for my constituents, especially those on the lowest incomes, who are worried about how they will manage their own budgets. Moreover, there is no certainty about what the public sector pay rise will mean in real terms. It was very worrying to learn that, this very morning, the Northumbria police and crime commissioner, Kim McGuinness, resigned from her national role negotiating pay deals for police staff in response to what she has described as the grossly unfair pay offer made to police staff and officers. She has said that if Ministers will not stand by our workers, there is no point in negotiating with this Government.

Unions across the public sector agree that the Chancellor must allocate extra money to Government Departments to fund pay rises. He must put his money where his mouth is. Data shows that real wages have fallen in every region in England over the last 10 years, by more than £23 per week on average. When we add to that the fact that more than 11,000 households in North Tyneside claimed universal credit and more than 4,700 of them were working people, only a third of whom will benefit from the taper rate, things are looking very bleak for many of my constituents.

North Tyneside Council has suffered Government funding cuts amounting to £127 million since 2011. When my Ray delivered his budget speech to the full council in February this year, he announced that the Labour Cabinet under Norma Redfearn, our elected Labour Mayor, had worked to fill the £6.3 million gap in funding and protect services, including the council's poverty intervention fund, which has been a lifeline for many people during the pandemic. No doubt there will be many calls on the fund in the coming months.

However, the Local Government Association has pointed out that among the announcements for councils, the spending review makes no mention of whether local government will receive a three-year financial settlement, or whether and when local government reforms will be implemented. In recent years, settlements have been published in draft form very late in December, after the stated target date of 5 December. The LGA rightly says that this target should be met and that councils should receive early certainty with a three-year local government settlement.

Whether it is in public services, local government, household budgets, the environment or business support, there remain so many ifs and buts in this Budget that I am afraid we may need heavenly help if we are to get anything worth while or concrete from our Chancellor.

1.30 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). I am sure that her late husband would have been pleased to see her banging the drum for her constituency.

I want to speak in this debate because I want to make two points: the first is about levelling up; the second is about the impact of the spending review on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office budget. First, however, it would be appropriate to reference my own constituency, which, outwith the highlands of Scotland, is the largest constituency in the United Kingdom. It is therefore extremely welcome news that fuel duty is to remain frozen, especially just now when family budgets are already under so much pressure. Over the past 12 years, since the freeze on fuel duty was introduced, I have argued for its extension. It currently saves the average driver £10 every time they fill up, compared with how the escalator would have operated. In a rural area, fuel costs are always higher, so the further freeze announced by the Chancellor will be welcomed across my constituency.

The Chancellor's announcement of a £150 million fund to help thousands of small and medium-sized Scottish firms to recover from the pandemic is also good news. The UK Government's furlough scheme

helped to save hundreds of thousands of jobs during the pandemic, and this fund will now help small businesses in Scotland to grow back even stronger. I hope to see it benefit companies across my constituency when the full details are announced.

It is particularly welcome that, through the Barnett formula, the block grant to help support public services in Scotland is to increase by £4.6 billion. As we have heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), this is not welcome. We know that, however much money there might have been in that Barnett increase, it would never have been enough for the Scottish Government. Some grievance would always have been manufactured, however the funds were deployed. On this occasion, however, I want to express my own grievance, and it is about the way in which the Scottish Government allocate funds within Scotland. The south of Scotland is systematically starved of resources, and my constituents feel that, because we are not a nationalist-supporting area, we do not see resources coming into the south of Scotland.

Jamie Stone: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the problem affects a slightly wider area than just the south of Scotland, and that the very remote areas of the highlands have the same problem as he does?

David Mundell: Indeed. The very northernmost part of Scotland is well represented by his good self, and the hon. Gentleman does not sit on the SNP Benches.

Alison Thewliss: The right hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point. I wonder whether he has spoken to his colleague, the Secretary of State for Scotland, because I understand that the Boris bridge would have left from Stranraer in his constituency, and there will now be a loss to that constituency. Perhaps the Secretary of State could speak to the UK Government and ask for the £20 billion from the imaginary bridge to come back to his constituency.

David Mundell: Madam Deputy Speaker, it will not surprise you to learn that, when a fixed link from Scotland to Northern Ireland was proposed, SNP Members opposed it. They were absolutely and completely opposed to it. Now that it is confirmed that it is not going ahead, they are demanding the money instead. That is just so typical of their approach.

I want to see some of this £4.6 billion coming to the south of Scotland. Many important projects that are within the responsibilities of the Scottish Government could be carried out there. We do not have levelling up in Scotland. Instead, we have areas that are deprived of resources, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has pointed out, and that continues to be so.

In relation to levelling up, I want to make what I regard as an important point to the Treasury, and I hope that it and other parts of the Government will take it on board. I welcome the levelling up funding and the approach of the shared prosperity fund and the community regeneration fund, but we have to acknowledge that smaller and rural local authorities and organisations operating in those areas are not always fully resourced to put in bids of the calibre that the Treasury and others are looking for. It is important, if we are going to proceed

[David Mundell]

on this basis and achieve levelling up, that we do not allow only those who are the most professional at putting in bids and ticking the boxes in central Government to succeed. If levelling up and the shared prosperity agenda are to achieve what is being sought for them, we have to support rural and smaller local authorities and others in putting forward those bids. In that regard, I hope that the system can be changed.

I raise my second point in my capacity as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nutrition for growth. Along with Lord Collins, the co-chair, and Congressman Jim McGovern, the chair of the House hunger caucus in the House of Representatives in the United States, I am writing to the Prime Minister and the President ahead of the Tokyo summit on nutrition for growth to ask the United Kingdom and the United States to come together and demonstrate world leadership in taking forward the nutrition agenda.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I commend the right hon. Gentleman's speech, particularly in relation to nutrition and the way those issues affect the developing world. Lord Collins has worked on global health, and particularly on malaria and other neglected tropical diseases. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that these are the key issues that we need to keep on the agenda? We welcome the announcement that there will be more money for this in two or three years' time, but we must not lose the momentum that has been gained as a result of the historic role that the UK has played in that arena.

David Mundell: On this occasion, I am able to agree fully with the hon. Lady. I particularly commend the work of Lord Collins, who has kept these issues on the agenda in the other place.

The covid pandemic has unfortunately led to an increase in malnutrition, and hundreds of thousands—indeed, millions—more children are being affected by that. There is an opportunity to do something about it at the summit, which will take place in Tokyo after a year's delay. I hope that the United Kingdom will be there at the highest level and make it absolutely clear that, along with the United States, we are renewing our commitments to nutrition. The spending review, on my reading of it, would allow us to do so, and I hope that that opportunity will be taken.

1.38 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It would be churlish of me not to refer to the good work of the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on nutrition for growth. The House will not be surprised to learn that I did not agree with some of his other comments, however.

I would describe the Chancellor's Budget statement as failing real people, especially those with disabilities. Likewise, after the past 18 months, my constituents in Motherwell and Wishaw, and indeed people across Scotland, have very little to celebrate. An increase in the living wage is welcome, but it will be denied to workers under the age of 23. An hour's work is an hour's work, regardless of the age of the person doing it. In the main, living costs do not differ by age. The Tory party claims to be the party of opportunities, but it is denying those under 23 the opportunity to earn a dignified wage.

Pensioners who have worked hard all their lives have been denied a triple lock on their pension. Pensioner poverty has recently risen to a 15-year high of 18%, meaning that around 2.1 million pensioners across the UK are now living in poverty. They have been utterly let down by the UK Government. The state pension is the primary source of income for most pensioners, and they will find it difficult, if not impossible, to find another source of income.

Reducing the taper on universal credit is welcome, but it does not come close to balancing the cut of the £20 universal credit uplift or the onslaught of rising costs of living. Hard-working families have been an afterthought in this Budget. It looks like a long, hard winter for so many people, who must now choose between heating and eating.

The Chancellor was also silent on introducing viable statutory sick pay for all. The UK has one of the lowest sick pay rates in the OECD. The current rate of £96.35 a week is wholly inadequate, and one in five workers is not even eligible. The TUC estimates that more than 2 million low-paid workers are excluded because they do not earn enough to qualify. This is another hit for those in insecure work and will disproportionately affect people with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

The SNP has repeatedly called on the UK Government to increase SSP in line with the real living wage, to make it available to everyone by removing the requirement to be a qualified worker and the earnings requirement, and to extend it to 52 weeks from 28 weeks. This is another missed opportunity where, yet again, the UK Government have let down sick and disabled people. After a global pandemic in which the health and livelihoods of the entire country were at risk, it is unforgivable for sick pay to remain so low.

Disabled people have been especially let down. According to the Disability Benefits Consortium, the financial situation of 78% of disabled claimants has worsened since the start of the pandemic. More than half said this was partly due to the increased cost of living, from rising utility bills to the cost of food shopping. This Budget does absolutely nothing to address those issues.

Inflation is set to rise—Huw Pill, the Bank of England's new chief economist, thinks it might hit 5%—which will only increase the misery for millions. The Resolution Foundation has found that four in 10 households on universal credit in the UK face a 13% rise in energy costs in the same month that their income is cut by £20 a week. Experts warn this will push an extra 150,000 Scots into fuel poverty.

It is beyond belief that the Chancellor did not introduce an emergency energy payment to help those struggling to pay their energy bills. He has failed to tackle the cost of living crisis in order to give a tax cut to bankers that is paid for by slashing universal credit, ending furlough and keeping poverty-inducing policies that push people into further hardship.

We have a steelworks in my constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw. We are a proud steel town, and we have been let down by the Chancellor. There is no mention of help for energy-intensive industries in this Budget. In my more than six years in this place, Tory UK Governments have dragged their feet and still have no discernible plan for steel.

The Chancellor had a real chance to vastly improve the lives of the most vulnerable, but instead he has acted true to type by reducing tax on prosecco and cutting the levy paid by banks. Those experiencing in-work poverty and earning poverty wages will not be cheering the Budget as the £20 a week cut to universal credit bites but, with the duty and levy cuts, bankers quaffing champagne and prosecco on planes will certainly be cheering. The Poverty Alliance said:

“We want to see the benefits of the economic recovery from Covid-19 going to everyone, and unfortunately this budget just doesn’t do that.”

It is apparent now more than ever that the only way for Scotland to have a Government and a Chancellor who can meet the needs of Scotland’s people is through independence. At election after election and Budget after Budget, Scotland is being denied the Government that it votes for. Whether it be a dignified wage for young workers making their start in life, reasonable energy bills for working families who do not want to choose between heating and eating, or elderly pensioners who want to enjoy their retirement with the peace of mind that their pension is triple locked, these basic necessities are available in so many other countries but Tory Governments in the UK continue to deny them. I am truly convinced that, sooner or later, the people of Scotland will have their say and will vote to determine their own future.

1.45 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): What an honour it is to speak in this debate, and what a fantastic Budget, too. I am a locally focused MP, and the Budget will help constituents in Don Valley and across Doncaster. In particular, businesses across the borough will be relieved following the announcement of the 50% business rates cut, with the cut totalling £7 billion.

Equally, the additional money for the Best Start in Life programme that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) has championed and the increased support for family hubs, for which I have campaigned throughout my time as an MP, will do a great deal of good in helping families in Don Valley and across the north of England.

There is much to celebrate in this Budget, not least the fact that Doncaster has been successful in securing money from round 1 of the levelling-up fund, which, hopefully, will open a gateway to more private investment in this great historic town and soon coincide with a new hospital being built in Doncaster. I apologise to no one for mentioning the hospital.

Despite everything that has occurred since March 2020, the Government have continued to invest in our people and businesses, which is what I am most pleased about. During my many hours of research ahead of my Westminster Hall debate on artificial intelligence last week, the importance of funding for research and development and for innovation projects was brought up time and again by policy papers and stakeholders.

I firmly believe we can award ourselves the title of “Great Britain” because we continue to punch well above our weight, and this Budget will help us to continue to do so. After all, even before the Chancellor’s statement, the UK ranked third in the world for artificial intelligence investment. As the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon.

Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), told me last week, this is not a baton we should drop. I look forward to welcoming him and his Treasury colleagues to Doncaster to show them the fantastic artificial intelligence investment opportunities in my borough.

The Chancellor’s statement means we will increase research and development spending to £22 billion by 2026, with a considerable amount of that funding going to support priorities such as a national science and technology council and artificial intelligence. This ambitious spending commitment, coupled with the additional money for families, schools and further education, will undoubtedly give young people across the country the skills and tools they need to help ignite the new green industrial revolution, about which this Government are so passionate.

It is clear that this Budget puts the levelling-up agenda at the heart of decision making. No longer can levelling up be accused of being a mere slogan. Instead, thanks to the £22 billion of R&D investment, industries will be created directly out of the net zero fund, the future fund and the R&D tax credits regime, to name just a few. This will ensure quality jobs are provided to people across the country, not just down in the south-east. As much as I want Oxford, Cambridge and London, the so-called golden triangle, to continue to succeed and be a beacon of innovation, it is time for a new golden triangle in the north that connects not just our great northern cities but our ambitious northern towns, such as Doncaster, to opportunity and investment. With the multifaceted packages of support provided to businesses, communities and educational institutions yesterday, the creation of a northern powerhouse is a real possibility.

The only way that a person can grow is through everyone around them sharing knowledge. Companies can grow by sharing knowledge, and the only way that a country can grow is by doing the same. Consequently, I shall carefully follow the research and development projects that continue to engage with businesses in places such as Doncaster and Sheffield. There are already fantastic processes that can be built on. For instance, Sheffield has made a great start in utilising R&D projects, and the University of Sheffield’s advanced manufacturing research centre is now home to the biggest names in the industry, including Rolls-Royce, Boeing, McLaren and many others. I thank Steve Foxley and Simon Collingwood from AMRC for their continued support for my mission to get children and young people in Doncaster an AMRC in their town. These two individuals share my dream, and good business sense, that our future lies in our children’s hands and that, with strong local educational institutions, they can help to do great things.

As much as I am, as a result of the Budget, excited about our future, I am concerned about the future impact of AI, as it will be a revolution like we have never seen before. We cannot stop it—and neither should we want to—so we must embrace it. That will involve using R&D funds wisely and involving individuals from all aspects of society. In other words, the R&D investment mentioned in the Budget concerns not only the young but those aged 40-plus, so let me speak directly to that demographic.

They say that life begins at 40 and, having come to this place at 47 years of age, I can certainly attest to that. If I can start my new career at 47, we should be able to help constituents in their 40s to retrain, skill up and start a new career, too. If individuals at this age are

[Nick Fletcher]

happy doing what they are doing, that is great, but if furlough has got them thinking that they can live on less, or that they have nothing more to offer, we should encourage them to think again. Perhaps they do not have the right skills or, as the Chancellor rightly pointed out yesterday, sufficient numerical skills, yet it would be a travesty to give up on people who are only halfway through their lives. I was therefore delighted that the Budget confirmed continued support for the lifetime skills guarantee, along with the new £500 million Multiply programme. From meeting community groups in Don Valley, I know that the programme will ensure that individuals can get the support they need to improve their livelihoods and better look after their families. If that is not levelling up, I do not know what is.

Before I finish, let me express my gratitude to all the businesses out there—from the white van man to the entrepreneur; from the young people setting up a start-up to the loyal employee of a private enterprise; from the chief executive who is sweating about his next board meeting, to the salesman who has just lost or won their latest order. This is not some cheap talk from a politician: I know what it is like. I have been there: no days off; sleepless nights worrying about getting paid; fretting about being able to pay staff; the thought of reading that tax bill. I know that literally thousands of people have those thoughts on a regular basis, and they are members of our business community. We must not forget them, and neither must we forget to thank them for all the work they are doing to prop up this great country and help to fund the services that we hold so dear.

I certainly do not forget, so I end by thanking businesses throughout the UK, not least in Doncaster, for staying strong during this incredibly difficult time. After all, we rightly clap for our NHS, yet there would be no NHS without businesses. I and my colleagues here would not get paid without businesses. In fact, the entire Budget would not be possible without businesses. So, tonight, I shall clap for every business, and for as long as I am here I shall remind those on the Front Bench at every Budget to remember what businesses enable Governments to do for the benefit of everyone in our country.

1.54 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am in the same place as my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband): we do not know what planet the Chancellor is living on. But we do know that he urgently needs to get back in touch with reality. In yesterday's Budget, he kept referring to the biggest investment changes in a decade and spoke of an "age of optimism"; I remind him that the only reason his investments look even remotely positive is that the past decade was defined by the devastating cuts and under-investment from Conservative Governments who have driven public services into the ground. Even if he was talking about new money, particularly for public services, it would replace only a fraction of the huge cuts over the past 11 years.

The truth is that this Budget is an underwhelming and uninspired response to the anxiety inducing cost of living crisis that our constituents face. Tax cuts for champagne and domestic flights will not go far to offset

the difficulties of the long hard winter ahead. Over the next five years, real household disposable income is expected to grow by only 0.8% per year—far below the historical average. It is worth repeating what Paul Johnson, the director of the IFS, said:

"This is actually awful. Yet more years of real incomes barely growing. High inflation, rising taxes, poor growth keeping living standards virtually stagnant for another half a decade".

The rising cost of living is biting hard in my constituency and the Budget does nothing for those hit the hardest. Figures published yesterday by the financial management company Aryza showed that the average personal debt in Teesside stands at £19,345—the second highest average in England—yet a recent report from the North East Child Poverty Commission revealed that in the north-east, spending to support people in financial crisis fell by 78% in the decade from 2010 to 2020, and the number of local welfare assistance awards made in the region fell from more than 16,000 to just over 12,000.

I have seen local Conservatives spin the Budget as one that is good for the Tees valley, but that simply is not true. Once again, the Tees freeport has been trumpeted, but the actual forecasted benefits are extremely limited. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned, the OBR's October fiscal outlook notes that

"given historical and international evidence, we have assumed that the main effect of the freeports will be to alter the location rather than the volume of economic activity, so the costs have been estimated on the basis of activity being displaced from elsewhere."

We have been promised tens of thousands of jobs, but now it appears that the Government's own Office for Budget Responsibility suggests that that is nonsense.

Kerry McCarthy: That point about freeports ties in with the Government's approach, which seems to me to be that they want announcements that get them photo opportunities and good press releases, and the MP who managed to get the freeport can then put that on their leaflets. But freeports contribute nothing at all to the overall picture; they just take from one area and give to another, which is no way to run the economy and to try to stimulate economic growth. We need a strategy by which everyone is helped to level up.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend is totally correct: the Government rely on picture opportunities and short slogans to run our country. That is not the way forward.

We have had promises of jobs in the future that simply do not materialise. We do not want other people's jobs: we want real, new jobs, not recycled ones. If it was all as grand as the Tories tell us, we would not still have around 10,000 more people unemployed across the Tees valley than there were in March 2020 and an unemployment rate 50% higher than the national average.

There was some good news in the Budget for the Stockton borough, but for me it was tarnished. I would not deny leafy Eaglescliffe and Yarm their success in being awarded levelling-up funding, but it was disappointing to see Billingham miss out once again, especially as it is in much greater need of levelling up. It just goes to show that the Tories like to talk a good game on levelling up—it is further proof that it is just an empty slogan.

As was mentioned earlier, the Budget contained nothing to address the high costs for energy-intensive industries, even though just weeks ago the country was on the

brink of being plunged into a CO₂ supply crisis when CF Fertilisers in my constituency had to cease ammonia production because it was not economical. Energy-intensive industries, like many in my constituency, face a triple whammy of unsustainable costs. The sectors have been left reeling by the combination of sky-high gas, electricity and carbon prices that is damaging their ability to compete in international markets and risks domestic supply chains. While I, of course, welcome the announcement that a deal between CF and its CO₂ customers will see production at its Billingham plant continue until January of next year at least, industries such as these need longer-term support, including urgent reforms to the short-haul gas tariffs and progress at pace on carbon capture, use and storage.

There was not much at all on energy in the Budget. Companies such as Kellas in my constituency, which I visited a couple of weeks ago, would have hoped for clarity on hydrogen production and the potential balance between blue, green and pink varieties.

Once again, we saw nothing of the support that we need to tackle the health inequalities in my area. Stockton-on-Tees is often used as a case study to highlight health inequalities in the UK. Men who live in the town centre ward are expected to live 18 years fewer than their peers just a couple of miles down the road. In every Budget speech that I have made for the past 11 years, I have called on the Government to fund the new hospital that Stockton desperately needs. I am, however, pleased that my neighbour, the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), seems to have joined my campaign around North Tees Hospital and has secured today's Adjournment debate to talk about that very topic. I look forward to hearing more from the Minister later on today. I have also tried to enlist support for a new hospital from other north-of-Tees MPs, and I sincerely hope that they will lend their voices to the campaign, which would benefit all of our constituents hugely. They will have found it just as galling as I do that just a fraction of the billions of pounds wasted on a failing test and trace system could have built us a new hospital.

This Government have not spent public money wisely, and they cannot be trusted with the public purse. The Tees Valley needs systematic and long-term investment that is controlled at a local level by local people and local councils, that will make sure that families have enough to live on, and that will free our children from poverty. We also need a plan that will stop firms such as Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company and local steel firms going bust. We need to save and retain existing jobs as we await the promises of the future to be fulfilled. Once again, the Tories have failed to deliver anything like that. The Chancellor's small-fry solutions will do little to help working families in our areas who are facing hikes in their Bills and lower take-home pay as we head into that long, hard winter.

Yesterday, the Chancellor said that it was a tall order to complete the spending review, and that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) was just the man for the job. Sadly, he and the Chancellor have given the people of my constituency and the entire country short shrift.

2.2 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and to hear his observations on the Budget for his constituents.

If I may, I will summarise what I believe are the views of my constituents in North East Bedfordshire. Bedfordshire is probably able to speak for much of the country. My first observation is that this was a fair Budget. In very difficult times, there was a tremendous risk that the Budget could be mispositioned, misplaced, or perhaps focus on the wrong priorities. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor demonstrated a fairness in his Budget and that, I think, would be reflected in the views of my constituents. They would also say that it was a very thoughtful Budget. Although I have not done a survey—I know that others have—I am reassured in my thoughts that the Budget was fair and thoughtful, because the latest opinion poll shows that the majority of voters think that, too. Indeed, a majority of Labour voters approved of the Budget as well.

Some measures were very relevant to my constituency. There is a great interest, for example, in support for buses, and rural bus services in particular. This is especially true in Stockfold and Arlesey, and the additional funds will be welcome. There is a great interest in and support for active travel networks—for cycling and walkways—particularly in the new developments between Sandy and Pottton and Biggleswade, and for additional resources for special educational needs provision. There is a lack of SEN provision in my constituency and I look forward to working with Central Bedfordshire Council on a proposal so that we might benefit from that additional funding.

On balance, my constituents would also say that taxes are too high and that they need to come down. Looking at the Budget report, it was interesting to see what this Government are doing. Some reports say that there has been some largesse in spending, but if we look at the period of spending from the 2020-21 out-turn to 2024-25, we see that, in real terms, current expenditure is pretty flat. It is into the investment side of public services where this Government are putting additional resources. Before the pandemic, public expenditure as a percentage of our overall economy stood at 39.8%. Yes, it has grown now to what I would suggest is an unsustainable 53.1% of the economy in 2020-21, but by 2024-25, it will go back down to 41.9%. We will be on the right trajectory to get back to where we were before the pandemic, but with an emphasis on investment rather than current expenditure. Those are worthy points to make and support the fact that taxes will come down, as the Chancellor has said.

Every Budget must be presented within the context of what is going on, and none more so than this one. We are coming through the covid period and through the Brexit transition. Even today, a French Minister has said that the only thing the British understand is force. That is unwelcome language. We do not want to have opposition from France or from any other member of the EU, but there will be issues about the Brexit transition that will affect the economy. We have spoken a lot today about climate change, but not so much about the changing relationship with China and what that does to supply chains. The other contextual factor is the OBR forecast

[Richard Fuller]

itself. It is ambitious in its forward growth projections in the near term. All of those issues provide the context for the Budget.

What we should really focus on is the purpose of the Budget. One of the great advantages of being given the honour to return to Parliament as the representative of North East Bedfordshire was to support our Prime Minister in setting our country's strategy post our departure from the European Union. That, ultimately, is the purpose of this Budget; it is to marshal the talents and the resources of our people to create a successful, global Britain on this new international basis. This Administration under this Prime Minister have the opportunity to become one of the great reforming Administrations of our country. The purpose of this Budget is to provide the confidence to investors, to the public and to the Government themselves that they can take those major steps to ensure the long-term strategic success of our country in that new direction. I think that it does that very well indeed in very difficult times.

It is important though that we cast a critical eye over some aspects that have the potential to knock the country off course. The first is on capital markets. The Bank of England has indicated that it has intentions to stop repurchasing and quantitative easing when interest rates hit 0.5% and then potentially to start restricting the money supply by making additional repurchasing if interest rates hit 1%. That could have a significant impact on the cost of Government borrowing, which is why the Government are right in this Budget to chart a downward course.

On labour markets, we should remember that the United Kingdom with its flexibility has one of the best labour markets in the world, in large part due to reforms undertaken by Conservative Administrations, but the Government must make sure that they achieve their increases in productivity targets.

We should also cast a critical eye over public sector efficiency, particularly in relation to health. If I could say also to the Minister that a further critical eye should be cast over the accounting of public sector pensions, which has been the subject of many questions. We went through tremendous changes in public sector pensions a decade ago, but as the Institute of Economic Affairs paper pointed out just last week, there is much ambivalence and discretion over the way in which the Government are currently accounting for public sector pension costs. The estimated under-reported cost is of the order of £57 billion. That is not a slight accounting error, but a very major difference in costs, which is caused by the way that the Government sort out how they account for public sector pensions. It is worth their looking at that seriously and it is worth consideration by the Treasury; I hope that they will look into it.

Let me close on three points. First, as the Chancellor said, the Conservative party has demonstrated that it is the party of public services, although I would say that that is demonstrated not by how much is spent, but by the quality and efficiency of the services delivered to the public.

Secondly, the Conservatives are the party of low taxes. That must mean that the Chancellor will fulfil his promise—I believe he will—to reduce taxes, because

taxes are too high and an unsustainable burden on enterprise. However, we all have to recognise that any tax reductions in this Parliament will mean that choices will have to be made, and they should be focused on improving the efficiency and enterprising part of the economy.

Thirdly, the Conservative party is the party of work. As I listened to Opposition Members, I reflected on the questionable negativity of the Opposition to many of the measures that have dramatically changed the importance of work in this country over the last decade. It was the Conservatives who introduced the living wage. It was the Conservative party and the coalition that did so much to increase the personal tax allowance. It was the Conservative party and the coalition that did so much to reform the benefits system that was a restriction on people's willingness to work. It was the Conservative party that introduced the universal credit system. And it is this Budget that has introduced the taper relief at the original level that was set by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith).

All those points indicate that this was—as I think the people of North East Bedfordshire believe—a fair, thoughtful and reasonable Budget.

2.11 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It is right that we view this week's Budget in two contexts: that of the pandemic, which is still very much with us, given the high case rates across the UK; and that of the political decisions that have been made by this Government over the past 19 months.

Time and again, the political choices that have been made by the Conservative party have been economically and morally adrift. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) rightly said yesterday,

"we have a Government who are a byword for waste, cronyism and vanity projects."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 290.]

We should not forget that it was this Government who awarded hundreds of millions of pounds in personal protective equipment contracts to a pest control firm and to a Florida jewellery firm that had no experience of public contracts, as well as £150 million to a company that produced 50 million face masks that the NHS could not use over safety fears.

All too often, the decisions were made before financial and company due diligence was applied. Seventy-one contracts, with a total value of £1.5 billion, were awarded to suppliers before the financial and company due diligence processes were completed. Some £2 billion of contracts were awarded to businesses with direct links to friends or donors of the Tory party. The Public Accounts Committee highlighted this yesterday in its report on Test and Trace, which showed that £37 billion was spent. It said that "eye watering... sums" of taxpayers' money were spent that failed to achieve the ambition of the project. That is the context of this Budget. That taxpayers' money could have been spend much more wisely elsewhere. The Government would have done well to have looked at the Welsh Government's actions in the pandemic for a good demonstration of political choices, under the sensible, steady and evidence-based leadership of Mark Drakeford.

My constituents have not been shielded from the Tory Government's cut to universal credit this month; 8,630 households in Newport East have lost out as a result of the Government's decision to remove the £20 uplift, which has made such a difference during the pandemic. The cut, coupled with the rise in national insurance, which will disproportionately impact those on the lowest incomes, falls in the middle of a cost of living crisis that this Budget does so little to address. The reduction in the taper rate is modest, and the Resolution Foundation highlights that about 75% of the 4.4 million households on universal credit will still be worse off as a result of decisions to take away the £20 a week uplift. This is made worse by the fact that the prices of so many everyday essentials, from food and fuel to gas and electric bills, have skyrocketed. No support was announced in the Budget for soaring household energy bills—and 3p off a pint in two years' time may be welcome, but it is no help for families today.

I very much praise the work of Newport and Monmouthshire citizens advice, which has highlighted that the country faces a perfect storm of household debt, with an estimated 2 million households across the country already behind on paying their energy bills. This Budget presented the Government with an opportunity to take action on the issue. Indeed, the Opposition called on Ministers over recent months to remove VAT from domestic gas and electricity bills—a policy that I know some Government Members would have supported—but that was rejected.

On the theme of missed opportunities, with COP26 beginning on Sunday, there was little in the Budget to suggest that the Government are willing to invest in tackling the climate crisis. Climate action must start at home, and Britain's credibility as holders of the COP presidency rests on the example that we set. There was little in the Chancellor's speech to suggest that the Government will invest in delivering the benefits of the green transition to households and to industry, and certainly nothing to match Labour's ambitions and the achievable demand for an investment of £28 billion every year until 2030 to tackle the climate crisis.

Crucially, as other hon. Members have said, there was nothing in the Budget this week for steel, an industry that would be a beneficiary of and contributor to the creation of a net zero economy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) set out that case brilliantly. Steel should be at the heart of the green recovery from the pandemic, and I say that as the Member representing Tata's Llanwern site and Liberty Steel in Newport. UK Steel has rightly said that this Budget is a "triumph of complacency" and "a missed opportunity" ahead of COP26. Indeed, in the Chancellor's statement, there was no hint of action on the sky-high industrial energy costs.

We heard a hugely weak response from the Secretary of State earlier in the debate that will deeply disappoint the industry, when he said that he is "in active conversations" and "watch this space". We have been talking about this for many years. It is a really big burden on our industry that holds back British steel manufacturers against continental competitors. There was also no allocation of funding to the clean steel fund or wider decarbonisation support for the sector. The steel industry has highlighted that, of the 10 points in the Prime Minister's plan for the green industrial revolution, eight relate to industries

or goods that depend on steel or support the decarbonisation of steel. Either the Chancellor has forgotten that or the Government's industrial strategy was not worth the paper that it was written on in the first place.

The Prime Minister has said:

"It would be crazy if we were not to use this post-Brexit moment to use the flexibility we have to buy British steel."

It is one of the very few times that I can kind of agree with him. But this Budget was not the vote of confidence in our industry that it needs and deserves. That will need to come, especially if the Government are serious about converting their rhetoric around levelling up into action for an industry that is so well placed to be at the heart of that agenda. The fact that the UK currently imports 60% of the steel that it requires remains an environmental and economic own goal. We have a highly skilled and passionate steel workforce here in the UK, including in Newport East, who are ready to play their part in a green industrial revolution if the Government will just let them.

Yesterday, the Government boasted of recruiting new or extra police officers, but, as the chair of the Police Federation has highlighted, the new recruits, while welcome—I very much welcome those joining Gwent police—are only a partial replacement for the 21,000 officers and thousands of police staff lost over the last decade. Forces such as Gwent, which faced a 40% cut to its budget from 2010 to 2020, deserve a fairer funding settlement from the Government to deal with the many challenges they face, from rising antisocial behaviour in our communities to new and emerging forms of organised, violent and cyber-crime. From speaking to constituents, councillors and local community groups in Newport East, I know that tackling crime is a pressing priority for them. They want our police to be properly resourced to protect us. Sadly, there was nothing in the Chancellor's statement to suggest that the Government are serious about giving the police the support that they need and deserve.

On public sector pay, as Unison has pointed out, there is no guarantee that it will rise above inflation. Wage rises below the cost of living, when taxes are going up and universal credit is cut, are, in effect, a pay cut.

Finally, of the 10 Welsh projects earmarked to benefit from the first tranche of levelling-up funding, half fall within marginal Conservative-held seats, although I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) on her allocation. There are just three beneficiaries in south Wales and none in the entire Gwent region, which means that the excellent cross-party bid for the regeneration of the leisure centre and town centre in Caldicot in my constituency apparently fell on deaf ears, which is disappointing. The Chancellor talked about beer barrel politics yesterday but this actually seems to be a classic case of pork barrel politics from the Treasury.

On that theme, yesterday the Government announced Restoring Your Railway funding for a bidder from north Wales. I ask that the Government now make progress on other bids in the Restoring Your Railway funding pipeline, including the excellent application for a walkway station for Magor in my constituency, which has enormous local support in the community and would bring economic

[Jessica Morden]

and environmental benefits to the area. I look forward to pursuing this yet again with Ministers in the light of yesterday's announcement for north Wales.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) was quite right to say that this Budget was underwhelming and uninspired.

2.20 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): It has been quite painful to sit through some of the speeches today and hear how negative they have been about a Budget that has been put together in incredibly difficult circumstances. It is entirely wrong just to pour negativity on it and to say that it is pork barrel politics when there are so many examples of Opposition right hon. and hon. Members whose areas are benefiting from this funding. I was pleased to see a poll in which over 50% of the public approved of this Budget and 17% disapproved. Those are very positive numbers.

What is crucial here is economic credibility. One of the problems that Labour has is a lack of economic credibility. A lot of that goes back to the note that was left saying, "I'm sorry, there's no money left." That is still in the minds of millions of voters up and down the country. The thing about getting economic credibility is the need to be open and honest about the fact that there are difficult decisions that have to be made. If the Opposition pretend that there are no such difficult decisions, then it will be very difficult for them to gain any kind of credibility.

Catherine West: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Hunt: The Opposition can agree to every kind of spending pledge under the sun, whether it is saying, "We don't want to cut international aid from 0.7% to 0.5%", or whatever else, but at no point actually prioritise and say, "We think this is particularly important, so we will make up the money in this way."

Catherine West *rose*—

Tom Hunt: All we get when the Opposition vote against the increase in national insurance, say, is vague strategies about wealth taxes, so we do not get any detail about how much will be raised in what way. Yesterday, the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer went on the attack against the independent schools sector as though that alone is going to start raising the billions of extra money we need to do. That is just typical Labour class warfare to no end whatsoever.

Catherine West *rose*—

Tom Hunt: I am not going to take any interventions at the moment, okay, so stop trying.

In terms of the circumstances we face at the moment, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) asked why we broke a manifesto pledge on tax. The key reason was the pandemic, and actually we spent £407 billion on dealing with the pandemic. That is why we had to do what we did. It was remarkable—the furlough scheme was absolutely the right thing to do, and it was incredibly impressive how quickly it was put

together and it saved millions of people's jobs. But when we were coming to the end of that scheme, I was concerned myself about what it would do to unemployment. The suggestion that it could have been 12% was not unreasonable, and I feared that it could be around that level. The fact that it is 5% at the moment is a significant achievement. Regardless of our politics, every Member in this House should be really pleased about that and the fact that there are huge numbers of people in work, in a secure job, who we feared might not be. A lot of that is to do with the ingenuity of the Treasury, the Chancellor and his team. I thank them for that because it saved many of my constituents' jobs.

On help with the cost of living, I very much welcome the decrease in the universal credit taper by eight points. The key thing about universal credit is that it was to try to ensure that it always pays to work—that work pays. Decreasing the universal credit taper by eight percentage points furthers that aim and saves some of the people on the lowest incomes a significant amount of money. That is to be welcomed. We should probably work to try to reduce it even more in future, but in a sustainable way that matches up with being responsible with our public finances.

Freezing fuel duty is also to be welcomed, as is increasing the national living wage. Apparently we are stealing Labour's clothes—that is what I have heard—but I would like to think we are doing so in a responsible, sustainable way. It is absolutely right that as a party and as a Government we are single-minded about trying to do everything we can to support some of those on the lowest incomes in society. Many of those people are in my constituency. They are on lower incomes but want to work to get a higher income, and want the support to do so. There is a lot in this Budget that does that.

I am very passionate about the hospitality sector in Ipswich. We have some of the country's best pubs, and we have some great breweries in Suffolk. The biggest cut in beer duty for 50 years is to be welcomed. I was one of the 100 Conservative Members of Parliament who wrote to the Treasury requesting that this happened. Only recently I was at the Belstead Arms, with its fantastic landlord Steve, who started the pub up in January 2010 and has got through a remarkably difficult period. He, for one, is very happy about this decision, as are the other 40 to 50-odd landlords in Ipswich, some of whom I will be visiting this weekend, but not too many.

The business rate reduction is also very welcome. It is one of the biggest reforms of business rates we have seen. It is not just tinkering; it goes much further than that.

Many right hon. and hon. Members will know that special educational needs are one of the things I feel most strongly about, partly because I myself had learning difficulties. I know I am a bit of a broken record in talking about that. I had dyslexia and dyspraxia. When I was 12, I had the reading and writing age of an eight-year-old. I was very lucky to get the support that I needed, so I am acutely conscious that a huge number of young people who are in the same position that I was do not get the support that they need. Not everything about special educational needs is about money, but a lot of it is, because most of the most powerful interventions we can make in special educational needs are resource-intensive. It is incredibly welcome that that has been recognised by increasing the special educational needs

and disabilities budget by £2.6 billion over the next three years, with 30,000 extra special needs places. Yes, special schools are part of this, but better provision within a mainstream setting is part of it as well.

I see extra money for SEND as an investment, whether it is for prisons, where about a third of prisoners have some kind of learning disability—I reckon it is actually more like 50% if we diagnosed everyone who went in—or for children in care, over 50% of whom have learning disabilities. There is often pressure on families when their children's needs are not met. Recognising that is incredibly important, and that is what the Government have done.

I want to finish by talking about levelling up and whether it is working for Ipswich. I think that in many respects levelling up is working for Ipswich. When some of my constituents heard about levelling up they feared that it was all about the north and the midlands. They were concerned that deprived parts of East Anglia would be forgotten—I actually mentioned that in my maiden speech. There are many examples of where the Government do recognise that it is not just about the north and the midlands. Ipswich has received £25 million from the town deals, and there are 11 discrete projects, many of them focused on skills. They are at the heart of levelling up and they make a massive difference to the lives of many of my constituents. We have had safer streets funding—in particular, for two parts of town with the worst problems of antisocial behaviour. We have a freeport just down the road in Felixstowe—one of just eight—which will hopefully bring forward 10,000 new jobs. We also have an opportunity area in Ipswich—one of only 12.

But there is one area where I would like to see the Government go a lot further. If we are going to sort out levelling up, we need to look at the way in which we fund our public services, and more specifically the funding formulas that lie behind the way in which those public services are funded, principally in two areas: education, particularly special educational needs; and police funding, where I do think Ipswich gets a raw deal. In Suffolk, police spending per head is £114.20 while in London it is £298, but we also compare very unfavourably with similar counties.

On SEND, there is a multi-academy trust with one school in Tower Hamlets and one school in Ipswich, and spend in Tower Hamlets is four times higher for children with mild to moderate learning difficulties, two and a half times higher for moderate to significant, and two times higher for significant to severe. It does not matter where it is—whether a child with a learning difficulty is in Ipswich, Birmingham or London, they are of the same inherent worth and value. There is no reason why random historical funding formula anomalies should mean that they get less funding and support per head than any other young person. That needs to be looked at.

I welcome this Budget. It is focused on the cost of living, focused on levelling up, and focused on allowing us to recover from an unprecedented pandemic.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind everybody that, unlike yesterday, there are wind-ups at the end of the debate today. Members are expected to come back for the wind-ups if they have participated in today's debate.

2.29 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Despite the protestations of Government Members, this really was an alternative reality Budget, with a Chancellor living in a dream world, ignoring what is actually happening in our communities and our high streets across the country.

This Budget had nothing to fix the emptying of our supermarkets and the escalating cost of living. Cafés, bars and restaurants, including businesses in my constituency of Cardiff North, are still reeling from the pandemic and struggling to find the staff they need and to keep going. Nor did the Budget tackle the lack of rape prosecutions and the severe court delays, which are leaving victims high and dry and struggling to cope.

There was no action on escalating energy costs, whereas Labour has been clear that we would immediately remove VAT for six months, which would have an immediate impact. Data released yesterday confirmed that real wages fell in every part of the country between 2010 and 2021, by a startling £23 a week on average. The Budget did nothing to remove the enormous tax burden on working people and businesses. There was a £4 billion tax cut for banks, a £300 million tax cut in domestic air passenger duty and a £12 billion tax cut for large businesses such as Amazon. Those tax cuts do absolutely nothing to help working people who are struggling day to day.

In the week of COP, it beggars belief that the Chancellor thinks it is okay to come to this House and make domestic flights cheaper. Will he really be going to COP next week and telling world leaders in his speech that that is what he has done? What an embarrassment! They are a Government who talk the talk on climate action, but when it comes to it, they just do not deliver. Where were the announcements on tackling the huge energy efficiency crisis we are facing? We have rising energy costs, cold houses and homes, and people unable to afford the weekly shop, let alone Christmas. This Government are letting working families down. Labour has pledged £28 billion a year to climate investment right up until the end of the decade. Our Labour Chancellor would truly be a green Labour Chancellor, investing in the jobs and skills of the future.

This Tory Government have created a low-wage, low-skill and low-productivity economy, taxing working families, making millions of people pay for their mistakes and refusing to overturn the £20 cut to universal credit. Three quarters of people on universal credit are worse off from the Chancellor's changes. With no plan for growth—just more of the same—it is working people up and down the country who are paying the price.

For Wales, there is no new investment for coal tip remediation and no significant additional funding to support rail infrastructure in Wales, even though the Welsh Labour Government highlighted those priorities again and again with this Government. It is clear this Budget does not deliver for the people of Wales. It does not deliver for anyone. There are clear gaps in funding and it takes hard-working people for granted.

This Budget showed yet again that this Government do not care about people up and down the country. There was only a passing mention of climate in the Chancellor's speech. It is clear that the Government do not care about the future of this nation. In the week of

[Anna McMorris]

COP, that tells us all we need to know. We must act now if we are to face up to the scale of the climate challenge. Not acting now not only risks the future of the planet, but is a major fiscal risk and a risk to our economy. I want to see a Budget that delivers, not only for working people, but for our children and our grandchildren.

2.35 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorris). In the limited time available, I will talk primarily about infrastructure and education, but I want to cover a number of other issues, too.

I start by talking about the many small businesses we have throughout Sedgefield. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) that a more fundamental review of business rates would be very welcome. I have everything from small cheesemakers, such as the one in Mordon, to breweries such as Yard of Ale at the Surtees Arms, and I am sure that the changes to duty will encourage them to move forward. Emma McClarkin, the chief exec of the British Beer and Pub Association, welcomed the Chancellor's continued support of the pub sector. I hope that the many pubs across Sedgefield, from Hurworth to Thornley and Ferryhill to Bishopston, also see the benefits of simplifying duty in particular. I must give a shout out to, of all names, The Impeccable Pig in Sedgefield, which was recently awarded "AA Inn of the Year". There are clear benefits to small businesses, but there are also benefits, as other colleagues have mentioned, from people being able to socialise in pubs. Getting away from the cheap lager from the supermarkets is a good step in the right direction.

One thing we need to remember, whatever we are doing, is that we always talk about "this place", and place is an important thing for us all to be thinking about. We need to think about where people are coming from and what they do there. That is where the importance of levelling up comes in. It is about looking after communities, but in particular those that my all-party parliamentary group for "left behind" neighbourhoods focuses on, which can miss out because they do not have the capacity to go for the grants and support being picked up by other people. We need to encourage all our businesses to be as cognisant as they can of social impact. We need to remember that the quality of place that people are coming from is a key driver in the quality of employee that businesses will get.

The primary town in the Sedgefield constituency is Newton Aycliffe, and it has put in a levelling-up bid to for town centre recovery. That is a key thing that must happen to help us grow. We also have some fantastic businesses there, ranging from Crafter's Companion, which has been active during the pandemic in getting people into crafting work and helping their mental health, to the likes of Hitachi. Hopefully we will see some announcements in the not-too-distant future on HS2, so that we can get some certainty. Certainty is what businesses need to move forward.

I also have 3M, whose efforts on masks through the pandemic have been incredible. We need to be careful about restructuring supply chains, because of the investment that people have needed to make. We also have lots of

coach businesses. I hope the Department for Transport will continue to support our local council on a capital and revenue basis to help those businesses transition back from the depths that they have reached, so that they can get back to viability. On council funding, I want to ensure that there is proper consideration of the rurality or deprivation indices for councils. Durham in particular sometimes suffers from the way that they are used in funding formulae.

To return to business and its the social benefits, there is a company called Finley Structures in my patch. Last week, I had the pleasure of going there to see a blue plaque put up for the Aycliffe Angels—the ladies who made munitions during the war. To our delight, a 100-year-old lady called Muriel Scott turned up unexpectedly while we were there. If funding comes through from the money that has been talked about for that kind of thing, John Finley, who runs the business, wants to create a museum to show what people like Muriel Scott went through.

We need to drive science innovation. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have visited NETPark—the North East Technology Park—just outside Sedgefield, and understand its significance. If we can get the investment, we will have the north-east space hub there too. The local council is doing a good job, but we need to make sure that we pull that off.

That feeds into education and training, which are critical. T-levels have a place in the agenda, but I encourage the Government not to throw out BTECs. It is important that everyone has an opportunity, wherever they come from and whatever level of education they start from, to engage with the process and take the next step forward. That leads me to university technical colleges, of which I have one of the best in the country. Because it is linked to the likes of Hitachi and Gestamp, it attracts people from all over the north-east and Northumberland—as far away as that. Lord Baker wants more UTCs to be established, so I am hopeful that they will happen. I encourage investment in them to develop the opportunity for more people to learn technical skills and get us all into a better place.

To return to infrastructure, I have spoken many times in this place about Ferryhill station and the opportunity for it to reopen. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) referred to jobs. If that station goes in, the line will go through to Stockton North and connect to Teesside and to all the jobs being created by the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen. Like all railway lines and roads, however, it is a two-way link, so it would present the opportunity not only for my people from the Ferryhills of this world to get to Teesside and the jobs there, but for anybody in the Stockton and Middlesbrough area who wanted to come to NETPark for the high-value science-led jobs to come on the train in the other direction. It is at the evaluation stage and I am hopeful that it will come forward.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and I think that my constituents will feel that this is a fair Budget at difficult time. Opposition Members have made a number of comments about Labour's position on business, but I sit on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee

and I have to say that the Opposition's presence in that Committee is lamentable. The number of times that the only Labour Member present has been the Chair is poor. How can they talk about business when they do not even turn up to the Select Committee? When we went to Tata Steel, the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) met us there; credit to her for joining us, but she was not a member of the Select Committee.

I welcome the funding for the British Business Bank. As a last point, because I do not think anyone should forget it, climate change is important but we need to make sure that we do things in context. There is no point in stopping doing things that nobody wants to do—I will use an easy example of the Cumbrian mine—only to then import coal from the other side of the planet and pay all the carbon costs that go with bringing it in from elsewhere.

There is a lot in the Budget that I like, but there is the odd thing, such as the Leamside line that was announced this morning, that I would have liked to get through, although that is not the Budget but the Restoring Your Railway fund. We will need to come back to that and have a closer look at it. In general, however, I welcome this Budget.

2.43 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The mistake with Budgets is to think that they are the beginning of a financial process. Often, they are the result of one. This Budget is the result of 11 years of austerity and under-investment. Wages flatlined, and our public services and infrastructure were ill-equipped for the pandemic and to be the engine of growth that we need to bring us out of the economic crisis it has precipitated.

The Budget is uncomfortable for Conservative Members of Parliament. No Government since the war has implemented a higher tax take from the people of this country.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said that it has been an uncomfortable Budget for Government Members. I have to say that I am extremely proud of the Budget, and later I will have the opportunity to say why.

Barry Gardiner: I am sure that the hon. Lady will explain exactly why she is so proud of the Budget. That is her right. However, it is clear that many of her colleagues feel that it is pulling them in different directions. I will come to explain why that is the case.

As I said, no Government since the war have implemented a higher tax take from the people of this country, yet wages are scarcely where they were 10 years ago, growth in the next three years will slow to a sluggish 1.3% and our country's debt stands at the astonishing figure of £2.2 trillion. It was notable that yesterday the Chancellor referred to underlying debt rather than gross debt. Underlying debt is still a staggering 85.2% of GDP and, on his own admission, set to rise over the next three years. Gross debt is now 103% of GDP.

What of the deficit? After the global financial crisis had seen it skyrocket from £50 billion to £103 billion in 2010, George Osborne said he would eliminate it by 2015. The deficit at its peak in 2010 was £103 billion, or 6.9% of GDP. At year end in March, the last ONS release said that the UK's deficit was £304 billion, or 14.5% of GDP. The hon. Lady may not feel uncomfortable

about that, but I think that a number of her colleagues do, yet the Chancellor had the extraordinary brass neck to tell the House that

"it is the Conservatives, and only the Conservatives, who can be trusted with taxpayers' money."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 276.]

The Chancellor talked about building a stronger economy. His party has had 11 years to do that and it has failed. What should be of real concern is the Budget's lack of direction. There is an extraordinary tension between No. 10 and No. 11, which are operating like a Doctor Dolittle character, with the Chancellor pushing for fiscal conservatism and the Prime Minister pulling for a bout of sunny optimism and lax monetary control. The truth is, they are afraid of the electorate and it showed in their spending decisions.

The Government are rightly relaxing the public sector wages freeze—to the horror of their Back Benchers—but they have wrongly imposed a £4 billion clawback on the very poorest in our society who rely on universal credit. Their changes to the taper relief show only how fearful they really are, but those changes do not nullify the impact of the clawback.

The Government have no strategy to tax wealth on unearned income. It is shameful that a cleaner on universal credit doing three jobs to make ends meet pays a higher rate of marginal tax and national insurance than her landlord. It is extraordinary that, instead of working with international partners to develop a proper tax framework for companies such as Amazon, they have done all they can to block one. It is extraordinary that the Chancellor has given £1 billion of tax cuts to the banks. Working families get tax rises; banks get tax cuts.

Priorities are the stuff of politics and the Chancellor has made his party's priorities clear. But, in addition to the wrong priorities, the Government have been incompetent and profligate. The total investment announced yesterday for the next three years was £150 billion. That same day, the Public Accounts Committee reported that, despite being allocated an eye-watering £37 billion, Test and Trace failed to achieve its objectives, failed in its key purpose and, at the most critical time, failed to disrupt onward transmission. The Prime Minister had a phrase for money wasted like that—it referred to something being done up a wall. Delicacy prevents me from saying what it was.

The past 11 years of Conservative Government have seen our economy grow at just 1.8% per annum. Even taking into account the impact of the global financial crisis, in the years from '97 to 2010, when Labour was in government, the economy grew by 2.3%. No wonder the only person on the Conservative Benches to look pleased at the Chancellor's discomfiture yesterday was the Foreign Secretary. The truth is he has taxed more and more unwisely, while presiding over unacceptably slow growth.

Many of us will recall the Government's response to Labour's manifesto commitment to invest £200 billion in the infrastructure of the country. They called it a magic money tree, but since then they have discovered a forest, even if their £130 billion infrastructure strategy now looks scarcely adequate to turbocharge our economy in the way that is required.

Let me now turn to the way that is required. It is to be regretted that the Chancellor does not use public transport when in London. Were he to do so, he would have seen

[Barry Gardiner]

the poster campaign that says, “The world is looking to you, COP26.” One of those posters says, “Secure our priceless planet. Or argue over cost.” Yesterday, the Chancellor could truly have given us a Budget of optimism: a Budget that addressed the infrastructure needs of our country, the skills development required for a just transition to a net zero economy, and the basis for sustainable economic growth. He failed, and did so in a way that displayed such an astonishing lack of awareness of the problem and what one can only call contempt for the reality of the crisis that it appeared a deliberate provocation to all those about to meet this weekend in Glasgow for COP26.

The Chancellor referred to the tax super-deduction of 130% allowances for capital investment. He failed to mention that these have no environmental or climate filter and that some of the biggest fossil fuel companies will be able to use them to receive from the taxpayer not only the entire cost of their polluting capital investments but a bonus 30% for doing so, in projects like the Cambo oil field. This incentivises the very behaviour COP26 is trying to curtail.

The Chancellor announced a new lower rate of air passenger duty on domestic flights and support for regional domestic airports to incentivise air travel within the UK. Other countries have banned domestic flights where a fast rail link exists and have been investing in their low-carbon rail infrastructure. It is, frankly, obscene that it is often cheaper to fly within the UK than to take the train. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) earlier remarked that a flight from her constituency in Bristol to Glasgow costs just £29.99, while the train costs £97.20. The Government’s investment priorities on this are wrong. They are wrong economically and they are wrong morally.

2.52 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I want to start where the Chancellor left off, by saying that I strongly believe that it is not just for the Government to fix every problem and tackle every challenge. I am a Conservative because I believe in and want to support strong families, strong communities, the voluntary sector and charities coming together to make our country a better place to live, work and raise a family. We saw that during the pandemic. The state played an enormously important role but so did families, volunteers and charities in Crewe and Nantwich and across the country, and I shall focus on welcoming the measures in the Budget that support families.

I welcome the introduction of family hubs—I supported my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) in campaigning for that—further funding for parenting support, more support for adopted children and their families, and the continuation of the holiday activity programme. In discussing the stability of families and poverty, we cannot ignore, and must pay greater attention to, some of the factors that make it much more likely for children to be living in poverty. Single-parent families and families with three or more children are much more likely to be living in poverty and I wish campaigners and those on the Opposition Benches would pay as much attention to these important factors as they do to the role of Government in topping up family incomes.

The emphasis on the first 1,001 days is also welcome. We are seeing increasing understanding across Government that the big impact we can have early on in terms of children and families is worth our attention and gets better results in the long run.

The Opposition too often focus purely on financial security. Of course financial security is important, but it is also important to support people to be the best parents they can be and to ensure that their children grow up with emotional security and have the kind of self-belief and aspiration that I was given by my family. Sadly, when I meet some children in my constituency, they do not have that. We have to do better at giving that to them.

As much as we argue over relatively small, albeit important, changes in the percentages and numbers of people living in absolute and relative poverty, if we take a step back and look at the big historical trends, those figures have been stubbornly in roughly the same place. I think that is because we focus too much on the money and not enough on the other factors that might lift people out of poverty and give them aspiration and opportunity.

Supporting people into work and better jobs is absolutely part of that, not just because it improves people’s incomes but because we know that work helps to improve people’s mental and physical wellbeing. I am proud that, compared with 2010, there are half a million fewer children growing up in a household that has been out of work long term. That is the kind of achievement that sustainably lifts people out of poverty.

That is why I welcome the emphasis on the changes we have made to universal credit—using the money wisely to encourage people into work and to keep more of their own money—and to the minimum wage. We need to do everything we can to ensure that the right incentives are there for people to be in work. Of course, closely tied to that are the commitments we made earlier in the year on things such as the lifetime skills guarantee and further funding to support free childcare. We need to look closely at whether we can go further when it comes to childcare. We still have historically high childcare costs in this country, and that remains a difficult barrier to work. Things such as the change in the taper would go further if childcare were cheaper.

We also need to look at child maintenance, which is another key factor in poverty. Some 60% of children living in single-parent households that are not in receipt of maintenance would be lifted out of poverty if that maintenance were received. When the restrictions and measures brought in to tackle this issue, which largely focused on things such as deduction orders for people’s earnings and court orders to seize assets, were considered, I do not think enough thought was given to the realities of using them, because most of those things make it difficult for someone to earn money, which defeats the object. Consideration was given to home curfews for people who were non-compliant with their child maintenance, but those powers were never enacted. We need to look at that again if we want to drive down the absence of child maintenance payments.

I am conscious that Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy colleagues are leading today’s debate, so I want to mention an area that will be important for job opportunities in Crewe and Nantwich, which I have been talking to the Secretary of State

about—the geothermal industry. We saw earlier in the year the difficulties of over-reliance on solar and wind power when it comes to our renewable energy drive. Geothermal is an under-utilised opportunity in this country. Unfortunately, earlier in the year, just as the industry wanted to invest, we removed the tariff that would give it a guaranteed return. That has obviously had a devastating impact on investment in geothermal. We see it rising across Europe and across the world, but it is not rising in this country because we do not have that guarantee. I will continue to work with BEIS colleagues to see whether we can do something about that.

Levelling up is important to us all. It is no good encouraging families and encouraging ambition if opportunity is not spread evenly around the country, as colleagues have mentioned. Yesterday, we saw the announcement of hundreds of millions of pounds of investment through the levelling-up fund. Through the impact of the £22.9 million Crewe town deal that we were awarded earlier this year, I have seen the real, tangible difference that those projects can make—led by local MPs, working with local authorities and, importantly, picking projects that are important to local communities across a whole range of issues. I look forward to us making a levelling-up fund bid in future funding rounds.

I am afraid that we have heard the usual today from those on the Opposition Benches. Labour Members want to tell everyone that there are no difficult decisions. There is never a request for more benefit spending that they say no to. There is no problem to which their answer is not just “tax the rich”, despite the increasing proportion of our tax bill being paid by the wealthy. Some 30% of income tax is paid by the top 1% of earners. I am not quite sure where Labour Members want that figure to be before they will accept that those with the broadest shoulders are carrying the biggest burden, and I do not think it is sensible in a global economy to further discourage wealth creators from living in this country.

Labour Members know that their rhetoric on taxing the rich does not add up. That is why, despite all the talk, they have outlined only one measure, which—along with all the measures they have talked about but failed to detail—they know full well does not come close to meeting their continual spending commitments. For example, they wanted us to spend not just £6 billion on retaining the uplift on universal credit, but £2 billion to extend it to those on legacy benefits, and £1 billion to extend it to those on tax credits. They wanted £2 billion to scrap the two-child policy; £2 billion to turn advances into grants—I could go on. They never explain how they would pay for that, besides broad discussions about taxing the rich. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), from a sedentary position, talks about champagne. It is classic Labour to misunderstand what it means to be aspirational. The people I know who want to buy a glass of champagne are not wealthy; they are people from ordinary families who maybe have a wedding or another special occasion and want to enjoy themselves. The hon. Gentleman's disdain for that measure just shows how he does not understand the people he is supposed to represent.

Paul Howell: Does my hon. Friend agree that when we talk about champagne, we are probably more likely to be talking about a £7 bottle of prosecco?

Dr Mullan: Absolutely. That is the kind of thing that the Conservative party understands when it comes to aspiration, but those on the Labour Benches simply do not.

I want to pick up on some of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). We cannot underestimate the real economic risks we face at present. We must be extremely careful. We have talked about how slight changes in interest rates and inflation can have a huge impact. The amount of money that we had to spend to get the country through the pandemic—of course, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) wanted to criticise the Government for creating that level of debt—would have been even higher had the Opposition been in charge. Despite spending £407 billion, it will never be enough for those on the Labour Benches. We cannot pretend it will all be smooth sailing. There will still be difficult decisions to come. We will need to say no at certain points. The Conservatives are trusted repeatedly on the economy by our voters because we understand that.

I want to pick up on the usual lines about the cuts we have made. Opposition Members have tried, again and again, to win elections by convincing the public that we made those choices freely and happily, but the public understand that we had no choice, given the economic mess we inherited. I encourage the Opposition to think about a new line of attack and perhaps they will have better success with it in future.

Difficult times ahead—and a difficult Budget. It is not risk free and we may still need to make difficult decisions, but the emphasis on families, early years, people in work and getting on in life is a direction of travel I welcome. In that regard, I support the Budget and support the Government in their attempts to get us back on track.

3.2 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan). To start on a point of consensus, I agree that these are very difficult times and I, for one, do not envy the Chancellor for having to navigate some of the large events on the horizon.

In the course of the debate so far, a couple of themes have emerged as ones that we all want to highlight, but on which we perhaps have different points of view: climate, the cost of living crisis and levelling up. I hope to be able to comment on each in turn in the time that I have.

On the climate theme, I echo and share the bemusement of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). In his opening remarks, he called into question the Chancellor's commitment to net zero and the decarbonisation of the economy. In response, the Secretary of State referred the House to the net zero strategy that the Government announced last week as evidence of the Chancellor's credentials. However, questions remain unanswered. The Institute for Government has suggested that the net zero strategy lacked detail on who will pay and offered only vague hints about a tax strategy to support the transition to net zero. In advance of COP26, we had hoped to see a bit more of that detail in yesterday's Budget, but we did not receive it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke eloquently on another theme that hon. Members have touched on: the cost of living

[Ben Lake]

crisis. She made a very good argument about how rising costs of living on the one hand and relatively low wage growth on the other have produced a situation where households are struggling. Government Members will perhaps accuse me of being negative or pessimistic, but we might agree that some of the OBR's analysis is quite staggering. Real household disposable incomes across the UK are expected to grow by only some 0.8% over the next five years, and if we look at next year, we see that the OBR suggests that net inflation will peak sooner than expected and that growth will be only about 0.3%.

I do not think that I am being too negative and pessimistic, but if I am guilty of that, it may well be because—unless my accent has not already betrayed me—I represent a constituency in Wales. In Wales, gross disposable household income in 2019 was already only 80.5% of the UK average—the second lowest in the UK—so households in Wales, in particular, have experienced a longer-term cost of living crisis, which hon. Members from across the nation were very keen to see some action on in yesterday's Budget.

I cannot deny that the announcements on the minimum wage and improvements to universal credit were welcome steps in the right direction, but welcome though the change in the taper rate and the working allowance were, they come on the back of about £6 million being taken from families in Ceredigion through the removal of the uplift.

The Chancellor and the Government were correct to remove the cap on public sector pay. Plaid Cymru has championed that for several years so we were very glad to see it included in yesterday's Budget statement. However, questions need to be answered that will determine how much of a difference it will make to people in the public sector. Ceredigion has a high number of public sector employees, so an important question for us is: how much will public sector wages increase and how will that compare with inflation? That is not my being pessimistic; we just need to bear that concern in mind when we talk about whether some of these policies will be transformational and make a real difference to people's pockets.

Let me focus on the rising costs of living. Energy bills have been mentioned and I agree with some of those concerns. Something that particularly affects rural areas such as Ceredigion is the price of fuel, and several hon. Members have spoken very effectively about that topic. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) mentioned how the fuel duty freeze helps somewhat to insulate rural households against the rising cost.

We all acknowledge that the freezing of fuel duty—I might even get plaudits for this from those on the Treasury Bench—is an incredibly expensive policy. We cannot deny that and it is reasonable to suggest that, in the not-too-distant future, we may need to reconsider whether the fuel duty policy is sustainable, not least for financial reasons, but also given our decarbonisation commitments. Should we come to that politically prickly and technical discussion, we should perhaps look to extend schemes such as the rural duty relief scheme so

that those living in rural areas, who, at the moment, do not have the benefit of a sophisticated public transport infrastructure, should not have to shoulder the burden of unrealistic costs. That would also perhaps introduce an incentive, for areas that have the luxury of fantastic public transport, to choose to use public transport more often than cars. In rural areas, however, as I think hon. Members would acknowledge, there is not that level of choice at the moment, and, sadly, using a car is still a necessity. Whether they are nurses working in hospitals or teachers going to school, people need to use cars. In approaching the big questions of decarbonisation, we need to think about how to ensure that there is investment in public transport in rural areas so that abandoning cars is an option, but for the time being, 80% of commutes in Wales are still by car.

Another pressure that I hoped would be addressed yesterday is the added burden on small businesses from next year's increase in national insurance contributions. When I speak to businesses in Ceredigion, they are grateful to the Treasury for VAT reductions; they have told me, especially in the hospitality sector, that they have been able not only to invest savings in their business to improve productivity and improve their offer, but to increase wages for staff. If we are serious about moving to a higher-wage economy, perhaps we could return to that point. It could be considered a missed opportunity in yesterday's Budget, so I encourage Members on the Treasury Bench to think about it for the future.

The Federation of Small Businesses has asked for an increase in the employment allowance for small businesses and simplification of the process of making tax digital, both of which are concerns that businesses in Ceredigion have raised with me. Any movement on those fronts would be welcome: they would not only support employment and reduce the risk of higher taxes being passed on as higher prices, but offer much-needed support to our high streets.

I would like us to return to the discussion about retrofitting homes. It was a missed opportunity yesterday not to look at improving the energy efficiency of our housing stock. A report by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales suggests that a commitment from the UK Government of some £360 million a year would go a long way towards bringing the quality of housing stock in Wales up to, I think, energy performance certificate rating C. The benefits are evident: it would not only create much-needed skilled jobs, but improve the efficiency of homes and reduce household bills by some £418 per year once the work was completed. It would also be good for the environment, of course.

I will leave it there, because I have run out of time. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me so soon in the debate.

3.12 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) for what I see as a perfect model of constructive opposition. He gave a thoughtful, considered and helpful speech; I hope that the Treasury takes up some of the points that he raised. I thank him for making that contribution to the debate.

I am extremely grateful to the Chancellor for supporting businesses in my community throughout the pandemic and protecting jobs. There is no doubt that there is still a very challenging and difficult environment for businesses, so of course I welcome all measures in the Budget to support business. I pay tribute to the many businesses that have struggled and struggled, but succeeded in getting through the pandemic with the help of the Chancellor. They have my full support as we move forward in what will continue to be a challenging time.

I would like to congratulate Mr John Ellis, a publican in my constituency. John, who runs the Elephant and Castle in Dawley and the Crown Inn in Oakengates, has campaigned for his sector harder than any constituent I have ever met. Throughout the pandemic and in the prelude to the Budget, he wrote letters to me and to the Chancellor; he met me; he bought me pints of beer. He gave me a full insight into the very serious challenges that the pub sector faces. Mr Ellis may not be 100% satisfied with the Budget and its measures for supporting pubs and hospitality, but I know that he will be delighted by many measures in it.

I am extremely proud of this Budget. I am proud of it because it is a Conservative Budget—a Budget that supports families and incentivises and rewards work.

Like all other Members—whether they will admit to it or not—I am delighted that this Budget puts more money into the pockets of the lowest-paid constituents in Telford, and specifically provides support for the struggling families whom we must support if we want to create opportunity for young people. As we all know, whether we admit it or not, these measures will make a real difference to the lives of our constituents, particularly those who struggle the most.

At the heart of the Budget are incentives and rewards for those who work. The universal credit policy that we now have is by far the most effective tool in helping people back into work. We on this side of the House do not agree with disincentives to work and keeping people trapped on benefits, and I know that many on the other side also believe in helping people back into work. The incentives in the Budget are welcome because a job gives people so much more than a route out of poverty. It gives them a sense of identity and of belonging—they are part of a community—and of personal responsibility, and they are surrounded by a support network which is particularly helpful in tackling the mental health issues that so many people have experienced during covid. That is why I am so grateful to the Chancellor for, since the start of the pandemic, prioritising jobs and skills as key to our economic recovery.

I particularly want to draw the Chancellor's attention to the fantastic work being done at Telford College in my constituency in respect of skills such as engineering, HGV training, digital and maths. In almost every sector one could think of, the college is delivering opportunity across our community, and, vitally, providing local businesses with the skilled people they need in order to succeed. I invite the Chancellor to come to see this inspiring college for himself: I know how impressed he will be by students and teachers alike.

I must also thank the Chancellor for the levelling-up money that has been coming to Telford. Earlier in the year we were awarded £22.3 million, and an additional £1 million for an exciting programme of projects that

will build opportunity across our community. The jewel in the crown was a digital and maths hub to provide access at every level to all who want to improve their skills. My thanks must go to the town deal board for its work on this, and to our excellent council officers, who are as dedicated as I am to Telford's future. The Budget has also confirmed the provision of a diagnostic health hub at the Princess Royal Hospital to tackle the backlog. That is desperately needed. While the health challenges that face Telford are perhaps a subject for another debate, there is no doubt that this will change lives, and we are truly fortunate to have been selected as one of the areas to receive such a hub.

Let me sound a note of caution. My constituents understand full well that getting the NHS back on its feet will take time. They understand full well that it will cost money, and they understand full well that they must make their contribution and share the pain of paying for it. My constituents are reasonable people who want the NHS to succeed. However, they want to know that their money, the levy money, will be spent wisely. I hope it will feature clearly on payslips, so that people have an understanding of the significant contribution that they are making to healthcare and social care. I want it to be spelt out, because I think that that will help to bring greater accountability to health trusts and boards to ensure that they deliver good-quality healthcare for my constituents and their families, rather than spending money on shiny projects such as state-of-the-art specialist units to which local people may never need access. We have seen that happening in Telford: having already been given £312 million for a specialist unit upgrade, the health bosses decided to put in a further bid for £560 million.

I understand that we all want to invest in better hospitals, but this really is not about buildings. As we emerge from the pandemic and try to recover and ensure that the NHS gets back to functioning at full capacity, I urge the Chancellor not to give money to those kinds of projects but to invest in tackling our backlog, as he has done in this Budget, and in ensuring that people can access their GPs and get through to them on the phone. That is what local people really want. They want better healthcare that they can access.

I would like to end by saying that sometimes it is good to say thank you, as I have been doing throughout my speech. There are those who say that the money is never enough, that things are never good enough and that Telford is missing out, and my local Labour council is never satisfied, no matter how much money comes to Telford. It very nearly scuppered the Telford levelling-up bid by saying that it had been cancelled. This upset not only the towns fund board but many people who were invested in that project. It is important to recognise when things are going well, and to look at what is getting done despite the extraordinarily challenging circumstances.

All of us in this House know that Ministers have given their all to get us through the pandemic and out the other side and to rebuild our economy, and I am grateful to every single one of them, whether or not I agree with everything they say and do. They have tried their best and given their all, and we all owe them a debt of gratitude. My constituents are grateful to the Prime Minister. On that note, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank you for including me in this debate, which I much appreciate.

3.21 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am the only speaker for my party in this debate, so I hope that the House will forgive me if I adopt a slightly winding-up tone. I want to put on record what a pleasure it has been to take part in the debate after the long time we have spent dealing with covid. We are not out of its shadow yet, but hopefully we are on our way. How nice it is to be back in this Chamber speaking in debates in our normal way.

I do not think that I am known for having a pop for the sake of it in this place, and if the Minister were still here, I would thank him for the excellent work that has been done on the space launch front. That is very enthusiastically supported in my constituency. However, I am bound to make two points, the first of which is a national issue.

As the House will be aware, as my party's Defence spokesman, I have made the point in recent times that I am particularly perturbed by the reduction in the numbers of our armed forces personnel, particularly in the British Army. Two points arise from that. The first is that if—perish the thought—we had to mount some sort of operation similar to the one in Afghanistan, I worry that the size of the British Army would not be sufficient to do that. Secondly, I believe that when it comes to recruitment, if the British Army gets below a certain critical mass, the brightest and best of our young people who might want to join our armed forces would take a look and say, "It's too small. It's beginning to look like a sunset industry. I'll go and do something else." That worries me about recruitment, because it is an issue for the British Army.

Returning to the Budget, I am deeply perturbed to see that there will be a cut of 1.4% in Defence spending over the next four years. I want to put on record that that is a dangerous cut, and I am surprised to see it in the context of what is a tax-and-spend Budget. We could debate the rights and wrongs of such a Budget, but I will not do so today. For those who have not seen it, I draw the House's attention to the editorial in *The Times* today, which states that the Chancellor runs the risk of stoking inflation. If we take a tax-and-spend Budget and add it to the increase in the price of commodities in the world—the price of fuel has been mentioned, and we have to consider the ramifications of covid and Brexit—we could, perish the thought again, have inflation on our hands.

I am the oldest member of my parliamentary party at the august age of 67, so I lived through the horrors of inflation in the 1970s. I was working in the oil sector on a smallish wage, and during the year my wages started not to meet the costs of the bills I had to pay. Inflation is a bad, bad thing. I hope it does not hit us, but I fear it might.

This morning I telephoned a friend of my daughter—they were in the same class up in the highlands. I spoke to her and another friend, both single mothers living in council accommodation, and I asked, "What concerns you about the Budget?" Members might think that perhaps they did not take a big interest, but they did. One lady said to me, "It is the cost of the bills I have to pay. I am concerned that I may not be able to afford them." The other young lady said, "I am concerned about education. I am concerned about special needs

assistance for my child." I believe they speak for a lot of people, as other hon. and right hon. Members have touched on.

These worries are out there. When we think about how inflation would add to those worries, it becomes scary. When we think about what inflation would do to our hard-pressed frontline services, it becomes very worrying indeed. I put down those two markers at national level.

I end on a point that might not ingratiate me with SNP Front Benchers. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) mentioned the great jug of money called Barnett consequentials that is poured out towards the Scottish Government after passing through a sieve. I think he was referring to the fact that in some parts of Scotland the sieve seems to have a hole, and in other parts of Scotland it seems to have a very fine mesh. What we in the highlands fear, with all due respect to my good friends in the SNP, is that the money rushes through the hole to the central belt and does not come to more rural areas. That is the challenge the right hon. Gentleman posed to the Scottish Government.

I have spoken many times in this place about maternity services in the far north of Scotland and how pregnant people have to make a return journey of 200 miles to give birth. There are so many pressures because of rurality, distance and sparsity of population. With the best of intentions, I sincerely hope that the Scottish Government will address those inequalities with the moneys they are being afforded through the Barnett consequentials. I live in hope, but there is a nagging doubt at the back of my mind.

3.28 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). I attended the reception he hosted yesterday for young people working in the renewable energy sector. He mentioned the reception in a couple of his earlier interventions, and I agree with those points.

I congratulate the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), on her assured response to yesterday's Budget statement. I am not sure how much notice she had, but I do not think it was very long—perhaps half an hour. She had to put up with some very ill-mannered barracking from two or three Conservative Members, but she seemed, if anything, to relish it and she set out a compelling case that the heart of the problem is the poor record on growth over the past 11 years. Her commitment to abolishing business rates has clearly rattled the Chancellor, and there is a compelling case for fundamental reform given the dramatic shift to online shopping, as a number of Conservative Members have said. Until the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), told us at the start of the debate, I did not realise that a promise to do that has been included in every Conservative manifesto since 2010. I do not know why, 11 years on, the Government are still nowhere near doing it.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy told us today that yesterday's announcement about business rates meant that they would be "more responsive and agile, with more frequent

reevaluations"; I do not think there is anything very fundamental there. In making the case for fundamental reform, my hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor is absolutely right. That is the kind of bold change that is needed.

It is striking that Ministers currently do not seem to be taking much notice of UK businesses. They got into the habit of ignoring all businesses' fears about Brexit, so they seem to feel they should continue to ignore their views now. From what I can tell, businesses are currently getting a hearing from the Labour Front-Bench team that they are not getting from Conservative Front Benchers. The argument made by my hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor—that the central problem has been weak economic growth since 2010—is very persuasive. We have a difficult winter ahead and the appetite for an approach different from the Government's may well be rising rapidly next spring, with real wages due to fall again in the next year.

We all understand why the tax burden is high coming out of the pandemic, but there seems to have been no attempt to share that burden fairly. It is all being borne by working families, what with the national insurance increase—the jobs tax—and the Chancellor's evident delight in cutting the duty on champagne then seemed to be rubbing salt in the wound.

I welcome yesterday's announcement of the reduction in the universal credit taper and the increase in the work allowance. Those are significant changes that are large enough to be worth while, and they will help low-paid working families to get over the £20 a week cut and will increase work incentives—those are positive things—but they will do nothing at all for unemployed families and people who cannot work because of ill health, all of whom have suffered the £20 a week cut to the rate of universal credit.

Benefit support for unemployed families is now at its lowest level, in real terms, for more than 30 years. In those 30 years, GDP has increased by more than 50% in real terms, but support for unemployed families is no bigger at all than it was 30 years ago. It is now at the lowest level ever as a proportion of average earnings. In fact, according to the House of Commons Library, support for unemployed people is now at a lower level, as a proportion of average earnings, than it was when Lloyd George introduced unemployment benefit in 1911. These are historically low levels of support.

When the Minister responds to the debate, will she give us some explanation of why unemployment support has been cut so low? We have had no explanation at all. I have pressed Ministers on the issue at the Work and Pensions Committee but they cannot give any justification for why this has happened. Social security has a job to do; we cannot have successive Ministers simply dipping into it to fund other things. At its current level, particularly in some parts of the country, it has been cut below the level at which it can any longer do its basic job. People cannot focus on getting a job if they are worrying about whether they can pay for their children's next meal.

We have just had 18 months in which people who were unable to work—unable to do their jobs—have had to live not on £75 a week but on 80% of their in-work earnings, up to a maximum of £30,000 per year. That is an approach to supporting people who are not in work that is very different from the one provided by social security in the UK. Perhaps we can learn lessons for the future from the success of that most

recent approach. The Work and Pensions Committee is going to conduct an inquiry on this subject over the coming year, to look at what the level of support for unemployed people should be and to consider the approaches being taken elsewhere and the evidence on the effectiveness of those different approaches.

The analysis published yesterday by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that the running cost budget for the Department for Work and Pensions has been one of the most deeply reduced in Whitehall since 2010. That is no doubt one of the reasons for the serious problems in the state pension service at the moment. Very large numbers of people—well over 100,000 people now, according to the Department—have not received the correct amount of pension over a period of 30 years or more, with older women particularly hard hit. Just in the past few months, there have been very large numbers of people having to wait a long time to get their pension after applying for it. The reduction of the running cost budget for the DWP must be one of the reasons why those things have gone wrong.

I do hope that the very modest increase in the Department's running-cost budget will allow some modernisation of the very old computer systems on which the state pension benefit and some other benefits are run. There has been a meeting this morning of the Public Accounts Committee with the permanent secretary, in which questions were asked about how things have gone so badly wrong with the state pension, particularly in these past few months.

By contrast, the universal credit system, which is modern, did a very good job during the pandemic in getting support to a large number of people efficiently and well in a short period of time, but too many of the Department's other systems, such as the state pension system, need urgent investment.

I note from the Budget document that the Government are planning for the universal credit roll-out, which we were initially told would be complete by October 2017, but which we are now told will be complete by March 2025. The OBR has always and rightly been sceptical about the Department's forecasts on this and expects it to take 18 months longer. I think that it is likely to be proved right.

I warmly welcome the case that the shadow Chancellor and her team have set out in response to the Budget. The heart of the problem has been this weak economic growth over the past 11 years. I hope that, between us, we can come forward with some compelling proposals for how that failure can be reversed in the years ahead.

3.37 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). I agreed with much of what he said, particularly with regard to state pensions. It was disappointing yesterday not to hear anything in support of our 1950s women who have been betrayed by this Government, as have our miners whose pensions have been completely neglected for many, many years. As always, it is a privilege to speak in the debate today, and I am grateful to be able to raise the concerns on behalf of residents and businesses across Pontypridd and Taff Ely.

We truly are in a cost of living crisis. The long-term problems caused by this Government's inaction on our crumbling economy are severely impacting working

[Alex Davies-Jones]

people. Fundamentally, it is working people and our businesses up and down the country who are paying the price. Along with so many colleagues on the Opposition Benches, I have spoken passionately and at length about the need to support people through what will inevitably be a difficult winter. And how do the Government respond? By piling costs on working people and businesses at the worst possible time, hitting them with tax rises and a cut in universal credit while of course giving breaks to bankers and big companies such as Amazon. This is an absolute car crash of an attempt at economic recovery, all at a time when our taxes are at the highest they have been since the war, but with even less than ever in return.

The sheer irony of the Chancellor standing in this place announcing billions of pounds of investment at a time when his Government voted for the devastating cut to universal credit only a few weeks ago certainly is not lost on me or on the residents in my area. Indeed, I had hoped that, in the previous Budget, the Chancellor was at last understanding the fundamental impact that a broken welfare system is having on people, when he finally admitted that the previous levels of universal credit simply were not enough for people to live on. Once again, though, I am disappointed, but ultimately not surprised, by the Chancellor's actions in recent weeks.

With that in mind, it would of course be remiss of me not to make reference to the devastating knock-on impact that this Government are having on people living in Wales. Put simply, this Budget simply does not deliver for Wales or the United Kingdom. It does not deliver on vital funding priorities, such as the long-term funding required for urgent work to repair Wales's coal tips. Indeed, only earlier this week the Welsh Government published data showing the true extent of Wales's challenge in increasing safety around coal tip sites. The Welsh Government have identified 2,456 tips across Wales. Although I welcome the joint approach by the UK Government and Welsh Government to set up a coal tip safety taskforce, it is clear that we still have some way to go on long-term investment. Despite a cross-party joint letter endorsed by all 22 council leaders in Wales, requesting funding from the UK Government, we see no commitment to an ongoing programme of funding, even though the issues with coal tips predate devolution in Wales.

This Budget, along with pleas for help and support, finally provided an opportunity for the Government to give some much-needed reassurance to communities such as mine in Pontypridd, and across Taff Ely and Rhondda Cynon Taf, that remain in the shadow of their industrial legacy. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), who is a good friend, reminded Members that only last week we commemorated the 55th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster. That catastrophic collapse of a colliery spoil tip, even years down the line, serves as a poignant reminder of how dangerous coal tips can be. Although I recognise that safety measures have vastly improved since that horrendous disaster, it is only with long-term, sustainable financial support that the issue can truly be tackled at its root. With that in mind, it is extremely disappointing that despite having the opportunity to make a positive change, the Chancellor has once again failed people in our coalfield communities, with no money for the coal tips and no justice for miners' pensions.

I welcome the announcement of funding for our community arts centre in Pontypridd and the dualling of the A4119 at Coedely in my constituency. I commend the outstanding RCT County Borough Council and our leader, Andrew Morgan, for all the incredible hard work they have put in to ensure that our levelling-up bids were successful. But let us not forget that although this money is welcome—and we are grateful—the £120 million for Wales is actually a £255 million cut on the promise to replace the EU funding. The failure to accept the responsibility for coal tips will cost Wales £600 million. Wales will get no consequential for transport infrastructure, and the universal credit cut will do nothing to tackle poverty, including in-work poverty. This is Wales not levelling up, but being short-changed by the Budget.

If the Business Secretary were in his place, I would take the opportunity to congratulate him on becoming a father and on the birth of his child. I am extremely passionate about an affordable and flexible childcare system that works for us all. Time and again, I have raised the injustice of the paltry parental leave allowances currently on offer from this Government, and that extends to neonatal leave. Although I was pleased to see the Government announce plans to introduce neonatal leave that will cover up to 12 weeks when a baby is receiving neonatal care, the policy simply does not go far enough. The changes announced are unlikely to come into force until 2023 at the earliest, leaving around 300,000 families with babies who will be spending time in neonatal care in the next three years forgotten and left behind once again. Once again, I find myself urging the Chancellor to be bolder in his commitments to parents who are going through what can only be described as absolute hell on earth.

Ultimately, I fear that this is a half-baked Budget, with hundreds of thousands of people being left behind once again. At the last Budget, I urged the Chancellor to learn from previous mistakes and rapidly to learn some lessons from the pandemic. Instead, we are seeing the same age-old policies, which will have a huge impact on working people. I urge him and the Financial Secretary to take these concerns seriously, and to act reasonably and responsibly. Diolch.

3.43 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) on a powerful and excellent speech. As a representative of a coalfield area myself, in County Durham, I express my solidarity with colleagues from Wales who have raised the issue of unsafe coal tips and the need for funding. It is poignant that my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd mentioned the terrible disaster at Aberfan. I know that it touched many hearts throughout the nation, including that of our sovereign. It was the most appalling tragedy. We must never, ever forget the debt of honour that the nation owes the coalminers and their families and communities. Although it is not the focus of my speech, I am also disappointed by the failure of the Chancellor to address the historic injustice of the mineworkers' pension scheme. It is not a case of demanding more public money, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who is no longer in his place, claimed. This is the miners' own money. That this historical injustice has not been addressed cuts to the quick those of us with mining connections.

The broad theme of this debate is people in businesses. I will confine my remarks essentially to cancer, which is the most dreadful business. I know that the Treasury Bench is populated by Ministers with a background in science, innovation and workforce skills, and I hope they will relay my comments to their colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care. I declare an interest as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on cancer and on radiotherapy. Access to cancer services is an issue that has touched me personally and about which I care passionately. About 50% of us will suffer and battle against cancer at some point in our lives.

A week ago, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), and, from the other place, Baron Fox of Leominster, and representatives from national cancer charities, cancer survivors and the cancer workforce, to deliver a petition and a letter to No. 10 Downing Street. The petition was signed by over 53,000 people. The letter, sent on behalf of a coalition of national cancer charities, patient advocacy groups, 64 MPs of all parties, peers and APPG chairs, called on the Government to invest urgently in our vital cancer workforce ahead of the Budget. A few months earlier, just before the recess, I presented to Downing Street a petition set up by Catchup With Cancer which was signed by over 370,000 people. That campaign was launched in conjunction with Craig and Mandy Russell, to whom I pay tribute. Tragically, they lost their daughter to bowel cancer at the age of just 31. Her life expectancy was drastically cut short after her cancer treatment was stopped as a direct result of the covid-19 response.

Even before the pandemic, at 62 days, we had the worst cancer waiting times on record and worrying variations in cancer services across the United Kingdom. The pandemic has not just laid bare the terrible strain on the cancer workforce, which has been happening for a number of years, but has driven cancer services to crisis point. It is reported that significant numbers of nurses are leaving or planning to leave our NHS following the pandemic. One in four NHS staff in England say they are now more likely to leave their job than was the case one year ago. In addition, long-standing unfilled vacancies and high staff absence and sickness levels continue to constrain cancer services. I am a great admirer of Professor Patricia Price, who appeared before the Health Committee earlier this week and spoke of “the biggest cancer crisis in living memory”.

To give credit where it is due, the emphasis on cancer diagnostic services in the Budget is welcome. It matches the ambitions set out in the NHS long-term plan of diagnosing 75% of cancers at stage 1 or 2 by 2028. The projections are that 55,000 people each year will survive for five years or more following their earlier cancer diagnosis. However—I must regretfully, with due respect, take issue again with points raised by Conservative Members—we need greater clarity on exactly how the money is to be spent. Unless the boost in cancer diagnosis is matched by an equal boost in treatment services and investment in the workforce to deliver those services, they will continue to fall far short of the Government’s stated ambition. The future of the workforce is now the most significant threat facing the NHS today. We need investment in equipment needed for treatments such as advanced precision radiotherapy, which I have benefited

from and which plays a vital role in cancer care and has continued to be the stand-out cancer treatment during the pandemic.

Make no mistake, the cancer backlog is a huge issue. Without a fully funded plan to increase the number of skilled staff and train the future cancer workforce, more patients will see their treatments unnecessarily delayed. Investment in cancer treatment services and the cancer workforce needs to be expanded to match investment in cancer diagnosis. The two are hand in —two wings of the same bird.

Jim Shannon: You need both wings to fly.

Grahame Morris: Precisely. We must ensure that people living with cancer get the support they need and deserve now and in the future.

The specifics are that according to the cancer charity Macmillan, we are 2,500 specialist cancer nurses short in England. Macmillan is urging the Government to take action and create a nurse cancer training fund, which could be set up with a modest investment of £124 million. That would train 3,300 specialist cancer nurses. When we think about the many billions spent on the test, track and trace system, the investment of a fraction of that sum in cancer treatment—modest as far as the budgets are concerned—would command majority support, not just on the Opposition Benches, but in the whole House and the country.

3.51 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. As ever, it is a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who spoke so eloquently about cancer. In the Budget, there was not a word about the call from the Association of Medical Research Charities to have a medical research charity partnership fund to fund vital medical research. Charities have been so hard hit during the pandemic, yet there was not a whisper from the Government yesterday.

The people and the planet will pay for yesterday’s Budget. While the Chancellor’s job is to positively spin each announcement, it is what is not said that exposes the economic reality and fragility. We must remind ourselves, after more than a decade of economic regression, that we are in this place because of the mismanagement of the pandemic. The Government were ill-prepared, despite warnings. They ignored those warnings, then were slow to act.

Inflation rises are costly, and they hit the poorest hardest. The Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that inflation could rise to 5% or even more. Inflation will really hit the poorest people in our constituencies, with energy, food and housing costs soaring. That will mean that family budgets will rapidly move into the red because of the contents of the Chancellor’s red box. Inflation will mean that many more families will visit one of York’s 16 food banks, 15 of which are in my constituency, and that many more will go without. That process will be accelerated for those who have just had £20 a week stripped from their working tax and universal credit payments, including 7,850 people in my constituency, at a time when the Government have also announced increases in national insurance contributions. Those in my constituency are living in a place where house prices

[*Rachael Maskell*]

and rents are rising more sharply than just about anywhere else in the UK. That £20 cut embeds inequality and injustice, yet the proposals from Government keep driving inequality through housing. There was not a word yesterday about how to fix that or the homes that people live in, so many of which are damp and overcrowded, with families struggling in them.

While York's Poverty Truth Commission will unveil the depth of this crisis, the Chancellor failed to bring fresh thinking to his Budget. A wealth tax, as many in business now call for, would have seen redistribution and been a first step to tackling entrenched disparity. With York as one of the most inequitable cities in the UK, we need to see that change.

While underemployment and underpay in York make living there more expensive than most places in the country, the relief for the hospitality sector will act as a sticking plaster to address some of the issues that it is facing, yet not all. Staff shortages are pressing down on the hospitality sector and making many businesses so unviable that they can open for only a few days a week—we see the notices going up in their windows. What was missing yesterday was how we are going to not only address that issue, but transition to secure and better jobs for our future economy. Of course any wage rise helps, but when the pressures are escalating disproportionately on the least well off, a £10 minimum wage was needed as a starter. As the Labour conference determined, it should rapidly rise to £15 an hour.

When we talk about the current staff recruitment challenges, we need to understand the pressure that is putting on our private sector businesses and our public sector. For example, there is a deficit in people providing the care services that are vital to address some of the challenges facing the wider NHS. If we cannot care for people in our communities, we need the Government to step in, yet we heard no response from the Chancellor yesterday as to how that crisis will be addressed.

On business rates, we again saw sticking plasters coming out of the Chancellor's pockets to cover the wound, but there is still a gaping hole and we need more innovation to address those rates. A property related tax belongs to a different era. As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is no longer in his place, said, we cannot have an analogue tax in a digital economy. That is why we need reform. I have talked to businesses in my constituency, 65% of which are independent and innovative in what they are doing. They are calling for a tax that looks at profit and turnover to address their contribution proportionately. We need to address those issues because, time and again, we have seen offshore landlords not paying attention to what is happening on our high streets. It is about time that they were held accountable.

Most seriously, the Chancellor's silence on support for local authorities to run good local services was telling. Our City of York Council's leader has squandered public funds on pay-offs, but my constituents should not pay a heavy price. They deserve decent services, but the Chancellor failed to say how they will be provided without cuts and rises in council tax. For example, how will the cost of repairs be met for schools such as All Saints Roman Catholic School, which desperately needs a new school estate, or Tang Hall Primary School,

which is so cold in winter that children wear hoodies to keep warm? That is the reality facing us, and it has to change.

There are other issues, such as the Sure Start programme. Yesterday, we heard a big brag from the Government about putting £500 million into 150 new family hubs, but we must remind ourselves that £974 million and 1,400 Sure Starts have been cut, which means that, for many years, many families did not get the support that they had had. On family hubs, the voluntary sector is expected to be a partner, but again that sector is really struggling and there was nothing from the Chancellor.

Although, obviously, I welcome the reannouncement of the funding for the National Railway Museum, as I have welcomed it each time the Chancellor has mentioned it, we need more investment in our city. That is why I was disappointed that York's response to the green new deal, BioYorkshire, did not get a mention yesterday. It would bring forward, ahead of COP26, a proper green new deal and transition, as well as vital regeneration and crucial jobs for the future to my city.

As our planet continues to melt and burn and flood, the Chancellor failed to mention its fate. Holding down road and air travel costs will only accelerate its demise, not stem it. In just five years' time, the UK will have spent its carbon budget. The Budget made the wrong calls. We just do not have time on our side, yet the Chancellor did not address that crisis. I am perplexed as to why, when the economic Budget is announced, the carbon budget is not addressed at the same time. They should be addressed together, hand in glove.

As the Chancellor stalls on funding for the poorest on our planet by suppressing overseas development aid until 2024-25, he also suppresses the green transition they need to make. Famine and droughts, conflicts and floods are forcing 80 million people to leave their homes and land to eat and live. Opposition Members cannot cheer the Chancellor with his veil of optimism, because we know that our constituents are not fooled. They see the trail of devastation that the Government are leaving for Labour one day to mop up. The Chancellor who said he would do "whatever it takes" left 3 million people stranded during the covid crisis. Yesterday, he abandoned not just the people but our precious planet.

4 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who made important points on the inequality that exists. Her constituency has similarities with mine. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, an enormous number of people are still on benefit, yet, at the same time, the wealth tax list published by *The Times* shows that 23 more billionaires have made money just from the covid crisis.

We have not talked much about waste this afternoon. The debate has to be considered in the context of the cross-party investigation on the covid crisis led by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and how much money was given out in a haphazard way. Had that money not been wasted, it would be available now to assist our constituents, who are feeling the pinch with autumn on its way and with inflation affecting food and fuel bills as well as clothing, shoes and everything that we purchase.

If my reading of documentation from the OBR and IFS is correct, there has been a 2% reduction in GDP as a result of the scarring from covid and a 4% reduction owing to Brexit. Trading with our European partners has gone down from about 63% to 60%. That may not sound like that much in percentage terms, but it actually represents quite a reduction in trade with our main trading partners. We face an autumn of many difficulties on many fronts—it makes one feel nostalgic for the last time we had a surplus Budget, which I believe was when Gordon Brown was Chancellor, which was quite some time ago. Since then, we have had deficit Budgets under Tory Administrations.

I want to highlight the increased tax burden on many people who do not earn very much money at all. The jobs tax increase of over 1% on employees and employers that will come in next April will lead to a sense of less money in the pocket. There is still much uncertainty at this time about covid and a question mark over whether we will need increased restrictions in the autumn. It feels like a bit of a gamble in terms of how much of a burden it is placing on working people to carry the can for Government mismanagement, waste and increased taxes.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the missed opportunity on climate ahead of COP26. We could have seen much more funding for basic measures: for example, we could have asked local authorities to retrofit homes and provide state-of-the-art new boilers. That could have provided the opportunity to train up the 180,000 workers we will need to install heat pumps. Our local authorities would have been grateful for the opportunity to do their bit; instead, they are still scrimping and saving, despite the small increase in local government funding. Much more could have been done.

We have the tax cut for flying between Manchester and Heathrow—should we be encouraging that in this day and age? When we look back at various green schemes—the green new deal introduced as a sort of payment on homes back in 2010 by Greg Barker, now in the other place, or the green homes plan, which ran out of steam—we see that time and again the Government have missed the opportunity to ask local authorities to deal with their own localities. Green schemes work best when operated at local level.

We all of course think day in, day out about the productivity puzzle. We know that, unless we spend more on education, we are not going to see long-term improvements in our economy. I welcome the work and report on early years by the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), but I do not think £500 million is going to do what Sure Start did. Many of us have had a number of Sure Start children's centre closures over the years and this is reinventing the wheel and too little too late.

The Chancellor talked yesterday about tutoring. I am a big believer in tutoring, but it often implies that the hours a young person spends in school are not productive. How do we use the hours when children and young people are in school in a better way? My survey of schools shows the teaching staff to be exhausted and morale to be quite low, and I hope that, after the pay review body does its work, teachers will get a proper increase for their daily work. Why does this need to be a question of either tutoring or increasing the time young people can spend in school? We should be looking at both.

Further education spending has been cut by 50% since 2010. I am pleased that there are some bootcamps and there are new and different ways to spend the apprenticeship levy, but we need to think much more carefully about what works and increase investment in training, career development and the whole area from early years through to FE and adult education.

Sir Kevan Collins, who was the education tsar under the Government, has written in today's *Times*. He thinks that the £5 billion is only a third of what is needed to bring our education system up to the required level. We all want our workforce to be more skilled and the productivity gain that would bring, but if Kevan Collins, the expert who was commissioned to look into this, says this falls far short, we need to believe that and do more about it.

I am very proud of my busy London high streets, but I was sad that the Chancellor did not even mention the word "London" yesterday; it seems to have gone out of vogue but, as those of us who are based in our wonderful capital will know, we need quite a lot of levelling up ourselves in London. The high street in Wood Green, where I am the MP, has a number of people walking up and down but businesses say that, although there is plenty of footfall—people are still there—the amount they are spending has dipped right down. Since 2010, the number of transactions and payments to small businesses and the chains in our mall have dropped considerably. That reflects Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis showing we have had negative growth, or tiny bits of growth in our local areas. A lot of that is down to these patches where we have high unemployment and not much at all in our pockets.

Our small businesses are very disappointed that, despite promising it for years now, there was not a proper review of business rates. The Labour proposal to take more as a digital tax from Amazon and to top up small business relief is a neat solution and I ask the Government to look at that again. They are letting down small businesses, which are the lifeblood of all our communities.

We are experiencing problems related to lack of occupancy of shops on our high streets. I am particularly cross with the banks. The week before last, I presented a petition about the closure of the NatWest branch in Crouch End, and then, lo and behold, as I sat down we learned that the Lloyds in Muswell Hill is closing. Not only is that a terrible waste of the lovely space that those banks were taking up on the high street, but often there is no guarantee that they will replace those branches with an ATM—a hole in the wall—which means that people will not even stop to buy a sandwich and get some cash out at the cashpoint. That is the least the Treasury could be doing.

I believe that there have been hundreds of bank closures since 2015. I would like the Treasury to show a bit of muscle and go back to the banks and say, "Okay, you're closing a branch, so what are you giving us back?" Why do we not make them work for the tax cut—the £4 billion—that they got from the Treasury yesterday and say, "In return, every time a bank is closed on the high street, put in an ATM so that at least we can get cash out and our high streets are not deserts?"

We know that many of our small businesses really do it for the love. I am thinking of small shops such as the Pretty Shiny Shop in Stroud Green ward and Dunns bakery in Crouch End. They are fantastic local employers

[Catherine West]

—that is the thing. They often have young people working after school, or women whose caring responsibilities work around the different shifts. They are doing their bit to keep our high streets going, and I would like to see the Treasury respond in kind to keep them going.

I want briefly to talk about the vibrant restaurant sector, which will benefit from some of the minor adjustments that the Chancellor announced yesterday. I am very grateful for that. I could not quite follow all the changes to alcohol, I am afraid—he lost me a bit—except that I think champagne is going to be cheaper, but I am sure you know that, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am sure you were taking notes, as somebody who likes a tippie.

However, some people do not drink—let us not forget that—and we could have spent that time talking about something that mattered more, such as fuel bills, how expensive childcare is, and the fact that people who are carers and do a job do not get any recognition for that in our taxation system. There are so many more things that we could have spent time talking about. Instead, I understand that yesterday's announcement was followed by a very funny outing to a brewery, where the wrong prop—the wrong keg of beer—was used. I am sure that the shadow Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), will refer to that in winding up.

This has been an excellent debate. There is a lot that we have in common, but we face a number of challenges. I would like us to be much more focused on how we can help our constituents through this very tough and uncertain period. Autumn will lead to a Christmas of shortages, of very high fuel bills, of expensive food, clothing and shoes, and of looking at a very modest increase to the minimum wage, which could really be a living wage if we tried harder and made it a real £10 an hour. I hope that the Treasury will look again at making some announcements this weekend when COP is in town, so that we can be even more pleased to be in a leadership role there, and that it will look specifically at the role of local government in day-to-day measures to improve our environment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are now going to move to the final Back-Bench contribution, so will any Members who have contributed to the debate please start to make their way to the Chamber for the wind-ups? Those will follow Mr Jim Shannon.

4.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first say a big thank you to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Government for all the help that they gave us—I say “us”; that is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—during the covid crisis? The moneys that have been spent are enormous—we know that—and they are the reason why many of the businesses in my constituency are here today. Help was given at the time that it was needed. This Budget follows that, and every one of us has to recognise what has happened before and what happens now.

I was thinking beforehand about how I would refer to the Budget and I was reminded of a saying that I have probably used before in this Chamber. The Budget is a

bit of a curate's egg: good in parts. I am a person who eats two eggs in the morning and two eggs at night, so I know how to eat me eggs. You have to eat the yolk and you have to eat the white as well, because they are both part of the egg. Now, what is the best part of the egg? It is the yolk. I am going to speak about the best parts of the egg, but there are also parts of the egg we may not enjoy as much and we should recognise that. *[Interruption.]* I hear from a sedentary position, “Don't eat the shell.” *[Laughter.]*

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health, so I want to talk about some of the good things in relation to respiratory health. I was delighted to hear the announcement in the Budget that money has been set aside for community diagnostic centres. The Government announced that 40 new community diagnostic centres are set to open across England in a range of settings, from local shopping centres to football stadiums, to offer new and early diagnostic tests closer to patients' homes. To roll out the strategy, the new centres will be backed by a £350 million investment and provide around 2.8 million scans in their first full year of operation. They are designed to assist with earlier diagnosis through faster and easier access to diagnostic tests for symptoms, including breathlessness, cancer and ophthalmology. The Chancellor also announced, through the health budget, additional moneys to tackle the backlog of diagnostic tests to deliver more checks, scans and treatment.

Those are some of the good things that have happened. The Government set a target of 100 centres across the whole of the United Kingdom, so I put on record my thanks to the Chancellor for making that very welcome announcement through the Department of Health and Social Care. I understand that each of the centres will include a multi-disciplinary team of staff, including nurses and radiographers, and will be open seven days a week. If those commitments are delivered—I hope they will be and I trust the Government to do that—we will have something we can be very thankful for. The all-party group warmly welcomes the creation of the centres and the funding allocated to them. I hope they can help to address the covid-imposed inequalities that we have seen across the country in asthma and lung cancer care and treatment. They should provide additional confidence to patients, and relieve pressures on the secondary and tertiary care appointments system. We also welcome the inclusion of breathlessness diagnostics in the centres. We think it is essential that the centres will be equipped to diagnose any cause of breathlessness, whether it is cardiovascular, lung cancer, asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. We have sent some questions directly to the relevant Health Minister to follow up on that.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) mentioned the need to retrofit homes. He is absolutely right. I am also the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings. We need to address the efficiency of older homes, but every home across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will be targeted in this energy crisis. We need a better system of retrofitting homes, making them more efficient and addressing the energy crisis. I think we can do more. That is a part of the curate's egg that has perhaps not been addressed and I hope the Minister, in summing up, can provide some kind of indication on that.

I very much welcome the Government's innovation targets, which the Secretary of State referred to earlier. On green energy, I made a point about hydrogen. I will be meeting him shortly with my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). We will put forward some ideas on hydrogen to create jobs and boost the economy, so we can look to the future. Again, those are some of the good things.

Many hon. Members mentioned air passenger duty and I have to say, with respect, that I do not agree with them. For those of us who live in Northern Ireland, I am very happy that the Chancellor announced a reduction in air passenger duty. I travel to work from Belfast to here, but it is not just me. On Monday, the plane was almost full, with very few seats left. Many of those people were also travelling to work. APD has been reduced, so there is an incentive for people in Belfast, Scotland and elsewhere in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—money in their pockets. The planes will fly anyway, whether there are 30 or 120 people on them.

The benefit from APD is for the regions of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that is a method of levelling up that we can all take advantage of. We as a party have been asking, I believe, for three years for this APD measure to be brought in, so we are very pleased on behalf of our constituents and those who travel to work from Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom. Here is something good for them.

I also welcome the £1.6 billion—my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) referred to that yesterday—that has been set aside for Northern Ireland through the Barnett formula. These moneys will be vital for the Northern Ireland Assembly, for the working of the regional Administration and to help to address the issues, shortcomings and problems with health, education, roads, policing and so on. Again, the Government have been very generous and we are very pleased to be in receipt of that £1.6 billion; it is a real increase. There is also a real increase in expenditure, as my right hon. Friend said, and those are some of the things that we will wish to keep track of. I think there may be some other Barnett consequential money coming through the health budget that was announced, so we are very pleased.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion spoke about universal credit as well—it just so happens that he and I have similar thoughts on this matter—and I was disappointed that the £20 uplift has been removed. However, given what the Chancellor seemed to indicate yesterday—if I have read it right, and I have asked people in my constituency to look at the figures to see whether this is correct—if people can still be in receipt of universal credit and earn more, that will enable some, and I hope all, of my constituents to take advantage of universal credit and, at the same time, increase the hours that they are doing. The taper rate change seems to mean that people can earn more and still be in receipt of universal credit, if I have read that correctly. I will check it out, because that only became known yesterday, but I am, certainly initially, very pleased to see that in place.

On the curate's egg, one thing that I am disappointed is missing, which is very important to my constituents, is an uplift in the child benefit cap for those working families who receive no Government help other than

child benefit and whose children will receive no help for uniform, school meals, university fees or anything else. The fact is that they are living on less disposable income, with higher gas, car and electricity costs, and I am disappointed that the child benefit cap has remained for a further year. I say respectfully to the Ministers on the Front Bench—the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith)—for whom I have the utmost respect, that middle-class people will be squeezed. I have asked for an uplift in the child benefit cap. If that was part of the Budget, it would enable some middle-class people not to be squeezed as much, and if they were able to take advantage of that, it would definitely make a difference.

I have two grandchildren who were born during the covid lockdown, and five grandchildren in total. Many in this House have grandchildren and their own children. I believe that my covid lockdown grandchildren will be paying for this in their taxes until the end of their lives and probably until the end of their children's lives, so I want to make sure that every penny is well spent. Although I welcome the large amount, I question the situation for middle-class families: I believe that more can and should be done to bring relief to working families who get no help other than child benefit. Their shopping costs have risen by 20% and their fuel costs have risen by 30%, yet they cannot take a pay rise of a couple of thousand pounds because they would lose a percentage of their child benefit. What they are given with one hand is taken away with the other. It would have been better to raise the child benefit cap to ensure that they, too, could get some advantage. They are no longer comfortable, but stretched: stretched in their precious time with their children, stretched in their finances, stretched in their energy. I fear that, at some stage, that stretch will lead to a break. I believe that we must do more to help them.

This is a curate's egg Budget: good in parts. Let us enjoy the yolk and enjoy the white part; they are all good, but some parts are better than others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will now start the wind-ups.

4.25 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond to today's debate on behalf of the Opposition. Although the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is not in his place, I begin by congratulating him on becoming a father for the first time. He would not tell us his age, but if he is an older dad, as I was, I suspect that he is learning the reason that people have children in their 20s and 30s. That is a lesson that we learn when we have them a little bit older in life, so I give him my full solidarity and best wishes on his new baby.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate, which were wide-ranging. Several hon. Members talked about the need for business rates reform in the longer term, which the Opposition very much support. Others raised continuing issues with universal credit and made the point that the changes made yesterday will benefit only a minority of those affected by the cut of £20 a week that was implemented

[Mr Pat McFadden]

a few weeks ago. There were also contributions on artificial intelligence, the return of inflation, bank closures and many other issues.

Several Welsh colleagues raised coal tip safety. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) rightly reminded us that it has been just over 55 years since the tragedy in Aberfan. I remember visiting the graveyard in Aberfan as a young man with my friend Huw Lewis, the former Assembly Member for the constituency: I will never forget the pictures of children on the graves, lovingly cared for and frozen in time forever. Fifty-five years on, I hope that the UK Government and the Welsh Government manage to reach agreement on securing the safety of coal tips for the future. I thank hon. Friends for raising the matter.

The Budget, like all Budgets, covered many things, but the stand-out feature was the Chancellor's admission that taxes are set to rise to their highest levels since the early 1950s—higher than under Norman Lamont, higher than under Ken Clarke, higher than under Denis Healey, higher than under any of the Chancellor's predecessors. Corporation tax, personal allowance freezes, national insurance, council tax—there is one tax rise after another. A new analysis today shows that the combination of them is set to mean £3,000 more in taxes per household than when the Prime Minister came into office.

The reason for all the tax rises is simple: the Tories have become the party of high taxation because they are the party of low growth. In the 11 years in which they have been in office, economic growth has averaged just 1.8%. In the previous decade, it averaged 2.3%.

Tom Hunt: I find it somewhat unbelievable that the right hon. Member cannot see that perhaps the £407 billion that we spent fighting the pandemic might have something to do with what he has just identified.

Mr McFadden: If the hon. Member reads the OBR report, he will find that it says very clearly that the effect of the pandemic is smaller in the long run than the effect of the low growth over which his party has presided for more than a decade.

As I was saying, in the decade before the Conservatives came to office, growth averaged 2.3%. Let us look at what the difference between those rates means to people. The difference, added up over the years, is worth £9,000 a year to every household in the country, and from the Exchequer's point of view, the difference would be £30 billion a year more to fund our public services. It is that more than anything—that appalling record on economic growth—which has forced the Chancellor to raise taxes. The British people are being forced to pay the price of the Government's long-term economic failures.

The long-term effect of this lack of growth is far greater than the impact of the pandemic. When we look beyond the huge fall in GDP last year, due to the pandemic, and the bounce back from it this year and next, the growth picture does not change. The OBR is predicting economic growth averaging about 1.5% between 2024 and 2026. It is that low growth which creates the projections of real wages barely rising in the coming years. In his dreams, the Prime Minister is Winston Churchill; in his rhetoric, the Chancellor is Margaret Thatcher; but in its actions, this Government is Ted Heath.

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister have trapped the country in a vicious circle of low growth, rising inflation, stagnating incomes and rising taxes. The economic legacy of this Chancellor will be a country on the path of low growth and high taxation, but his political legacy will be as the man who buried forever the Tories' reputation as a low-tax party.

Barry Gardiner: I entirely agree with all the points that my right hon. Friend is making. The Chancellor said yesterday that in three years' time we would still have growth of 1.3%—negligible growth. If we look back to the years of the Labour Government, we see that even in 2010, after the global recession, we still had growth of 2.3%.

Mr McFadden: That is precisely the point I am making. The long-term growth trend makes a huge difference to the Government's choices and their power to fund public services.

In the face of that, what was remarkable about yesterday's Budget was the total absence of any plan for economic growth, and nowhere is that clearer than in education. The Chancellor expects us to applaud a lap of honour where in a couple of years' time, funding per pupil only just gets back to its 2010 level. Let us think about that for a moment: almost 15 years with no real increase in investment in the workforce of the future. A generation of schoolchildren will have gone through their whole education with fewer resources than their predecessors.

How can the Government talk realistically about levelling up when their record is long-term neglect of educational opportunity? What an appalling dereliction of duty to young people in this country. There can be no more short-sighted decision than to stop talent flourishing—to take away the platform from which dreams can be fulfilled. For people born without money or without means, education is the only way in which that can happen. It is the means by which people can change the circumstances into which they were born. It is the platform to ensure that the course of life is not dictated by the hand that they were dealt at birth. Yet, for 11 years, this Government have neglected it. Then, when they were presented with a catch-up plan to help children to recover from the education lost during the pandemic, they shredded it. That is not only socially unjust; it is economically self-defeating, and that record on education is a major contributor to the weak, anaemic, stunted growth that has resulted in the tax levels we are seeing today.

This was not a Budget written in a few weeks in the Treasury. These high taxes and stagnating household incomes are not the product of the short-term crisis through which we have been living. This was a Budget written over 11 long years. Where was the plan for growth? Where was the plan to back the best of British creativity and enterprise? Where was the plan to ensure that we succeed in the technologies of the future? Where was the plan to ensure that, when it comes to levelling up, it is people and the talents that they hold, not just bricks and mortar, that are at the heart of it?

It is not just our view that the Budget did not measure up. The CBI has said that it will not “do enough to transform the UK economy for a post-covid world”. The Federation of Small Businesses asked:

“Is there enough here to deliver the Government's vision for a low-tax, high-productivity economy? Unfortunately not.”

The Government ditched their industrial strategy out of ideological spite. The transition plan for net zero produced just last week was a damp squib. One of the biggest challenges that we face is how to transform the heating in our homes, yet their plan would partially cover just one in 250 of the replacement boilers needed. The long-term reform of business rates, which several Conservative Members said they supported, has been ditched once again. Time after time it is ditched. And the Government have only just discovered the importance of early years education, a decade after taking a wrecking ball to Sure Start and setting back a good start in life for millions of children around the country.

It is not just the fact that we have the highest taxes in living memory; it is that those taxes are not being used for any coherent long-term plan for the country. They are being used to firefight one issue after another as it momentarily occupies the mind of the Prime Minister. There is only one plan that the Chancellor has here, and it is as clear as day. It is to hold some money back in order to offer tax cuts before the next election. If that plan succeeded and the Tories won, what do we think would happen afterwards? We know what would happen. There would be a big speech about how taxes now had to go up because we had to pay our way and could not borrow what we could not afford. And the reason for that would still be the Tories' lamentable failure on economic growth. That is not a moral mission. It is just a Tory election plan, and it is one that has been funded by hard-working taxpayers.

There is a better path. There is a better future and a different way, and that is to put our efforts into raising medium-term growth prospects and to get out of this bind of high inflation, high taxes and poor growth that 11 years of Conservative Government have left us in. That is the better path to prosperity and security. That is the path to ensuring that talent is used and to making the most of the UK's potential. On the Labour Benches, we want to work with business, not treat it as a scapegoat for every problem that comes along. We want a fair deal for the workers in business, with good pay and decent conditions. We want to support wealth creation every bit as much as we support fair wealth distribution. We want to invest in the skills and talents of all our people, whatever their circumstances, from the youngest age possible, and we will have a net zero plan that meets the challenge of the moment and gets the best possible economic and employment benefits for the country. That is a better plan than the high-tax, high-inflation, low-growth model that the Conservative party has been pursuing, not for two years, not for one year but for 11 long years. It is that failure that gave rise to yesterday's Budget and the tax burden being imposed on the country by this Chancellor and this Government.

4.38 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

It is a privilege to close this debate on behalf of the Government. As we come out of the biggest recession in 300 years and emerge from the pandemic, it is critical that we as a Government support our people and our businesses, and this has rightly been the subject matter of today's debate.

This is a Budget that delivers a stronger economy for the British people. It is a clear expression of what this Government stand for and what we are determined to

achieve: investment in a more innovative, high-skilled economy, because that is the only path to individual prosperity; world-class public services, because they are essential to our day-to-day living; backing business, because our future cannot be built by the Government alone; help for working families with the cost of living, because we will always give families the support they need; and levelling up, because opportunity should never be limited to the few and should not depend on where a person was born or who their parents are. Our goal is an economy fit for a new age of optimism, and this Budget is our foundation.

The right hon. Members for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) talked about investments over the past 11 years, stagnation and the lack of growth. I wonder whether they remember the financial circumstances in which their party left the country when it left office, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) pointed out. As they talked about economic stability and credibility, I wondered whether they had spotted that, under its current leader, Labour has made more than £400 billion-worth of spending commitments, in opposition to the Government's responsible decisions to pay for our plans, yet announced just £5 billion-worth of proposed revenue rises, showing that it has no plans beyond reckless spending and no plans to deliver responsible public finances. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) said, it is important that an elected Government have economic credibility, and that rests with this Government.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East said the Government's plan will only increase taxation. I wonder whether he was listening to the Chancellor yesterday when he talked about his fiscal rules, whether he heard the Chancellor's commitment to cut taxes and whether he heard that the first step is a cut of the taper rate for those on the lowest incomes.

A year ago this country was experiencing the deepest recession on record, but thanks to the Chancellor's plan for jobs, which the Office for Budget Responsibility yesterday called "remarkably successful," we are fast recovering. The OBR expects the economy to return to pre-pandemic levels at the turn of the year, earlier than it thought in March. It has revised anticipated growth up every year for the next five years, and it has revised expectations on unemployment down to 5.2%, with more than 2 million fewer people likely to be out of work than was predicted at the height of the pandemic. Wages are also rising. In other words, the decisions this Government took during the pandemic were the right ones for the economy and for the British people.

The subject of today's debate is support for people and businesses, and that support is clear to see. I start by addressing our support for people, and particularly for those on low incomes. It was a Conservative Government who introduced the national living wage in 2016, and the Budget increases it by 6.6% to £9.50 an hour, raising the pay of over 2 million of the lowest-paid workers. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said that that is not enough, but I wonder whether she realises that the rate is set by the Low Pay Commission, and that is what we have accepted.

Alison Thewliss: Does the Minister accept that she is talking about not a real living wage but a minimum wage? The real living wage will be set by the Living Wage Foundation on 15 November. Will she match that?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Lady knows, we are on a trajectory to get the national living wage to a higher rate. We need to increase the national living wage, as we have by 6.6% this time round, and it will go up again in time. She will have heard Conservative Members asking how it will work for the businesses that are paying it, so there is a balance to be struck. This Government are progressing on that trajectory to the right path.

We are also reducing the universal credit taper rate from 63% to 55%, which, combined with a £500 increase in the work allowance, means an effective tax cut worth more than £2 billion a year. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central said that that would not help families, so let me give an example: a single mum living in Darlington who works full time on the national living wage would see a £1,200 increase in her pay by December, and that would be £1,900 in April when the new national living wage comes in. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) acknowledged the transformative effect that the increases to the national living wage and the universal credit taper will have for many of his constituents. I am grateful for the constructive comments made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) in welcoming the national living wage and public sector pay increases.

With fuel prices at their highest level in eight years, we are not prepared to add to the squeeze on families and small businesses, which is why the Budget freezes fuel duty for the 12th year in a row. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) is wrong to say that we are not supporting people with their gas bills: in addition to the fuel-duty freeze, we have the warm homes discount, which supports 2.2 million people, who receive a £140 rebate on their bills. Like the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), the hon. Member for Newport East called for a cut to VAT on fuel bills—something the Labour party calls for—but what would that do? What would happen if we cut VAT on fuel? Such a cut would apply for everyone, across the board, so who would it help as well as the low-paid? It would help the wealthy. I am quite surprised to hear Opposition Members suggest that.

Barry Gardiner: Does the Minister recognise that it is the poor who pay the largest portion of their disposable income in fuel costs? She is absolutely right that such a cut would, of course, be of greater benefit in monetary terms to the wealthy, who tend to spend more on energy, but in terms of the difference made to lives, 5.7% of the disposable income of the very poorest goes on energy costs.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member makes a valid point and I absolutely recognise that, but the way to solve that problem is not to give a tax benefit to a large group of people who simply do not need it, but to give discrete, directed support to those who do need it. That is what this Government have done: the hon. Member will know that six weeks ago we announced £500 million to support the most vulnerable families when they absolutely need it.

Members from all parties mentioned the support for families and for family hubs and welcomed the measures in the Budget. I was pleased to hear the support from

my hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris). My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) made a good speech about how important it is to support struggling families, and I was interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich said about the importance of not only supporting young families financially—we have heard how important it is to support recent mums and dads—but giving them emotional security as well.

I was disappointed to hear the shadow spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South-East, speak about our lack of support for education, because we have invested significantly in education, not only in this Budget but in previous ones. This Budget provides a wide variety of support through the education system. We are increasing the core funding for schools, with an additional £1,500 per pupil, and providing catch-up funding, with an additional £1.7 billion bringing the sum up to £5 billion. In addition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich said, we are increasing the funding for SEND provision, with an extra 30,000 places for pupils with high needs. Through our new Multiply programme, we are helping school leavers who did not get the maths skills that they ought to have got at school.

Catherine West: There are some really good measures in the education package, but does the Minister not accept that returning us to 2010 expenditure on education when we have more children to educate, a bigger population and a need to look at the workforce as well, does not really help us in terms of the productivity puzzle, which is key to making the Brexit challenge work?

Lucy Frazer: The £4.7 billion investment in core school funding will be welcomed by schools and will enable them to support their students over the coming years. I would like to take this moment to thank all those teachers across the country who have committed so much over the course of the past 18 months in very difficult and challenging circumstances. I know that, although schools are back, students have lost time and there is a huge amount of work to do. Our one-to-one tuition and other such measures will help with that. The mark of a good Budget is one that makes a difference to people's lives, in many different ways, and I hope that this Budget makes that difference.

Let me turn now to skills. Supporting people does not just mean cutting their tax bill. If we want to build a stronger economy and spread opportunity, we need to do more to boost people's skills. I have talked about education, but, in addition, we are spending £3.8 billion over the Parliament, with more hours learning for 16 to 19-year-olds, expanded T-levels, more traineeships, more Institutes of Technology funding for the lifetime skills guarantee, and a large increase for apprenticeships by the end of the Parliament. I was very pleased to hear the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) welcoming our boot camps, which are increasing skills for people across the country.

Every Government should aspire to provide greater life chances for future generations, but this Government not only have the ambition, but have already shown through their plan for jobs that we can level up and we will continue to do so with this Budget.

Anna McMorrin: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Lucy Frazer: I will press on at the moment.

Just as the Budget seeks to help working families, so it supports businesses as they continue to recover from the pandemic, with a particular focus on encouraging them to invest. Small businesses are the lifeblood of the British economy. Their contribution to this country, day in, day out, is extraordinary, and we want to support businesses to grow, so the Budget introduces changes such as the new 50% relief for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties—a tax cut worth almost £1.7 billion. The Budget also cancels next year's planned increase in the business rates multiplier—a tax cut worth £4.6 billion for businesses. Taken together, the Budget cuts to business rates amount to support of £7 billion over the next five years. I am really pleased that that was welcomed by my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) suggested that this was not significant support, but in fact it is the largest support by way of business rates over a period of time, save for the coronavirus measures.

I would like to address one point that was raised by the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon). There was a suggestion that freeports—one of our measures that significantly support business—were not generating economic activity. Let me say that we are already seeing evidence of new investments at freeports. DP World, for example, is investing £300 million at the Thames freeport.

Let me turn now to investment. We are boosting innovation by investing in our world-leading research and development sector, maintaining our target to increase annual public R&D investment to £22 billion, and spending £20 billion every year by 2024-25. On top of initiatives such as Help to Grow and the Future Fund, we are increasing regional financing to help businesses innovate and grow, and providing £1.6 billion for the British Business Bank to expand the UK-wide regional angels programme and establish new regional funds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) recognised, it is extremely important to improve our science education and investment, and that is exactly what we are doing. We want this country to be the most exciting and dynamic country in the world for business, and it will be.

The position in relation to the devolved Administrations was mentioned by several Members, including the hon. Members for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). Some of them mentioned funding for the coal tips in Wales. I point out that in this Budget the devolved Administrations have had the biggest funding settlement ever, with the biggest annual block grants in real terms of any spending review settlement since devolution in 1998. I do hope, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, that that money is spent well.

Alex Davies-Jones: The Minister mentions the block grant that is given to the devolved nations, but surely she and the Government recognise that the £600 million needed for the coal tips legacy cannot be paid for by the Welsh Government alone. It was the UK that benefited from those coal tips, so it cannot be for the Welsh Government to pay for the legacy on their own, especially when it predates devolution.

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Member knows, these matters can be dealt with through devolution. As I mentioned, there is a significant funding settlement coming the way of the devolved Administrations; obviously, it is up to them how they spend that money.

As the country emerges from the worst economic shock that we have ever seen, this Government choose to invest in people, in skills, in innovation—in our future. The Budget and spending review begin to deliver the new economy and optimism of which the Chancellor spoke yesterday, with a pay rise for over 2 million people, a £2 billion tax cut for the lowest paid, the biggest business rates tax cut in 30 years and the largest real-terms increase in departmental spending this century. This Budget levels up to a higher wage, higher skilled and higher productivity economy. It is a Budget that will be measured by the difference that it makes to people's lives across the country. I commend it to the House.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(Scott Mann.)

Debate to be resumed Monday 1 November.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank every Member who participated in the debate, because everybody turned up for the wind-ups. We will pause briefly as those who wish to leave the Chamber do so, before I call the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) to present the petition.

PETITION

Inquiry into policing at Orgreave Coking Plant

4.58 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents and many mining communities throughout the country on the need for an inquiry into policing at the Orgreave coking plant on 18 June 1984. In the five years since 31 October 2016, when the Home Secretary decided not to order an inquiry, the Government have not responded to any of the new evidence that has been presented.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Easington,

Declares that the UK government has not properly investigated the behaviour of police at the Orgreave Coking Plant on 18th June 1984; further that in the five years since the Home Secretary decided not to order an inquiry, on 31st October 2016, the Government has not responded to any new events and evidence; further that key events and evidence that came to light during that time include the 2020 decision of the Scottish Parliament to grant a collective pardon to miners' convicted in Scotland during the 1984/85 strike, the 2018 independent approach by the Bishop of Sheffield that there be an independent panel set up (similar to the Hillsborough Independent Panel) to commence scrutiny and consideration of the events of 18th June 1984, the further release of Home Office papers relating to the strike in the last five years and finally the disclosure by the National Police Chiefs' Counsel of the existence and location of Association of Chief Police Officers files relating to Orgreave and the miners' strike that are embargoed until 2066; further that Tory MPs representing ex-mining communities have failed to publicly state their support for an inquiry; and further that the recent Daily Mirror article exposing Amber Rudd's conversation about not holding an inquiry into Orgreave because it would "tarnish Thatcher's memory" was very disappointing.

[Grahame Morris]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and review its decision not to order an independent inquiry into policing at the Orgreave Coking Plant on 18 June 1984 and to consider afresh the legal submission presented to the Home Secretary by the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign in 2015.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002695]

North Tees Hospital

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I understand that Mr Cunningham has sought permission to speak briefly in this debate, and that Mr Vickers and the Minister have agreed, so after Mr Vickers has resumed his seat, I will call Mr Cunningham to speak.

4.59 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the House for the opportunity to hold this important and urgent debate, and to the Minister for his attention this evening. After much time spent securing the debate, I am delighted to have the chance to make the case for much-needed and urgent improvements to North Tees Hospital.

I pay tribute to all the amazing healthcare workers—the doctors, nurses, technicians, cleaners, and anyone who had a hand in making sure that our hospitals, including North Tees, stayed afloat during the pandemic. While many retreated to the safety of their own homes, they got on with the job, putting themselves at risk, to help keep us safe. We owe them all a huge debt of gratitude. I was recently fortunate enough to undertake a shift alongside the doctors, nurses and surgeons at North Tees Hospital, and I saw for myself the challenges that they are facing and the sheer scale of the elective surgery backlog created by the pandemic. Doctors and surgeons are being forced to make decisions on who gets their treatment first: the elderly lady who needs a hip replacement to deal with her arthritis or the youngster who needs surgery after a sporting accident.

Dealing with this backlog involves us all making the difficult decisions that are required to get our NHS back to full health. While none of us on the Conservative Benches wanted to increase national insurance or create the health and social care levy, having seen the waiting lists, and seen the work our surgeons are doing, I am confident it was the right thing to do. This funding is what our constituents need and what our hospitals so desperately need. Of course, this money comes on top of the record investment that the Conservative Government are placing in the NHS, with 50,000 more nurses, 50 million more GP appointments a year, and, as announced yesterday, an additional £5.9 billion, taking the total investment to date to £176.5 billion—a 27% increase since the Conservatives came into government in 2010. In the past year, we have welcomed £6.5 million invested in North Tees, including huge improvements to our now award-winning urgent care centre.

Seeing the hard work and commitment of all the people who work and volunteer at North Tees Hospital is inspirational, and the people there really are award-winning. Dr Iain Loughran, one of the physiotherapy consultants, won an award at the chief allied health professions officer awards for creating an app for physiotherapists who were deployed during the pandemic; nursing associate Lisa Tomlinson was shortlisted for the rising star award for her work as an ambassador for cervical cancer after beating the illness herself; and volunteer Stephen Pratt was awarded the British Empire Medal as part of the Queen's new year honours. These incredible people deserve the facilities and resources they need to go about their great work.

Built in 1968, the hospital serves a population of 400,000 people—a population with some of the highest health inequalities and highest rates of deprivation in the country. It is a heartbreaking and outrageous fact that, according to Public Health England, Stockton has the nation's biggest gaps in life expectancy. In central Stockton, male life expectancy is just 64 years, while just a few miles up the road a man can expect to live to 85. This cannot go on; it has to change. When it comes to levelling up, people's life expectancy must surely be a priority, and delivering good health services is the key to that.

Unfortunately, the North Tees Hospital building does not live up to the standard fit for the great people who work there and the patients treated there. During my shift, I got to see the challenges of the estate and the staff's frustrations. The building was constructed in the 1960s. It is a concrete building constructed at a time when medical needs and processes were very different, and the architects had no foresight when it came to design. As a result, the hospital is in a state of poor repair and is pulling resources from frontline services to address its issues. Structural and engineering elements of the major buildings are now well beyond their life expectancy. The NHS workers in my patch, who have worked with determination and perseverance to make the best of the facilities they have, have said that this is putting the trust's ability to provide good care at risk.

It is time to replace this hospital, which is far past its sell-by date. The fact that the hospital is comprised of two towers, which host both wards and theatres, means that piecemeal improvement or ongoing gradual investments will struggle to ever make the change needed. It is not practical and barely possible to extend a ward or theatre above the ground floor. The building has a flat roof, and as a result the building suffers hugely during adverse weather conditions. Nobody should be greeted by buckets catching water from leaky roofs when sat in A&E, in a ward or when in theatre or losing a loved one. At those tough times, we need to do better than that.

The hospital is no longer fit for purpose. By national health building note standards, our wards are way too small, with too many shared rooms. HNB guidance suggests that 85% of rooms should be single occupancy. In our trust, the proportion of single rooms is just 16%. Our theatres are also far too small. HNB standards suggest that theatres should be 55 square metres, while some theatres at North Tees are just 28 square metres. That has a huge impact on what can be done in them. There is not the space for modern technology and robotics. Not being able to have that equipment means that some patients must go elsewhere for certain surgery. Moreover, it results in some surgery taking longer to perform and it extends recovery times, so longer surgery slots are filled more quickly and more time is spent in hospital beds.

Improving isolation facilities on wards, improving clinical adjacencies and increasing the number of single-bed rooms are all options that would improve health outcomes in Stockton South, but they can only be achieved if we invest now. No amount of paint slapped on the hospital and no amount of plastering over the cracks could hide the fact that it is no longer fit for purpose. A six-facet survey was recently conducted, and it concluded that

demolition and replacement was by far the best option. The costs are only one of the factors that justify that approach.

The trust continues to invest significant capital in maintaining the facilities in a safe and operational condition, but the six-facet survey indicates a steep increase in the backlog, with more than £250 million-worth of maintenance to be undertaken in the next 10 years as a “do minimum” option. On the other hand, the consolidation of services on to a new hospital site would have estimated savings of between £5 million and £6 million a year. My trust does not want to spend millions each year maintaining a crumbling building; it wants to spend the money on doctors and nurses and improving health outcomes.

By far the most important justification for this proposal is the improved care it would provide for my constituents and others. A new modernised estate could support a health management programme that would address some of the health inequalities that exist in communities such as mine, because, sadly, we are still more likely to have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or heart conditions or die earlier than the average citizen. Those problems are set only to get worse as our population ages.

Aside from that investment, there are so many other opportunities up for grabs that could revolutionise healthcare in North Tees. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the future of retail, I am a huge advocate of the “Health on the High Street” initiative, which I have been championing locally. By decentralising NHS estates and putting diagnostic centres in empty buildings on our high streets, we can bring healthcare closer to people's doorsteps and bring some desperately needed footfall to our town centres. During the last year, I have taken that idea to my local NHS trust, and there is now a strong possibility of developing a hospital with diagnostic facilities in our town centres, but it all costs money, and we need cash in Stockton.

If there is one other thing we can do that would make the NHS fit for the future, it is getting rid of Labour's crippling private finance initiative deals. The James Cook University Hospital, which is not in my patch, but serves many of my constituents, has a PFI scheme that costs £57 million a year. That is more than £1 million every single week and £18 million more than an equivalent hospital trust would ever have to pay. It is ridiculous. That £18 million could pay for 530 nurses in our hospitals.

I was delighted that the Conservative Chancellor announced in 2018 that those dodgy debt-loading schemes would no longer be used, but if we want to put the NHS on a surer footing, we need to get rid of the schemes that remain and hold it back. I ask the Minister to look again at what can be done to end Labour's debt legacy on the James Cook University Hospital, so that that money can be spent on nurses, doctors and improving the health outcomes of people from our part of the world.

I will return to my main ask before I finish. To eradicate the risks associated with an ageing estate that is no longer up to the job, a new 21st-century hospital for Stockton is a must do. Now is not the time for sticking plaster. We cannot go on throwing good money after bad to maintain a building that is just not fit for purpose.

I hope that Ministers will back the bid that has been put forward by North Tees, so that we can build a new North Tees that is fit for the future, fit for patients, and

[*Matt Vickers*]

fit for staff. I know that the Government are committed to modernising the NHS and have announced a massive investment that will fund healthcare across the region. The Minister is probably sick of hearing from me on the issue, but I will not give up until the amazing doctors, nurses and staff have the modern facilities and resources that they deserve.

In the light of that, I invite the Minister to the hospital to see the challenges and the improvements that must be made. If his diary does not allow that, however, North Tees will happily take a nice big cheque instead.

5.11 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), my next-door neighbour, and to the Minister for agreeing to me making a short contribution to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South on securing it. I am pleased to see him following in the footsteps of Lord Wharton and Dr Paul Williams in championing the case for North Tees Hospital.

The speech of the hon. Member for Stockton South was excellent. I did not agree with everything he said, but it certainly made the case that many of us have been making for some time that we must have a new hospital in North Tees. Last year, the then Secretary of State visited North Tees and learned for himself—I hope the Minister will too—not just of the challenges we face with an outdated hospital, but of the plans and systems being developed to drive change and better healthcare in our area, where health inequalities are some of the greatest in the country, as the hon. Member for Stockton South said.

I have been calling for a new hospital to be built in Stockton for more than 11 years after the planned one was axed by the then Tory-Lib Dem Government. I often wonder what the health of our area would be like if that hospital had gone ahead. I wrote to the Minister in February requesting an update on the possibility of funding for the development work. To his credit, he has acknowledged that he owes me a letter. I am also grateful that he met the chief executive officer and the then chairman of the trust at my request just before that.

I will give a few short reminders. In Stockton North, 7.4% of the population suffer from asthma, which is higher than the 6.5% in England. In England, the level of COPD among the population is 1.9%, which rises in my constituency to 3.1%. Men in the town centre of Stockton-on-Tees, in both North and South constituencies, live 18 years less than their peers down the road. That inequality is appalling, but not inevitable.

I believe that the Minister is a good Minister—I do not say that very often—who wants to help and who recognises our challenges, but we need action now. We ask him to come good. We challenge him to join the two Stockton MPs as a champion for North Tees and convince the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister that we and our people need that hospital. We look forward to good news soon.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) and the hon. Member for Stockton North

(Alex Cunningham) for their words. Without prejudging what the application process for a future new hospital might come up with, in contrast to the hon. Member for Stockton North, I agree entirely with the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South in what was, as ever, an extremely powerful exposition, on behalf of his constituents, of the need for a new hospital. I congratulate him on securing the debate. He has been a tireless campaigner on behalf of North Tees Hospital ever since he entered this place, and he continues to be a great advocate for the people of Teesside and Stockton on healthcare and many other matters. They are extremely lucky to have him representing them in this place.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton North for his kind words about me. I will bank that, though I may consider it an asset that needs to be renewed from time to time and not one that lasts in perpetuity. He mentioned how, when he raised the matter at Health questions earlier in the week, I said that I owe him an update letter. I undertake to write to him and to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South jointly to set out an update on the issue outwith the debate.

My hon. Friend was right to highlight that these have been incredibly challenging times for our NHS, including for the staff at North Tees Hospital and those across the trust and the country. I join him in expressing my gratitude to all of them for the work they have done and their dedication and commitment to caring for all his constituents and people across the region. I also pay tribute to him for the shift that he undertook at the hospital.

Before I turn to the substance of the case made by my hon. Friend, he kindly invited me to join him on a visit. I am due to bring my wellies to visit my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who secured a commitment for a visit earlier this week. If we can find a way to add that to the tour that it looks like I may be undertaking around the country, I look forward to visiting him and the hon. Member for Stockton North in the not-too-distant future.

Alex Cunningham: It's only 100 miles away.

Edward Argar: Given that I have also committed to visiting places in Norfolk and—I think—Lancashire, it will be a pretty big tour. That is all I will say.

As I said, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South on his campaign on behalf of the hospital and on the dynamism that he has brought to it and to this place. He set out clearly the context of the hospital in terms of his constituency and the healthcare needs of his constituents. Two things that he said in particular struck me as very powerful statements. First, he set out the difference in life expectancy at 64 years compared with over 80 just up the road. Secondly, I was struck by the age of the hospital—it predates my existence, so it almost certainly predates his as well—and the impact that the design standards of that time and the ageing of the hospital has on its operation and maintenance costs as well as physically keeping it functioning as an acute hospital.

The Government have made clear our commitment to levelling up outcomes across the country, and that will certainly extend to benefiting the people of his constituency. To level up effectively, we need to improve health outcomes, and we are committed to reducing

health disparities between the most and least deprived areas of the United Kingdom. Yesterday, as my hon. Friend said, the Chancellor confirmed that the Government are backing our NHS with a significant capital settlement including £5.9 billion to cut waiting lists as well as for surgical hubs, community diagnostic centres and IT improvements. That will create a step change in the quality and efficiency of care up and down the country. Of course, giving people greater opportunity to get diagnosed and scanned earlier may lead to an increase in the need for services at his hospital and others as people have their illnesses identified and need to have them treated. I will turn in a moment to his powerful plea for a new hospital.

My hon. Friend also touched on the critical need for trusts to maintain their estates. We are pleased to confirm that the spending review continues to back trusts with significant annual operational capital investment to do that, enabling them to maintain and refurbish their premises. Crucially, that is with multi-year predictability and certainty. We all know how, in capital spending, the longer the settlement in years, the easier it is both to plan for it and to get a better deal for the investment from those being employed to carry it out. More broadly, we previously confirmed an initial £3.7 billion over the four-year period from spending review 2020 to make progress on the building of 48 new hospitals by 2030. Thirty of the hospitals already announced are due to be built outside London and the south-east. Of course that comes on top of additional funding to upgrade hospitals.

My hon. Friend is, as ever, passionate and persistent in putting the case for North Tees to be among these new hospitals, as is the hon. Gentleman. I reassure my hon. Friend that I never tire of having the opportunity to talk about this with him and having him putting the case to me; he is always very welcome to do so. I will turn shortly to the process and timelines for these additional eight new hospitals on top of those already announced, but first I want to highlight a little of the significant investment that North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust has seen in recent times.

That investment includes: £3.5 million as part of our 2020-21 critical infrastructure risk fund to help it address backlog maintenance across the locations of services in the trust; £3 million as part of our A&E upgrades fund for covid measures, including funding additional streaming capacity for the emergency department at the University Hospital of North Tees; and as part of our £200 million diagnostic investment to replace diagnostic machines that are more than 10 years old, the trust has received a new CT scanner that has been installed and operational since 2020 at University Hospital of Hartlepool.

Of course, we are aware of the need for further investment across the NHS estate, and that is why the Government have been doing ambitious work providing substantial capital investment to support the biggest hospital building programme in a generation. As my hon. Friend has already highlighted, the Government have launched the next phase of implementation for our

hospital building programme. On 15 July we invited expressions of interest from trusts who wished to be considered for inclusion in the next wave. The deadline for submitting expressions of interest passed in early September and, without prejudicing the decision, I was pleased to receive a submission from the University Hospital of North Tees.

We are of course committed to a robust selection process for these next eight hospitals, and as such I am sure my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot comment on individual bids substantively while that selection is ongoing. The submission and assessment of expressions of interest is the first of a two-stage process for the selection of the next eight, to be followed by a more detailed process for long-listed schemes later in the year, considering schemes against multiple priorities, including: transforming services to deliver better, joined-up care; creating stronger and greener NHS buildings; and of course looking at need and the state of buildings that need to be replaced. Another key criterion is the fair allocation of investment by addressing levelling-up criteria. We aim to make and announce a final decision on the next eight hospitals in spring 2022.

My hon. Friend highlighted his concerns about private finance in the context of the legacy of the previous Labour Government and what that meant for his hospital trust. As he is aware, the Government have retired—that is the nice way of putting it—the private finance initiative used so extensively by previous Labour Governments, so, in future, new hospitals built for the NHS will no longer be privately financed. My Department continues to work with the NHS to do more to maximise the value of existing PFI contracts. I would encourage any trust concerned about their PFI contract to contact my officials for help. I continue to have discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury more broadly and strategically about addressing the costly legacy of PFI in the NHS.

To conclude, I reiterate my gratitude, both to the hon. Member for Stockton North for the tenor in which he always approaches campaigning for his constituents and their hospital, but particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South for the work he is doing to support the refurbishment of North Tees Hospital. As I said, he brings a passion and a dynamism to this place on behalf of his constituents, and I am very conscious of the fact that, terrier-like, he will not let go until he has achieved what he seeks to achieve on behalf of his constituents. I commend him for that.

The Government are committed to delivering their improvement programmes to hospitals and the NHS estate across the country and look forward to delivering the step change in the quality and efficiency of care underpinned by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcements yesterday.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 28 October 2021

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

The Coroner Service

1.30 pm

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Before we begin, I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the parliamentary estate. That can be done either at the testing centre in the House, or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering or leaving the room.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Justice Committee, The Coroner Service, HC 68, and the Government response, HC 675.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir George, and to introduce the debate. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for the debate. This is an important matter that deserves further attention. I am sorry in some respects that it requires further attention, because had the Government responded more positively to what is a detailed report based on careful and substantial evidence, it might not be necessary to highlight the measure of deficiencies that are revealed in the Government's response.

I welcome the Minister to his first justice debate in Westminster Hall, having congratulated him warmly on his debut at the Dispatch Box in the main Chamber yesterday. I appreciate that the Government response was not his responsibility, and I am not sure if he can avail himself of the young and naïve defence that was used yesterday.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): It was Tuesday.

Sir Robert Neill: Tuesday. Now that he is in post, I hope that, once he has read the Government response, he will take the opportunity to ask his officials to review it, because there are compelling reasons, which we will set out, why the Government should look again at a number of issues.

It is good to see a former member of the Justice Committee appear for the first time as a shadow Minister in Westminster Hall. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) certainly knows the full detail of the report because he played a substantial part in contributing to it. I hope that he will be able to agree with the contents of the report when we get to the end of the debate.

I also want to mention the presence of the hon. Member for Wallasey—

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Garston and Halewood.

Sir Robert Neill: Garston and Halewood. The hon. Lady has played such an important role in the debate and has raised the issue—I know she will do so again today—of inquests into major disasters, such as Hillsborough, with great passion and expertise. I am grateful to her for her input to the report and to today's important debate.

The debate is on an issue that is of concern to a lot of people. I am grateful to the House authorities for making an exception by allowing representatives from INQUEST and Mr Andrew McCulloch, who gave our inquiry compelling evidence about his family's experience, to sit in the Public Gallery.

Let us start by taking an overview. The coronial system and jurisdiction date back to medieval times; it is one of our oldest jurisdictions. It grew up on the basis of a very localised approach. That means that historically it was dealt with and supported by local authorities—initially parishes, counties and then eventually it morphed into being supported by essentially top-tier authorities in the modern local government structure. That makes it completely different from any other type of court jurisdiction because we moved to a unified magistrates court service some years back. That originally came from not dissimilar localised routes, but it was recognised in the case of magistrates that logic compelled that we move to a single national system. I have to say that nothing has persuaded me that the same logic does not apply to the coronial system.

The system means that some of the procedures and levels of funding are much more variable across the country than those in any other form of court system. There are differences between it and the criminal courts in particular—the coronial system is inquisitorial, whereas the criminal court system is adversarial—even though there is, sadly, an overlap in the subject matter they both consider. The complexity and nature of the issues that now frequently come to be considered by coroners, in relation to both the evidence presented in individual inquest cases and the growth in inquests into multiple deaths, mean that the system—which started in the time of the Plantagenets and evolved through the Tudors and Hanoverians—does not work in the 21st century, based on our judgment of the evidence. That is why, on the back of very strong evidence, the Committee recommended a major reform.

This is not the first time that there have been calls for a national coroner service. Previous reports, which are well documented in our report, have argued for this in the past, but the Government have been consistently unwilling to agree to it. I am sorry to say that I cannot see any compelling reason for their stance. The argument seems to be cost, but that same argument could have been made about magistrates courts. It rightly was not. We have to balance cost with the importance of the work that coroner courts do for the public and individual families.

It is right that when tragic deaths occur, there is a proper and transparent hearing into what has happened. Many of the cases dealt with by coroner courts will be straightforward and uncontroversial. Nobody is seeking to change that, but increasingly there are cases that are not only much more complicated in terms of the causes of death, but of really high public importance. Hillsborough is the most obvious and well-documented example, but there are many others. We have seen this in the growth in issuances of prevention of future deaths letters, which

[Sir Robert Neill]

is a procedure the coroner is in power to use. These are being written more often because, sadly, more instances of failures, often corporate, come to light at inquests. It is important for public policy that those issues be fully ventilated.

Those arguments lead us to the conclusion that we need to take a much more radical look at the issue. The last overhaul of the system was with the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. There was a review of the operation of that Act, as had been promised in 2015, but I regret to say that it was never published. It sits somewhere in the archives of the Ministry of Justice. Perhaps if the Minister, as I occasionally used to do when I was in post, went in on a Friday when the officials might expect him to be in his constituency and had a poke around, he might find it somewhere. I urge him to get somebody to go and have a look at it.

The simple question is: why was the review never published? What on earth was the reason, even back in 2015? We ask why it has not been published and are told that it is now out of date. If one sits on anything for long enough, it becomes out of date. We might ask whether this is a blatant cover-up, but if it is not a cover-up why not publish the review? It would cost one official's precious little time to put it on a website—we do not need anything more than that. No doubt, there will be a suitable narrative around the review saying, "This goes back a long way and things may have changed." As a matter of good public policy and transparency, why on earth has the Ministry of Justice not published it?

The Ministry may even say at the end of the day that it disagrees with the conclusions or does not think they are viable. It may say that the review is not appropriate any more. Put it up there and say that. To me it is the obvious thing to do. It might be that there are lessons to be learned from the review. The actual structure of the service has not changed since the 2009 Act and there have not been any significant changes, so I guarantee that not everything is purely of historic interest. I ask the Minister to respond to this issue, which I mention first simply because of the history. It is against the background of a number of reports recommending a move to a national system that that became the central part of our recommendations.

The reasons can be encapsulated as follows: coroners' services are funded by local authorities, whose financial circumstances and priorities vary—as you well know, Sir George—because the pressures on their resources vary. As such, the service that is given to bereaved families across the country varies, as does the service provided to the public. We do not think that that is justifiable, any more than it would have been justifiable in the case of magistrates courts some time ago.

The overwhelming majority of those who submitted evidence to the inquiry called for a unified coroner service to ensure consistent standards, and that is what we recommended. The Government rejected that, saying that they did not think it would be the best solution. They said, as far as I can see, that there is merit in flexibility, but that does not at all reflect the evidence we received. I have had a few clients over the years who were faced with pretty overwhelming evidence, and I usually told them that the answer was to put their hands up. For some reason, the Government have not done

that, but the evidence is just as strong—it was really quite marked how compellingly the weight of evidence was tilted in one particular direction—so I hope the Minister will take that recommendation away and have another look at it.

In particular, it was suggested that there were cost issues around the proposal, and I accept that. However, this is part of the justice system, and as some of us have said on other occasions, an effective justice system is so fundamental to the wellbeing of civil society in this country that one should not be afraid to make a proportionate amount of money available to make sure it is delivered properly. Can the Minister at least tell us whether he will share the cost analysis that backs up the Government's conclusion in relation to this recommendation? Will it be made public? It seems to me that it ought to be. What is the basis of the Government's assertion that it is too costly, given the benefits that the evidence clearly suggests would be achieved?

A second recommendation went hand in hand with the first. If one thought that a national service is too ambitious—which I do not—one could consider having a coroner service inspectorate: a single national inspectorate. We have inspectorates for the Crown Prosecution Service and a raft of other Ministry of Justice agencies, and it does not seem unreasonable to do that in this case. I am glad to say that in recent years there has been an important development: the creation of the post of Chief Coroner. A series of very distinguished judges have held that post, and they have undoubtedly done a lot to improve the system within the limits of their current powers.

Being head of a national service could, of course, give the Chief Coroner the proper powers of direction to ensure consistency across the piece. The CPS, the prisons and probation inspectorates, and the inspectorates assessor alongside them, are not expensive in the overall scheme of things. We all know that the budgets for the inspectorates that the Ministry of Justice run are very small compared with the day-to-day delivery costs. I would argue that that should be introduced alongside a national service, but even without one it would be a sensible, reasonable thing to do and a step in the right direction, and something that the Government could consider without prejudice to their principal position.

Has any work been conducted to assess the affordability of establishing a coroner service inspectorate? Without such an inspectorate, how are the Government going to ensure that the coroner service is sufficiently transparent and accountable? Given that the Government did not dispute the evidence of inconsistencies of practice, how will they ensure consistency of practice, or much more consistent practice than we have at the moment? That is exactly the sort of thing one would expect an inspectorate to be there for, so why not?

Another very important issue was the question of access to legal aid for bereaved persons, which is an immensely sensitive issue, as Members will understand. We heard really moving evidence from a number of families who had lost loved ones and, inevitably, found the whole process to be extremely distressing. It seems to me that a number of issues arise from that.

At the moment, there is no legal aid for bereaved families at inquest, other than exceptional case funding. To be clear, a large number—perhaps the majority—of cases that come before the coroner's court will not

require legal representation. They are very straightforward and seek to ascertain the cause of death—no more, no less. However, a significant number of cases involve more complex issues. One would, therefore, expect that it is right for families to have legal representation in those cases. However, they may have lost the principal breadwinner of the family or be going through many other pressures—is it right to expect them to go through the very complicated procedure of exceptional case funding? It is not like the ordinary legal aid application form; it is a much harder, more bureaucratic set of measures. It does not seem fair to put people through that, after such tragedies.

There is also an important question of principle. Frequently, one of the interested parties will be a public body. It may well be a health authority, a police authority or chief constable, or a local authority. It might be a Government agency of one kind or another. That party will invariably have legal representation. Sheer equality of arms—a basic principle of the rule of law—would surely dictate that in circumstances where a public body is legally represented, the family should also have legal representation, even within an inquisitorial, as opposed to adversarial, system. The family have the right, as they should, to expect that the evidence given by the public body and its representatives is tested, particularly as there may be a challenge to it, and that there is a full explanation as to whether the actions of the public body, whatever it may be, contributed to the death of the deceased.

Maria Eagle: I agree very much with what the hon. Gentleman has said thus far. Does he agree that the adversarial nature of some coroner's inquests often results from a public authority trying to defend its reputation and defend against civil or criminal liability that it may fall into as a consequence of the outcome of the inquest? Yet the families, who are also interested parties, simply want to know what happened to their loved one. Things become adversarial because of that difference in the interests of the interested parties.

Sir Robert Neill: That is a perfectly fair point. We have all had experience and seen a great deal of evidence of that. The more potentially sensitive the issue, the more that is likely. Let us be blunt: in some cases, there will be public bodies who desire to avoid the potentially significant claims for damages that could arise if it is found that their negligence has, to some greater or lesser extent, contributed to the death of the deceased. They therefore have a direct stake in trying to minimise their fault. There is inevitable pressure on them to do that.

In that event, it is right and proper, even within an inquisitorial system, that the coroner should not have to bear the whole burden of trying to rectify that. Instead, we should enable the other interested parties—the families—to have legal representation as well. The truth is, in these types of inquest, it is not the purely old-fashioned inquisitorial system any more. The reality is that an adversarial and defensive nature has inevitably been brought into the legal proceedings by the legal representatives—acting on the instructions, of course, of the public bodies concerned.

That is why we think it is important that there should be equality of arms. We recommended that there should be automatic entitlement to non-means-tested legal aid

for legal representation for people in relation to mass inquests, where there are multiple deaths, and that non-means-tested legal aid or other public funding for legal representation is made available for people when public authorities are legally represented. The level of representation may vary according to the complexity of the case. However, the principle should be there.

I accept that there has been positive movement from the Government in one respect. INQUEST, in its very helpful briefing for today's debate, recognised that the Government did announce that they would take forward legislation to remove the means test for applications to exceptional case funding for legal representation at inquests. They also announced an intention to provide non-means-tested legal help. That is also crucial. However, the suggestion that non-means-tested legal help will be contingent on cases where ECF has been granted does not seem to be logical, given the range of cases that are potentially engaged here, and the way these processes operate.

As I understand it, there are plans to remove the means test for legal help in these circumstances—I am told there will be some public consultation on this—but I hope the Minister can update us on the progress of plans to remove this and on the time frame for bringing this to a conclusion. That would remove a great deal of pressure for many of the families who contacted us during our inquiry. Even if this cannot happen for them, the fact that it would be possible for families in the same position in the future would be a great boon, would improve public confidence, and would be a humane gesture by the Government. I hope therefore, in that spirit, that the Minister will give us more detail on how the Government intend to pursue that welcome move. Having been critical in some areas, I give them credit where credit is due, but I would like to see flesh on the bones in how that will be achieved.

It has also been suggested that there should be some delay until the Government have responded to Bishop Jones' report relating to the Hillsborough families' experiences. That was a very important report, and I can quite see that the Government would want to take it on board, but it was published in 2017, and we still do not have the Government's response. I know the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) will want to talk about that. I know that it sometimes takes a long time to get things done, but four years seems to be an awfully long time, particularly given the sensitivities and how that might weigh on the families of those concerned and on public confidence in the system. Can we have an indication as to when the Government intend to respond to the Bishop's report, and a timeline for how they intend to deal with the particular issue of legal aid, which they have already moved towards?

What will be done for cases that fall outside that ECF funding to ensure families have legal help from the outset? The importance of that is not just what happens on the day, at the inquest. It is also in dealing with, for example, post-death investigation and inquest preparation. I hope the Minister will have more detail on that.

I might add, in passing, that another point in favour of a national coroners system is that it would enable the Chief Coroner to have far greater power to ensure consistency in pre-inquest hearings and that coroners, on a national basis, have a greater suite of case-management measures than they currently have—as found in the

[Sir Robert Neill]

Crown court or elsewhere—to ensure that preliminary hearings are dealt with expeditiously, and that the issues are narrowed down so that evidence, when it does come from bereaved families and so on, is only that which is absolutely necessary. Sometimes, irrelevant material is attempted to be introduced, causing great pain to families without actually leading to the key conclusions in the case. That could be dealt with, and its admissibility determined, at a much earlier stage in the proceedings.

Those are all arguments for the national service, as well as for strengthening the role of the Chief Coroner—in management and so on. However, to do that properly, it is right and fair that the interested parties are legally represented on an equal footing at those preliminary hearings.

Those are some of the key areas that we addressed around the national system and the position of families in relation to inquests and representation. There are other things that we recommend should be done to help with families, particularly the experiences that all families have, which may not require legal representation but do just need a hand through the system. Even if it is not a contentious death—if I can put it that way—it is none the less a traumatic experience. The thought of having to go to court, having to identify the deceased, or so on, is a difficult circumstance for people. We thought that more work needed to be done to ensure that bereaved people know of the existence of the Ministry's guide to coroner services; it is good that it is there, but the evidence shows that, on a consistent basis, there is nothing like the awareness of it that there should be.

We recommended that there should be work done to update the guide and make sure that it is freely available online, and where people cannot access it online, it is available in hard copy. I am glad that the Government accepted this recommendation—we appreciate that. However, we are concerned about what monitoring will be put in place, absent any form of inspectorate or national control, to ensure that this is delivered in practice and that families do receive the access that Government and the Committee want them to have. If it is locally based, what levers will the Government use to make sure it happens in every coroner's area?

At the moment there is no central funding that goes to the coroner service; it is funded through a local government process with nothing from the Department. We think that the Government should look at a small amount of funding being made available for support services for bereaved people at inquests. That could be done as a separate stream, in the same way as we have streams for victim support in other areas of criminal justice. A small pot here could go a long way towards ensuring consistency. If it was ringfenced, and came directly from the Ministry, then it would ensure that support services for victims were not subject to the same local variations and vagaries as other elements of the system. It is a modest proposal, and I hope that the Minister might be able to tell us what the Government will do on it. Could they perhaps look at the affordability and deliverability of it? Has any work been done on it in the same way that work has been done to ensure that families get access to the guide and are signposted to other forms of support?

An unusual feature of the coroner system is that there is no right of appeal, as such. There is the right to seek a judicial review of the coroner's decision, but the test for that is a very high one. One recommendation in our report is that there should be a straightforward appeals mechanism to the High Court, without having to go through the judicial review test—is it Wednesbury reasonable and so on. The Government said, fairly, that they would consider whether an additional appeals mechanism was appropriate, and I welcome that, but can the Minister help us as to what progress has been made in consideration of it? If there has been progress, and there is time, could we use the Judicial Review and Courts Bill to bring that forward? If not, can we have a timeframe as to when the Minister thinks the Department will be able to come up with a conclusion on an appeals mechanism and identify a vehicle that can put it in place?

As a general concern, it should be said that although there are some useful changes in the Judicial Review and Courts Bill that we debated on Tuesday, which are generally welcomed, a lot more that could have been done. I think there is a general disappointment that the Bill was not used as a vehicle to take forward a number of other issues that were raised in this report.

I wish to raise two further issues. One area of specific concern is the remuneration of pathologists—that is a real problem. The evidence is compelling; there is a real difficulty in finding sufficient pathologists to service the system. We heard that there are 580 consultant pathology vacancies in the United Kingdom, and we recommended that the Ministry should review and immediately increase coroner's fees for pathologists. The fees have not gone up for over 20 years; it is difficult to think of any public service that could continue to attract people if the fees are not updated for 20 years. For some reason the Government have rejected that recommendation, and yet, we are not talking about vast numbers of people. We are not talking about the number of legal aid solicitors or barristers in the country; we are talking about a very small number of highly skilled and rare clinicians. To make it worthwhile for them to undertake this work, surely the Government need to look again at this.

Maria Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is hard to think of anything that could have a more catastrophic impact on the capacity of the coroners courts to do their work than a shortage of pathologists?

Sir Robert Neill: It is pretty fundamental, is it not? At the end of the day, if the purpose of the inquest to determine the cause of death, the most important bit of the evidence in that respect will often be the pathologist's report, so it seems strange, to put it mildly, that what is a very modest proposal in the overall scheme of things has not been pursued.

The Government said they were not convinced that the level of fees was the reason for the shortage of pathologists. I ask the Minister politely, in that case, what they think it is? If it is not the level of fees, what is the problem? The Royal College of Pathologists certainly thinks it is an issue; it says 62% of its members giving up post-mortem work cite poor remuneration as a major cause of their decision. If it is not the sole consideration, it sounds to me as if it is one of the major ones, and one that could be easily and swiftly resolved.

There are other issues that we suggested, such as working with the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that pathologists' work is planned within their NHS contracts. The problem is that the work they do for coroners is outside the NHS contract. If it is outside their contract and they are being paid a wholly out-of-date fee for it, no wonder it is difficult to get people to do it.

Is there a proper workforce plan for recruiting adequate numbers of pathologists? As the hon. Lady says, we almost cannot get past first base in many inquests without having the pathology services there to start with. I hope the Government will be able to look at that again. What do the Government intend to do to improve recruitment and retention of pathologists? If it is not increasing the fee levels, what else will they do? Things are clearly not sustainable as they are—having 580 vacancies is simply not viable.

The other point I wanted to touch on briefly is something I mentioned early on: the procedure for addressing fatal risks identified by coroners and juries, the prevention of further deaths reports. As I said, they have become increasingly important, and we have all seen their value in many highly publicised cases, but there is currently no consistent mechanism to ensure follow-up. Again, that is due to the highly localised and diffuse system that we have.

What progress have the Government made? They said that they recognised that more could be done and they would consider options, and I welcome that, but what progress have they made in considering how preventing future deaths reports could, first, be made more accessible and, secondly, followed up routinely? The whole point is that they ought to be out there in the public domain to change working practices, to change behaviour and to stop such things happening again.

However, as we found out with prison inspectorates and other things, all too often recommendations are left sitting there and are not followed up. The difference that was made when Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons had the ability, and some funding, to follow through on its recommendations was quite marked. What will the Government do to learn from what happened in the prisons system and put in place a mechanism for consistent follow-up and action? Could the Chief Coroner be given greater powers here? It would sit very logically within a coroners inspectorate system, which is perhaps another strong argument for going down that route, but in any event there ought to be a system of consistent means of follow-up and proper transparency and scrutiny.

The Government accepted our recommendation on bringing stillbirths within the coroner's remit. That will be a considerable benefit to many bereaved families. A joint response from the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Health and Social Care was promised; can the Minister tell us when that response will be forthcoming?

I have not touched on everything, but I hope that gives an overview of what was a very substantial report, and the substantial issues it raised, by no means all of which have yet been satisfactorily answered. I know the Minister brings a fresh mind to this matter, and he is a can-do politician, so I hope he will use this opportunity to reassure us that the Government have not just closed the book on this and said, "No, thank you, that's the

end of it," but that we can continue to have a constructive engagement with the Government about improving the system—because clearly, it does need improving.

2.5 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. As a fellow Merseyside MP, I know you have long-standing experience of some of what I will discuss, particularly the first inquests into the Hillsborough disaster. I think you are the only person present who actually attended one of the many inquests at the time, so you know better than anybody how catastrophically wrong they went.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), who is the Chair of the Justice Committee, on the way he introduced this important debate. I welcome the Minister to his post. Immediately after we produced the report, all the Ministers were cleared out in the reshuffle of the Ministry of Justice. It is not something that is ever helpful for getting continuity of effort and speed of response but it is not the Minister's fault that he has only just come into his role and I wish him well. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said he is a can-do Minister, and I hope he is a will-do Minister too.

The report into the coroner service is not only knowledgeable and good—I am bound to think that, given that I am a member of the Justice Committee, which produced it. It also identifies issues that have come to light not just over the last couple of years but, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, over a couple of decades in some cases. I was the courts Minister in the MOJ for a period of time, back when Jack Straw was the Lord Chancellor in the late 2000s, as well as being the prisons Minister thereafter. I was also one of the Ministers who took the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 through the Commons, although I was not the lead Minister. Bridget Prentice did the policy development, but I did some of the work in respect of the Bill.

I recall the debates about whether we should have a national coroner service. It is always a question of cost, but somebody will have to grasp the nettle and deal with this issue at some point. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, it is anomalous that it is still a local service. No matter the value of a local service, the consequence of having a local service is that people get a postcode lottery, which is not acceptable for the delivery of basic elements of our justice system. That is something for the Minister to grapple with in due course.

Perhaps my most important qualification for wanting to speak in today's debate is as a constituency MP from a Liverpool constituency. I have been the MP there for almost 25 years, and I have a long-standing involvement with many of the bereaved families and survivors affected by the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. I have seen the horrendous experience of our justice system that they, as wholly innocent bereaved and traumatised people, have had to endure, partly because of the appalling failings of the first coroner's inquest, which took place in 1990. That was not only the fault of the coroner who handled it at the time; in part, it was a consequence of the behaviour of public authorities, particularly the South Yorkshire police.

I am very much in favour of putting bereaved people at the heart of the coroner service, and it is not only about Hillsborough. I have had dealings with other

[*Maria Eagle*]

families who have been caught up in other disasters, such as the sinking of the MV Derbyshire, although that did not involve the coroners. It happened at sea, so that involved a wreck commission. It was long before my time as an MP, but the ongoing trauma felt by bereaved families was still there when I became the MP for what was then Liverpool Garston.

There was also the Alder Hey organs scandal. Scandals and disasters happen every few years, and they can lead to decades of trauma for families.

I have had constituents who have had to deal with coroners' inquests at the worst time in their lives—after they have lost a loved one, often in traumatic, unexplained or contentious circumstances. They have had to face a public authority that is being defensive, that is lawyered up to the eyeballs and that seemingly has an unlimited budget to spend on avoiding the blame and minimising its responsibility. That is how it often seems to bereaved relatives, who are going along as interested parties—the same status as the public authority before the court—simply to find out the truth of what happened to their loved one and to have a measure of justice done, so that they get the right verdict according to the facts. That is what families who go to inquests want, whether they are a member of a group of bereaved people who have lost their loved ones in awful circumstances or a single family who have lost a loved one and the coroner needs to be involved.

I want to say a little about the experience of families caught up in public disasters. In the case of Hillsborough, the interim report of the Taylor inquiry into the cause of the disaster—remember, this was filmed; it was on TV live, and people saw what happened—reported within four months of the 1989 event. Although time has proven it was wrong in some respects, most notably on the emergency services' response, it has been proven entirely correct—remarkably so, given that police were changing statements to try to affect the way in which the inquiry apportioned blame—in finding that the main cause of the disaster was a failure of police control. That report was done within four months. It was quite clear at that stage what had gone wrong, yet South Yorkshire police did not like that finding and refused to take responsibility, as Taylor had said in his conclusions that they should. Instead, they used the inquests to give a very different impression, which set the tone that persisted for three decades—three decades of hurt and pain caused to the families and survivors.

There were procedural issues at the time of the first inquests. The inquests were difficult to handle and took more than a year. At that time, they were the longest inquests that had ever taken place in British legal history. The way in which the coroner chose to handle them did not work. The police exploited the way in which he chose to handle them to have evidence put that supported their story. Every individual who died had their blood alcohol levels taken, even though a third of them were children—the youngest was 10. The coroner allowed that.

So the impression was given, during the inquests, that the police story, which Taylor had refuted—that it was not the police's fault but that of the victims and the Liverpool fans—was perpetuated, ingrained into the public imagination and reported in the newspapers every day for a year. Funnily enough, 30 years later some people

still think that is what happened at Hillsborough. It was the coroner's inquests being inappropriately conducted that led to that hurtful and difficult outcome—a year of propaganda leading to the wrong verdicts.

It took Hillsborough families until April 2016 to get the new, correct inquest verdicts of unlawful killing—a full 27 years after the events. The second inquests were not as terrible as the first. For example, the pen portraits introduced at the beginning of those inquests, which enabled families to say something about the deceased, are a wholly welcome innovation, which I know has been taken up in other proceedings. That is good. But imagine, 25 years after the events, family members having to sit and listen for two years—that is how long it took—to the same old lies being told in court by those who were still being defensive, despite the intervening years and the vast amount of evidence. It was deeply traumatic for those families and very difficult for them to cope with. Many felt they had to go every day and listen. Twenty-five years later, they had to go every day and listen, and it took two years—pretty tough.

Being an interested party at the inquest gives the bereaved family no greater locus than that of those who may be at fault for the death or who, by natural omission, failed to prevent a death, even though bereaved families have lost far more. Often, the public authority is simply using lawyers to seek to avoid blame or to protect its reputation above all other considerations. To avoid liability or cost is sometimes the main aim of the public authority that behaves in that way. It does not necessarily think about the consequences for the family.

That was certainly the case with Hillsborough, although I think there was also an institutional unwillingness by South Yorkshire police to accept any criticism or blame for the Hillsborough disaster. Even though—or perhaps because—Taylor had found them to be at fault, they were intent on proving that they were not, blaming someone else. The lack of consequences and the impunity for those responsible for that approach meant that South Yorkshire police were able to continue with it for decades. Right up to the second inquest, they were still advancing the same case, which had repeatedly been shown to be nonsense, to the deep hurt and pain of the families. Had the chief constable been dismissed after Hillsborough, after Taylor, a lot of what happened might have been avoided: a lot of that institutional impunity and appalling behaviour, and 30 years of extremely expensive legal actions, might have been avoided.

I met the families after I was elected. I had known some of them before, in my capacity as a junior lawyer in Liverpool at the time. They told me that the inquest had overturned Taylor—that the inquest verdicts had overturned the result of the public inquiry. As a lawyer, I said, "Oh no, they do different things," but actually the families were right, because that is what the police set about doing and did—that was the consequence.

Not until September 2012 and the report of the Hillsborough independent panel, which was a non-legal procedure, was the truth finally known and accepted by the vast majority of people in public life in this country. Before that, politicians and other people frequently said that Hillsborough was about hooliganism. It certainly was not, but that was the impression left by the first inquests. That is what can go wrong if things are allowed to go wrong.

Although the public authorities and the bereaved families in essence had the same status—that of interested parties—at that time and still do, the fact is that the police had far, far more resources at their disposal. They seemed able to use unlimited amounts of their public funding to pursue those arguments about who was really at fault and how it was not really them. Only when the second inquest came along did the families have exceptional case funding, which I am sure ended up being extremely expensive, but they were at last able to have equality of arms.

Equality of arms between interested parties in contentious and adversarial proceedings, whether for individuals or in a disaster such as Hillsborough, is essential to establishing and getting justice and the right verdicts, and to persuading families that yes, they have been party to a proper proceeding. Bishop James Jones, in his 2017 report on the lessons of Hillsborough, recommended what he described as the “proper participation” of bereaved families at inquests. That is vital.

The bishop’s specific recommendations are similar to some of those in our report. He recommended:

“Publicly funded legal representation for bereaved families at inquests at which public bodies are legally represented”—

not all inquests, but those where public bodies are represented. He recommended:

“An end to public bodies spending limitless sums providing themselves with representation which surpasses that available to families”,

and which does not have the same tests applied to it. He recommended:

“A change to the way in which public bodies approach inquests, so that they treat them not as a reputational threat, but as an opportunity to learn and as part of their obligations to those who have died and to their family.”

That is a fundamental shift in attitude, if it can be encouraged. He also recommended:

“Changes to inquest procedures and to the training of coroners, so that bereaved families are truly placed at the centre of the process.”

One still hears examples of appalling insensitivity, if I can put it that way, by coroners. I am not saying all by any means. Some coroners are excellent at involving and engaging families properly, but not all are.

Our report proposes an automatic entitlement to non-means-tested legal representation for bereaved people at inquests into mass fatalities. That is tremendously important, but we also recommend more broadly that the MOJ should by 1 October—that deadline has passed, Minister—

“for all inquests where public authorities are legally represented, make sure that non-means tested legal aid or other public funding for legal representation is also available for the people that have been bereaved.”

I know that the Government responded to that recommendation, albeit not particularly positively. Bishop James also proposed a statutory duty of candour for police officers; our report proposes it for the coroner service, and for the Government to consider whether that should be extended to all public bodies.

There should be an equality of arms: legal aid or some kind of funding support for families in these circumstances, along with a more extensively applied statutory duty of candour. Together, those two things are a substantial part of the Hillsborough law, the Public

Authority (Accountability) Bill, which Andy Burnham proposed before he left the House and of which I was co-sponsor at the time. I believe that those measures, along with the Public Advocate Bill, which was prepared by Lord Michael Wills and me, and which I have again introduced in the Commons in this Session, would go a long way towards preventing what happened to the Hillsborough families from ever happening again to families of those bereaved in public disasters.

There have been public disasters since Hillsborough, and unfortunately there will probably be more over time. One thinks of Grenfell, and one can already see things going wrong with that. The families are not satisfied with the way that the inquiry is enabling them to represent their views, and one suspects that that disaster has a long way to run before getting to the end of all the legal proceedings that are likely to happen as a consequence of that terrible disaster. The proposals made by Bishop James and in my Public Advocate Bill are not just a relic of some past disaster that would have made a difference; they will, if enacted, make a difference in future to families in that terrible situation.

It has taken the Hillsborough families 32 years to get to the position they are now in, where there is general acceptance—the truth has been officially acknowledged. They have had a measure of justice, in respect of the second inquest’s verdicts of unlawful killing; they have not had accountability for those who caused the disaster, and who over all these decades have sought to blame those who died and the footballs fans in the ground that day, rather than themselves. The Hillsborough families have not had accountability, and if we were to talk to them, they would not say that they are totally satisfied with the outcome, even after 32 years, because nobody has been held to account for what was done—the unlawful killing of 97 people. That cannot be a good day for justice in this country, if that is the outcome after all these years.

In what I would say was a somewhat disappointing response to our report—I think the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst was harsher—the Government have effectively played for time. I take the view that if they are playing for time, they have not completely said no to all the recommendations that they have played for time on. This is where the Minister comes in. This is where he can be a can-do Minister—a will-do Minister. The Government have accepted only six of our 25 recommendations.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that another speaker has to be brought in, and I will call the Front Benchers at 2.38 pm. Will she take that into account?

Maria Eagle: I will—apologies, Sir George. I will make sure that the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has time.

I hope that the Minister will consider Bishop James’s report and our proposals, and come forward with a much more positive set of responses to the issues raised. In view of the time, I will not say what I wanted to about the prevention of future deaths, but more needs to be done on that. If more is done, lessons can be learned to prevent future deaths instead of the same thing happening time and again, with different coroners sending letters saying the same thing to the Government, who then do nothing about it for many years.

2.26 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am grateful for your intervention, Sir George. I do not have a lot to say, but I want to raise two specific issues, which have both been alluded to by the previous contributors. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and the Justice Committee on a comprehensive, timely and necessary report.

The two issues that I want to raise are coroners' investigations into stillbirths—the subject of my private Member's Bill—and the Shoreham air show crash. To start with the latter, I am sure that colleagues will remember that fateful day in August 2015 when at the Shoreham air show, which had been running for some 28 years, raising large amounts of money and providing a great spectacle in aid of the Royal Air Force charities, a Hawker Hunter jet crashed and 11 innocent bystanders on the ground tragically lost their lives. It was the deadliest air show accident since the Farnborough air show crash in 1952, so that activity has an extraordinary safety record over those many years.

An interim report on the crash was first produced in September 2015 by the air accidents investigation branch. A second report was produced in December 2015, and a third in March 2016. In January 2017, the Civil Aviation Authority accepted all the recommendations. In March 2017, a final report identified pilot error, and in December 2019 there was a supplementary report to the final reports from the AAIB. There was also a prosecution, and the court acquitted the pilot in March 2019. A lot has been written about the tragedy.

The only thing that has not happened is the coroner's inquest. Six years, two months and six days on from that fateful tragedy on 22 August 2015, the families of the 11 men who lost their lives have still not have the closure that a coroner's inquest could help to bring. That is made worse by the fact that, in the end, nobody was convicted of any fault. I make no comment about the trial that took place, but it certainly did not answer the questions those families still have. They have had to go through the trauma of not really getting to the bottom of what really happened on that day and not getting the answers that a coroner's inquest could bring.

I share some of the misgivings about the way the coroners system is working. It is not very effective in certain cases, and it has not been remotely effective in the case of the Shoreham air show victims. There are all sorts of reasons for that. The relationship between the AAIB, the police and the CAA really needs to be looked at in detail. Giving some form of closure, information and comfort to the families of those who lost their lives must be a priority, yet they seem to come at the back of the queue in such considerations.

Something I was involved in to start with was the question of who was going to represent the families at the inquest. The original inquest opened on 2 September 2015, and was adjourned until March 2016. There were pre-inquest review dates, further pre-inquest review dates were set, and a full hearing was originally due in March 2017. That was delayed and postponed, delayed and postponed, and finally in May 2020, it was announced that the hearing would be postponed again until 2021. We are still waiting, and I hope that it will happen before too long. Throughout all that time, the coroner

for West Sussex, Penny Schofield, has played a remarkable role and sought at every juncture to keep engaged with the families and keep them in touch as much as possible.

However, it was not clear whether those families would get legal representation paid for by legal aid at the outset. I hope that is now going to happen. It was estimated that 18 public bodies would be represented at the inquest, all of which would get public funds for legal representation. The only people who would not automatically receive funding for legal representation would be the families of the victims—the most important part of that inquiry, one could say. I share the concerns of the Select Committee and of Members who have spoken today: we must ensure that in tragedies such as this, legal representation is automatically available for the families, and the coroner system has to work more efficiently and effectively, not drag on for many years, as it has in this case.

The second case of “dragging on” I want to raise is that of my private Member's Bill, the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, which was passed by Parliament in February and became law in May of that year. Two of the measures in that Act have now come into practice, the first of which is civil partnerships between opposite-sex couples. The first of those civil partnerships happened on new year's eve 2019, and they have been taken up by many couples and have been a great success. The second measure, which came into effect earlier this year, is the inclusion of mothers' details on marriage certificates, a historical anomaly going back to 1837 that I am glad to say this Act corrected.

However, two parts of the Act have not come into effect, the first of which is coroners' investigations into stillbirths, dealt with in section 4. That section requires the Secretary of State to

“make arrangements for the preparation of a report on whether, and if so how, the law ought to be changed to enable or require coroners to investigate still-births”,

and states that

“The Secretary of State must publish the report prepared under this section”

and that

“After the report has been published, the Lord Chancellor may by regulations amend Part 1 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 (coroners etc) to—

(a) enable or require coroners to conduct investigations into still-births”.

Effectively, due to interpretation of the law, coroners cannot investigate deaths until somebody is deemed to have lived, and a baby who is stillborn is not deemed to have lived and therefore does not fall within the remit of the coroner. However, in some cases in which children have been stillborn, serious questions need to be asked. That is why, after representations from many coroners—including my own—and various baby charities, I included that clause in the Act. It is referenced on page 31 of the Justice Committee's report, urging the Government to get on with publishing that report.

It is slightly odd that I am once again having to go over the reasons why this provision is so important, because we made the case for the Act in the long time it took to get it through Parliament. It was described as the most complicated and comprehensive private Member's Bill ever to make the statute book, but it was widely

supported in this House by Members from all sides, in the Lords, and by many baby charities. The Select Committee on Health and Social Care also included a reference to the Act in a recent report, and it has been supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), the former Health Secretary who is now Chair of that Committee. The reason is that, according to the charity Sands, an estimated 500 babies die or are left severely disabled because of an event during their birth that was either not anticipated or not well managed, and there is currently no independent investigation of those intrapartum deaths. That, again, leaves many questions unanswered for many parents.

There have been many improvements to the way the NHS has been dealing with stillbirths, and the Government are to be congratulated on that. Various investigation measures have been brought in, but none of them are independent. They are all within the NHS. That is why it is still deemed necessary that the coroner, in exceptional circumstances where there are unanswered questions, should have the power to investigate. The Minister was involved in my private Member's Bill and he was very helpful with and supportive of it, but I ask him, when is the report going to be published?

I had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) when she was Health Minister as well as this Minister's predecessor in the Ministry of Justice, in which it was suggested that various details of the consultation would be published before the summer. However, the Department was loth to go ahead with measures because they were worried about the compulsory inquest by coroners causing trauma to parents. I am afraid I do not accept that; it was parents who were asking for these powers.

I am particularly concerned about the sunset provisions in the 2019 Act. Section 4(6) reads:

"No regulations may be made under this section after the period of five years beginning with the day on which the report is published".

Time is ticking away. I urge the Minister to investigate where the report is. It was never sent to me, so was it published on the quiet? Can we see the full result of the consultation responses? Will he go away and look at when we can have regulations brought forward, which the vast majority of people have agreed is necessary, so that the third important part of my 2019 Act can come into force? It will give great comfort to many parents who are concerned that they had a stillborn child in circumstances where many questions have not been answered.

In some cases that results in legal action taking place. The provisions in the 2019 Act will cut down on that sort of legal action and hopefully give quicker and more effective answers to those parents who have gone through the traumatic experience of suffering a stillbirth. There are good reasons why the law was passed by the House. I see no good reason why it has not become effective. Can the Minister respond as to when we can expect the good news?

2.37 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you chairing our proceedings, Sir George. I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon.

Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), for his comprehensive and clear setting out of the recommendations of the report and for not pulling his punches in dealing with the Government's response. The contributions of the hon. Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) were much appreciated. The examples they gave were not typical of the inquest system, but the system needs to stand up to all eventualities. They talked about particularly harrowing circumstances and personal recollections from their own constituencies, which show how important it is, not just for the many people affected by coroner proceedings, but for the general public. We must get the policy right, and that is not happening, sadly, in all cases at the moment.

If the Chair of the Committee had not already outed me, as part of my duty of candour I was going to say that I was a member of Justice Committee when it heard the evidence for and approved this report. It comes as no surprise that I think very highly of the report. It deserves this debate on its merits but, as the Chair of the Committee made clear, this debate is a mark of the displeasure of the Justice Committee. The Government's response to what has been set out is wholly inadequate. The report is the first since Tom Luce's 2003 report almost 20 years ago that has comprehensively looked at the faults and issues in the coroner system. We might have expected something better in response.

It is clear that proceedings grind slowly in relation to reform of the coronial courts. The legislation recommended by Tom was not passed for six years and did not take effect for four years after that. We then had the review, which was six years ago, and it has not yet been published. That is not a terribly good start, but we now have the happy coincidence that the Judicial Review and Courts Bill is going through its proceedings in this House. It had its Second Reading this week and will begin its Committee stage, which the Minister and I will take part in, next week.

A whole chapter of that Bill is to do with the coroner system, which provides an opportunity to address some of these issues. Unfortunately, the current proposals in the Bill are pretty minimalist and, if they do anything, they tend to restrict transparency and accessibility rather than the other way round, which is certainly not what the Select Committee was looking for. However, let us not let this be a missed opportunity. There is time to get it right, and whether it is in this House or in the Lords, there is an opportunity for the Government to bring forward some of their responses to the Committee that they said were delayed.

I counted at least seven major omissions from the Government's response, and many of them have been mentioned already by the contributors. One is the provision of non-means-tested legal aid, which might be the most central of them. One is appeals on coroners' decisions. One is the issue of pathologists' fees. One is the national coroner service, which the report recommends. One is the inspectorate, which the report recommends. One is a complaints procedure. The last is the independent office. Some of those are rejected out of hand, such as higher fees for pathologists and the national coroner service. With others, we are told that the Government will consider them—not now, but they are not saying not ever—or simply that they are not responding at present. It is quite unusual that we had a response along the lines

[*Andy Slaughter*]

of, “Why are you bothering us with this report now? Don’t you know we’ve got a Ministry of Justice to run?” I do not think that is an adequate response.

I do not have time to go through all the issues in detail, but let me mention one or two of which I have had personal experience. It is right that the Government appear to be shifting some way on the issue of legal aid, but they are looking at it from the wrong end of the telescope. What is clearly needed is not to make some adjustments to exceptional funding and early help, but to state the situation categorically in situations where there are unrepresented families—they are almost always families—in proceedings where there are state actors who are well funded and represented.

In my time at the Bar, I appeared at many inquests, but I do not think I ever appeared in one where 18 state bodies were represented, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham told us about. However, I have certainly been at an inquest where there were at least six state bodies and a family who either did not have representation or had pro bono representation, and neither of those is sufficient, frankly. I hope we can get an answer to when we will see the proposals coming through and when we will have a response to the bishop’s report.

On the issue of appeals, I cannot understand why this is probably the only area of law where there is no right of appeal. That seems an anomaly.

The prevention of future deaths reports have been significant in many cases and are a welcome innovation in the process, but they do not do the job that the independent office would do—what INQUEST calls in the report the national oversight mechanism. Again, I have personal experience of this. I have done a lot of work on fire safety over the past few years, and there have been a number of inquests around the country into situations where people have sadly died because of electrical fires and other fires that have occurred, but the dots have not been joined up. There may have been an individual report, but it has not been sufficient to carry it through into national policy.

The conduct of coroners is rather dismissed out of hand in the Government response, but it is a serious issue. I have taken part in a Westminster Hall debate with representatives from across west London about the west London coroner service. There have been allegations of appalling conduct, but there is no real mechanism for addressing them, which needs to be examined. I also think that the Government should look again at the idea of a national coroner service.

I know the Government will be concerned about cost in some of these areas, but at least they should investigate the price and decide whether there is merit in some of the recommendations here. The recommendations should not be just left to rest.

I mentioned the Bill that is coming up, which includes provisions for discontinuance of investigations, inquests in writing and remote attendance inquest hearings. I will be interested to hear how the Minister defends those changes, but none of them are about the fundamental reforms we have suggested. Indeed, he may want to look at the responses from the Royal College of Pathologists, a series of bodies representing victims and, indeed, from Tom Luce himself about the opportunity presented in the Bill to make some of these changes.

I do not want to exceed the 10 minutes I have been given, Sir George, so I will conclude with this: in responding today, in the time available, I am sure the Minister cannot cover every recommendation in detail, but perhaps he could at least do two things. First, perhaps he could articulate more clearly the Government’s response to us and what the Government’s policy is towards coroner services. There is a common theme of consistency in the report, whether we are talking about appeals, the independent office, the inspectorate or the national coroner service: consistency. How do we get a high standard of consistency in the decisions being taken in coroners’ districts around the country?

Secondly, and more immediately, can the Minister say when the response to the bishop’s report will be published, when the legal aid guidance will become clear and whether he will meet the ask in the Select Committee report on that, and whether he will consider bringing forward in the Bill some of the issues that the Government have not currently ruled out—appeals, inspection, and an independent office or national oversight mechanism?

If we can go that far, that will address many of the Committee’s concerns. If we do not, and we are left with the Government’s response as it is, they will have singularly failed again to address a service in which problems are being highlighted every day and every week by hon. Members on behalf of their constituents around the country, and in which people, often in extremis, are left to their own devices to try to represent the interests of their loved ones when they should be getting assistance from the state.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. My huge congratulations to the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill); he spoke fantastically on Second Reading this week, and he has done so again today. In terms of speakers today, it has been more a case of quality than of quantity on display.

I will try to cover all the points raised as far as possible, but I will leave my hon. Friend two minutes, so if I fall short in covering points in order to give him those two minutes, my apologies. I not only thank the members of the Justice Committee for their thorough and wide-ranging inquiry, but express my gratitude to the previous chief coroner, his honour Judge Mark Lucraft, QC, coroners’ charities, faith groups, medical professionals and organisations, bereaved families and many other stakeholders who provided written evidence to the Committee.

Like other public services in England and Wales, coroner services have faced, and continue to face, unprecedented challenges, exacerbated by covid-19. Despite those challenges, however, the coronial system continued to deliver. While we might say that, relative to other parts of justice, particularly criminal justice, this area arguably attracts less attention, coroners provide a vital public service that has a significant impact on bereaved people at their most vulnerable, and the Government are committed to ensuring that bereaved people are at its heart.

The Justice Committee's report highlighted a number of key areas of concern and made 25 recommendations. My hon. Friend is very kind in what he says about a can-do attitude, but I think that responding in just two months, and then having some of those recommendations in a Bill a couple of months later, is not a bad performance time-wise. But, of course, the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) was right that we are still considering some of them. That is absolutely correct.

Five of the recommendations were for the chief coroner to consider, and we expect that Judge Teague will respond directly to the Committee on them and that the Committee will publish his response in due course. The remaining 20 recommendations were for the Government. The Government's response explained that the Government accepted six of the recommendations outright, and we are already undertaking work on those recommendations.

One recommendation was to improve access to the Ministry of Justice's publication, "A Guide to Coroner Services for Bereaved People". The Committee acknowledged the value of the guide to bereaved people, and we are looking at how we ensure that hard copies are made more widely available.

Two of the Committee's recommendations that the Government accepted relate to provisions that we are now bringing forward in the Judicial Review and Courts Bill, which is currently before Parliament. I look forward to debating the provisions with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) in the Bill Committee that starts shortly. There are five coroner measures in the Bill, and the provision to make it easier for coroner areas to merge precisely meets one of the Committee's recommendations. Taken together, the five coroner measures in the Bill are aimed at streamlining processes in the coroner's courts and supporting the chief coroner's post-pandemic recovery plans, thereby meeting another of the Committee's recommendations.

Successive chief coroners have proposed a change to the legislation to give the High Court greater flexibility when it is asked to quash or request a fresh inquest, which speaks to the point about appeals. There is, of course, a route of approaching the Attorney General for an inquest verdict to be challenged in the High Court. I do not say that that is precisely what we would call a legal route of appeal, but it is there and it is important. The Government accepted the Committee's recommendation to adopt the proposal on quashing verdicts and we have committed to introduce this measure when parliamentary time allows.

Let me come to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). The Government also accepted the Committee's recommendation about the consultation on coronial investigation of stillbirths. Publication of the Government's response has unfortunately been delayed due to the impact of covid-19 on wider priorities, but a response to the consultation is expected to be published in due course. I note my hon. Friend's point about the sunset clause, which I will look into further.

On the terrible tragedy at the Shoreham air show, as noted by the chief coroner's office at Shoreham, the inquests are legally and logistically complex, with large numbers of participants, and are being progressed as quickly as possible. I understand from the West Sussex coroner service website that the next Shoreham pre-inquest review is on 6 January next year. I also understand that

the coroner very much regrets the delay in holding the Shoreham air show inquest—the delay is because of the pandemic—and that the coroner has applied to the High Court for permission to access material from the criminal trial. The coroner cannot continue with the inquest until the outcome of the application to the High Court is known. As we say, we expect the next pre-session in January.

I turn to the points raised by the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood, who has quite a background. She has had this job, been a solicitor, served on the Committee and, perhaps most importantly of all, has many constituents who have an interest in Hillsborough—as you do, Sir George—and has spoken on the issue many times with great passion. I very much admire the way she has done so. Of course, I can do nothing to change the amount of time that has elapsed. It is not my Department but the Home Office that will be responding in due course, and I am afraid I cannot say more than that today.

The hon. Lady made some very good points. On change of approach and the number of lawyers of either type that can be there to support public bodies, there is a protocol in the Government's guide to coroner services that Departments must consider the number of lawyers, bearing in mind the commitment to an inquisitorial rather than an adversarial approach. The protocol is designed as a "model of behaviour".

We are considering the independent public advocate. I know that the hon. Lady led a debate on this issue recently, which was answered by my predecessor, who is now the Solicitor General. He said there are details we need to look at, and I stress that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst raised many points. On the non-publication, shall we say, of the 2015 post-implementation review, I am afraid this is not a can-do answer. The work is almost six years old. I take my hon. Friend's point about what happens if we sit on something long enough, but I am afraid that is our position. I am happy to speak to him further on that point offline.

The Government decided that 10 recommendations needed further consideration to determine whether the proposals could be delivered. They were not rejected, but need further work to determine whether they would be affordable and aligned with the Government's priorities.

I will turn to legal aid, which is obviously very important. I realise that even on Second Reading several right hon. and hon. Members raised the issue of the inequality of arms and so on. We said that more work was needed on the recommendation around non-means-tested legal aid for legal representation for bereaved people at inquests. There have also been numerous calls from stakeholders for the Government to consider their position on the provision of legal aid funding for legal representation at inquests, in particular where the state is represented. The Government remain of the view that legal representation is not necessary for the vast majority of inquests because they are an inquisitorial, fact-finding process.

It is, however, one of the Department's long-standing priorities to ensure that families are put at the heart of the inquest process. We acknowledge that there will continue to be instances where bereaved families are entitled to legal aid, for example where the state or public authority's acts or omissions have arguably contributed to a death or where having representation at an inquest would be

[James Cartlidge]

beneficial in the wider public interest. We believe that, where there is an exceptional case for legal aid, the process to access that support should be as straightforward as possible—not least to relieve the stress and anxiety that the application process brings to the bereaved family. With that in mind, we are in the process of amending legislation to remove the means test for exceptional case funding; I am pleased to confirm that that is currently being drafted and that we hope it will come into force early next year.

The Committee also asked the Government to consider adopting a charter of rights for bereaved families. The Government are keen to explore those issues, but explained that they would respond as part of their response to Bishop James Jones's review of the Hillsborough families' experiences, which is expected to be published in due course.

On the matter of—shall we say—a national service, the Government rejected the recommendation to unite coroner services into a single service for England and Wales. The Government recognise that many calls for a national coroner service stem from the view that such a service would address inconsistencies or a postcode lottery. We do not accept that nationalised organisations are necessarily the answer to such inconsistencies or postcode lotteries. I would make two points on that matter. This is about not only the cost per se, but the question of how it would be funded, given the service is currently operated by local authorities. That raises a lot of issues. We are moving from around 85 coroner areas to around 75, so there is amalgamation and there are therefore more economies of scale. However, we remain of the view that this is best as a local service.

I will wrap up there, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that he would have time to finish. It has been a very high-quality debate, with lots of passion and very good points, some of which we are still considering and some that we have responded to. I congratulate my hon. Friend on a very thorough report on a very important matter.

2.57 pm

Sir Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister for his response and the way he raised it, as I am to all Members who participated in the debate. I take on board some of

the things the Minister said, and I welcome some of the moves that the Government are making, in particular any indication as to what will happen around legal aid. If the improvements to that came earlier in the new year rather than later, I think that we would all welcome that.

I hope that we might press the Minister in due course, via the Select Committee, for a definition of what “in due course” means. That is one of the great phrases used in this place. We have already seen about six years pass by in due course, in some instances, so I think we will need a little bit more than that. I hope he will understand if the Committee returns to that topic, because these are matters of pressing concern. The concern is that, with many other things facing the Government, those issues can get lost and slip down the agenda, which does not help anyone. While the passage of time may well be a reason for not acting on a report, I am not sure it is a very convincing reason for not actually publishing the thing, even if they then say they are not going to do anything with it. I am not quite sure why the Government are so troubled by it, frankly.

However, on the big issue, I hope they will reflect in particular on a means to achieve greater national consistency, such as the oversight mechanism referred to in the course of the debate, and—even if they are not yet persuaded of it, although I hope they one day will be—a national service, a proper inspectorate, and proper oversight and greater powers for the Chief Coroner. I am glad for the reference to Mark Lucraft, an old colleague at the Bar, and Judge Teague. That would be a step forwards, at least, which I hope would be achievable within a comparatively short period.

I welcome what the Minister has said, as far as it goes, although he will not be surprised if I say that members of the Select Committee might want to go further and return to the topic. I hope there is some common ground that we can work on, as far as that is concerned.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Justice Committee, The Coroner Service, HC 68, and the Government response, HC 675.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Black History Month

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: e-petition 324092, Teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum, and e-petition 323961, Making the UK education curriculum more inclusive of BAME history, Oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee and Women and Equalities Committee on 5 and 18 November 2020, and 25 February 2021, on Black history and cultural diversity in the curriculum, HC 893, Correspondence with the Minister of State for School Standards, relating to Black history and cultural diversity in the curriculum, reported to the House on 9 March 2021 and 27 April 2021, HC 893, Written evidence to the Petitions Committee and Women and Equalities Committee, on Black history and cultural diversity in the curriculum, reported to the House on 8 December 2020, HC 893, and Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on Black history and cultural diversity in the curriculum, reported to the House on 26 January 2021, HC 893.]

3 pm

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Before we begin, I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the parliamentary estate. That can be done either at the testing centre in the House, or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

3.1 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Black History Month 2021.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Graham. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this vital debate and I extend my thanks to the hon. Members who supported my application and have joined to participate today. To some, this might be just another debate, but for black and minority ethnic communities, holding this debate in Parliament shows that we recognise and celebrate that history and their achievements right across the UK and the world. I sincerely hope that general debates to celebrate Black History Month will become a regular fixture on the parliamentary calendar.

This year's theme for Black History Month is "Proud to Be". That is so important because so many are made to feel uncomfortable about their ethnic heritage, cultural history and language—seen, or felt to be seen, by others as the other, inferior or a minority. However, black people have so much to be proud of culturally in the ways we have contributed to British history, and we ought to be proud to be both black and British. In her Adjournment debate last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Opong-Asare) highlighted several black British individuals who make us feel proud. I am sure that colleagues will no doubt mention several more individuals who have made

significant contributions to our nation's history and who we ought to be proud of. From Yvonne Conolly, the UK's first black headteacher, to C. L. R. James, the renowned author, from William Cuffay, the leading figure of the Chartist movement, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the first black woman to be elected to this Parliament, we see figures who reflect the diversity of our country and who we can all be proud of.

The UK has its own rich civil rights history, which my generation and those before me were unfortunately never formally taught and have had to take it upon ourselves to learn. Not recognising yourself in your history can have a serious impact on your identity. How are we expected to feel "Proud to Be" if we are shown by omission that the contributions of black people are not worth being taught in our schools? Colleagues may be aware of the petition that circulated last year, which called for the UK to teach Britain's colonial past as part of the curriculum. It achieved over 260,000 signatures and, along with similar petitions, means that the teaching of black history in schools has received the most support of any parliamentary petition in our history.

That appetite has not waned at all, because more than 660 schools in England have signed up for a diverse and anti-racist curriculum developed by teachers and council staff in the London Borough of Hackney. The Black Contribution aims to teach young people about not just the history of black people, but fundamentally the history that we all share because—as I hope everyone has heard many times throughout this month—black history is British history.

Now is the perfect time to pay tribute to the Labour Government in Wales, which have instituted black history as part of their curriculum. Seeing them lead the way and seeing how much support that has had, I cannot understand why the Government still refuse to commit to putting black history in the curriculum, when there is such widespread support. Perhaps when responding to the debate, the Minister can inform us the reason why the Government refuse to take action on this.

Instead, unfortunately, what we have seen is discussions descending into a so-called war on woke and culture wars, and other, very bizarre claims about the phrase "white privilege", how it has affected us and the idea that it is being widely taught in schools. First, anyone who actually speaks to teachers will find that that is not a feature in any of the lessons. We do not hear about children running home from school talking about it or, indeed, about teachers asking Timmy, "What's 1 + 1?", Timmy saying, "2", and the teachers saying, "Aha! Timmy, you knew the answer because of white privilege." We do not hear such nonsense. That is not what is happening in our schools. Secondly, teaching children about race inequality, as some teachers will do during Black History Month, is not what is holding back working-class children in our education system. It was not teaching about racism that closed down hundreds of youth services or cut funding per pupil in this country; that was this Government. It is those policies that hold back working-class children from all our communities.

I completely understand why this Government may not want to talk about race, and especially not about their record on race, but ignoring these issues will not lead to the post-racial society that some people believe we are living in. We have to address them. We have to

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

address past issues of slavery and colonialism and their lasting impact, which is the racism we face today, and we have to do it by education and other means. I would be proud to be part of a Parliament that finally apologised for the atrocities of slavery and colonialism. Yesterday I was pleased to officially launch the all-party parliamentary group on African reparations and am looking forward to policy on this. Cambridge University recently returned, and quite proudly so, two of the looted Benin bronzes, but there are over 3,000 in this country and 900 alone in the British Museum. Reparations begin with things such as that: giving back these things that do not belong to us.

We know that over the past few years there has been no shortage of discussions about racial disparities. We have had debates about the impact of covid on black and ethnic minority communities, about the need to teach black history as part of the curriculum, about racial disparities in maternal health outcomes, and about the ethnicity employment gap and the ethnicity pay gap, and of course the Black Lives Matter protests, a tragic reminder that racism can be a matter of life and death. Time and time again, we have raised the ongoing racial disparities in the UK, and time and time again we have called on the Government to act, but the response has been felt to be full of platitudes and empty gestures, with a report that told us, quite famously, that systemic racism does not exist and that in some ways actually attempted to create some racial divides.

Although it seems like we have talked about it quite a lot, given that the last CRED—Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities—report was only released earlier this year, it would be remiss of me not to mention it. As far as I am concerned, it turns back the clock on ending racial inequality. There are other reports and inquiries that have outlined how racism continues across society, and report after report outlining the social causes and political failings that underpin it.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her amazing speech. She alludes to the fact that there have been multiple reports on racial inequality in this country. Does she agree that if the Government just took some time and looked at beginning to implement some of those recommendations, we might, just maybe, begin to make some headway on racial inequality?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we had gone down that road, perhaps we would not be having the discussions that we are having today.

We need to think about what that report said, when it decided that there was no institutional or systemic racism, and how that discounts years of lived experience and the things that people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds have experienced in this country. What I could not understand at the time was whether the Government believed they would get any buy-in for a report that was so widely discredited across our communities or to what extent, given how discredited it has been, it was actually for our communities, even though it was very much about them.

The idea that institutional racism does not exist means that there is no action for the state to take, because it is not an institutional problem. As far as I am

concerned, the Government appear to be absolving themselves of responsibility to take action on institutions that fail to deliver racial equality. We did not need that report; we needed action on reports gone by. We certainly did not need a new story about slavery and colonialism, when the one that we have at the moment is not even being widely taught.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) pointed to the recommendations of reports gone by that have not been implemented, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) reminded me that the Government continue to stall on implementing fully his Lammy review. In the meantime, BAME youth custody now sits at 51%, which is an increase of 10% on when he was asked to do the review just five years ago.

The Windrush lessons learned review by Wendy Williams was also commissioned by the Government. Even the author of the report has said how woeful it is that, again, the Government continue not to act on the recommendations. Furthermore, the scandal continues, because many people caught up in it have not yet received compensation or their proper status of leave to remain in this country.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. When we talk about unimplemented reports and inquiries, we could go all the way back to the early '80s and the Scarman inquiry. If everything that Scarman spoke about had been addressed, we would not be in the situation we are in today.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is what we want to bring to an end. We have to stop this cycle whereby something bad happens, we have a report or inquiry, and the Government—successive Governments—just push it under the carpet and wait until the next disaster in which racial inequality is raised. Part of why we are not making headway is that the bodies that are meant to protect us and to apply checks and balances on the Government simply do not have the ability to do so.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights report, “Black people, racism and human rights”, said that overall there was a very damning picture of structural racism right across society, such as in health, immigration, policing, the justice system and electoral participation. It also mentioned, in a key way, the failures of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is tasked with policing equality and, potentially, enforcing such targets. However, it is not fit for purpose in its current form. How could it be? It is supposed to be an independent arm's length body, but its major appointments are still made by the Government. That must make it difficult to take action when Government policies lead to inequality or human rights breaches. That has been highlighted in many court cases over the past few years. The EHRC also appears to have rarely used and limited investigation and enforcement powers, and it has an ever-dwindling budget. In practice, it has become a body with no teeth.

In my work on the Women and Equalities Committee, we have found that when people—the Government included—refuse to comply with what they are meant

to do under equalities legislation, the Equality and Human Rights Commission appears to be able to do very little. Key to that, given that our main purpose here every day is to pass legislation, is that the Government do not produce equality impact assessments of various pieces of legislation. When they do, at times they refuse to publish them. How on earth are we meant to hold the Government to account and ensure that they are complying with our equalities law? Why does our equalities law always have to be an add-on?

Frankly, black communities need fewer champions and more enforcement of what are supposed to be the rights that protect us. Report after report has reinforced not only the issues, but the recommendations that we need to bring about systemic change. If we were clear about our equalities legislation and the guidance, we would be moving forward.

When we discuss racial inequality and call on the Government to introduce policy to change things, we are not asking for anything beyond equality; we are simply asking the Government to recognise how we are treated as a community in this country and to take meaningful action to change it. Likewise, when we ask the Government for black histories to be taught as part of the curriculum, we are not asking for that to be done over other aspects of British history; we are asking them to recognise that black history is British history—it is a part of that history—but that it is not taught widely, as it should be. They should take those key steps to ensure that that is done.

If racism is ignorance, and education is the absence of ignorance, there is an obvious answer to dealing with racial inequality; it is simple and it costs the Government nothing to start just there—with education.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): I suggest an informal time limit of eight minutes to try and ensure that everybody who wants to speak can do so.

3.15 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I begin by declaring my non-pecuniary interest as chair of the advisory board of Conservatives Against Racism For Equality. I do not think there is any point shying away from the truth that I am the only Back-Bench Conservative who is here today. I hope that part of the purpose of CARFE can be to encourage Conservative MPs to rise to the leadership and representational responsibility that we all have.

I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and I congratulate her on this debate. She said that black history is British history; I absolutely agree with her. We certainly should be facing up to our history. As I listened to her, and as I reflect on what she said—as well as on some of the things that have been said to me—I realise that an element of this is that we are asking people to face up to acts and facts of shame in our history. It is a very uncomfortable thing for people to do, particularly when those of us alive today are not responsible for the crimes of the past. Nevertheless, it is necessary for us to face up to the crimes of the past and to recognise, as the hon. Lady said, that black history is British history. However painful it may be to face up to it, we must do so in a way that is inclusive and will appeal—if I may say so—to white people to be part of.

To reflect for a moment on my own journey, as I have possibly said before, growing up as part of an ordinary family in Cornwall I suppose I was able to take for granted the equality of all people for most of my childhood and adult life. I wonder what proportion of the UK public today are also able to take for granted racial equality, without reflecting much on the experience that people who are not white have—and, in particular, that black people have.

I am very proud of Wycombe; I am delighted to speak in this debate because, once again, we have an opportunity to celebrate the history, achievements and contributions of black people in Wycombe, and across the UK. Wycombe was a very popular destination for people coming from the Caribbean, and I am sorry to say that sometimes their contribution has been overlooked. I hope to put that right. I am very grateful for the work of Wycombe Museum. This October, it has been celebrating our fantastic community with a selection of events funded with support from—my notes say the Department formerly known as MHCLG—the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, as well as Thames Valley police among others. The museum has a very close relationship with the High Wycombe-based SV2G, which celebrates the second generation from St Vincent. I am incredibly proud of the whole community.

SV2G shed light on the tragic life of George Alexander Gratton, a child from St Vincent and the Grenadines born into slavery and transported to Britain. Wycombe has the largest population of Vincentians in the UK. In last year's debate I spoke about George Alexander Gratton, and I encourage people to look at his story. I particularly want to congratulate those organisations in Wycombe for the work that they do to promote black history and to keep alive Wycombe's place within it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) was not able to attend today, and he asked me to put the following on the record for him:

“Black excellence is truly spread across the whole United Kingdom. Far from the turf of Wembley, the world's first professional black football player started as a goalkeeper for Darlington. In 1882, Arthur Wharton abandoned his missionary training in the town to become Darlington's goalkeeper; he was part of the team which reached the FA cup semi-final in only his second season at the club.

I am proud that during black history month last year, a mural was unveiled in the town to mark his achievements. Darlington's sporting excellence is continued to this day by champions like Troy Williamson who earlier this month won the British Super Welterweight title in Liverpool.”

I know that my hon. Friend is proud to represent everyone in his community.

Turning to Government policy, I welcome the Minister's announcement that the Government will respond to the Sewell report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. I am very pleased that the Government will act on the recommendations in the report, in particular by seeking to further trust, fairness, inclusivity and agency. It is very important that the Government pick up on agency. We must express our belief in the dignity of every person and our recognition of their agency, so I look forward to the Government's swift implementation of those recommendations.

The other members of CARFE and I are very excited by the establishment of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities to properly target health disparities in

[Mr Steve Baker]

the UK, focusing on research, communication and expertise to reduce those inequalities across all groups. We welcome the Government's desire to build social and cultural capital to enrich everyone and to prevent harm, reduce crime and divert young people away from the criminal justice system. In particular, I understand that the Government are going to develop an evidence-based pilot to divert offences of low-level class B drug possession into public health services; I hope the Minister will say more about that pilot.

The Government need to replicate those factors of educational success for all communities everywhere, and I will put in a plea for levelling up in Wycombe. I am very happy to take my hon. Friend the Minister to the parts of Wycombe that certainly need extra help. The curriculum, of course, must be made more inclusive, and I again urge Ministers to make sure that we include black history as British history.

I will just touch on the idea of disaggregating the term "BAME". I think it is unhelpful to polarise our society between white people and everybody else. With great sorrow, I would say that some of the worst racism I have ever heard was directed among different sections of the Asian community in the UK, and I think it is incumbent on us to recognise that Caribbean history is very different from the history experienced by people who have come from, for example, west Africa. I encourage the Government—I encourage everybody, actually—to disaggregate this term "BAME". I think it leaves people separated between "white" and "everybody else", and I want us to move into a world in which the colour of our skin does not matter any more than the colour of our eyes. We should be morally, legally and politically equal, with equal opportunities, and there should be justice in the outcomes that everyone experiences.

I am very pleased that the Race Disparity Unit has been awarded a research excellence award by the Office for National Statistics. That fact should be taken seriously, including by the Government's critics. I welcome the Home Secretary's endorsement of improving diversity in police forces: she has said that this is a "critical and personal priority" for her, and I think it is worth putting on the record just how diverse this Cabinet is. I am particularly proud that this Conservative Government have such a diverse Cabinet—of course, I lament that I am not in it, but I am nevertheless grateful that it is so diverse.

I am very glad that we have had this debate today. If anybody wishes to visit Wycombe, there is the opportunity to go to the "There's Something About Wycombe" original theatre production on Friday and Saturday at Hilltop community centre. Based on a true story, it is the story of one man's move across the world from St Vincent to High Wycombe, and the community he found there. There is also the Windrush legacy pop-up exhibition at the Eden centre, which I will be visiting on Saturday to look at the legacy of Windrush in our town.

Again, I am very proud indeed to represent Wycombe, and to represent everyone in Wycombe. As the hon. Member for Streatham said in her remarks, black history is British history. I am very proud of every section of our community, and I hope that the Minister will be able to set out an optimistic and hopeful vision of how the Government are going to help black people right across the UK.

3.23 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is an important debate, and I look forward to us continuing it in the main Chamber.

As we all know, Black History Month is a chance to celebrate and reflect on the many achievements of the black British community here in the UK. This year, it is also important to celebrate black Britons across the country who have faced huge challenges as a result of the pandemic.

Whether we know it or not, we are all affected by the brave men and women who have gone before us. I am proud to stand on the shoulders of so many of those greats—women such as the abolitionist Mary Prince, the first black woman to have a memoir of her experiences of slavery published in the UK; the amazing Mary Seacole, whose statue stands tall just over the river at St Thomas's Hospital; Lilian Bader, one of the first black women to join the British armed forces; and the activist and campaigner Olive Morris, who was born in my Battersea constituency.

As I mention those great women, I must also mention John Archer, who was elected in Battersea in 1913 as London's first black mayor. In his election victory speech, he rightly cited his election as a critical moment for racial equality. Being a Bristol girl, I must certainly also mention those who led the Bristol bus boycott in the 1960s: Paul Stephenson, Roy Hackett and Guy Bailey, who was my youth worker when I was growing up. Their campaign led to the overturning of that racist colour bar, and the boycott also paved the way for the Labour Government's Race Relations Act 1965.

Learning about our history is essential. That is why, this time last year, I called for black history to be part of the national curriculum, so that all children are taught about black British history. There are great examples where this is already happening, such as St George's Church of England Primary School in my constituency. At this point, I pay tribute to the Black Curriculum social enterprise, which is helping to deliver black history across the UK. As we have all said today—and I know we all agree—black history is British history, after all.

This year's Black History Month comes 40 years on from the New Cross fires in south-east London—a tragic event that killed 13 young black people between the ages of 14 and 22. I think we would all agree that their lives had not even begun. It is also 40 years on from the uprisings across the country, including in Brixton, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester, in response to the devastating reality of many black people in the UK: mass unemployment, poor housing conditions, police brutality and racism. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) alluded to the Scarman report, which was commissioned as a result of many of those uprisings in the 1980s.

We should therefore ask the question: how far have we come in our fight for racial justice? Last summer, we were all captured by the Euros, when our brave England team proudly took the knee in solidarity and a call for an end to racism and injustice. Sadly, though, rather

than supporting them, their Government chose to sow division and hatred, which led to the ugliest and most awful racial abuse of Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka at the European cup final. My heart went out to them. As the older sister of a professional footballer, I could only imagine how their families must have felt.

Those young men and the rest of the England team united our nation, in all its diversity and difference, and showed the best of modern Britain. However, sadly, we still face deep-rooted inequalities in health, education, employment, immigration and our criminal justice system. In maternal health, we know that black women are four times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth. In the labour market, unemployment rates are up to four times higher for black people. School exclusion rates are five times higher for black Caribbean pupils in some parts of the country. We must be honest about that reality, and the Government must be bold in their response. Unfortunately, to date they have not been.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): My hon. Friend has mentioned some important, though depressing, statistics about the reality of things in the country today. To add to that, there are fewer than 200 black university professors among 23,000 in the UK. Does she agree that that is a shameful figure, and one that needs bold action from this Government?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must address the issue of representation in education, right the way from school through to colleges, universities and at professor level. Perhaps the Minister, in his response, can address the point on those disparities in the education system.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report, catalysed by the brutal murder of George Floyd and by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, was an opportunity for this Government to tackle structural racism. Instead, they produced a divisive and now discredited report seeking to deny the extent of structural racism.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for putting forward this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for the important points she has raised. Does she agree that the murder of George Floyd resulted in an increasing number of organisations and businesses across the country having uncomfortable conversations with employees about how they could do things differently and on understanding the experiences of individuals? Does she also agree that the Government need to take that a step further and implement a race equality strategy, while also looking at diversifying the curriculum? The only way we can move forward is if we learn from our past to build a better future.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend must have read my speech, because those are exactly the points I was going to raise. She is spot on. In my former role as shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, Labour rightly rejected the report. Within days, it had been discredited by a long list of experts, including the British Medical Association, trade unions, and many human rights experts at the UN.

Mr Steve Baker: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marsha De Cordova: No. Eight months on, the Government still have not published their response to the report. I hope that the Minister will today give us a timeline, as that was promised to be published in the summer. We are now leaving autumn and going into winter. Their apathy towards meaningfully addressing structural inequalities is shameful, and an insult to those of us with that lived experience.

Today, I call on the Minister to urgently look at implementing a race equality strategy to fundamentally change those systems and institutions in which structural racial inequalities exist. That includes reforming the national curriculum, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) has already mentioned. The Government must commit to addressing those shocking disparities in black maternal health, which leave black women at a greater risk of death during childbirth, and include the recording of accurate and robust data. They must also commit to upholding their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 in carrying out and publishing equality impact assessments. I was pleased to see that yesterday's Budget included one, but that has not been the case with many of the Government's policies and even legislation.

We all know that the Government should by now have responded to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report. The Minister may wish to say that the Government have conceded that the report does not even warrant a response. Perhaps the Government will just crack on and get on with implementing the recommendations from so many of those other reports alluded to by my Friend the Member for Streatham in her excellent opening remarks.

I will finish by quoting the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who said:

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

That is so important. We are all here because we care about black history. We must demand action—from ourselves, but also from the Government.

3.34 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for securing this debate, which I am deeply honoured to support.

I would like to take the opportunity to put on the record a precious piece of history from my constituency, in the sincere hope that it will add to our appreciation of the value of Black History Month to a wide range of people in Wales and beyond. During last Thursday's business statement, I was proud to mention the launch of the John Ystumlllyn rose. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said that it would have been nice to have more Conservatives attend the debate, but I must give credit to the Leader of the House, who welcomed the initiative with great enthusiasm.

John Ystumlllyn is the first—there will be a number of firsts in my speech—definitively recorded black person in north Wales, and he worked as a gardener near Criccieth in Dwyfor in the 18th century. The John Ystumlllyn rose is therefore a particularly poignant way to remember his life and times, but it is also a powerful symbol in and

[Liz Saville Roberts]

of itself. It has been created by Harkness Roses of Hitchin, which has worked with Zehra Zaidi's We Too Built Britain campaign to make available what is believed to be the first ever rose named after a minority ethnic person in the United Kingdom.

Who was John Ystumllyn? Not surprisingly, there is quite a lot of uncertainty, and there also late records, which have their own pattern of recording. We believe he was born in west Africa around 1740. He was abducted by slavers as a young boy, with a late 19th-century account by Alltud Eifion, who was from Porthmadog in north Wales, saying that John's last memory of his mother was how she protested as he was taken away. We do not know the name by which his family knew him, but we do know that he never saw them again.

By whatever route he arrived, we know that the boy was sent to live with the landowning Wynn family, who owned, and whose descendants still own, extensive estates in north Wales and north-west England. He learned Welsh and English, and he was baptised as John Ystumllyn. He became a well-known and talented gardener who was especially known for his skills in growing flowers. It is recorded that he was a handsome young man and much admired by the young women of the neighbourhood, and we are fortunate to have a portrait of him from 1754. He eloped with a maid who worked at Ystumllyn, Margaret Gruffydd of Hendre Mur, Trawsfynydd, and the pair were married at Dolgellau in 1768. Because they eloped from their jobs, they both lost their jobs, but John shortly found new employment in the area and was then offered his former post again. He must have been a good gardener—too good to lose.

The couple had seven children and many descendants, some of whom are believed to still be in the area. John died in 1786 and his grave can still be seen at Ynyscynhaearn churchyard, although it does give an incorrect date of death. His story conveys romance and a strong sense of how our roots are all intertwined. I have deliberately included some of the relevant place names because they resonate strongly not only with historians, but with people whose history and sense of belonging is closely tied to a sense of place. We cherish the memory of John Ystumllyn locally and it is very important to us, as he is so associated with those place names, which resonate with the history of north-west Wales.

We should also remember that while John was growing up and settling in Ystumllyn, the ships being built at Pwllheli, 10 miles away, included vessels that were designed to service the slave trade. A traveller's diary from 1801 describes a ship—probably the *Mary*—as a “large Guineaman”, which is a byword for a ship involved in human trafficking from the Guinea coast of west Africa. It was fitted for 600 slaves. In Wales, there is a long history of the profits of slavery contributing to local economies—from the well-known triangular trade of copper, slaves and sugar, to what was known as Welsh plains: coarse wool made by small-scale weavers in Maldwyn and Meirionnydd, whose goods were sold to plantation owners to clothe slaves in the 18th century.

These stories all need to be told, and I am proud that the Welsh school curriculum—there has been some talk about school curriculums—will now include guidance on the history of black, Asian and ethnic minority people that is to be taught to all children who attend

state schools in Wales. I mentioned earlier the delight locally—schoolchildren learn about John Ystumllyn, and that is a great source of pleasure and making connections.

I am also very proud that the first statue of a named, non-fictional woman in an outdoor public space in Wales was unveiled a month ago in Cardiff to celebrate the life and work of Betty Campbell. Betty Campbell was a first. She was the first black woman to be appointed as a headteacher in Wales, at Mount Stuart Primary, Butetown. I mentioned the proximity between Criccieth and John Ystumllyn and Pwllheli and the slave galleys. Butetown is very close to Her Majesty's prison Cardiff. While we celebrate these histories, we have to remember the proportion of black people imprisoned in Wales. In 2017 this stood at 72 people per 10,000, while the proportion of white people is 15 per 10,000. The proportion in all the prisons in England and Wales is desperately high and wrong, but in Wales it is staggeringly wrong.

While we celebrate these firsts and successes, we must remember this great and most shocking indication of inequality. There are many, I freely grant, but in the 21st century disproportionality in imprisonment is something that we must seek to use as a marker of what we do not tolerate. It is evident that history can be both fragrant and thorny. Perhaps it is best to close with the rose of John Ystumllyn and remember that gardens have always been places that bring people together. *Diolch yn fawr iawn.*

3.41 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on obtaining this important debate.

We have heard a lot of important points about black history, but I want to talk about more recent black history. I want to answer the question of why four black MPs were elected for the first time in 1987. It is tempting to think that it was because of our great merit or the benevolence of our political parties, but I would argue, having been one of the Members elected in 1987, that the fact that we could get selected and elected owed a lot to events in the 1980s. It is my view that the black Members of Parliament that were elected in 1987 and, with respect, black Members who are here today, stand on the shoulders of people in the community who were willing to stand up and in some cases actually cause urban disorder. Without those people at the grassroots, none of us would be here.

Colleagues have touched on these events, but let me remind Members of them. First there were the April 1981 Brixton riots. It is hard to recollect what an impact those riots had. Scenes like that had never been seen on the British mainland. I remember going to Brixton the day after those riots, seeing the devastation and realising that something really impactful had happened to the British political narrative. The reason that the Scarman report, which I mentioned earlier, made such an impact was that it was an elderly white judge saying quite shocking things about institutional racism in British society. He could not be dismissed.

Sadly, many of the things he said were not acted on, but the Scarman inquiry was extremely important. In January 1981 there was the New Cross house fire. As hon. Members have said, the slogan at the time was

“13 dead, nothing said”. A black people’s day of action was organised and 20,000 people marched. I was one of those people, and the extraordinary thing about that march was that there were so many people on it who were not regular black, left activists. They were ordinary people who were shocked that 13 young people could die in this way and nothing really was being done or said about it.

Then there were the 1985 Brixton riots, which were triggered by the death of Cherry Groce. Then there was the 1985 Broadwater Farm uprising, which was triggered by a police raid that ended in the death of Cynthia Jarrett.

Without activity at grassroots level, without anger and the expression of anger—sometimes by marching, sometimes through what was written and what was said—we would not have had the tide of events that resulted in the election of four black MPs in 1987. I will touch on who they were, as I am the only one left in Parliament.

There was Keith Vaz, who read law at Cambridge and became a practising solicitor. There was Paul Boateng, who was born in Hackney—Members do not need me to remind them what a great borough that is—and made his name working at Brent law centre. He also represented Cherry Groce in the aftermath of the Brixton riots. He had a very distinguished ministerial career and ended his career as high commissioner to South Africa, a position that was particularly appropriate because the struggle against apartheid was always one of Paul’s signature issues. Then, of course, we had the legendary Bernie Grant, one of the first black leaders of a local authority as leader of Haringey Council.

There are so many issues that were first raised in the ’80s and before, whether that is black children in education or in the criminal justice system, black people in business and the lack of access that they sometimes have to finance and support, or black people in employment, be that public sector or private sector, where black people often find themselves hitting a glass ceiling in terms of promotion. Then there is the issue of black maternal health, which other hon. Members have raised.

Mr Steve Baker: I am glad that the right hon. Lady has reminded us about the death of Cynthia Jarrett. As she reflects historically, she reminds us all of the appalling experiences that people have been through. She did not mention the murder of Keith Blakelock. I remember that happening when I was young. Surely she is not advocating for civil disorder today in response to the problems that we undoubtedly face—surely not.

Ms Abbott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. Of course I am not advocating civil disorder. As someone who lived through that era, I am saying that without people marching and taking to the streets, I am confident that there would not have been the impetus, the concern and the focus that enabled me and my three colleagues to be elected in 1987. He must give me some credit for having lived through that era and having been active in the community at that time. Neither I nor anyone on these Benches would advocate civil disorder, but it happened; we cannot pretend it did not and we cannot pretend it did not have an impact, as Lord Scarman himself said.

Marsha De Cordova: My right hon. Friend is making an absolutely fantastic speech and giving everybody a well-needed lesson in our history. Does she agree that

this is why it is important that our history is told properly? We have to see the good, the bad, the everything in all that we do, so that we all know, and so we can stop the cycle of injustice.

Ms Abbott: Yes, we have to stop this cycle. I have lived through too many decades of it: of civil disorder, which hon. Members opposite deprecate, of anger, anguish and concern, of reports such as the Scarman report, of “13 dead and nothing said”, of reports being written and nothing changes. I have to tell hon. Members that the community—not just the ethnic minority community but the community as a whole—is weary of reports being written and injustice being pointed out and nothing happening.

Black people make our own history. We continue to contend against the forces of institutional racism, whether that is people engaging with civil disorder, which of course I entirely deprecate, or whether it is those of us in Parliament today in 2021. We make our history. Our history is British history. We will continue to fight on. I would like to think that, on some of the issues that have been raised in the past 40 years, we will see real action, a real strategy for action and real change in the coming years.

3.49 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair for this important debate, Sir Graham. Like everyone else, I start by thanking the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for securing this debate and all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part and contributed thus far.

This is a hugely important topic, and today’s debate gives us the opportunity not only to celebrate the lives of so many black people, but to recognise the invaluable contribution they have made to society. It gives us a chance to acknowledge and reflect on those who, often at great personal cost, as we have heard, have put themselves in danger to expose and seek to end racial injustice and to make society better for themselves and for every single one of us. It is absolutely right that we should celebrate those people, because through their sacrifice they have laid a pathway for others to follow.

As the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) have said, many of those figures are well known to us, whether they be politicians, actors, sports figures, or academics such as Betty Campbell and her marvellous statue, but behind them are millions of people who, unrecognised and without fanfare, have devoted their lives to the betterment of their community. I believe today should be as much a celebration of their contribution as anyone else’s.

I sincerely thank the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) for her superb analysis of contemporary history, which showed clearly that Black History Month is not the celebration of the end of a journey—far from it. Black History Month exists to reflect on how far we have come, but also to shine a light on how far we as a society have still to go. Depressingly, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Battersea, the vile racist abuse that those three young England footballers had to suffer following the penalty shoot-out at Wembley shows just how far that is.

[Brendan O'Hara]

I am reluctant to inject a note of discord into the debate, but I must take issue with the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who quoted his friend the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson). The great Arthur Wharton was the first English black professional footballer, but the first pioneer on that front was Andrew Watson, a Scots Guyanese footballer who played for the phenomenally successful Queen's Park football club, captaining Scotland to success over England and Wales on several occasions. I know so much about Andrew Watson because, in a previous life, I made a documentary on his outstanding success. I believe it is still available on YouTube, should anyone care to view it; I would appreciate it if the hon. Member for Wycombe could recommend it to his colleague the hon. Member for Darlington.

Where we can all agree, I am certain, is that racism is an evil that none in our societies can claim to be immune to. We have a huge amount of work to do if we are to advance racial equality across these islands. Let me be absolutely clear: racism, however it manifests, has no place in modern Scotland, but it is not enough simply not to be racist. Particularly in the positions we hold in this place, we must be actively anti-racist, be seen to actively support minority ethnic communities and be first in line to call out and condemn racism wherever it rears its ugly head.

The First Minister of Scotland has made it abundantly clear that she will not tolerate racism in Scotland, whether it is the recent disgraceful anti-Irish racism on the streets of Glasgow, or the discrimination against any of our ethnic minority communities. She has made it clear that her Government are determined to play their part in eradicating racism, inequality and injustice and in building a better, fairer Scotland for every single one of us. I am pleased, therefore, that the Scottish Government have opened a new fund accessible to all organisations with a focus on tackling inequality and prejudice, which is in line with the goals and outcomes of Black History Month.

We have heard from many speakers this afternoon that one of the best ways to tackle racism is through education. Only through education can young people in particular gain an understanding of their history. In the Scottish National party's May manifesto, we committed to funding an online programme on Scotland's colonial history and encourage local authorities to adopt that programme in all Scottish schools.

I understand that in last year's debate, the Equalities Minister, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), expressed the opinion that the education curriculum was not in need of decolonisation because, in her view, there was no colonialism present in the curriculum. She could not be more wrong. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) was right when she said during last year's debate that

"racism is rooted in untruthful or selective teaching about our past. People are not born racist. They learn it."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 2020; Vol. 682, c. 1006.]

We need to recognise that there is a desperate need for the UK—I include Scotland in that—to face up to our colonial history and the role that we played in colonising great swathes of the planet, and how we as a society became phenomenally wealthy in no small part because of the enslavement of black African people.

I am from a generation of Scots children, particularly Glaswegians, who were educated in the late 1960s and early 1970s. From primary school age, we were taught about the Glasgow tobacco lords, that group of Scottish merchants who in the 18th century made huge fortunes trading tobacco from the Americas. They became so unimaginably wealthy that they redrew the city itself: vast sums were spent on houses and new roads, which they named after themselves. Indeed, to this day, there is an area of the city—one of its most beautiful—known as the Merchant City. We were taught that these guys were something to admire: that we should have an enormous sense of civic pride in what they did and how their wealth allowed the city of Glasgow to become that much-heralded second city of the empire.

The fact that those tobacco barons were slave traders who made their fortunes from that triangular trade between Glasgow, west Africa and the Americas was an inconvenient truth that was rarely, if ever, mentioned. The fact that they grew fabulously wealthy, and that Glasgow was transformed into a large and prosperous city, because of the slave trade and the enforced labour of the tobacco plantations of Virginia and sugar plantations of Jamaica was airbrushed from the narrative.

As children, we were told that the entrepreneurship of those men was to be admired and celebrated, and to this day, they are immortalised in the street names and place names of Glasgow, a city they effectively built. Any walking tour around Glasgow will include Glassford Street, Oswald Street, Buchanan Street, Cochrane Street, Dunlop Street, Ingram Street, Gordon Street and Robertson Street—all named after the Glasgow merchants whose fortunes were directly linked to the slave trade. If one did not recognise those family names, then Virginia Street, Tobago Street, Jamaica Street and even the Kingston Bridge would provide a clue as to where our city's money came from. Unknowingly, the good people of Glasgow—like probably many of our constituents—literally walk in the shadows of slavery every single day.

While accepting that we cannot change our past, we should at least know what that past is, and understand the role that the enslavement of other human beings played in our success. We have to accept, because it is an undeniable fact, that our stories are told from one perspective: the perspective of the coloniser. However, there is another, equally important story that deserves to be heard and must be heard, which is the story of the colonised. Without that missing perspective—without being able to hear the stories of those victims—we will only ever have half of the story. For many years growing up, I was failing to completely understand what had been done, why it had been done and the consequences of it, because I only ever had half of the story.

Scotland's links to the transatlantic slave trade are deep and complex, but they are also undeniable. I am therefore delighted that future generations of Scottish children will have a far more rounded and inclusive education—one that focuses on race equality. The Scottish Government recently announced their curriculum for excellence, which will provide opportunities for young people to learn about current and past attitudes, values and historical events, and their impact on our society. That can include learning about Scotland's role in the transatlantic slave trade. Scotland's role in that trade will now be an option in both our national 5 and our

higher history qualifications, and Education Scotland will be publishing resources for teachers on slavery and human trafficking, including resources to support teaching and learning about the slave trade and Scotland's role in it. The Scottish Government will fund the development of an online programme for teachers and encourage all local authorities to take it up. That is very welcome, and a far cry from how my generation was taught Scottish history. The sooner we get to an acceptance that black history is an integral and fundamental part of our history, the better for us all.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Streatham for securing the debate. I share her belief that it should be an annual event marking Black History Month until such time as it is deemed no longer necessary, which unfortunately seems a long way off.

4 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) for securing such an important debate. I know how hard she worked to give us all the opportunity to discuss and celebrate Black History Month. I also thank all Members who have spoken for their powerful contributions.

Black History Month is about celebrating and highlighting black heroes. For me, the first person who comes to mind is Ira Aldridge, a Shakespearean actor who came to Britain from the United States in the 1830s. He was a fierce abolitionist who spoke before Parliament about ending slavery the world over. He went on to settle in my own city of Coventry, where he managed the Theatre Royal, becoming the first black theatre manager in Britain. Ira Aldridge stands firm in our history among other black trailblazers.

The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) referenced George Alexander Gratton from his constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) mentioned the first black London mayor, John Archer, from her constituency. Two other black trailblazers come to my mind. Mary Prince—my hon. Friend also mentioned her—was a black abolitionist, and the first black woman to write an autobiography and present an anti-slavery petition to this House. The second person who springs to my mind is Annie Brewster, one of the first Afro-Caribbean nurses to work in Britain—a pioneer for supporting elderly patients losing their sight.

I must also mention the trailblazers who came before us in this place. I echo the sentiments of my colleagues in celebrating incredible black parliamentarians. I am thinking of Lord Boateng, Bernie Grant, Baroness Amos and of course my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). Their legacies and continued work in Parliament can be seen throughout. We need to ensure that the legacy of those trailblazers is known to all in Britain.

Recognising and celebrating black Britain should be as ubiquitous in our culture as it is in our history. We should not relegate that celebration to a few debates once a year—I add that today's debate was not brought forward by the Government—because celebrating such trailblazers from our history, and our world, inspires the next generation of black Britons to pursue and achieve their dreams. Hearing the accomplishments of

my predecessors in this House partly inspired me to stand for Parliament, and helped me to become Coventry's first black parliamentarian.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend has spoken, quite correctly, about heroes, but does she agree that it is not just about heroic figures? It is also about ordinary black men and women—the ordinary nurse, the ordinary factory worker and the ordinary bus driver—who were willing to do what it took to take black politics and black dignity forward.

Taiwo Owatemi: Absolutely. As my right hon. Friend said, ordinary black people who worked hard to support this country and contributed significantly to our culture should be celebrated for their contribution to the advancement of this country. When we recognise and celebrate the accomplishments of black people in this country we empower the next generation of young black Britons.

Although this month is dedicated to the celebration of black history, it is crucial that we reflect on the historical barriers that black people in this country continue to face. When we look across all parts of our society, including our NHS, we see that we are well represented in the workforce, although sadly often not in positions of power. As an NHS worker myself, it pains me to see that black people are far less likely to rise to the top of the medical profession.

My hon. Friends the Members for Streatham, for Battersea and for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington have spoken passionately about the results of the recent reviews by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and Baroness Lawrence. Baroness Lawrence's review shone a light on the inequality that black healthcare workers face, putting facts to feelings that many of us present already had. The review exposed how black, Asian and minority ethnic NHS workers have suffered disproportionately from the Government's failure to keep them safe during the pandemic.

I bring this worrying state of affairs to the attention of the House because just as important as celebrating the achievements of black people in Britain is recognising those ongoing obstacles that black Britons face and the continuing fight to eliminate them. There are a couple of worrying examples that I will touch on. First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said, we must take concrete steps to eliminate the ethnicity pay gap in this country, which stands at 24% in the major cities. That is disgraceful, and fixing it is long overdue. As with the gender pay gap, that injustice entrenches inequality and disempowers millions.

Secondly—an issue also raised by my hon. Friend—exclusion rates for black students in English schools are up to six times higher than those for their white peers in some local authorities. The reason why that is so important is that we know about the damage that exclusion can do to a student: it can derail their life chances for good. Excluded students are far less likely to get good GCSE or A-level results and, sadly, they have much lower job prospects post education. That is an incredible injustice for many black students and we need to root it out. Excessive use of exclusion risks wrecking the life chances of young black Britons and it must be curbed.

[Taiwo Owatemi]

Another point made today—by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and others—was about the black British curriculum. My hon. Friend made the important point that schools in Britain need more black representation. I pay tribute to the Black Curriculum, an organisation to which many Members have paid tribute today. When the Minister responds, I hope that he will provide answers on whether the Government have any plans to follow the Labour-led Welsh Government in implementing a black British curriculum.

Having a black British curriculum would not only provide young black people with an understanding of their heritage, but play a significant role in tackling racism through better education about colonial history. It would empower young black British students to learn about the trailblazers who have gone before them, and inspire more young black children to aspire to become teachers. Given the lack of black representation in the education system, that would go a long way towards making up the difference. I hope that the Minister will tell us what steps the Government are taking to address the lack of black representation in school leadership.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea also spoke about black maternal health and how black women are four times more likely to die while giving birth. I hope that the Minister will explain what steps are being taken to address that and to ensure that data will be collected.

To wrap up, as the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, I celebrate the many achievements of black Britons. I will use my role to combat the inequalities that I have outlined today.

4.9 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) on securing this important debate. She spoke passionately—as so many other Members have—about the importance of Black History Month. I welcome the contributions that we have heard. I also congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on granting the debate.

Black history is extremely important to the Government. It has resonance across many different areas of policy. It is right, then, that all Departments should be responsible and accountable in debates such as these, which is why I am appearing today as the Minister for School Standards. I shall respond predominantly on matters regarding black history in education, as I am sure the hon. Lady will understand. As many hon. Members—including my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) in his thoughtful speech—pointed out, there is a huge range of topics to cover, so where issues such as maternal health have been raised, I will write to colleagues in relevant Departments to ask for a response. In the case of the ethnicity pay gap, that will be the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). I will ensure that the relevant Ministers send responses on the broader issues.

As we have heard, October is Black History Month in the UK, a time to celebrate the contribution of black communities and individuals over the centuries in shaping the dynamic and diverse country that we have today. Like the hon. Member for Streatham, I want black children in our schools to be proud to be black and proud to be British. Like the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), I want to ensure that we inspire the next generation to achieve their dreams.

I take a personal interest in debates of this nature. One of my predecessors as Member for Worcester, who also happened to be my late father, campaigned alongside Jack Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson for civil rights in the United States and came to this House fresh from those campaigns at a time of critical change in the recognition of civil rights in that country. He continued to champion this important issue during his time as an MP and after. When I became Member of Parliament for Worcester in 2010 and met members of Worcester's Afro-Caribbean community, I was deeply touched to hear how much they valued some of his work in the constituency on their behalf.

It was one of my greatest honours, for too short a time, to represent Basil D'Oliveira and his family. I was very glad that the city I represent marked his life not only with a magnificent civic service in 2012 but also posthumously by granting him the freedom of the city in 2018. Basil was a softly spoken, deeply unpolitical gentleman who became an unlikely hero in the struggle against apartheid, his role showing the cricketing world the true nature of South Africa's colour bar and helping to strengthen the sporting embargo. His example drew global attention to the fundamental unreasonableness of racist policy. In the words of Nelson Mandela when he met him, he did his bit.

My younger constituents have also been an inspiration to me. Darian Murray-Griffiths, who until recently was one of my constituents, is one such person. I first met him as an 11-year-old boy after his proud parents reached out to me to encourage his interest in Parliament and history. I have since followed his progress closely and, as a student at Worcester sixth-form college, he made an eloquent and thoughtful speech at a Black Lives Matter event in the city. Such was the impact of his speech that he was invited to No. 10 to discuss it. I have no doubt that young people like him will further bring together diverse communities in modern Britain and make their own contribution to history.

I want to acknowledge the strong engagement of parliamentarians, children and young people, black community groups and the public on black history in the curriculum. The Department has been clear that the national curriculum for history enabled black voices and experiences to be taught, whether it is events such as the Bristol bus boycott that had a national impact or the global impact of those soldiers across the former empire and Commonwealth who fought in both world wars. The recent anniversaries of the first and second world wars showed the greater awareness of black and minority ethnic contributions to both. For the first world war, that was aided by Government projects such as *The Unremembered* and *No Barriers*, alongside the promotion of figures such as Lieutenant Walter Tull.

Ms Abbott: Is the Minister prepared to share his plans to do something about the wholly disproportionate level of black exclusions from our schools, which often

leads to a school-to-prison pipeline? It has been said that the day you exclude a child from school, you might as well give them the date and time to turn up at prison. Will he share with the House his proposals to recruit more black teachers and make it possible to rise up the ladder to be headteacher?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Lady makes some important points and I want to respond on both. I shall return to the issue of teachers later in my speech. On exclusions, we have heard a number of different figures for the proportions in that respect. It is important that we work to reduce exclusions in general. As a Department, we are looking at our behaviour policies to make sure we can support schools to keep more people in school. I would caution that many of those figures are also related to geography and where people happen to be in the country. It is difficult to realise one overall set of figures but I am told that, once other figures are controlled for, black Caribbean children are about 1.7 times more likely than white children to be permanently excluded.

We should not shy away from the fact that some groups of children are more likely to be excluded than others. That is why we are updating our guidance to ensure that schools and governing bodies understand their responsibility to spot trends in the data and accordingly put support in place for certain groups of pupils faster or provide early intervention. We are clear in existing guidance that schools should consider what extra support might be needed to identify and address the needs of children from groups most likely to be excluded to reduce the likelihood of a situation arising where an exclusion is warranted. Ofsted's assessment of behaviour in schools also includes specific consideration of whether any groups of pupils are being disproportionately excluded, which is absolutely something we should continue to look at.

Our reforms to alternative provision will also look to improve behaviour, attendance and long-term pupil outcomes, including better transition to post-16. That will ensure that all children and young people, including pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, get back on track and get the right support at the right time. I will come back further on the point made by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) about teacher recruitment and the pipeline.

Marsha De Cordova *rose—*

Mr Walker: I will give way once.

Marsha De Cordova: The Minister talks about the data he is using. The evidence is very clear. It was actually the Government's own Race Disparity Unit that highlighted a lot of the data, which clearly shows that black Caribbean children are disproportionately likely to be excluded from school, controlling for all other factors. The facts are clear. It is an issue that needs addressing, and I would be grateful if the Minister kindly addressed that disproportionality and that disparity for our young black children.

Mr Walker: I would say to the hon. Lady that that is just what I tried to set out. We think that, where there is any disparity, it needs to be addressed. That is one of the things that Ofsted is already encouraged to look into. It is also one of the reasons that we are looking at our behaviour and exclusions guidance to see how we can address the issue more generally.

It was good to hear the hon. Lady talking about good teaching of black history at one of her local primary schools. At a recent visit to Burnopfield Primary School in County Durham, I was very pleased to see black history being taught through a rich and broad curriculum. Black Olympians were celebrated in PE and black musicians' significant contributions were celebrated in a reception class. Inclusivity is an ethos at the school, and Black History Month is celebrated as part of that. That is particularly striking in an area that is almost 100% white English.

Teachers and historians are embedding black history in teaching all year round. In her articles, Hannah Cusworth explains how she teaches her pupils that York was more ethnically diverse in Roman times than it is now; that black people were present at the Tudor courts; and that William Davidson, a black Georgian, was involved in the Cato Street conspiracy. Many history teachers have followed the example of Kerry Apps, who ensures that when pupils study Elizabethan England, they understand the many Elizabethan trading and diplomatic connections with the wider world, such as those that led to the Moroccan delegation to London in 1600. Primary pupils in Haringey Education Partnership study the fifth-century African empire of Axum as an integrated part of their work on early Christian empires.

We have heard some fantastic examples of local history. The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke about the new rose that has been dedicated to John Ystumllyn—she will have to forgive my Welsh pronunciation—which I was fascinated to read about this morning. I congratulate the We Too Built Britain campaign for its work on that.

We have heard about some very important figures who have been commemorated, such as the example originally given by the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) of Yvonne Connolly, along with Betty Campbell in Cardiff; Olive Morris in Battersea; Ira Aldridge in Coventry; George Alexander Gratton in Wycombe; Arthur Wharton, the goalkeeper for Darlington; and, of course, Andrew Watson at Queen's Park F.C.—the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) would not forgive me if I did not mention him. I want schools to look at local figures like those when they teach local history.

We have thought carefully about whether we can do more to support high-quality teaching and to help teachers and schools develop their own school curriculum, fully using the flexibility and freedom of the natural history curriculum and the breadth and depth of content it includes. I acknowledge that some teachers may need more guidance on how to teach a high-quality and diverse history curriculum, and that is why I am pleased to announce that we are taking steps to develop a model history curriculum. We will work with history curriculum experts, historians and school leaders to develop a model history curriculum that will stand as an exemplar of a knowledge-rich, coherent approach to teaching history. The development of model, knowledge-rich curriculums continues along the path of reform that the Government set out in 2010. Our reforms are driven by the ideas of Professor E.D. Hirsch, whose work sets out the importance of the transmission of rich subject knowledge from teachers to pupils. Hirsch came from what might be termed a left-wing background in his views,

[Mr Robin Walker]

and he strongly advocated an education that gave all children cultural literacy, in recognition of the fact that knowledge had often been the preserve of the elite.

School education gives the rare opportunity to offer children experiences that go beyond their own circumstances and cultural background. The cultural breadth that schools can teach children offers common cultural touchpoints for all. That is why a knowledge-rich approach embeds diversity in a meaningful, rather than tokenistic, form. A curriculum based narrowly on relevance to pupils is to deny them an introduction to the best that has been thought and said. There is no reason why the work of a dead white man is not appropriate for all children to learn about. Maya Angelou famously said that Shakespeare must be a black girl, as his poetic words expressed so intensely what she, a victim of poverty, racism and childhood sexual abuse, felt inside.

This is why the development of the model history curriculum is so important. We have already published the model music curriculum in March; this is non-statutory music curriculum guidance for key stages 1 to 3, developed by an independent panel of 15 specialists from across the UK. Diversity will be an important aspect of the model history curriculum, as we demonstrate how the content, themes and eras of the national curriculum can be brought to life by teaching them in an interconnected form throughout key stages. A diverse history can be taught because history is diverse. As so many Members have said today: black history is British history.

British history is deeply connected with world history; we do not stand apart. What makes this country “Great” Britain are these historical connections, and how they have shaped our past and present. The model history curriculum will equip teachers and leaders to teach migration, cultural change and the contributions made by different communities to science, art, culture and society. We will announce further details in due course, but I am pleased to show our commitment to high quality teaching in this debate. This country has a lot to be proud of—

Mr Steve Baker: I very much welcome what the Minister has said. I say this slightly tongue-in-cheek, but it feels to me that he is bound to be accused of being woke for what he has announced. What will he say to those, possibly even within Government, who accuse him of being woke? Will he explain to them that it is very necessary and right that he carries through this policy?

Mr Walker: I would say to my hon. Friend that it is much more important to celebrate what brings us together than allow discussions to set us apart. In that regard, this country has a lot to be proud of. Children should be taught all aspects of our shared history, and as we have heard in this debate, that includes both the good and the bad.

We must teach about the contributions of people of all ethnicities, both men and women, who have made this country what it is today. The shared history of our country is one that is outward looking; a nation that has influenced the world and been influenced in turn by people from all over the world. It is people who have built the culturally rich country that we have today, and we are truly an example of the riches that diverse communities can bring to one another.

We believe that schools and teachers should use the flexibility they have in the curriculum to develop a more detailed, knowledge-rich curriculum, and to teach their pupils in an inclusive manner. To support this, the curriculum includes a number of examples that could be covered at different stages, drawn from the history both of this country and the wider world. Examples at key stage 1 include teaching about the lives of key black and minority ethnic figures, such as Mary Seacole and Rosa Parks. It was interesting that the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute referred to his education; I did not learn about Mary Seacole when I was at school, but I did learn about her from a school in my constituency. Other individuals can be taught at this key stage; I know that schools widely teach about Nelson Mandela as an inspiring figure—we mark his great achievements with a memorial statue in Parliament Square, in London.

The key stage 2 curriculum focuses on early civilisations; it also requires the study of a non-European society that provides contrast with British history, with examples including Benin, west Africa, from 900 to 1300. At key stage 3, as part of the statutory teaching of the overarching theme of Britain 1745 to 1901, topics could include Britain’s transatlantic slave trade, its effects, its eventual abolition and the development of the British empire. The latter could include teaching about the successful slave-led rebellions and challenges that led to the abolition of slavery, for example the role played by slaves and former slaves, such as within the Somerset ruling, and the life and work of Olaudah Equiano in the abolition movement. In the theme “Challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day”, the end of empire and decolonisation can be taught. This key stage also requires the teaching of at least one study of a significant society or issue in world history and its interconnections with other world developments. Examples include the USA in the 20th century.

For key stage 4, the Department sets out that GCSE history specifications produced by the exam board for pupils should

“develop and extend their knowledge and understanding of specified key events, periods and societies in local, British, and wider world history; and of the wide diversity of human experience.”

We know that exam boards such as OCR, AQA and Pearson often offer options to study migration in Britain. There are a lot of resources available to help teachers teach black history, for example, lesson plays and resources produced by the Windrush Foundation, which support the study of the Empire Windrush and Caribbean migration. Runnymede Trust’s “Our Migration Story” website provides extensive resources telling the story of generations of migrants who came to and shaped the British Isles. Oak National Academy has developed a primary and secondary history curriculum, which is designed to be diverse and representative, including covering black history. Oak’s history curriculum includes medieval Mali, British colonialism in America, the abolition of slavery, the experience of those ruled by empire in Africa and why we celebrate Nelson Mandela Day.

Other subjects such as citizenship, English, PSHE, art, music and geography offer teachers opportunities to further explore black history with pupils, helping to build understanding and tolerance. Diverse texts are offered by exam boards in GCSE English. Pearson and Edexcel include texts such as the play “Refugee Boy” by Benjamin Zephaniah, adapted for the stage by

Lemn Sissay, and the novel “Boys Don’t Cry” by Malorie Blackman in their post-1940 section of texts for English literature GCSE.

We know that a diverse teaching and school leadership workforce is important. We want teaching to be an inclusive profession, for schools and their leadership teams to reflect their communities, and for pupils to feel represented and inspired. There is further to go on this. Data show increases over time in the number of black teachers and leaders, but numbers still do not match the proportion of black people in the working population. We make sure that we target diverse audiences in our recruitment campaigns, and I am pleased that the picture is particularly encouraging when it comes to black postgraduate trainees starting their course—around 4% in 2020-21. This is in line with the wider working population.

I note the point that was made about university academics, and I will ensure that I pass on the point to the Minister for Universities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan). It is often said that talent is evenly distributed but opportunity is not. I believe this to be true. That is why we want to remove the barriers holding people back, whatever their background. This means tackling discrimination, but also levelling up opportunity, so that no matter where anyone lives in the UK and no matter what their socioeconomic or ethnic background, they can fulfil their potential. That is why the Prime Minister launched his independent commission on racial disparities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe noted, we will be responding to that commission in detail in due course.

I will conclude, because I want to give the hon. Member for Streatham a chance to respond. Months such as Black History Month can highlight the great black Britons who have helped Britain shine internationally, from artists such as Steve McQueen, writers such as Malorie Blackman and athletes such as Dina Asher-Smith to the everyday contribution to our society of people from the Caribbean and Africa, who helped build and support the NHS. I am grateful to the hon. Member for

Streatham for this highly interesting debate and for once again highlighting the importance of Black History Month.

4.28 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I want to start by thanking all Members who have participated for their well-delivered contributions. I would like to say that the support of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for these issues does not go unnoticed. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) took us through the history of great black women and reiterated the shameful lack of quality impact assessments on Government legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) pointed out quite rightly the shameful lack of representation of black teachers in our schools and wider academia.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), whose constituency I know I have pronounced wrong, gave an analogy about discussions about race and our history being fragrant and thorny. I really liked that. As the only Welsh Member here, she probably takes full pride in the launching of the teaching of Black History Month in schools in Wales.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) reminded us of the civil rights struggles here in the UK. She took a lot of time to talk about the other black Members of Parliament without mentioning herself. She is a trailblazer. She talked about the others whose shoulders we stand on, but we know fully that we stand on hers. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), our shadow Minister for Equalities, quite rightly reaffirmed her commitment to tackling these issues. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara)—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Petition

Thursday 28 October 2021

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Rugby Community Ambulance Station

The petition of residents of the constituency of Rugby,

Declares that the last remaining Community Ambulance Station in the town of Rugby is essential for ensuring the safety of local residents; and further that West Midlands Ambulance Service's intention to close it puts the health and welfare of Rugby residents at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the West Midlands Ambulance Service to abandon the proposals to close the Community Ambulance Station in Rugby and to ensure that the residents of the town continue to receive the level of emergency healthcare which they demand and deserve.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mark Pawsey, *Official Report*, 15 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 1091.]

[P002689]

Observations from the Minister for Health (Edward Argar):

The Government recognise the petition from the residents of the constituency of Rugby, in which they call for the abandonment of the proposals to close the Community Ambulance Station (CAS) in the area.

The approach to ambulance trust estates, including the model and placement of ambulance stations is an operational decision for NHS ambulance trusts to take based on the best use of resources to serve patients.

Officials have sought advice from NHS England and Improvement (NHSEI) on this matter. NHSEI advises that the West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS) is reviewing CAS provision in Warwickshire in light of its long-term strategic move toward ambulance “Make Ready Hubs”, and changes to the way that ambulance trusts categorise and respond to calls introduced under the national Ambulance Response Programme. The Rugby Community Ambulance Station closure is part of these wider changes.

WMAS advises that the changes will not degrade care or change the level of ambulance provision in Rugby, and that where an ambulance starts or finishes a shift will not have a substantial impact on provision in the area that it is based in. The same number of staff and ambulances will continue to operate in the area.

Additionally, the trust advises that ambulance deployment from Make Ready Hubs is significantly more efficient than from CAS sites. Ambulances are cleaned, fuelled and fitted with a standard load list that should last a full 12-hour shift, maximising clinician time responding to calls and treating patients. This is not the case for CAS site ambulances, which crews will need to prepare themselves before a shift, and will typically need to return for restocking during the shift. WMAS advises that it loses in the order of 2.5 to 3 hours of ambulance time at each CAS site each 24-hour period, due to the way they operate.

As this is a local decision, we would encourage petitioners to engage directly with the Trust to ensure any remaining concerns they have are addressed.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 28 October 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	392	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—	
Church of England Payroll Budget Allocations	394	<i>continued</i>	
COP26	392	Biodiversity Loss.....	383
Level of Financial Donations to the Church:		Food and Drink Sector: Labour Supply.....	382
Covid-19	392	Freight Traffic: Navigable Waterways.....	381
England's Historic Cathedrals: Cost of		National Food Strategy: Government Response	376
Maintenance	390	Sustainable Farming	379
Number of Ordinands	388	Topical Questions	384
Refugees from Afghanistan.....	387	UK Environmental Protections: COP26	380
ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE	389	Untreated Sewage: Discharge into Waterways.....	375
Voter ID: Electoral Participation	389	Winter Air Quality	378
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL			
AFFAIRS	375	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	391
Agricultural Exports to the United States	381	Apprenticeship Programme.....	391

PETITION

Thursday 28 October 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1P
Rugby Community Ambulance Station	1P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 4 November 2021**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 28 October 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 375] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Church Commissioners
House of Commons Commission
Speaker's Electoral Commission Committee

UK-French Trading Dispute [Col. 395]

Answer to urgent question—(George Eustice)

Business of the House [Col. 405]

Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation [Col. 420]

Debate (Second day)
Debate adjourned

Petition [Col. 500]

North Tees Hospital [Col. 502]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

The Coroner Service [Col. 199WH]
General Debate

Black History Month [Col. 223WH]
E-petition debate

Petition [Col. 1P]

Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
